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The problem of conscience in the light of Pauline teachings

The human being is a multidimensional entity that consists of the following tightly intertwined dimensions, as presented in Figure 1: the moral dimension (conscience), rational dimension (intellect), volitional dimension (the will), emotive dimension (the heart), and corporeal dimension (the body). The name of the human species, *homo sapiens*, indicates that the rational dimension is what distinguishes humans from other beings, that it is the most important dimension, the dimension that is the seat of humanness. It seems, however, that in the hierarchy of human dimensions the highest position is occupied by the moral dimension, the rational dimension being its subsidiary.² That is, what ultimately makes humans human is their conscience, not intellect, very important as it is. To see the role played by conscience, let us consider first interrelations between various human dimensions.

Intellect is the reasoning faculty which uses various means to derive conclusions from information accessible to it. This information can come from sensory perception, from memory, and from the results of intellectual processes; the reliability of this information can be influenced by the body (e.g., the sharpness of reasoning is diminished by inebriation), by emotions (anger very likely can cause disregard of some information), by principles coming from conscience, and by the exercise of the will that may influence the direction of reasoning (consider the expression “having clouded judgment”). If some statements made by intellect are sustained by the will, the result is faith (“assent with certitude”).

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² The view of priority of moral dimension over rational dimension is presented in A. Drozdek, *Moral dimension of man in the age of computers*, Lanham 1995.

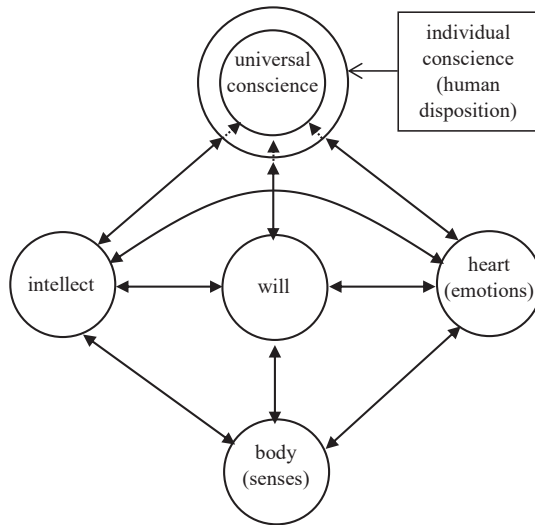


Fig. 1.

The will decides how a person proceeds by choosing a particular course of actions using conclusions arriving from intellect and from principles submitted by conscience. Its capacity can be enhanced or undermined by emotions and by signals coming from the body, e.g., pain inflicted on the body very likely will constrain the will in the choices it would otherwise like to make.

The heart is metaphorically considered the seat of emotions, passions, and desires, the most important of which is, arguably, love. Emotions will be stirred in a particular way by conscience — causing guilt or satisfaction; by the body and the sensory data — fear or delight at the sight of a particular sight, anger can be caused by, say, noise; by the will — emotions can be subdued or inflamed by the strong will; and by reason — rationalization can mollify passions.

The body provides the person with sensory data coming from its sensory apparatus. It can be influenced by the intellect: if audio data are needed by the intellect, the visual data can be disregarded and concentration would be directed to sound rather than to other types of sensory data. In this process, the will would have its say. Emotions can influence sensory mechanism — certain types of desires will make the body focus of only certain types of sensory data.

At the top of the hierarchy of dimensions is conscience. It is divided into two parts. The *universal conscience* is shared by all humans. It is the core of humanness, something present from the beginning of human life. It is the seat of immutable moral principles that are measuring sticks for thoughts and actions. They assess them morally before they, actions in particular, take place (antecedent conscience), and they assess them afterwards (consequent conscience) im-

pacting emotions in a particular way depending of the result of the assessment. And thus, a person feels guilt and shame when actions go against what moral rules prescribe, or the person feels satisfaction and fulfillment when actions follow moral rules. Many, probably most, actions are morally neutral and thus conscience passes over them: it usually does not matter, morally, if a term paper prepared by a student uses Times Roman font or Arial. Content, on the other hand, might.

