



Martin Heidegger on Conscience and its Implication for Social Morality

Peter Z. Alawa

Department of Philosophy, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria

peteralawa@yooh.com

07066784981

ABSTRACT

Martin Heidegger is a mystic reflecting on Being. He also believes that every man on being dumped on earth begins to create his essence through the choices he makes consequently upon his personal experiences. It means that one is subject to his own moral precepts. This naturally creates absolute moral subjectivism, and this is problematic. The question that naturally arises is how then can different individual men and woman have common understanding at the level of social cohesion and interaction? Questions of this sort generated by Heidegger's position on human nature, vis-à-vis human essence and conscience; constitute the fundamental problems which our work is conscientized with.

INTRODUCTION

Martin Heidegger stands out as one of the greatest philosophers of our time. His philosophy centres on Being. He believes that Being is a mystery and one can only approach but cannot penetrate. However Heidegger has another interesting aspect that people do not know and we wish to expose it in this work that is his notion of conscience. Again, some thinkers have different opinions about ethics in Heidegger. Frings confirms it thus:

 Serious readers of the work of Heidegger will discover that there is no place for ethics in his philosophy. For it is only by reason of fundamental thinking that man relates himself to Being and achieves the very fullness of his authenticity. Heidegger hardly ever employs the term "ethics".

And when he does, it is mostly to reveal the term's inability to disclose the basic truth of Being. Even though, Frings says there is no ethics in Heidegger,

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we do not follow his line of thought because he is not Heidegger. One should also know that ethical principles supersede metaphysical principles in matters of common understanding at the level of social cohesion and interaction. It means then that there are elements of ethics in Heidegger. Therefore, we are examining what is conscience, historical survey of conscience, types of conscience, Heidegger's notion of conscience: its implication for social morality; and conclusion. It is important to begin with what is conscience.

What is conscience?

Conscience is a term that is commonly used as it is commonly misunderstood. As a result, people prefer to talk about conscience without taking time to look at what the term is. The word "conscience" has had such a complex, ambiguous history and has been used with so many meanings and it is difficult to confine it to a simple definition; yet it is central to any discussion of morality. The general understanding of conscience is that it is the inner voice that warns a person to do good and avoid evil. Even though, conscience means different things to different people all have one thing in common and that is the etymology.

Etymologically, conscience comes from the Latin word "Conscientia", which is related to the Greek word "Syneidesis", which originally meant joint knowledge or knowledge of right and wrong. In this light Karl H. Peschke in his book Christian Ethics says:

"conscience is that moral faculty which tells people subjectively what is good and evil and which manifests their moral obligation to them."²

In continuation, Thomas Mautner in Dictionary of Philosophy writes:

The faculty of judging morally one's own actions. This is the standard sense. My conscience does not judge your own action only my own. But in the past, the word was sometime also used to signify moral judgment generally.³

Despite its various popular and technical usages, the word conscience is a philosophical term which designates an act of the intellect by which one evaluates an action. Moralists, however, agreed that for all moral judgments, there is an implied reference to moral laws; the validity of which in some ethical systems is the subjective and objective.

We make two kinds of judgment about ourselves, firstly I judge whether and how far I am responsible for all my acts myself. Secondly, I also judge whether I as a person deserve praise or blame as a result of doing those actions. The conviction that some acts are right and ought to be done that others are wrong and ought not to be done and that there are still others that

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are different whether such judgments are correct or not is another matter. What is necessary is that people also make them. Austin Fagothey strongly puts it in his work Right and Reason thus:

The power to do this kind of Judging is called conscience, the conscious self is attuned to moral values and disvalues (right and wrong, good and evil) in the concrete judging themselves and its personal actions in terms of those values and disvalues.⁴

For Fagothey, we as individuals are responsible for our acts, only the individual person can know. The act I do, has its sources in me; it is my act, because this is so the quality of my action reveals the quality of my personhood. I am the kind of person who does this kind of act, I am also responsible for the kind of person I am. Others may judge me, but without my help they can see only my externals. The judgment of responsibility as such is different from conscience. The two are certainly connected with one another, because we normally judge the goodness or badness, rightness or wrongness of acts that we are responsible for. This personal judgment about my own actions and about myself as a person is what we mean by judgment of conscience.

Fundamentally, nature has imposed certain laws on man. Nevertheless, it is in the final analysis that man's conscience interprets these laws. This is clearly demonstrated by St. Thomas Aquinas in his often quoted dictum thus: "Conscience is said to witness, to bind, to incite and also to accuse, to torment or to rebuke. Therefore, properly speaking conscience denominates an action."⁵

From the above citation, it can be deduced that conscience performs this function of law interpretation to particular action in three fold manner:

Firstly, conscience confronts us with our past action in order to pass judgment on them. Secondly, conscience interpreters an action to be ill done and therefore brings remorse or that the action is well done-it brings about joy.

