

Conscience, Identity, Reconciliation

By Prof. Friedhelm Lamprecht

In the same way that a mountain range is a group of mountains, and a stream is an abundance of waters, so conscience is a conglomeration of knowledge. The word itself refers to a pooling together of knowledge (*German: 'Ge-wissen', English: 'Con-science'*). The conscience presupposes a knowledge of responsible action, derived from individual or social norms, whether to do something or not to do it. It has something also to do with the knowledge of the effect on others, which in turn implies empathy and the faculty of anticipation. Dogma, conventions and value judgements, based on our environment, upbringing and habits, shape the patterns of our actions. There is considerable disagreement in literature about the role of the genes in the forming of conscience, despite the fact that the evolutionary ethic is based upon the premise that morally relevant structures of impetus and behaviour are encoded in our genome. Paul describes conscience as the organ of realisation of the natural, moral law contained in the Mosaic law.

While the extreme positions are relatively clearly described, the grey area in the middle is much harder to grasp. Let us think for example of the AIG managers of the world's largest insurance company with billions (thousand millions) of losses, where the managers, during the same loss-making year (2008) awarded themselves bonus points, amounting to millions. Of course we also have similar examples in Germany. Goethe says on this point: 'Nothing seems dishonest for those who are winning'. What is missing in these individuals is, so to speak, a sense of shame, as an expression of a guilty conscience. Education is

no shield against consciencelessness; even in highly intelligent people, a completely perverse sense of responsibility can result. According to Immanuel Kant,

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consciencelessness is not a lack of conscience, but rather the tendency, not to be directed by its verdict. He sees conscience as the awareness of having an 'inner courtroom' in the human being, where duty speaks up as the categorical imperative, as a judge so to speak. Surrounding the concept of consciencelessness, we find a number of concepts with easily distinguishable meanings, such as coldness, unkindness, inconsiderateness, heartlessness, thoughtlessness, negligence and lack of restraint, to name but a few examples. The famous psycho-pathologist Robert D. Hare, in his book *'Without Conscience'*, subtitled *'The Disturbing World of the Psychopaths Among Us'*, essentially describes criminals of his time as prison-psychologists, and reintroduces the concept of the psychopath, who, according to K. Schneider does not suffer by himself, but under whom others suffer. In his book, drawing upon his long term experience of prison work, murderers and violent criminals are described who lack any sense of guilt. If we look at the criteria for the antisocial personality-structure in our present system of diagnosis (ICD-10, F.60.2), we find there the following descriptive criteria:

1. A thick-skinned detachment from the feelings of other people and a lack of empathy
2. Clear and continuous irresponsibility and disregard for social norms, rules and obligations
3. An incapability for long-term relationships
4. A very limited tolerance of frustration
5. An incapability for experiencing awareness of guilt and learning from experience
6. A tendency to blame others or offer superficial rationalizations for one's own behaviour, thereby bringing oneself into conflict with society

7. A continuous irritability

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As to whether this irritability is the expression of a suspicion that something in their behaviour is not right remains unclear. In any case, these people seem to have no conscience. At this point I may be permitted a small departure dealing with Nazism (National Socialism) and its consciencelessness. In this case, the concept of the corruption of the conscience is also implied, as for example when Pastor Friedrich Benesch writes in 1934 concerning the religious climate in Germany: “And the question, whether or not Christianity, whether or not Jesus Christ fulfils the meaning, the preservation and the transformation of this Germanic-Nordic spirituality – this question stands before us today with the same depth and power as it did 2000 years ago. We see that both churches have failed to fulfil this task, and if one answers that question in the affirmative, then Jesus Christ's most damning judgement actually falls on the churches, not on the Germanic-Nordic spirituality. If one answers the question in the negative, then the blame must fall more on the German nation, which was even then not up to freeing itself from the – in this case – foreign kind of religion and thereby serving the fulfilment of the Germanic-Nordic spirituality. Nazism has set itself up as the trustee of the Germanic spirituality of the German nation; it sees everything that happens only from this point of view,” and [Benesch] ends with the sentence: “All of us and with us Adolf Hitler await this man. And this man will decide, not whether the German nation is Protestant or Catholic or Neo-Pagan or Nazi, because it is already that, but rather whether or not it is Christian.”