The content of the universal conscience is shared by all people across times and cultures. However, such a statement appears to be a blatantly false and it is enough to look around one's own neighborhood to see counterexamples. The universal conscience can be viewed as a set of general principles which should be made specific for practical application.³ They thus require an accompanying *individual conscience* also called *the human disposition*. The content of the universal conscience does not change, but it is surrounded by a layer of individual conscience that functions as a filter which allows the voice of the universal conscience to get through with a variable level of clarity, in some extreme cases, not at all. The individual conscience is also a set of moral principles, but these principles vary from one person to another and are influenced both by the social and natural surrounding as well as by other inner dimensions of the same person. Social environment exercises pressure to adopt certain rules of conduct and they are frequently adopted, not always consciously. Family pressure coming from early upbringing, peer pressure, pressure coming from colleagues, from superiors, from culture, etc., all influence the content of the individual conscience. However, the person is not always a mere passive recipient of these influences. Reflection, reasoning, meditation may help greatly to defend oneself from influences considered harmful, and in this reasoning the voice of the universal conscience would be used to influence one's decisions. Rationalizing may, on the other hand, lead to the adoption of rules which otherwise would be rejected. Emotions of the person may play a great role in the adoption of some rules; consider the gravity of hatred, vengefulness, jealousy, but, on the other hand, of love, joy, optimism. The will has its say, too, in adoption or rejection of certain moral rules: I want to be a good person and I act upon this desire notwithstanding obstacles that may arise. Such a desire sustained by sheer will

³ In analogy of Chomsky's linguistic competence and a specific language learned by a child, the concepts of the universal moral grammar and individual moral judgments were proposed; S. Dwyer, Moral competence [in:] K. Murasugi, R. Stainton (eds.), *Philosophy and linguistics*, Boulder 1999, pp. 176–177; the universal moral grammar would correspond to the universal conscience. For the grammar-morality analogy, see J. Mikhail, *Elements of moral cognition: Rawls' linguistic analogy and the cognitive science of moral and legal judgment*, Cambridge 2011.

turns into a habit, into a moral rule that becomes a part of the person's individual conscience, a part of personality.

One big problem discussed in ethics was raised by David Hume who stated that an "ought" cannot be derived from an "is." The representation of the human makeup presented here if not removes then it at least alleviates this problem: there is no need to derive morality from factuality since morality is present in the human person from the very inception. The "ought" is in the universal conscience and, by its fluctuating presence, in individual conscience.

The anthropological structure presented here fits the creation account given in the Bible. Humans were created in the image and likeness of God after which humans separated themselves from God by sin. The *image* of God in humans, however, was not affected by sin; it remains undefiled in its pristine condition as the universal conscience, as the goodness of God inscribed in this conscience in form of moral rules. However, the likeness of God in humans became obscured by sin and thus not unobstructedly accessible to intellect, will, and emotions. The individual conscience is the obstructing element which can be more or less impeding, depending on its content. The *likeness* of God in humans is the intellect, the will and some affects, love in particular. However, they remain fluid, shaped by the course of one's life and the strength of one's personality. For a believer, they are also shaped by the providential God particularly in those who turn for help to Him.

Conscience in the New Testament

The presentation of conscience given above can be related to the Biblical use of conscience. The Old Testament does not have a specialized word for conscience.⁴ However, the role of conscience is played by the heart (לב),⁵ the seat of mental and spiritual activities, which includes moral decisions and emotions associated with these decisions. The New Testament uses the word συνείδησις for conscience; however, it is not used in the Gospels nor in John's epistles. Instead, the word καρδιά, the heart, is used, thereby taking over the Old Testament usage of the word and its generality. The heart appears to stand for the personality of a human being. When Paul spoke about the foolish heart that was darkened when the Gentiles recognized God, but did not glorify Him (Rom. 1:21), he meant as much human reason, as conscience and will, and so he did when speaking about the impenitent heart (2:5). However, the moral aspect of *kardia* appears to be the

⁴ M. Kähler, *Das Gewissen*, Halle 1878, p. 192.

