

**Conscience & Fundamental
Option In the Catholic
Tradition**

Presented by
Rev. James T. Bretzke, S.J., S.T.D.
University of San Francisco
E-mail: bretzkesj@usfca.edu

**Scriptural Context for Moral
Living**

- Searching for God
- Finding God and Following God
- Expressed in a Covenantal Relationship
 - Remaining faithful to God
 - Turning back to God
- For Christians this is done in the Discipleship Community
- Yet the Pre-Vatican II moral manuals stressed an individualistic, act-centered vision of morality

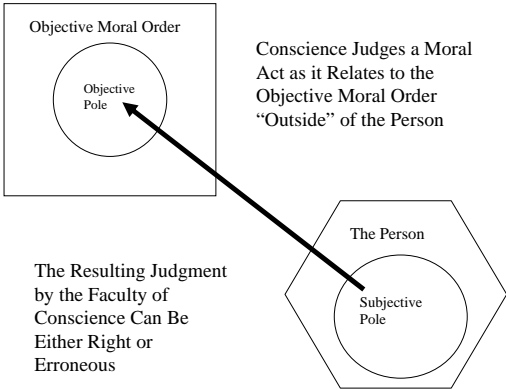
Recall Human Moral Agency

- Keep in mind that for genuine, human moral action we must *never* separate the human agent from the actions s/he performs
- Recall that as humans we are embodied spirit which means we must live in the concrete world
- Therefore our moral lives must be grounded and evaluated in reference to our real-life situation
- As Christians we believe that our lived response to our situation is best seen in terms of conscience-based discipleship response.

Historical Views of Conscience

- Where the individual meets God
- Seen as a “faculty” of right reason
- Which in turn made 2 judgments:
 - The objective moral norm
 - And its proper application in the concrete situation

Faculty of Conscience Judging a Moral Action



Types of Conscience

- Certain
 - And Correct (in accord with objective morality)
 - Or Wrong (Erroneous Conscience)
 - Due to either vincible ignorance (culpable)
 - Or invincible ignorance (not culpable)
- Doubtful
 - Unsure of what is the right thing to do
 - Resolve doubt before acting if possible
 - Consult Trusted Experts

Development of Conscience

- Forming Conscience
 - Through practicing the virtues
 - And following one's conscience
- Informing Conscience
 - Through discernment
 - And seeking appropriate counsel

CONSCIENCE-BASED MORAL LIVING

- Sanctuary of Conscience
 - Sacred Place: Where we meet God
 - Safe Place: No outside authority may enter
- Primacy of Conscience
 - Always follow your conscience
 - Even when "erroneous"
 - But take care to form and inform

Conscience & Religious Freedom

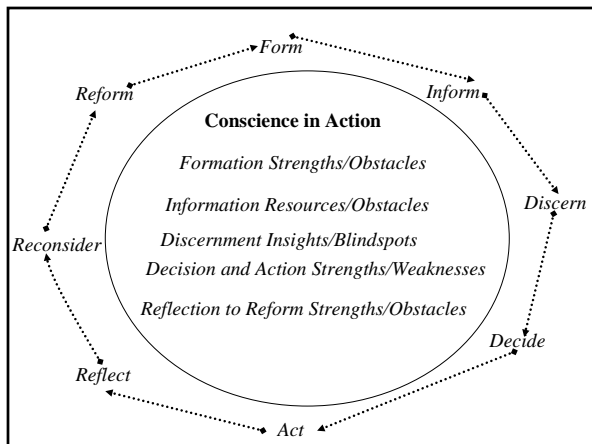
- **Condemned is the view that** "liberty of conscience and worship is each man's personal right, which ought to be legally proclaimed and asserted in every rightly constituted society"
- Gregory XVI (*Mirari Vos*, 1832); Pius IX, (*Quanta Cura*, 1864)
- **Affirmed:** "The human person has a right to religious freedom. The ... right to religious freedom is based on the very dignity of the human person as known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself."
- *Dignitatis Humanae*, Vatican II, 1965

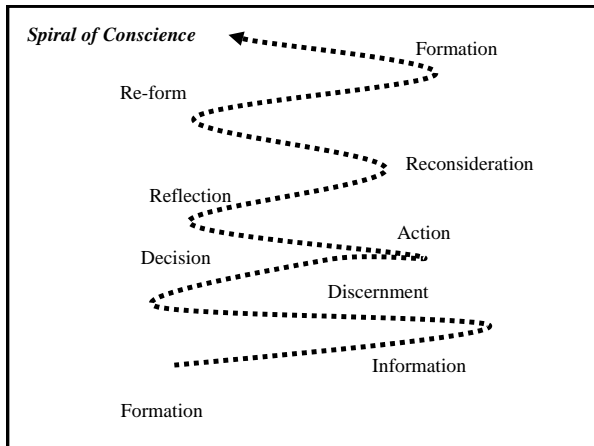
In the depths of his or her conscience, the human person detects a law which she or he does not impose upon themselves, but which holds them to obedience. Always summoning them to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to their heart: do this, shun that. For human persons have in their heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of human persons; according to it they will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of the human person. There she or he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in their depths.

