

Should you trust your conscience?

Philip Bitar

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In our modern world, the individual is held in great respect, as conveyed in the American Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

As a consequence of respect for the individual, the idea has developed that a person's conscience is sacred. The conscience is conceived to lie at the core of a person's psyche and must be respected.

Freedom of conscience

The idea of freedom of conscience can be traced back to the Indian king Asoka, of the 200s BCE, and to the Apostle Paul. Here's a quote of Paul in 1 Corinthians 10.29:

For why should my freedom [*eleutheria*] be judged by another's conscience [*suneideseos*]?

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_of_conscience#History_of_suppression_and_development

The idea of freedom of conscience appears in the Virginia Declaration of Rights, which was written by George Mason and was adopted by the Virginia Constitutional Convention on June 12, 1776:

A Declaration of Rights made by the representatives of the good people of Virginia, assembled in full and free convention, which rights do pertain to them and their posterity, as the basis and foundation of government.

Section 16. That religion, or the duty which we owe to our Creator, and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence; and therefore all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, **according to the dictates of conscience**; and that it is the mutual duty of all to practise Christian forbearance, love, and charity toward each other.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virginia_Declaration_of_Rights#Text

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights cites freedom of conscience as a right:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion....

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_of_conscience#Overview

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_Declaration_of_Human_Rights

The idea of freedom of conscience is realized in the notion of conscientious objector:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conscientious_objector

During the years encompassing World War 1 through the Vietnam War, the United States government imposed a military draft on young men, and the idea developed that a person should be excused from the draft if they were a conscientious objector — that is, if serving in the military violated their most deeply held dispositions, as determined by their conscience.

Note that a natural corollary is that a person should be excused from paying a complementary portion of their taxes — taxes that are conceived to pay for government activities that violate a person's conscience. But, not surprisingly, the courts did not extend the concept of conscientious objection to the payment of taxes.

Psychopath

It is said that the problem with a psychopath is that they have no conscience and that, as a result, they lack a normal inhibition to committing crimes and harming others.

Role of conscience

Where does a person's conscience come from and why should it be considered sacred?

Suppose that a Nazi has a conscience about associating freely and on equal terms with Jews? Suppose that a white American racist has a conscience about associating freely and on equal terms with black people?

Or suppose that you're considering the possibility of doing something that your conscience forbids you to do. Suppose that you think deeply about the issue for many weeks, and in the process you consult respected friends and other respected sources of information. Suppose that you eventually determine that your reason indicates that the wisest course is to perform the action in question. Should you act according to your conscience or your reason?

As an example, suppose that the action in question is to leave your childhood religion for another religion, say, leaving Islam for Christianity or vice versa. Or, similarly, suppose that the action in question is to leave your childhood religion for atheism or, vice versa, to leave childhood atheism for a religion, say, Christianity.

In view of the foregoing examples, the following question emerges:

Should we trust our conscience?

Meeting format

At the meeting, we'll consider what everyone has to say about this question. During this discussion, I'll present my theory of mind to explain where the conscience comes from and what its proper role is in our thinking and in our decision-making.

For the interested reader, I present the main facets of my theory of mind in the following meeting agenda:

How does our mind work?

<http://www.meetup.com/Why-human-life-makes-sense/events/138613022>