Conscience in Context:
Historical and Existential Perspectives

by Stuart P. Chalmers

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Rev. Stuart P. Chalmers, vicar general of the Diocese of Aberdeen, Scotland, adapted his doctoral research on conscience throughout history into a much-needed recipe for rehabilitating the concept of conscience as an effective guide for living a graced, prayerful, and virtuous life "in the context of hope in God's love, mercy and providence" (4). In his foreword, Bishop Hugh Gilbert praises the subtlety with which Chalmers fuses his analysis of theory and practice, which follows the example of St. Thomas More.

Chapter 1, "Setting the Scene: Fragmentation," establishes a reliable starting point from which to appreciate conscience in the context of the fragmentation of both moral theology and secular reasoning. Multiple definitions of conscience have been proposed, and most seem to be useful to one degree or another. For some, conscience is the voice of God whispering in the depths of their being, while for others it represents the superego, which needs to be outgrown in order for a person to become a mature thinker in his own right. Chalmers refers primarily to insights from Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* and Jean Porter's *The Recovery of Virtue*. Echoing MacIntyre, the author asserts that "the Enlightenment's rejection of both an essential human nature and any notion of *telos* or goal to human existence, leaves morality without its necessary framework, which leads to a fundamental breakdown in the purpose of ethics" (11). This leaves humanity with emotivism, that is, "the doctrine which holds that all moral and evaluative judgments are without objectivity, and are nothing but expressions of preference and feeling towards something" (12). MacIntyre recommends Aristotelian virtue ethics as a way to orient moral reasoning toward the quest for a good life. Similarly, Porter laments the division in Catholic morality between deontological and proportionalist approaches to forming moral judgments, which represent only selective appropriations of the rich Catholic tradition.

Next, Chalmers focuses on William of Ockham's rejection of St. Thomas Aquinas's view of free will as inclined to divine beatitude and virtue. Ockham asserts that reason's goal is to properly discern and follow God's arbitrary commands. The author endorses Servais Pinckaers's contrast between Ockham's freedom of indifference and Aquinas's freedom for excellence. For Pinckaers, the summit of freedom for excellence is a joyful life lived in the Spirit, bearing much fruit in love (John 15:8–11).

This first chapter concludes with citations from Pope St. John Paul II and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI. *Veritatis splendor* strongly warns against subjectivism and emotivism in moral reasoning. Such a completely individualistic ethic "leads to a denial of the very idea of human nature" (31). This is followed by a warning from Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger: "The concept of conscience needs continual refining, and laying claim or appealing to conscience stands in need of a cautious honesty that is aware that one abuses something that is great when one rashly calls it into play" (35).

Chapter 2, "Conscience in Classical Culture and Sacred Scripture," explores conscience, or *syneidesis*, as conceived by St. Paul, who originally developed and applied

the concept to personal situations, specifically, the conduct of Christians in Corinth and Rome. Chalmers determines that Paul was most likely working with a concept of conscience that was already recognizable to his average readers, particularly those coming from Greek and Jewish backgrounds. The earliest Hellenistic conception of conscience is characterized by a painful feeling in reaction to previous poor decisions. Although the term *syneidesis* has no Hebrew equivalent, Chalmers draws similarities between *syneidesis* and the Hebrew term *leb*, which is usually translated *kardia* or *heart*. In Psalm 51[50], for example, the psalmist prays for a "clean heart" or a good conscience, in right relationship with a loving God. A natural law can only be sensed by a listening heart that is focused on its experience of nature as reflecting God's image, likeness, and plan.

Chapter 3, "Medieval Investigations on Conscience," delves into the convoluted derivation of the term *synderesis*, which appears to have been inadvertently introduced into a commentary by St. Jerome on the four beasts in the vision of Ezekiel. In any event, the creatures have come to represent four different faculties, appetites, or powers, and the eagle symbolizes *synderesis*, whose higher reasoning rules uncontaminated over the other earthbound powers. Chalmers demonstrates an extensive, critical awareness of historical and contemporary literature regarding these often confusing concepts and does not shy away from criticizing several authors for their unconvincing assertions, even when he values their overall contributions.

