Saint Thomas Aquinas

Disputed Questions on Truth

Question Seventeen: On Conscience

In the First Article We Ask: IS CONSCIENCE A POWER, A HABIT, OR AN ACT?

REPLY:

...[The] name conscience means the application of knowledge to something. Hence, to be conscious (conscire) means to know together (simul scire). But any knowledge can be applied to a thing. Hence, conscience cannot denote a special habit or power, but designates the act itself, which is the application of any habit or of any knowledge to some particular act.

Moreover, knowledge is applied to an act in two ways. According to one way, we consider whether the act exists or has existed; according to the other, whether it is correct or not. According to the first mode of application, we are said to have conscience [that is, consciousness] of an act inasmuch as we know that the act has been placed or has not been placed, as happens in the common manner of speaking when one says: "As far as my conscience [consciousness] is concerned, this has not taken place; that is, I do not know or I did not know whether this took place." It is according to this manner of speaking that we understand the passage in Genesis (43:22): "We cannot tell [non est in conscientiis nostris] who put it (the money) in our bags"; and the passage in Ecclesiastes (7:23): "For thy conscience knoweth that thou also hast often spoken evil of others." It is according to this that conscience is said to bear witness of something, as in Romans (9:1): "my conscience bearing me witness..."
According to the second mode of application, by which knowledge is applied to an act, so that one knows whether the act is right or not, there is a double course. There is one according to which we are directed through the habit of scientific knowledge to do or not to do something. There is a second according to which the act, after it has taken place, is examined with reference to the habit of knowledge to see whether it was right or not. This double course in matters of action is distinguished according to the double course which exists in things speculative, that is, the process of discovery and the process of judging. For the process by which through scientific knowledge we look for what should be done, as it were taking counsel with ourselves, is similar to discovery, through which we proceed from principles to conclusions. The other process, through which we examine those things which already have been done and consider whether they are right, is like the process of judging, through which we reduce conclusions to principles.

We use the name conscience for both of these modes of application. For, in so far as knowledge is applied to an act, as directive of that act, conscience is said to prod or urge or bind. But, in so far as knowledge is applied to an act, by way of examining things which have already taken place, conscience is said to accuse or cause remorse, when that which has been done is found to be out of harmony with the knowledge according to which it is examined; or to defend or excuse, when that which has been done is found to have proceeded according to the form of the knowledge.

But we must bear in mind that in the first application, in which scientific knowledge is applied to an act to know whether it has taken place, it is application to a particular act of sensitive knowledge, as of memory, through which we recall what was done, or of sense, through which we perceive the particular act in which we are now engaged. But in the second and third applications, by which we deliberate about what should be done, or examine what has already been done, the operative habits of reason are applied to an act. These are the habit of synderesis and the habit of wisdom, which perfect higher reason, and the habit of scientific knowledge, which perfects lower reason. Of these, either all are applied at the same time, or only one of them is applied. We examine what we have done according to these habits, and, according to them, we take counsel about what should be done. Examination, however, concerns not only what has been done, but also what is to be done. But counsel concerns only what is to be done.
In the Second Article We Ask: CAN CONSCIENCE BE MISTAKEN?

It seems that it cannot, for…

7th Objection: In all things, the rule which regulates other things must be infallibly correct. But conscience is a rule of human actions. Therefore, conscience must always be correct.

To the contrary:

1: In John (16:2) we read: "The hour cometh, when whosoever killeth you, will think that he doth a service to God." Therefore, their conscience told those who killed the Apostles that they would please God by this action. But this was a mistake. Therefore, conscience makes mistakes.

2: Conscience includes comparison. But reason can be deceived when it makes comparisons. Therefore, conscience can make mistakes.

REPLY:

As is clear from what has been said, conscience is nothing but the application of knowledge to some special act. Error, however, can occur in this application in two ways; in one, because that which is applied has error within it, and, in the other, because the application is faulty. Thus, in using a syllogism, mistakes can happen in two ways: either from the use of false premises, or from faulty construction of the syllogism. But this use of something false takes place only in one of the premises and not in the other. For, as has been said, through conscience the knowledge of synderesis and of higher and lower reason are applied to the examination of a particular act.

However, since the act is particular and the judgment of synderesis is universal, the judgment of synderesis can be applied to the act only if some particular judgment is used as the minor premise. Sometimes, higher reason furnishes this particular judgment; sometimes, lower reason does. Thus, the act of conscience is the result of a kind of particular syllogism. For example, if the judgment of synderesis expresses this statement: "I must not do anything which is forbidden by the law of God," and if the knowledge of higher reason presents this minor premise: "Sexual intercourse with this..."
woman is forbidden by the law of God," the application of conscience will be made by concluding: "I must abstain from this intercourse."

