

Formed and De-Formed: An Orthodox Christian Reflection on Conscience

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The difficulty of writing about conscience lies in its malleability—that is, in its complete dependence on one’s worldview. Conscience is interwoven with a complex tapestry of other human faculties. There exists an ethos of Orthodox Christianity that necessarily loses coherence when put in writing, but when transcribed will help elucidate this perspective on conscience. In this article I will demonstrate the ways that several key concepts shape an Orthodox Christian perspective on conscience, rendering it necessary, yet insufficient, for wholly orienting a person towards God. These concepts include a narrative of humanity that accounts for its fall, an integral narrative of salvation, a muscular ethos of spiritual struggle, and a careful appropriation of the concepts of truth and shame.

In a recovery of ancient modes of moral living, modern scholars of ethics such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas have emphasized the importance of narrative. MacIntyre describes a virtuous agent as one who possesses the “unity of a narrative quest.”¹ The unity of this quest is determined by those things which are good for humanity and for that person as a moral agent, and which in turn function as directives for the person’s actions, decisions, and behavior. Hauerwas also emphasizes the importance of narrative by pointing to the

community of the Church. Humans are inherently contingent beings: narratives guide us, form us, situate us, and give us reference points by which we can relate to all other realities.² No person or community can be understood apart from a particular context. Specifically, Christians must locate themselves within the story of Jesus Christ found in Scripture and lived out through other communities since his time.³ It is only through narrative that meaning can be ascribed to actions, thoughts, and ways of life.

The narrative that is foundational to every aspect of the ethos of Orthodox Christianity is that humanity was created to be with God, united to him, in love with him, and in love with each other. However, through the free will God gave humanity through his love, humans decided to separate themselves from God, that is, they chose death—to live without Life himself. God did not leave his creation on the downward fall into nonexistence, however; he communicated with humanity frequently, especially through his prophets and righteous followers, preparing humanity for the incarnation of his eternally- and only-begotten Son to reconcile the separation that existed between God and humanity.⁴ The unity lost in the Garden of Eden has been restored again, but humanity will reach its perfection upon Christ’s second coming from the heavens, an

¹ Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Third ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2007), 219.

² *Ibid.*, 34–5. Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 28.

³ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 35.

⁴ To better understand the effects of the fall of humanity and the need for the Lord Jesus Christ’s incarnation, see St. Athanasius’s *On the Incarnation*.

awesome return, full of glory. The good shall rise to a perpetually progressing unity with God, that is, to the “resurrection of life,” and those who rejected God will experience the “resurrection of judgment” (John 5:29).

This narrative has anthropological consequences. Humans, according to Orthodoxy, are in a volatile state: (1) Humans experience some tendencies related to their fallenness and separation from God through sin and fleshly attachments. (2) Humans have been saved through grace and grow in unity with Him—a process aided by worldly detachment. (3) Humans will be saved upon Jesus Christ’s return and will be further transformed in a perpetual progression of perfection from glory to glory, eschatologically.⁵ The narrative described here agrees with the experience Saint Paul describes:

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. (Rom. 7:14–20)

What a person wills to do, that she is not able to do. In fact, she can often do the opposite of what she wills—a paradox experienced by all humans and that evades resolution by the hard sciences. The more a particular desire,

impulse, or thought—good or bad—is fed, the stronger it becomes. The less it is fed, the weaker it becomes. In this light, conscience in an Orthodox perspective is only as reliable as it is trained. Even if conscience *begins* as a good guide, it is adulterated by sin, indulgence, and attachments along the way, thus necessitating retraining. If someone responds positively to the invitations of the Holy Spirit, the call to love God and neighbor through a sacramentally rich communal life of Godward spiritual struggle, fleshly detachment, Scriptural intimacy, sacrificial charity, virtue, and submission to God, that person’s conscience will be formed differently from that of someone who has done just the opposite. The former is strengthened to follow his conscience with more confidence than the latter. This explains how different people can have seemingly different consciences despite belief in the existence of the same God; it is a *praxical* formation, not just an intellectual one. When belief manifests in action, it becomes transformative, opening up a person’s entire being (conscience included) to deeper belief and further good deeds; it is a positive feedback cycle of faith and works.