Chapter 3 focuses on the insights of three major philosopher–theologians of the medieval period, namely, St. Bonaventure, St. Albert the Great, and St. Thomas Aquinas. Bonaventure explores how a person should act when his conscience tells him to disobey an opinion of the church. He concludes that *synderesis* is a reliable driving force for good and asserts that "the clarity of the complete truth found in God is revealed to us in stages," not exhausted, before the beatific vision. This is another good reason to refrain from acting on one's own opinion in such circumstances (100).

Albert's insights serve as a meticulous reassessment of the entire body of his work. His main contribution lies in his description of conscience as the conclusion of a syllogism, where infallible *synderesis* backed by divine justice supplies the major premise, and fallible moral reason supplies the minor premise. Chalmers expands on an assertion Albert makes in *Summa de creaturis* (2.72), which likens conscience to hope in Christ, citing St. Paul's first letter to Timothy 1:5: "The only purpose of this instruction is that there should be love, coming out of a pure heart, a clear conscience and a sincere faith" (119).

Next, the author turns to the writings of Aquinas, extensively referencing at least three sources, including *Commentary on the Sentences*, *De veritate*, and the *Summa theologica*. Aquinas applies Aristotle's idea of the unmoved mover to *synderesis*, which contains within itself immediately known first principles of practical reason (126–127). Aquinas retains Albert's use of a syllogism to approximate the action of conscience in applying these first principles to real situations, an action which still could be subject to error. A person is bound to act on the decision of his conscience, but an erroneous choice should eventually be correctable with better knowledge. Chalmers cites several authors, including Josef Pieper, who have remarked that, in the *Summa theologica*, Aquinas reflects extensively on the virtue of prudence as at least a partial equivalent or replacement for *conscientia*. Ultimately, Chalmers sees the Scholastic division of conscience into *synderesis* and *conscientia* as a happy accident that recognizes that some of our moral knowledge is more certain than the rest, but the entire process of conscience commands great respect because it deals with God's law.

The third chapter ends with two appendices. In the first, Chalmers traces the subsequent development of conscience by later moral theologians, who tend toward a highly legalistic viewpoint, as well as the inevitable backlash, which led to probabilism, laxity, and license. The second appendix includes several texts regarding *synderesis*, including Jerome's *Commentary on Ezekiel* and several later analyses of the same text.

Chapter 4, "Issues on the Nature and Function of Conscience," tackles more recent investigations into the weakness of relying on deductive reasoning as a model for the action of conscience. Once again, Chalmers shows his familiarity with a great variety of psychological and philosophical literature. Our decisions, rather than being always linear or monotonic, are sometimes based on perceived needs or patterns and are part of a cyclical movement of reevaluating situations as they unfold. One clear example is that of a physician trying to prescribe an antibiotic for someone who is allergic to penicillin.

Chalmers also explores several more contemporary holistic perspectives on conscience, primarily the writings of Charles Curran, who continues the exploration of how reason, emotion, intuition, grace, and faith influence decision making. Chalmers examines how a person of good will matures in prudence and probity over a lifetime of experience. He insists that this, too, is the effect of virtue and grace. He also cites Josef Fuchs, who emphasizes the role of the conscience when applying the transcendental insights of the magisterium to the concrete situations of daily life. Chalmers goes on to cite Aquinas's overall positive appreciation of the role of emotions in helping a well-ordered conscience see what is truly good and supporting the desire to *act* on that understanding. In contrast, he sounds a more cautionary note on the role of intuition, which may be based on extensive experience but can still be swayed by biases and prejudices.

Next, he addresses how discernment might be related to conscientious decision making. Does the Holy Spirit help reason in this way? Chalmers focuses primarily on insights from St. Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*, as interpreted by Jules Toner and Karl Rahner. Toner laments that discernment is sometimes used to describe *any* method of making decisions, even one that ignores the key aspect of searching for *God's* will. He describes successful discernment as an affective connaturality, where the person's will is properly attuned to God's will. Rahner focuses on an individual's sensitivity to the peace or disquiet that follows a serious choice. Ignatius speaks of conscience's role in causing remorse in a person who has committed a mortal sin. Indeed, the original text of the *Exercises* uses the term "stings their consciences with remorse" by means of their *synderesis* (*"*por el synderese").[1]

The overarching premise of the *Spiritual Exercises* is that all choices made by humans should "praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord."[2] Later, in "Rules for Thinking, Judging and Feeling with the Church," Ignatius states that this should be effected through an attitude of the deepest respect and love for the teachings of theologians who have worked within the guidance of "the true Spouse of Christ our Lord, which is our holy Mother the hierarchical Church."[3]