Error has no place in the general judgment of synderesis, as is clear from what we have said earlier,†10 but a mistake can occur in the judgment of higher reason, as happens when one judges something to be licit or illicit which is not, as heretics who believe that oaths are forbidden by God. Therefore, mistakes occur in conscience because of the error which existed in the higher part of reason. Similarly, error can occur in conscience because of error which exists in the lower part of reason, as happens when one is mistaken about civil norms of what is just or unjust, good or bad. Error also occurs because conscience does not make a correct application to acts. For, as in constructing speculative syllogisms one can neglect the proper form of argumentation, and thus arrive at a false conclusion, so he can do the same in practical syllogisms, as has been said.†11

Still, we must remember that in some things conscience can never make a mistake, namely, when the particular act to which conscience is applied has a universal judgment about it in synderesis. For, as in speculative matters, error does not occur when we are dealing with particular conclusions which are derived directly from universal principles and expressed in the same terms— as for instance, no one is deceived in the judgment: "This whole is greater than its part," just as no one is deceived in the judgment: "Every whole is greater than its part"— so, too, no conscience can err in the judgments: "I should not love God" or "Some evil should be done." For, in each of these syllogisms, the speculative as well as the practical, the major premise is self-evident in so far as it exists in the universal judgment, and the minor, by means of which the particular predication of identity is made, is also self-evident. This is the case when one says: "Every whole is greater than its part. This whole is a whole. Therefore, it is greater than its part."

Answers to Difficulties:

Reply to 7th objection: Not conscience, but synderesis, is the first rule of human activity. Conscience, however, is a kind of rule which is itself regulated. Hence, it is not strange that it can make mistakes.
In the Third Article We Ask: DOES CONSCIENCE BIND?

It seems that it does not, for …

3rd Objection: One is bound only by something superior. But the conscience of a man is not superior to the man himself. Therefore, a man is not bound by his conscience.

To the contrary:

1. The Gloss on Ecclesiastes (7:23), "Your conscience knows," says: "No one who is guilty is set free by this judge."†1 But the command of a judge is binding. Therefore, the dictate of conscience binds.

2. On Romans (14:23), "All that is not of faith . . .," Origen says: "The Apostle desires that I say, think, or do nothing against conscience."†2 Therefore, conscience binds.

REPLY:

Conscience is certainly binding. But, to see how it binds, we must bear in mind that binding, taken metaphorically from corporeal things and applied to spiritual, means imposing necessity. For he who is bound must necessarily stay in the place where he is bound, and the power to go off to other places is taken away from him. Hence, it is clear that binding has no place in things which have internal necessity. For we cannot say that fire is bound to rise, although it is necessary for it to rise. Binding, then, has place only in things which are necessary with a necessity imposed by something else.

Now, there is a twofold necessity which can be imposed by an outside agent. One is the necessity of coercion, through which someone with absolute necessity does that which the agent forces him to do. Otherwise, it is not properly called coercion, but inducement. The other necessity is conditional, on the presupposition, that is, of an end to be attained. In this way, necessity is so imposed on one that, if he does not do a certain thing, he will not receive his reward.

The first necessity, that of coercion, has no place in movements of the will, but only in physical things, because by its nature the will is free from coercion. The second necessity, however, can be
imposed on the will, so that one must, for example, choose this means if he is to acquire this good, or avoid this evil. For, in such matters, avoiding evil is considered equivalent to achieving some good, as is clear from the Philosopher.†3

Moreover, as necessity of coercion is imposed on physical things by means of some action, so, too, it is by means of some action that conditional necessity is imposed on the will. But the action by which the will is moved is the command of the one ruling or governing. Consequently, the Philosopher says †4 that by means of his command the king is the source of movement.

Similarly, too, where the will is concerned, the relation between the command of a ruler and the imposition of the kind of obligation by which the will can be bound is like the relation between physical action and the binding of physical things through the necessity of coercion. However, the action of a physical agent never imposes necessity on another thing except by the contact of its action with the object on which it is acting. So, no one is bound by the command of a king or lord unless the command reaches him who is commanded; and it reaches him through knowledge of it.

Hence, no one is bound by a precept except through his knowledge of the precept. Therefore, one who is not capable of the knowledge of a precept is not bound by the precept. Nor is one who is ignorant of a precept bound to carry out that precept except in so far as he is required to know it. If, however, he is not required to know it, and does not know it, he is in no way bound by the precept. Thus, as in physical things the physical agent acts only by means of contact, so in spiritual things a precept binds only by means of knowledge. Therefore, just as it is the same power by which touch acts and by which the power of the agent acts, since touch acts only by the power of the agent and the power of the agent acts only through the mediation of touch, so it is the same power by which the precept binds and by which knowledge binds, since the knowledge binds only through the power of the precept, and the precept only through the knowledge. Consequently, since conscience is nothing else but the application of knowledge to an act, it is obvious that conscience is said to bind by the power of a divine precept.

Answers to Difficulties:

Reply to 3rd objection: Although man is not higher than himself, the one whose precept he knows is higher than man. This is how he is bound by his conscience.
In the Fourth Article We Ask: DOES A FALSE CONSCIENCE BIND?

