The Opacity of Moral Selfhood: The Fit between Conviction and Moral Courage

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Our lives and identities are swept up from time to time in moral undertows that can overwhelm us, moments of shame, remorse and guilt that force us to question the meaning and measure of our commitments. Alternately, we can be buoyed up by convictions that, like a wave, threaten to sweep away everything that gets in their way. Although metaphorical, this brief description speaks to one of the most telling, if not more complicated, features of moral life, namely, that we experience morality as participants in something larger than ourselves, and so much of our commitments are not at our immediate disposal to rectify or remedy. This observation is nothing new, and has appeared in manifold forms throughout countless moral theories over the last 2500 years. The argument I wish to pursue here, however, locates this complexity in a moral concept that has all but disappeared from serious moral analysis in the last century, that of the moral conscience. The reasons for this neglect are both multiple and complicated, and I do not wish to pursue them here in much detail. Rather, I want to sketch out a new way of understanding an old concept, and then show the extent to which this new paradigm forces us to re-consider the integral connection between conscience and moral courage.

So how can conscience elucidate the moral complexity of selfhood, and what bearing does this have on moral courage? Agreeing with the work of contemporary scholars like Douglas Langston’s *Conscience and Other Virtues*, my basic argument is that we should reject the idea of conscience as some timeless and infallible moral insight,
The more we see conscience in terms of some internal entity that unfailingly regulates moral behavior, the more we mitigate any real grasp of its origin or relevancy. And as a consequence, the less we understand of its relation to moral courage. But if we can no longer view our conscience in terms of some special faculty whose judgments are infallible, then how should we view it? Following the basic outline of Hegel’s interpretation, supplemented with work in moral psychology and philosophy of emotion, I argue that we need to see conscience in terms of a perpetually incomplete narrative of moral integration and self-recognition, which has a tendency to obscure the complexity of our moral commitments and relationships just as much as it does solidify them. If this interpretation is correct, we need to re-think the common conception of moral courage, which is exemplified by the person who stands for their convictions against all adversity, and see it as something much more subtle, namely, a willingness to risk critically assessing the grounds of our own convictions.

The traditional depiction of conscience trades on its description as an infallible moral insight or intuition. This characterization re-appears in one form or another throughout the Occidental tradition: Cicero, Aquinas, Descartes, Rousseau, Kant, Fichte, Butler, and even Mill. The problem with this approach is that it assumes the single term ‘conscience’ corresponds to a specific faculty or capacity, whether this is the natural light of reason (Cicero), innate voice of nature (Rousseau), the authority of practical reason (Kant) or a mass of subjective feeling (Mill). Following Nietzsche we can say the single term ‘conscience’ is assumed to designate a single phenomenon. This is one of the main

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reasons the ‘faculty’ conception of conscience continues to this day. We owe it to Hegel, however, and not Nietzsche, to be the first thinker to have clearly seen through this confusion, disclosing conscience as a dynamic process of internalization that speaks to not only our differing moral orientations but also our tendency toward self-absorption and self-deception.²

Whether we turn to Hegel, Nietzsche or Freud, the notion that conscience is the expression of an unerring moral insight, the source of which is immune from corruption, comes under devastating attack. Although the arguments vary, the principle problem is the impossibility of insulating any form of infallible moral intuition from the vagaries of selfhood and experience. Wherever we choose to place the certitude of conscience, in sources transcendent or immanent, cultural or individual, we come to the same paradox of accountability: the agent must play some determining role in the cultivation/execution of his/her convictions, which undermines the moral authority of conscience. In brief, the more we seek to guarantee the certitude and objectivity of our convictions, the more redundant becomes the role of personal insight when acting on our convictions. On the other hand, the more we base our moral convictions on personal initiative and feeling, the more contingent and idiosyncratic they become.

As I understand it, conscience expresses the reality of first-person accountability. It designates the way agents deal with the undeniable fact that they are personally implicated in a world of moral norms they did not create, yet cannot disown.