To the principle of leadership belong virtues – in themselves positive – such as obedience, diligence, dutifulness, the spirit of orderliness and fitness for action. As we are aware, these virtues were then abused for conscienceless purposes within the Nazi ideology. We

remember the numerous Nazi trials with statements like: “But I was only doing my duty”, or the concentration camp warder Hanna from [Bernhard Schlink's] *“The Reader”* (*“Der*

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Vorleser”), who, in response to the question as to why she had not opened the door of the church in which women and children were being burned to death replies: “But I had to look after them.” Here, it seems not even to have produced an inner conflict in the sense of a collision of interests, as is the case for so many others. The so-called 'wholesome popular sentiment' (*gesundes Volksempfinden*) had in many people taken the place of the individual conscience, whereas it was previously thought that the brutalities of the Third Reich had only to do with the Germans' authoritarian state thinking; likewise did Hannah Arendt describe things in her book about the banality of evil, which psychologist Stanley Milgram described as coming very near to the truth, following his ground-breaking experiments at the beginning of the 1960s. The most fundamental discovery of his research, namely the fact that completely ordinary people, who were simply fulfilling their duty and harboured no feelings of personal enmity, could, through [the presence of] an authoritatively posing experiment-leader, be made to take an active part in an extermination project involving electric shocks of up to 450 volts – this project took the form of a 'learning experiment', in which, for each wrong answer, the voltage was increased by 15 volts. The results showed that, via a pseudo-scientific authority, three quarters of the average population can be made to torture and even kill in unconditional obedience an innocent person who is completely unknown to them. Only few people have sufficient steadfastness to actually stand up and oppose the authority.

Such collisions of interests are nowadays commonplace in medicine. In post-disaster medicine, for example, when there is a gross disproportion between the numbers of rescuers and people needing treatment, a so-called triage results, meaning that help is

given [first] to those having the greatest chances of survival. Under economic constraints, similar discussions take place in the most intensive care hospitals. I recall the case of an

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haemophiliac who suffered from a rare factor-deficiency and whose treatment – this was at a time when we still used the Deutsch-Mark – would have cost 700,000 DM. When he came back a year later, he was turned away, which made headlines in the press. When one then hears that wardens to watch over suicidal patients are dismissed for economic reasons (in this case we are dealing with 80 DM per night) and if one of the patients jumps out of the window, the question arises as to who should have a guilty conscience: the medical director, the administration-manager, those who deal directly with the patients, the medical pastor, the nursing staff, and so on. The lower one descends through the hierarchy, the more guilty is the conscience, yet at the same time the more powerless are the people involved. In the book *“Medicine and Conscience”*, subtitled *“If Dignity became a Value”*, on page 214 we read “that external influences such as money, competition, legal protection, career plans, economic consideration and workplace anxiety can easily affect either directly or indirectly medical decision-making processes for a certain treatment. In practical medicine, market shares are increasingly fought over. There are numerous examples of the fact that different medical decisions being taken in cases of equal or similar levels of disease “cannot be explained by medical expertise.” On the one hand, this leads to treatments being postponed in the case of budget-exhaustion, as similarly in the case of emergency patients who are turned away. On the other hand, the issue of reimbursement may be prominent as an incentive, to reach a budget goal expectation. Diagnosis-related groups (DRG's), flat-rate charges per case, and the case-mix-index are mentioned here only in passing. In any case, it becomes clear that, behind the patient's back, the economy submits to medical-nursing bargaining. Here we are only at the beginning of a development process. Other developments that challenge our conscience

are the abuse of embryo-research, voluntary euthanasia and age restriction for certain treatments, to name but the most important. "Healing, a Question of Conscience", was a

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recent headline in the *Zeit* magazine (2006, *Die Zeit*, issue no. 27, page 137) concerning the now successful but still controversial therapy involving stem cells from aborted foetuses, here in the example of stem cells being used in serious burn wounds for the development of new skin.