Gaudium et Spes, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, #16

Moral Autonomy & Conscience

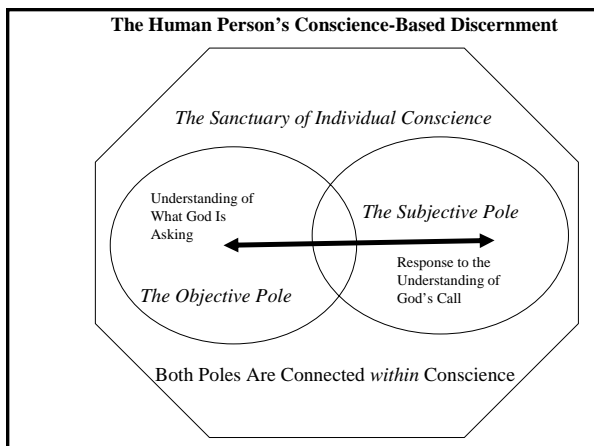
- “Auto” + “nomos” (self + law)
- Does *NOT* mean “creating” one’s own moral law
- But rather discovering the “law” written by God on the human heart (cf. *Gaudium et spes* #16)
- And then obeying that inner law
- This is the function of conscience





Fuchs' Theology of Conscience

- Objective Pole
- Relates to the objective moral order
- Established by God
- Inscribed *in* the heart of each person
- Builds on Thomas' *lex indita non scripta*
- Image of God not as "ruler" or "commander"
- Subjective Pole
- Connected to the objective pole
- Responds to what the individual believes God is asking of her/him
- The "objectivity" is the perceived will of God
- The individual does *NOT* make up "morality" but seeks to respond to God's voice in his/her heart



Moral Discernment & Ethics

- *Not* just what is “right” or “wrong”
- *Not* “WWJD”
- *BUT* what is the Spirit of God making possible for me/us in the here and now
- Requires reading the “Signs of the Times”
- As Distinguished from the “Spirit of the Age”

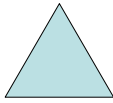
Three Legs of Moral Discernment



Openness to God's Spirit



Individual Effort



Community Discussion

In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of people in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals from social relationships. Hence the more right conscience holds sway, the more persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and strive to be guided by the objective norms of morality.

Gaudium et Spes, #16

Erroneous Conscience

- Vincible Ignorance
 - Can be overcome and therefore the person is culpable
- Invincible Ignorance
 - Not easily overcome & the person is NOT culpable
- “If the ignorance is invincible, or the moral subject is not responsible for his erroneous judgment, the evil committed by the person cannot be imputed to him. It remains no less an evil, a privation, a disorder. One must therefore work to correct the errors of moral conscience.” **Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1793**
- “Vincible” and “Invincible” Exist on a

Gaudium et Spes, #16: “Conscience frequently errs from invincible ignorance without losing its dignity. The same cannot be said for a man who cares but little for truth and goodness, or for a conscience which by degrees grows practically sightless as a result of habitual sin.”

Catechism of the Catholic Church, # 1790: “A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were deliberately to act against it, he would condemn himself. Yet it can happen that moral conscience remains in ignorance and makes erroneous judgments about acts to be performed or already committed.”

Erroneous Conscience Summary

- Vincible Ignorance
 - Can be overcome
 - Person is culpable
- Invincible Ignorance
 - Not easily overcome
 - Person is NOT culpable
- These exist on a spectrum