This Orthodox understanding of conscience is informed in part by Aristotle’s ideal of the virtuous agent, which follows what might be described as an instinctual conscience that has been habitually formed and transformed in the good. The emphasis in Aristotelian-based virtue ethics on an agent who requires little deliberation prior to ethical action has had implications for those who have yet to attain such unimpeded deliberation. For example, in Julia Annas’s account of an Aristotle-based virtue ethic, she presents the concept of “flow,” which is unmediated by deliberation, is active rather than passive, and is enjoyable in and

⁵ See St. Gregory of Nyssa’s following works for a fuller picture of this perpetual striving to God, known in modern scholarship as *epektasis*: *On Perfection, Commentary on the Beatitudes, Commentary on the Inscriptions of the Psalms, Commentary on the Song of Songs, and The Life of Moses*.

of itself, although it may also fulfill a greater end. A virtuous agent practicing such flow finds no interruption in the exercise of thought prior to acting virtuously.⁶ Thus, it would not be accurate to say that a person is good, virtuous, or justified, just because her conscience was at ease when she carried out this or that action. It is the other way around: the more virtuous a person is, the more she should obey her conscience.

The question of conscience is one of formation. Conscience can be formed and de-formed. One's very perception is transformed by what one sees, thinks, senses, and does throughout life. For this reason, Orthodoxy focuses on transformation through grace-enabled spiritual struggle. It is a training of the senses, in a body that is at once material and spiritual. Spiritual struggle is an embodied confrontation of the suffering experienced in the world. To struggle against the fallenness of one's own nature is to confront the evil that has befallen the world. This is not an abstract parallel between microcosm and macrocosm, but a literal confrontation of the evil which can take root only in humans, whose bodies can function as vehicles or mechanisms for its toxic dissemination. Spiritual struggle functions as a reversal of that evil, expunging that which is foreign to the goodness that is human nature, and exuding a goodness, peace, and virtue that ripples out to everyone and everything a person encounters. It is a perpetual struggle on this side of the eschaton to grow in God's likeness, as God's tool for the salvation of the world.

Who God is—the subject of theology proper—is central to the Orthodox understanding of conscience. There are clear traditions within Orthodoxy that recognize the partial knowability

(cataphaticism) and unknowability (apophaticism) of God. God's cataphatic attributes, which include all virtue, goodness, and beauty, are known by humanity through God's self-revelation, and serve as important attractors in the journey to God. Conscience is only a trustworthy guide if it has been formed through pursuit of God, and virtue is a marker of that pursuit. And yet, the more one approaches God, the more one realizes that there is no limit to growth in this knowledge; it is a perpetual journey, an eternal life that begins here and now and continues eschatologically (John 17:3). Most pertinent to this discussion is that it assumes belief in an absolute truth—God himself. Without belief in absolute truth, even one that is only partially comprehensible, conscience finds little grounding, defense, and meaning.

For three years now, in the undergraduate courses I teach, I have had discussions with hundreds of students on the question of relative versus absolute truth. The overwhelming majority subscribe to a relativistic worldview in which morality is only dictated by upbringing, society, and personal opinion. I then walk them through an exercise conducting unofficial polls, asking them to raise their hands if they believe certain actions are absolutely morally reprehensible. I begin asking about insulting, cheating, stealing, and lying, moving on to more egregious acts of killing those who are guilty, killing those who are innocent, and finally to killing innocent children. By the end of this list, it is almost always the case that all students raise their hands. Certainly, there is much to say regarding relativism within both deistic and atheistic purviews, but this exercise is designed to show students that they may in fact believe in absolutes with-

⁶ Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 71–7.

out realizing it, and that this is not an impulse that requires resistance. These students have consciences that are strong enough to declare universality, something that is incumbent on all societies globally despite virtually a virtually infinite variety of circumstances. Without declaring belief in some level of absolutism, how can one society defend its judgment that another society's actions are deplorable and require amelioration? How can a person conclude that certain actions are good while others are bad, even though logic at times would conclude just the opposite (for example, killing a healthy person to harvest organs and thereby save five sick people)? Take a look at the majority of post-Enlightenment ethics, and one will quickly find the impasses, stalemates, conundrums, and implausible scenarios that taint the field—a result often proportional to the increase of relativism. The issues are much more complex than I have space for here, but all this is to say that it becomes increasingly difficult to defend a worldview that does not include some level of absolute reality, upon which the general population's individual and communal consciences are built.