Consequently, ‘having a conscience’ deals more with how people contend with the multiple and often conflicting moral warrants that anchor their own sense of accountability, than it is an inviolable seal of moral approval.\(^3\)

Gilbert Ryle draws attention to this issue when he states we experience matters of conscience only when conflicting dispositions are present, and where such conflict is absent we are best to refer to the experience by some other name, say discretion or caution, but not conscience.\(^4\) I think Ryle is right to point out the connection between conscience and internal conflict, but I would stress that such conflict encapsulates not only the experience of competing dispositions and desires, but also the difficulty of making transparent the link between the affective and cognitive dimensions of moral experience. By this I mean that acting according to one’s convictions can also mitigate an appeal to reasons insofar as the link between certain emotions, such as shame or guilt, and certain moral norms can become so ingrained that introspection loses its critical component. This means that ‘following one’s conscience’ is not always a good thing, since it can insulate agents from the implications of their own moral beliefs. To be sure, it is precisely this duplicity that is one of the defining features of conscience, and so to neglect research into this phenomenon is to our own detriment.

Conscience does not refer to a state of consciousness, nor some one faculty, but a constellation of experiences that center on integrating what Gabrielle Taylor terms emotions of self-assessment, such as shame, guilt, remorse and pride, with degrees of introspection that also serve to motivate behavior. This basic approach follows that of

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\(^3\) Thomas F. Green addresses the notion of conscience and its various ‘voices’ as the central concern of moral education. See his insightful book, *Voices: The Educational Formation of Conscience* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1999).

C.D. Broad in which he states having a conscience means at least three things: a) one reflects on one’s past or future with an eye to evaluating the moral worth of one’s actions; b) one has an emotional disposition to feel those emotions associated with moral approval and censure; and c) one exercises those conative dispositions that enable one to pursue what is believed to be good and avoid what is bad.\(^5\) I find Broad’s description very instructive because it points out a variety of common features that can work in an integrated way, yet need not.

On the interpretation I want to defend, we should resist identifying conscience with any one capacity or faculty, but approach it in terms of a specific narrative of self-integration that arises from the attempt to balance the affective and cognitive dimensions of moral experience. More specifically, conscience develops as the existential integration of three different sources of moral authority: emotions of self-assessment that underwrite our experience of moral individuation; social modeling that intertwines our sense of self-identity within larger cultural and institutional norms and practices; and reflective reasoning that introduces us to the practice of reasoning for the purpose of assessing and guiding actions.

Our conscience comes into its own through the amalgamation of these three basic sources of moral authority, each of which implicates us in a world of others in a different way. The authority of emotions like shame, guilt, remorse and pride rests in the way they directly diminish or intensify our sense of self-worth. The authority of social modeling rests in the way it fastens our sense of identity to concrete projects and traditions that provide a sense of accomplishment and direction. The authority of reflective reason-giving rests in the way it enables us to not only articulate our interests

and desires but also justify them in a way that can be recognized by others. As embodied, historical, reasoning beings, these are the three most elemental ways our sense of self-identity is anchored in a normative world of moral significance. I recognize that in practice these three domains often appear to feed into one another and reinforce one another; for instance, a life of religious devotion is one in which all three of these warrants may be working cooperatively to engender a life of meaning and transcendence. The crucial point is that they need not work together, and on occasion do not.