Let us now turn towards the opposite pole: having thus far concerned ourselves with deficient or dubious guilt feelings, we find on the reverse side there is a reinforced consciousness of guilt, to the extent of what is termed sin-mania. The sufferer with sin-mania accuses himself without reason of having committed the most heinous crimes. Small offences or even mere inner temptations are blown out of all proportion into unpardonable sins. For the sufferer, (Bleuler, page 33) "not only will the patient [himself] be punished in a frightful way in this and his coming life, but also all of his dependants, indeed the whole world". We are dealing therefore with the morbid belief that one has burdened himself with heavy moral guilt. This may be triggered by a single improper thought. However, this improper thought bears no relation to the extent of the delusional self-blame. Hereby, the voices of the patient's conscience make themselves heard, causing the patient's thoughts and actions to be subject to a fair or malicious critique: "Sometimes, warning and luring voices, friendly and hostile voices divide themselves into two persons." Although these symptoms are heavily paraphrased, they convey a richly faceted contact with guilt, particularly in the field of depression. Guilt is triggered by an overstepping of the norm. As to whether this becomes a guilt feeling depends on socialisation and the structure of conscience developing from this. Spinoza writes in his 'Ethics', part four, theorem 44: "For we see how people are sometimes so taken by an object that they

believe it to be in front of their own eyes, even if it is not present. And when this happens to a person who is not asleep, we say he is insane or foolish. By contrast, if a greedy

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person thinks of nothing but profit and money, and an ambitious person thinks of glory and so on, these are not seen as insane, rather only as tiresome, and generally speaking they are despised. In reality, however, greed, ambition, sensuality and so on are types of insanity, even though they are not counted as diseases.”

A baby is at first amoral; longing and desire for security, warmth and food first prepare the way for the learning process, in which is seen from the parents' reactions what is good and what is bad, and from which the fear of the conscience then develops. Freud says in *“Civilisation and its Discontents”* that evil is therefore that for which one is punished by a lack of love (page 484). Only the development of the conscious ego is able to restrain animalistic behaviour. Spiritual functions are hence more easily accessible for the conscious ego the higher they stand in social and ethical value. The unconscious introspective function of the ego is placed by Freud in the same context as the phenomenon of the conscience. This self-critical part of the ego, seen as an indicator of something higher in us, as the super-ego in Freud's structural model, eliminate judgement. The predominantly unconscious part of the super-ego becomes comprehensible through the conflicts of the ego and adoption of parental rules, bans and standards at a time when the reflexive sides of the ego have not yet been developed, which happens approximately during the fifth year of life. The value standards of the surrounding society will be integrated into the super-ego. The super-ego is also the carrier of the “ego-ideal”; it effects that which ideally should happen and does not have only forbidding and punishing functions; rather it participates predominantly unconsciously in

mediating between the impetus and the actual opportunities of the external world. The ego-ideal is important for the feeling of self-confidence, the capacity for enthusiasm and

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the regulation of self-worth. If this is eliminated or has not been developed in the first place, then punishing tendencies within the super-ego will gain the upper hand, which can lead via lack of self-confidence, feelings of worthlessness and sin-mania to suicide. A moralistic masochism with its continuous desire for punishment may also develop from this. For Jung, the conscience as the *vox dei* ('voice of god', Spengler) goes beyond Freud's internalized representation of collective standards; the conscience as the ethical yardstick measures what is actually possible and enables the person to unfold in a self-responsible way and helps him to become that which he has the potential to become. Jung writes on this theme (1951, paragraph 84): "The idea of good and bad (...) is the prerequisite of moralistic judgement. It is a logically equivalent pair of opposites, which as such forms a *conditio sine qua non* ('a condition, without which it could not be') of any cognitive faculty (...). From this viewpoint, one should realise that good and evil as the co-existing halves of a moralistic judgement have not been derived one from another, but rather are always already in existence together." If one feels guilty because of sinful behaviour, this can in the deepest sense not be forgiven by any human being, because something remains behind, which goes beyond the interpersonal sphere, namely the awareness of an objective order that becomes audible in the conscience and can only be acquitted by this authority (*vox dei*). In any case, the point of reference that guides the conscience is situated outside of the interpersonal realm. In the procedures of the conscience, we are concerned not only with an intellectual recognition of a generally moral standard, but rather with the fact that the person is in practice struck by a moral demand. Being struck is part of it. Readiness to be called ensures the sensitization of the

conscience; since Heidegger, the method of the successive and considered uncovering of the essential has also been termed the phenomenological approach towards the encounter. According to him, man is inevitably guilty, because finite existence cannot

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realize all of the opportunities that present themselves: by grasping one, it misses another and because of that becomes guilty. According to Heidegger, it is part of conscience to allow oneself to be engaged in the right way in an encounter, and such a view of conscience can be gained neither through moral law, nor by way of the moral code in the religious sphere.