Thirdly, conscience commands or prohibits an action here and now, conscience incites and binds. Having discussed how conscience in man performs this function of law interpretation and application on action according to St. Thomas Aquinas. To the historical survey of conscience we turn.

Historical survey of conscience

From antiquity-we mean the ancient period, the Greeks were the first to talk about conscience. According to Austin Fagothey in his book Right and Reason he says:

"The Greeks were the first to reflect philosophically on the nature of conscience and they described it as self consciousness in its role of making moral Judgment."⁶

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However, Plato did not use the exact word conscience but the centre of his ethics is the idea of the good. While for Aristotle, his ethics centres on happiness and virtue. According to Aristotle happiness is a supreme goal for its own sake. No one wants to sacrifice his own happiness for another, Aristotle believes that virtue lies in the middle.

In the medieval period St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas discussed conscience at length. According to Pesche in his work Christian Ethics commenting on conscience in St. Augustine remarks:

St. Augustine was more theological but more abstract in his concept of conscience when he refers to it as the place of the innermost encounter between God and man, and therefore, the voice of God. In it he is aware of God and the soul⁷.

For Augustine, conscience is the voice of God and in it man is aware of God and the soul, the idea of conscience in Augustine is purely theological. For Thomas Aquinas, the concept of conscience is not divorced from his fundamental understanding of the existence of God. Conscience here is seen as the voice of God within man, telling him what is good to do and what is evil to avoid. The early theologians and the fathers of the church took note of the reality of conscience, but it was the Angelic Doctor – Thomas Aquinas who systematized it into theological studies. RH. Pesche in his work Christian Ethics commenting on Aquinas on conscience writes:

It was Aquinas who constructed the approach of conscience of the early Christian writers into a critically reflective science of moral theology.⁸

Aquinas sees conscience as an instance of the operation of reason. He identifies “Synderesis” not only as the core of conscience but also as the habitus of reason. For him conscience is conceived as the application of general norms to particular action. In summary, the concept of conscience is highly rationalistic and intellectualistic in Aquinas.

In the modern period conscience is not correctly explained by the assumption of innate moral ideas. Neither does Kant’s explanation as a transcendental faculty suffice. Inadequate also are theories which find in an explanation of the origin, development and activity of conscience in an extra moral factors, naturalistic and evolutionary doctrines according to which conscience is a development from experiences of its usefulness in the history of the person or the species of individual or of society.

For F. Nietzsche, we can talk of good and bad conscience. Accordingly to Karl Rahner connecting on conscience by Nietzsche in Encyclopaedia of Theology says:

Nietzsche, under the influence of biological evolution is in, regards the bad conscience as a product of human civilization.⁹

In understanding Nietzsche it reveals that a decadent, psychopathological development of man whose thwarted instincts have turned in on themselves. For Sigmund Freud, conscience becomes the “Super ego”. This was confirmed by Karl Ralmer reflecting on conscience by Freud when the remarks:

Very widely accepted is the explanation stemming from the depth of psychology of Sigmund Freud which is imperfectly developed from conscience (Super ego) is the product of the unconscious activity of the underlying instinctive reality.¹⁰

In the contemporary period, the existentialist philosophers accept a formal concept of conscience which is not totally moral, and which contains substantially the call to existential realization. To the types of conscience we turn.

Types of conscience

- **Antecedent conscience:** This is a guide for actions prompting us to do them or avoid them.
- **Consequent Conscience:** This judges our past actions and it is the source of self approval or remorse.
- **Correct Conscience:** This judges what is really as good and what really ere as evil. In this there is a correspondence of subjective and objective morality.
- **Erroneous conscience:** This judges as good what is reality evil or evil what is really good. This caused because of callc of knowledge or ignorance. Ignorance can be vincible and invincible and this gives rise to the next two kinds of conscience.
- **Vincible erroneous conscience:** This is when the error can be overcome and the judgment corrected.
- **In vincible erroneous conscience:** When the error cannot be overcome and the judgment correct.
- **Doubtful conscience:** This is either hesitates to make any judgment at all or when it makes, it does some misgiving that the opposite may be true.
- **Perplexed conscience:** In this one can make up his mind and remains in a state or in decisive anguish, especially if he thinks that he will be doing wrong which ever alternative he chooses.
- **Scrupulous conscience:** This torments its owner by over and over again doubts that were once settled, finding new sources of guilt in old deeds that were best forgotten, striving for a kind of certainty about one’s state of soul that is beyond our power in this eye. To Heidegger’s conscience we turn.