Following the general implications of psychologists like Sigmund Freud, Robert Sears, Anna Freud, Robert Coles, and Donald Winnicott, conscience is a necessary consequence of being a social animal dependent upon others for our nourishment, survival, and esteem, and arises very early on in child development. However, it would be a serious mistake to infer from this that conscience is simply about acceptance or the sublimation of biological drives, or the internalization of parental authority. It undoubtedly begins here, but broadens as our sensitivity and discernment of the world broadens, our allegiances multiply, and our projects come into competition with those of others. In fact, a healthy conscience will be one whose framework of emotional self-assessment will be flexible enough to constructively correlate with different moral sanctions. For example, the practice of critically assessing one’s actions according to general principles becomes a source of emotional self-assessment, supplanting the authority of parental approval. What’s more, this incorporation of reason-giving is neither forced nor contrived, but is experienced as a natural extension and outgrowth of our own involvement with the world.
There is mounting evidence to demonstrate that our emotions should be understood as neither simply physiological reactions nor primitive instincts, but elemental commitments to different aspects of the world that we hold valuable. As Martha Nussbaum puts it, emotions are “ways of seeing the world,” with each type distinguished by its respective array of intentional objects, and not by physiological responses. Consequently, when the objects of our emotional commitments are re-assessed, the emotions themselves become malleable as well, if not sometimes disintegrating all together. As the work of philosophers as different as Jean-Paul Sartre, Amélie Rorty, Martha Nussbaum, Ronald De Sousa, Robert Solomon, and Gabrielle Taylor convincingly attest, the idea that emotions are simply irrational, or that we are doomed to remain victims of our emotions, is simply false. But if it turns out that our emotions are much more malleable than previously thought, how does this relate to the status of conscience?

Emotions are open to a certain degree of circumspection and even self-correction but this is not easy, and such reflective evaluation can become especially difficult when dealing with emotions of self-assessment. Moreover, the idea that such emotional

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7 Looking back to Sartre, Robert Solomon argues that emotions should not be seen as something the agent simply ‘undergoes,’ but rather as “urgent judgments” or “non-deliberate judgments” that are purposive (intentional) in the way they give personal meaning to experience and action. As a consequence we can learn to deal with our emotions in much more responsible ways than the bifurcated options of traditional philosophy, which amounts to either disowning the emotions (Kant) or becoming their slave (Hume). See Robert C. Solomon, “Emotions and Choice,” in *Explaining Emotions*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (California: University of California Press, 1980): 251-281.

experiences should be open to critical introspection can be discouraged, both intentionally and unintentionally, in a multitude of ways. It seems clear that our earliest experiences of shame and guilt arise in our struggle to gain acceptance and some standing within the family. It is with these elemental experiences of self-recognition that our sense of conscience first begins to solidify. Depending on the intensity of shaming and guilt as disciplinary practices, it may become difficult to dislodge the object or reason for one’s guilt from the actual experience of feeling guilty. Our attachment to the authority of a norm, for example, parent’s prohibition against failure, can become so fused to the authority figure it issues from that additional reason-giving, either to question the potential legitimacy of the norm, or contextualize it, is deemed pointless or even disrespectful. When this occurs and one’s sense of accountability is prevented from incorporating other sources of justification, serious problems can arise. Our conscience can become deformed or myopic if our emotions of self-assessment are restricted from adjusting to larger spheres of significance. Our moral lives can close in on us and our sense of dignity can become dependent upon impregnable moral authorities that can dissuade us from critically assessing our own commitments. Let me show you what I mean with a few examples.

If one is raised in such a way that shame is the primary motivating experience, than low self-esteem if not self-loathing can be the result. If one is truly ashamed of who one is as a person, then one’s sense of accountability to sources of moral significance will be seriously crippled. For instance, the practice of reason-giving when assessing one’s needs and expectations--seeking consistency, objectivity and impartiality-- is not going to carry much weight if one is convinced they are worthless as a person, since by
implication, their judgments will be worthless. Likewise, this sense of shame can prevent one from ever genuinely participating in larger social-cultural institutions, since it is not clear how one could benefit from, or contribute to, these institutions in a way that would matter. In extreme cases, intense shame can even force one toward neurotic or psychotic behavior; a case in point is Tom Ripley whose entire motivation is to literally steal the lives of other people, satiating his own lack of self-esteem by avenging himself on those who have self-esteem.