For Orthodox Christians, to debate over whether conscience is innate or inherited is pointless. In an Orthodox view, God's grace is the initiator, sustainer, and consummator. His grace pervades all facets of life. He is the one who forms conscience, he is the one who informs conscience, and he is the one who enables good action, resulting in the continuation of the cycle through further formation. God works through others, sometimes in concert with human will and other times despite human resistance. God forms conscience through family, friends, and society. And yet without the grace-filled, struggle-laden *pursuit*

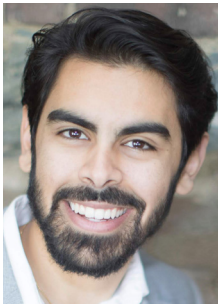
of God, it is not possible to fine-tune the complexities and nuances of navigating the dilemmas of contemporary culture. Orthodox Christians have a high view of absolute truth; he is a person who not only lived on this earth but who is dynamically involved in the world at the present, guiding the consciences of people through the Holy Spirit. The more one unites with this person, the more clearly one's conscience is guided to the truth of matters, a truth that is often limited and yet insightful, helpful, and transformative, personally and communally. The dynamic nature of this journey also helps one navigate the shifting complexities of society, such as in the rapid growth of new technologies and social media.

However, a person can hinder the robust formation of a good conscience, limiting its full potential. In fact, repeating actions that are in opposition to a godly conscience can eventually numb the conscience to that action. Compare, for example, the first time a person commits an action that he otherwise deems morally questionable with the hundredth time that act is committed. A silencing occurs—a descent and devolution. The sense of guilt once felt when initiating the action is, after much silencing, dispelled. Guilt and shame are not entirely useless. They are cues to be heeded, to ensure that we are not deaf to the voice of God—sometimes a still small voice—embedded within us (1 Kings 19:12). They prevent fallen humanity from further collapse. Alone, however, they are insufficient to enable unity with God. Positive progression cannot be driven by guilt, and an accumulation of guilt can result in the silencing of conscience; this is the soul's failsafe, without which it would crumble under the weight of guilt. The solution is not to deem all actions acceptable,

thereby eliminating the potential for guilt or shame. The solution given by the Lord Jesus Christ is a sacramental offering of one's godless actions, signaled at times by guilt or shame, in an act of penitential *metanoia*. It is a change of heart, mind, and soul, reorienting a person away from that which acts contrary to human nature and towards the God who fulfills that nature. In this way, the weight burdening the conscience is lifted, allowing it to soar to greater heights.

In the end, it seems that Orthodox Christian reflections on conscience are unique. Conscience requires training to move away from the fallenness that pervades humanity and towards a recovery of primordial human nature in union with God, marked by virtue. Formation is central, relying on the sincerity and

grit of grace-enabled spiritual struggle. Struggle is an indispensable component of an Orthodox Christian ethos and is no less important in the formation of a good conscience grounded in truth, that is, in Jesus Christ himself, aided by the Holy Spirit. The more one unites with God the truth—the ultimate telos of humanity—the more reliable one's conscience becomes. Finally, guilt is to be heeded as a signal for repentance, not as a means for despondency or as an argument against the development of clear moral convictions. In all of this, the understanding of conscience is molded by the fullness of an Orthodox Christian life, at times an enigmatic masterpiece, cycling through grace-enabled struggle, knowledge of God, and *metanoia*. Good conscience becomes the marker of a humble, resilient, and lifelong pursuit of life himself. ✱



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