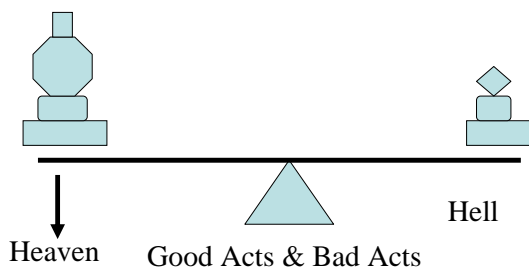
Rationalization and Conscience

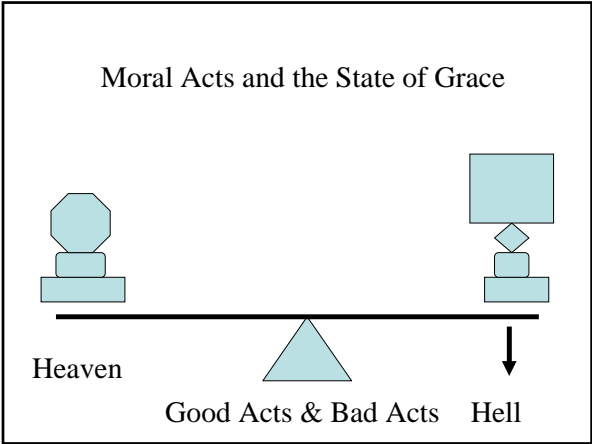
- Probably the biggest problem for most good people is not “erroneous” or “doubtful” conscience
- But rather the self-deceptive techniques of rationalization we seem to pick up so easily along life’s path.

Pre-Vatican II Scale of Acts

- State of Grace and State of Sin were often presented as a sharply dichotomous position, like the “on” or “off” light switch
- One day you could be in the state of grace, then the next in mortal sin, then back in grace, and so on
- Belief that the act alone changed the balance...

Moral Acts and the State of Grace





But Is This a Sound Vision?

- While this approach seemed to fit very well with both the notion of sin as a grievous act
- And with the notion that our good acts pleased God
- Is this approach actually in accord with the best possible understanding of how God is, and how God deals with us? ...

Enduring Treasure

- Matthew 6:19-21 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Sound Vision

- Matt 6:22-23 "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!"

Necessity of Choice

- Matt 6:24 "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money."

God *ALONE* Knows Our State

- Jeremiah 17: 9-10: "The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse-- who can understand it? 10 I the LORD test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings."
- 1 Cor 4: 3b-5: "I do not even judge myself. 4 I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me."

Therefore, Judge Not!

- 1 Cor 4: 5: “5 Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God.”

Our Transcendental Nature

- Basic to F.O. theory is the premise that all adults to become truly human must orient themselves to what they consider to be the ultimate absolute in life, either God or a false god (such as money, power, etc.)
- This basic choice is “athematic” since no one can see his/herself in totality
- Only God can see the person in this way

Types of Freedom & Acts

- Basic or Core
- Enables the human person to orient him/herself to the Absolute
- *Cannot* be intentionally “chosen” or “seen” in a given moment in time, such as “I now dedicate my life to Jesus”
- Categorical (act-centered)
- Can be lessened by other factors such as fear, passion, sub-conscious factors
- But which is intentional & discernible by the person

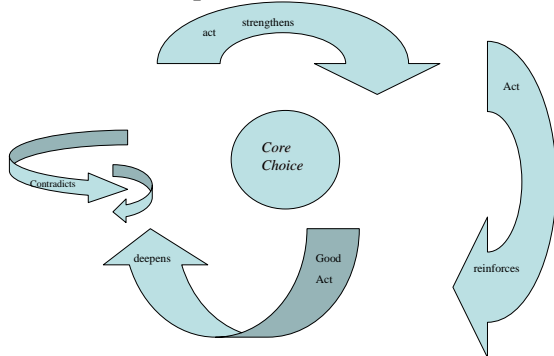
Types of Individual Acts

- Acts which are *consistent* with the F.O.
- Therefore strengthening it
- These acts can be of varying degrees of importance
- And involve varying levels of freedom
- Some examples..
- Acts which are *inconsistent* with the F.O.
- Therefore weakening it
- These acts can be of varying degrees of importance
- And involve varying levels of freedom
- Some examples..

Changeability of the F.O.

- The Fundamental Option *can* change
- Though since the F.O. is the core relation between a person and their transcendental absolute (e.g., God or idol) this relation would not change easily
- Yet, if the relation is weakened enough it might shift...

Fundamental Option & Individual Moral Acts



Analogy of the Marriages of Bob & Carol and Ted & Alice

- Bob & Carol marry
- Marriage relationship has more "downs" than "ups"
- Each becomes progressively more self-centered
- And hateful to the other
- Ted & Alice marry
- Marriage relationship has more "ups" than "downs"
- Love bond is strengthened and grows
- Each grows closer to the other

But comes an act of infidelity

- Bob is unfaithful to Carol
- This is a single, serious act
- A final straw
- Which symbolizes and effects the end of the relationship
- Ted is unfaithful to Alice
- This is a single, serious act
- But since their marriage is strong
- Though weakened the union survives

Insights of F.O. Theory

- Helps us to see more clearly the *Relation* aspect of the States of Grace or Sin
- Takes more seriously the core nature of this relationship and how our individual acts can either strengthen or weaken this relationship
- Helps us differentiate sin along a *spectrum* of venial to serious to mortal