To take another less extreme example, consider the case of the individual who is not emotionally neglected, but instead has her every whim immediately gratified and her sense of entitlement repeatedly indulged. The result, as Robert Coles explains, will often be that we end up with an individual so self-absorbed that she is unable to effectively negotiate with a world of others whose priorities do not match her own desires. Consequently, the world is experienced as directly at odds with the sources of her own self-esteem, with neglect and frustration becoming the emotional norm as a tyrannical sense of pride smothers the other emotions of self-assessment.

In the examples I just gave, one’s sense of conscience was so narrowed that it either disappeared completely, inverting into revenge, or became so intertwined with a sense of personal entitlement that it inverted into self-glorification. The problem in each case is that one’s sense of personal accountability, what I am calling conscience, became deformed or myopic, and so rather than expanding the extent and measure of culpability, enriching one’s sense of self-worth at the same time, ends up in aimless repetition.

Conscience expresses the existential truth that my sense of identity is always implicated in expectations that are never simply reducible to my personal needs or

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interests. To be a self means that one’s sense of self-worth is always in negotiation with others, for better or worse. If this were not the case, there would be no conscience. Initially we have as little control over the formation of our conscience as we do the acquisition of our mother tongue. Yet this initial state of passivity, which anchors our interior lives irrevocably in the recognition of others, should alter as our experience of the world’s complexity grows. Our sense of accountability changes from one of seeking immediate acceptance to one of engaging in constructive self-evaluation as we are confronted with different measures of assessing our own culpability.

Contrary to most philosophers and theologians, having a conscience is much more complicated than previously recognized, and is dependent on multiple conditions for its full realization, many of which may not be in the direct control of any one agent. Consequently, we can be victimized by our own deep seated moral convictions, and suffer a profound moral disempowerment depending on how static or externally regulated our sense of culpability. This means that remaining true to our moral convictions against all odds can just as readily malign our sense of self-worth by simplifying the relationships that make up our world. But if this is true, then how does the virtue of moral courage stand in relation to conscience? Given the complexity of conscience as an existential narrative of integration, and one that is perpetually incomplete, what does it mean to examine moral courage?

Common to many definitions of moral courage is the emphasis placed on a willingness to face ostracism and shame in following through on one’s moral principles. As Rushworth Kidder explains in his monograph *Moral Courage*, exposure to social criticism and risk of significant loss are necessary features of morally courageous acts. I
take it that this common emphasis on risk and humiliation is to help ensure moral courage is not confused with its more trivial doubles, such as simply voicing one’s moral opinion or playing the devil’s advocate.\textsuperscript{10}

Unlike physical courage, such as courage in battle, moral courage appears to have little to do with following orders or seeking honor, but is a profound reaction against perceived moral injustices. And so moral courage is inherently alienating, in a way that physical courage is not. William Miller echoes this sentiment when he says that moral courage is a lonely courage, requiring that we call attention to ourselves in uncomfortable ways, whereas physical courage is something that can just happen.\textsuperscript{11} As a consequence, Miller argues that moral courage is more complicated to the extent it is dependent upon more “converging influences” than physical courage, and has a much smaller range of application.\textsuperscript{12} But if we can distinguish moral courage from physical courage, it is still not clear how moral courage relates to conscience or is even different from it. Does having a conscience and having moral courage amount to the same thing?

I think some headway can be gained distinguishing the two, and in a way that is conceptually important, but only if we give up the traditional notion of conscience as an unerring moral intuition. Under the traditional idea of conscience, moral courage is the appropriate response to any beliefs authorized by our conscience, since there is no possibility one’s convictions could be in error. On this view, the exercise of moral courage has nothing to do with avoiding self-deception, but mustering the will to act on one’s moral convictions come what may. I think this way of thematizing the relation

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p. 263.
between conscience and moral courage is far too simplistic and passes over much of the complexity of their inter-relationship.