The announcement and language of the conscience cannot only be heard in a figurative sense as “the voice of the conscience”, which on account of its forcefulness sometimes leaves no choice for the person concerned. The very restriction of possible choices, out of fear of love deprivation, as is often found in depressions, can go as far as to induce acoustic hallucinations. Condrau has shown that scrupulous people are especially keen of hearing in their attempt to escape being guilty in any way, for that which is expected of them. Often these patients see this as a religious issue and try to gain relief through religious practices, even to the point of confessions, although here a psychotherapeutic approach would be necessary. The knowledge of conscience results from the perception of a call, a question, a challenge and the readiness to respond to it. Hence it becomes obvious that having a conscience is carried out in the sphere of human encounter. The improper conscience is neurotically restricted, whereas the proper conscience is characterized by greater degrees of freedom of action. In a free and open existence, the range of ways of being addressed is so diverse that the call – due to the diversity of opportunities of calling – is not localised by being announced in a loud voice and is less definite. Martin Heidegger writes in “Existence and Time”: “Conscience should be the readiness to be called”, which Medard Boss agrees with, in that he equates “having a

conscience” with “allowing oneself to be engaged in the right way in all encounters”, which presupposes knowledge of the right kind of encounter. Such a notion of conscience – as

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previously said – cannot be gained through a moral law. It denotes a person freed from neurotic guilt. He does not become guiltless thereby, but rather he remains guilty of his non-completed tasks in the present and the future. This remaining guilty has lost every burden and oppressiveness. Here, then, we see the contrast between the neurotic person's restricted room for movement, with his oppressive guilt feelings, and the relatively sane people, who are open to what life and the world presents in the way of opportunities for encounter and reveals in terms of opportunities for decisions and choices. The depressive person, anxiously fleeing from being guilty, precisely thereby remains guilty of many things in his life. The insensitivity of the conscience in general indicates a superficial approach to life. Paul refers to this in Romans chapter 1, verse 18: “[those] who suppress the truth in unrighteousness”. Knowledge supports the conscience and can lead, via expansion of knowledge, to new insights on value. If one has guilt feelings, because he has made a mess of something, the more precise term would be repentance. To grapple with one's guilt would after all mean the assumption of responsibility for one's behaviour. While, in the case of the sane person, guilt is followed by the guilt-feeling, the depressive person often has guilt feelings without guilt. Real guilt cannot be comprehended in its totality via the categories of psychoanalysis into repression and realisation. Martin Buber writes on this theme: “I have seen three people, who were important and dear to me, struck down by lengthy illnesses, because of their even if only occasional failure in the days of an acute communal debt, in which the role of the psychogenic element was scarcely to be estimated, yet unmistakable in its action. The first of these three people refused to bow to the judgement of his own spirit, to confess to self-contradiction; the

second rebelled against the fact that the offence he remembered as being only trifling should be acknowledged by him as serious through being linked with a very serious overall chain [of offences]. The third however did not want himself to be forgiven by God for a