HEIDEGGER'S NOTION OF CONSCIENCE

Man is a rational animal, and he exists in this world not like stone, tree or a goat. Human existence is characteristically distinct from the rest of the existing things. In short, man exist, man exists on a higher plane because he can reason, therefore man can strive to authenticity, fulfillment and self realization. According to Heidegger in his took Basic Writings says:

“of all existents- stones, trees, animals, plants – man exists.”¹¹

For him only human being exists, it is only human being that stands out in the midst of different objects of reality that has conscience. Consequently, he alone can ask the question of philosophy: According to Martin Heidegger in his book An introduction to metaphysics says:

It is the business of the philosopher, not of the man in the street or a trader, but a man of wisdom who can ask questions and validate them.¹²

For Heidegger, this ultimate question also contributes to the growth of human thought and knowledge. In the very words of Heidegger conscience is essentially:

The call of care from the uncarniness of being in the world. The call which summons Dasein to its own most potentiality for being guilty.¹³

Conscience from the above citation means the duty of summoning man back to his personal responsibilities of freeing from in authentic human being to a eye of being authentic self. For Heidegger, conscience is not the voice of God. For him, the operation of conscience has the character of a call and this call is a type of discourse. In discourse, conscience “appeals” to human being himself intrinsically so that his lostness in the crowd will be restored to him so that he will be a captain of his own life. This required being true to oneself by following the dictate of one’s conscience.

Heidegger here tries to explain conscience in a different way as it is traditionally understood and likewise moral guilt as we experience it. Obviously, in this theory, unless it is genuinely possible for one to be guilty, that will means conscience will have no role to play in my life. According to Heidegger conscience is never a voice that calls one to do good and avoid evil, but conscience is that voice that calls “dasein” from being in the crowd to him self (from dasman to himself). To Heidegger on conscience: its implication for social morality we now turn.

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Heidegger's ethics is by experience and circumstances one finds himself, I may not be influenced to live an in authentic life by circumstances found myself. But if Heidegger's morality accepts objective values all man should have values that are common among them; and not as one feels or decides. The position of our author, with regard to conscience poses such other question as for as how families can be reared. Since it will be difficult to find common grounds for family values that will enable one individual to unite with one another for the purpose of co-existence. Heidegger does not admit universal essence in man nor objective or universal conscience at the base of the individuality of every man, the question that naturally arises is how then can different individual men and women have common understanding at the level of social cohesion and interaction.

The problem is that Heidegger's conscience is that of absolute moral subjectivism. This was confirmed by Vincent P. Miceli in his work The Gods of Atheism when he writes:

Another glaring disservice of Heidegger's night of nihilism is that it proposes to man isolated from God, an ethic which is like that of Nietzsche which is beyond good and evil. The private, subjective conscience is made the sole source of morality.¹⁴

In continuation Miceli says:

Heidegger also accepts that by courageous decisions of freedom for man to make authentic existence its goal in life by overcoming dread, mass mediocrity and death. But such mere teaching and exhortation to moral rectitude is uninspiring and indeed sterile. If the obligation to moral goodness is imposed solely by private conscience which enjoys a liberty solely by itself, which is to say, can unrestricted liberty.¹⁵

What we can understand from the above quotation is that we are reminded again of Iran K Aramazov's logical rule of morality: If there is no objective conscience anything goes. Thus, Heidegger's ethic is reduced to being totally subjective and irresponsible. The result of irresponsibility will be as follows: telling lies, killing to be in authority, extortion, bribery and corruption, child labour, homosexuality, incest, lesbianism, prostitution, kidnappings, militancy, ritual killings for money etc.

The position of our author, Heidegger, with regard to conscience poses a fundamental problem. This is because a better understanding of conscience today is known as both subjective and objective as against Heidegger's absolute moral subjectivism. This work is necessary because of the misconception of conscience by people to justify their actions, as our author Heidegger did. It is to give the proper meaning of conscience as it is based on

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essence and not from experiences. In so doing we maintain that there is a universal conscience as man qua man and therefore we have objective moral principles to guide our actions. Indeed, from conscience, we have what we call good and bad conscience. The man of good conscience is the one who has modeled his life on accepting the dictates of his conscience to live a righteous life. This is confirmed by Gabriel Okara in his book The Voice when he echoes out: "listen to what the inside tells you"¹⁶. What Okara means here is that let the voice of conscience guide you in all your actions. The man of bad conscience on the other hand is one who despite the dictates of his conscience to live a righteous life chooses to do evil rather than good. I wish to think aloud with Thomas Akempis as follows:

"The glory of a good man is the testimony of a good conscience and you shall always have joy. A good conscience can bear very much and very joyful in the midst of adversity. A bad conscience is always fearful and uneasy."¹⁷

CONCLUSION

Heidegger's conception of conscience is misleading, this is because Heidegger never accepted a conscience to give direction on what is good or bad. For him, conscience is that which calls dasein from the crowd to himself. The better understanding of conscience today is that if man lived a good life, guided by his conscience, the good ideas he passed on to people still live on. It is important to note that one should consider the other person in whatever things one does so that he/she will not step on toes; since we are human beings first before "I" as an individual. Conscience today means both subjective and objective and not subjectified conscience as professed by Martin Heidegger.

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