It seems clear that moral courage requires one has acquired a conscience otherwise there is nothing at stake in my own unique involvement, so why risk pain of disapproval. However, having a conscience does not require I act on my convictions. As I defend it here, conscience is the act of recognizing I am imputed in some norm, but it does not require I risk my life to defend it. Conscience does not actually tell us what to do, but registers the extent to which we are morally implicated in the lives of other people, institutions, or the world of reasons. In short, conscience reminds us of the inescapability of certain commitments. Moral courage is risking action, and so entails going beyond acknowledging the extent of our accountability and actually doing something to rectify the situation.

Risk, exposure and loss are recurrent themes in discussions of moral courage. However, we need to recognize that these features apply to more than loss of life or reputation, but our own willingness to admit we may be mistaken or deceived in our moral view of things. If our sense of self is confirmed or denied most viscerally in terms of the experience of conscience, which is the account I defend here, then it should come as no surprise to find a great deal of resistance when it comes to re-evaluating our moral convictions. There is much at stake in our moral commitments thanks to the emotions of self-assessment that underscore them, and deliberately questioning these commitments takes real moral courage, for if pursued diligently it can alter the fabric of our lives. This is a form of moral courage one reads much less about, which is understandable since the
risk and exposure it courts is so difficult to see, yet it would be a serious mistake to
discount it, especially given the interpretation of conscience on offer here.

Typically when we think of moral courage we are reminded of individuals like
Jesus Christ, Socrates, Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and Rosa Parks, but
moral courage need not always be the stuff of legend. Moral courage is much more
pervasive than the high water marks of history suggest, or at least it should be. What’s
more, it speaks to a continuum of action that begins with each one of us, and that decision
to ask uncomfortable questions of ourselves and the grounds of our convictions. In many
ways, this first act of moral courage may be the hardest to muster, because if done
authentically, can provide no guarantee of what we will find. Consequently, there is no
way to absolutely guarantee courageous moral introspection will meet with success. As
Miller perceptively recognizes, moral courage has its own extremes, ranging from
“priggishness and officiousness” to “self-indulgence and self-aggrandizement” with non-
conformism and egoistic assertiveness somewhere in between.\(^\text{13}\) Despite this difficulty,
the moral courage to assess our convictions remains an indispensable prelude to that fuller
realization of moral defiance whose culmination is the confrontation with the actual
agents and institutions of injustice.

Given the complexity of conscience and the difficulty of engaging in moral
courage, what are we left with? First, conscience remains an indispensable moral
concept in the way it indicates how agents come to terms with the inevitable demands of
first-person accountability. It accomplishes this by determining to a very large extent
what we respect as a moral norm, and the extent to which we are personally implicated
by its sanctions. This means that the moral domain is not something set in stone, but is

\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 266.
fluid, just like the agents who inhabit it. Following Amélie Rorty, the idea that moral concerns make up a definable border we can all come to recognize in the same way is a myth of moral theory. What engages our conscience is not always the same thing for everyone, and it is this reality of conflicting convictions that makes moral live so challenging at times.

No one chooses to have a conscience, but we do have some latitude in terms of how we deal with the elemental truth that our moral identities are never completely in our own power. As social beings with an interior life, we gain our sense of identity through the recognition of others, but like our sense of self-identity, our conscience can become so maligned and myopic that it simply ceases to implicate us in anything other than our own self-obsessions. For most of us, however, we manage to avoid such extremes, but that does not automatically mean that all is right with our convictions. To the extent we ignore the expanding and restricting scope of our conscience, and the possible schisms this can create, the more we forego our chance to participate in the formation of our own moral identities. Given the dynamic character of conscience and its multiple warrants, we should come to expect that some of our moral appraisals may be off from time to time. The reason for this is not because our conscience is hopelessly corrupt or aimlessly relative, but rather because so much of who we are is at stake in our moral convictions. It is precisely thanks to this overdeterminacy that moral courage needs a more central place in our lives, and should not be construed simply in terms of denouncing evil regimes or blowing corporate whistles. We should think of moral courage as the best response to our own moral opacity. It enables us to act not only on our deepest sense of what is right, but also face up to our own moral histories and risk being wrong.

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