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momentary blunder, because he had not forgiven himself for it. All three of them seem to me to have been in need of professional help.” Guilt without guilt-feeling leads to increasing brutalization and ever new guilt, as we have seen in the example of the Third Reich, in terrorism, and so on. Guilt-feeling without guilt can in the case of depressive patients lead to increasing despair and to suicide. Genuine guilt-induced guilt feelings without a burdening of the conscience often lead as an insurmountable problem to psychic and psychosomatic illnesses, to dulling and despair. Genuine guilt is the consequence of conscious wrong decisions for personal gain; vague guilt feelings then must lead to a definite acknowledgement of guilt and be expressed in a confession, which has an inherent transforming power. Here it may therefore be the task of the psychotherapist to deepen also the genuine guilt feelings to [effect] a burdening of the conscience, in order to let the person experience, through repentance, prayers and confessions, the wonder of forgiveness and the renewal of the personality in connection with it. While preparing this lecture, I came upon a book about the ordeal by fire by Werner Bergengruen, which some of you probably know. I will read once more the key passage: “In wartimes, the councillor Grieben often had to be on guard in the townhall by night. His wife Barbara became rumoured to have had a nightly affair with a lover called Schwenkhusen. Her husband demanded that his wife must pass the ordeal, that is to say, carry a glowing hot iron in her bare hands. Barbara confessed, believed that she had received God's forgiveness, and passed through the test without her hands being burnt. Her alleged lover, at first believed to be dead, returned some time later from the war, safe and sound. Their old affair begins anew. Barbara, who through her ordeal by fire had been raised almost to the status of a

saint, had to mark the anniversary of her divinely passed fire ordeal. When the cold iron as a symbol of remembrance was once more laid in her hands, she collapses, dying, with the exclamation, 'I am burning'." The meaning of the story is that the effect of the fire was

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annulled through the belief in God's forgiveness, despite the existence of guilt. The metaphysical prevails. The belief, the facts remain incidental. The guilt, which Barbara actually brought upon herself following Schwenkhusen's return, changed a cold iron into fire.

The conscience is so to speak the witness of personal identity, or rather also non-identity, approximately in the sense of: 'what do I care about my gossiping yesterday?', which could also be described as a denial of one's identity; for experience and knowledge of one's own identity reveal themselves to the self and the social world in the execution of one's entire life. The conscience can also be considered as a protection in the function of a guardian for our identity. Why do we require such a function? It is the flip side of freedom that we pose a danger to ourselves. If we think of Luther's words, "Here I am, I cannot do otherwise", then it becomes obvious that identity and conscience are inextricably intertwined in our subjectivity. From the conscience grows the strength for continuous self-renewal. The conscience accompanies us in temporal development, looking behind, looking ahead and of course to the present, thus touching on our development process. Through the conscience a person becomes responsible for his own person; he can adhere to himself or distance himself and thereby be at odds with himself through the question: can you wish to become identified with this opinion or this mode of behaviour? Where the identity and the existence of the person are concerned, it becomes obvious that the freedom of the conscience must be protected. My identity actually reveals itself in the fact that I have previously seen and handled things differently than I would do today, although I

am still the same person. The potentialities of the ego lead, via their prioritization, to a guilty conscience, as for example when an aspiring new graduate realises that he is eschewing the opportunities of encounter with a wife and children, or at least severely

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limiting them. The awkward feeling comes from the non-apprehended opportunities and only disappears if later on he seeks to talk with his grown-up children, and indeed to do so not in the sense of a self-justification, but rather in order to generate understanding of his wife and children.

What very often happens is unfortunate: that the non-apprehended opportunities become suppressed and thus the stimulus for change fails to appear. With the notion of responsibility, the dialectic of the individual and social constitution of morality, of identity and likewise of time, which are closed linked together, becomes obvious. If one discovers in himself negative aspects that cannot be hidden, then the self image and the own identity are at stake and the regulation of self-worth reaches a breaking point. Only he who can become guilty can also become good, whereby the capacity for guilt belongs to the *conditio humana* (human condition), and finally, in order to escape from the bottleneck, one is directed to the cycle of guilt acknowledgement, remorse and reversal of direction; this is easier for a Christian if he can accept forgiveness, by means of which the development process of his own identity is again initiated. Guilt likewise is always a question of identity: not 'Who has done this?', but rather, 'Who was I when I did this, and what would I like to be?' Here, the ego-ideal comes into play, and, through combining both the life stories from the past and the present, the identity is once again fashioned. Horntrich writes on this theme: "When guilt becomes to this extent a question of the own identity, then our guilt is freed from a fixation on the accumulated errors that we drag around together with our past, and becomes instead a question of reversal of direction and forgiveness."

At the end of the day, we are all sinners and remain dependent on forgiveness. Despite our sinfulness, Christ has reconciled us with God.

(Translation by Erika and Lois Cordelia Bülow-Osborn)