Chalmers next turns to Aristotle's observation that people often fail to make good choices even when presented with a rather straightforward syllogism. Their passions, senility, and other biases often lead them in other directions, especially when they harbor preconceptions. Chalmers quotes extensively from Bartholomew Kiely's *Psychology and Moral Theology*, which asserts that well less than 50 percent of communities have reached psychological maturity, while around 20 percent manifest significant degrees of psychiatric pathology. Applying this to his own pastoral experience, Chalmers affirms the value of catechesis in a parish setting. Although only the briefest argument can be introduced to parishioners during a sermon, a deeper explanation of a topic can be more patiently offered in study groups. Limiting moral input to Mass has contributed to the sense of moral failure and despair felt by many Catholics over the years.

One other key question that Chalmers addresses from a variety of perspectives is whether or not there is any specific content or list of fundamental moral norms within *synderesis*. For Josef Pieper, the primordial conscience comes from an awareness of God's relationship to reality and our loving response to the good. Benedict XVI proposes an understanding of conscience as *anamnesis* or remembrance. Human beings can make choices guided by their innate relationship

with God that continues to create and sustain them. The magisterium serves as the great *anamnesis* of Christian memory. Chalmers concludes with his own analysis of the Scholastics. Besides the norm that "good is to be done and pursued and evil is to be avoided," Aquinas mentions several more specific maxims, such as God's precepts are to be obeyed, and promises should be kept.

In chapter 5, "Conscience and Virtue," Chalmers asserts that virtue ethics can provide a strategy for doing good but does not eliminate the need to follow moral precepts. In this regard, Terence Kennedy cautions that a "virtue is not simply a subjective flourishing of the agent. It is the agent's capacity for action that brings about consequences in the real world."[4] Chalmers demonstrates this through Aquinas's understanding of prudence as "right reason concerning action." The virtue of *habitus* allows us to maintain hope of becoming better, more Christ-like people. Prudence is supported by other virtues, such as *docilitas*, an open-mindedness to the advice of others, especially to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Many authors remark that Aquinas speaks more of conscience in his earlier works and of prudence in his later works, although Chalmers denies that he would see them as identical. To mention just one difference, conscience can look back on previous actions, while prudence focuses only on present challenges and options. Chalmers also relates conscience to the cardinal virtues, showing for example how fortitude can lead even to martyrdom in the pursuit of what conscience sees as the truth (330–331). Finally, he considers the theological virtues. Hope, for example, understood as confidence in God, can motivate us to persevere in our struggles to do good, while love unites our wills to Christ's.

The sixth and final chapter, "Conscience and the Call to Holiness," recommends a review of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church's* treatment of Christian morality as life in Christ, centered on the Beatitudes and the call to universal holiness, rather than a list of rules. Prayer allows us to hear the voice of God and dialogue with him, while memory and an examination of conscience leads us to appreciate our true motivations and allows us to trustingly ask for God's mercy. A discussion of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit demonstrates at least one indispensable blessing in this area: "The Holy Spirit acts within us or he penetrates into us like an anointing. He makes us, at a level that is deeper than that of mere regret for some fault, conscious of the sovereign attraction of the Absolute, the Pure and the True, and of a new life offered to us by the Lord" (380). We follow Christ within the reality of our lives, which, for believers, always includes the Christian community and the magisterium.

Chalmers's masterful summary reminds the reader of all the major themes. Throughout the book, he returns to his main insights several times so they can be more fully appreciated by the reader, and he shows a remarkable ease and familiarity with both ancient philosophical texts and the most recent psychological research. Readers of *Conscience in Context* will be richly rewarded with lessons from Bonaventure, Albert the Great, and Aquinas, as well as hundreds of other authors who have adding their insights to this most important topic in pastoral and moral theology. I have already promised my moral philosophy students a thoroughly renewed treatment of conscience and moral decision making inspired by this careful and comprehensive work.

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1. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises,* in *Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works,* trans. and ed. George E. Ganss (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), n. 314.

2. Ibid., n. 23.

3. Ibid., 353.

4. Kennedy, *Doers of the Word*, vol. 2 (Middlegreen, Slough: St. Paul Publications, 2002), 138–139, quoted by Chalmers, 276.