It seems that it does not, for…

3rd objection: According to Ambrose, sin is "a transgression of the divine law and disobedience to the heavenly commands."†3 Therefore, whoever disobeys the divine law sins. But a false conscience makes a man disobey the divine power when, for instance, his conscience tells him to do something which is forbidden by the divine law. Therefore, a false conscience leads one into sin if he follows it, rather than binds him under pain of sin if he does not follow it.

To the Contrary:

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3: Sin is principally in the will. But whoever decides to transgress a divine commandment has an evil will. Therefore, he sins. Whoever believes that something is a command and decides to violate it wills to break the law. Therefore, he sins. Moreover, one who has a false conscience, whether in things intrinsically evil or in anything at all, believes that what is opposed to his conscience is contrary to the law of God. Therefore, if he decides to do that, he decides to act contrary to the law of God, and, so, he sins. Consequently, conscience, no matter how false it is, obliges under pain of sin.

4: According to Damascene: "Conscience is the law of our understanding."†6 But to act contrary to a law is a sin. Therefore, it is also a sin to act against conscience in any way.

5: One is bound by a precept. But that which conscience dictates becomes a precept. Therefore, conscience binds, no matter how false it may be.

REPLY:

There are different opinions on this matter. For some †7 say that conscience can be mistaken both in things which are intrinsically evil and also with regard to indifferent things. Furthermore, a mistaken conscience does not bind in things which are intrinsically evil, but does bind with regard to
indifferent things. But those who say this do not seem to understand in what sense conscience imposes an obligation. For conscience is said to bind in so far as one sins if he does not follow his conscience, but not in the sense that he acts correctly if he does follow it. Otherwise, a counsel would be called obligatory, for one who fulfills a counsel acts correctly. Still, we do not say that we are bound to counsels, since one who neglects what is of counsel does not sin. But we say that we are bound to precepts because, if we do not keep them, we commit sin. Therefore, conscience is not said to bind in the sense that what one does according to such a conscience will be good, but in the sense that in not following it he will sin.

Moreover, it does not seem possible for a man to avoid sin if his conscience, no matter how mistaken, declares that something which is indifferent or intrinsically evil is a command of God, and with such a conscience he decides to do the opposite. For, as far as he can, he has by this very fact decided not to observe the law of God. Consequently, he sins mortally. Accordingly, although such a false conscience can be changed, nevertheless, as long as it remains, it is binding, since one who acts against it necessarily commits a sin.

However, a correct conscience and a false conscience bind in different ways. The correct conscience binds absolutely and for an intrinsic reason; the false binds in a qualified way and for an extrinsic reason.

I say that a correct conscience binds absolutely because it binds without qualification and in every circumstance. For, if one’s conscience tells him to avoid adultery, he cannot change that conscience without sin, since he would commit a serious sin in the very error of changing such a conscience. Moreover, as long as it remains, it cannot actually be set aside without sin. Thus, it binds absolutely and in every event. But a false conscience binds only in a qualified way, since it binds conditionally. For one whose conscience tells him he must fornicate is not obliged in such a way that he cannot omit the fornication without sin except on condition that such a conscience remains. But this situation can be changed, and without sin. Hence, such a conscience does not oblige in every event. For something can happen, namely, a change of conscience, and, when this takes place, one is no longer bound. That which is only conditional is said to be qualified.

I also say that a correct conscience binds for an intrinsic reason, and a false conscience binds for an extrinsic reason. This is clear from the following. For one who wishes or desires something because of something else desires that because of which he desires the others for an intrinsic reason, and the other for an extrinsic reason, as it were. Thus, one who loves wine because of its sweetness loves
sweetness for an intrinsic reason, and wine for an extrinsic reason. But one who has a false conscience and believes that it is correct (otherwise, he would not be mistaken), clings to his false conscience because of the correctness he believes is there, and, strictly speaking, clings to a correct conscience, but one which is false accidentally, as it were, in so far as this conscience, which he believes to be correct, happens to be false. It is for this reason that, strictly speaking, he is bound by a correct conscience, but accidentally by a false conscience.

We can find this solution from what the Philosopher says †8 when he asks almost the same question, that is, whether one is guilty of excess only if he departs from right reason, or also if he departs from a mistaken reason. His solution is that one who departs from right reason goes to excess essentially, and one who departs from mistaken reason goes to excess accidentally. And a man departs absolutely from the former and with some qualification from the latter, for what is essential is absolute, and what is accidental is qualified.

Answers to Difficulties:

Reply to 3rd objection: A false conscience which is mistaken in things which are intrinsically evil commands something which is contrary to the law of God. Nevertheless, it says that what it commands is the law of God. Accordingly, one who acts against such a conscience becomes a kind of transgressor of the law of God, although one who follows such a conscience and acts according to it acts against the law of God and sins mortally. For there was sin in the error itself, since it happened because of ignorance of that which one should have known.