⁵ C.F. Stäudlin, *Geschichte der Lehre von dem Gewissen*, Halle 1824, p. 21; W. Gass, *Die Lehre vom Gewissen: ein Beitrag zur Ethik*, Berlin 1869, pp. 15–16; W. Schmidt, *Das Gewissen*, Leipzig 1889, pp. 81–91.

most important so that when *syneidesis* is also used, the difference between the two meanings becomes blurred⁶ to the point that they can be blended together as synonymous.⁷

The word *syneidesis* is used 31 times in the New Testament out of which 21 times by Paul: 12 times in the Corinthians, 6 times in pastoral letters, and 3 times in the Romans; moreover, it is used 5 times in the Hebrews, 3 times in Peter's letters, and twice in the Acts.⁸ Sometimes the word is used by itself; often it is accompanied by an adjective or a noun and it may refer to the universal conscience, to the individual conscience, or to both taken together.

There is a reference to conscience that is good (ἀγαθή, Acts 23:1; 1 Tim. 1:5, 1:19; 1 P. 3:16, 3:21), pure (καθαρά, 1 Tim. 3:9, 2 Tim. 1:3), beautiful/good (καλή, Heb. 13:18), blameless (ἀπρόσκοπος, Acts 24:16), but also that is weak (ἀσθενής, ἀσθενούσα, 1 Cor. 8:7, 8:10, 8:12) and bad/evil (πονηρά, Heb. 10:22). It does not appear to be a semantic difference between good, clean, blameless, and pure conscience. In all these cases, the individual conscience can be meant since the universal conscience does not change; it is always good. Individual conscience, on the other hand, may contain different moral precepts, not all of them admirable and thus its level of perfection can go through different shades of goodness or badness.

Conscience can be modified by a noun. Ineffectiveness of offerings is indicated by the fact that if they worked, a person would not have a conscience of sins (Heb. 10:2). This seems to point to both the universal and individual conscience which induce the feeling of guilt in a person because of the person's sinful behavior. Having the conscience of sins would mean the condemning workings of conscience on account of the presence of sin. The expression sounds, in English, very close to having the consciousness of sins;⁹ however, conscience may induce guilt when the person is not conscious of sin in order to bring it to the person's consciousness.

Peter urged believers to endure undeserved wrongs on account of the conscience of God (1 P. 2:19). If this is understood as objective genitive, then the reference would be to the content of universal conscience as being a stamp of God, His image, a reflection of His greatness, goodness, and love which should be the primary motives of human response to whatever happens. If it is under-

⁶ "The function of the heart is akin to the function of conscience (*syneidesis*)"; P. Feine, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, Leipzig 1912, pp. 430–431.

⁷ Verses Rom. 2:15; 1 Tim. 1:5; Heb. 10:22; 1 P. 3:15–16 speak to the identification of heart and conscience, according to P. Delhaye, *The Christian conscience*, New York 1968 [1964], p. 48; cf. C.F. Stäudlin, *Geschichte*, pp. 45, 51. "In some cases, St. Paul uses interchangeably terms heart and *syneidesis*," W. Poplatek, *Istota sumienia wedlug Pisma św.*, Lublin 1961, p. 85.

⁸ A single use in the Gospels (J. 8:9) is in a phrase that appears only in late manuscripts.

⁹ Even more so in French, where *conscience* means both "conscience" and "consciousness".

stood as subjective genitive,¹⁰ then the reference would be to God as the author of the content of universal conscience, the God, who made humans moral beings, the God that is infinitely greater than anything that may be encountered on earth, good or bad.

Conscience is mentioned twice in the same verse where the weak conscience appears to be synonymous with the conscience of the idol (1 Cor. 8:7), the conscience of those who eat offerings to idols as such, i.e., they believe to be morally commendable to honor idols by participating in the offering ceremony. And thus, their conscience is weak because of their sincere belief in idols and allowing this belief to form their individual conscience — for the worse. Incidentally, the phrase “conscience of the idol” (συνείδησις του ειδώλου), which in many Bible translations is changed beyond recognition,¹¹ ties it nicely to Francis Bacon’s discussion of the idols of the mind: an idol could be understood as an idol of the marketplace (views coming from society), an idol of the tribe (relying too much on human nature, e.g., on the senses), an idol of the cave (relying too much on peculiarities of one’s own character and upbringing), and an idol of the theater (clinging to tradition). And thus, for instance, individual conscience is shaped by knowledge — or its lack — of religious truths (1 Cor. 8.6–7), but also by outside influences such as the views prevailing among people with whom a person lives and practiced morals in the social surrounding may be adopted by the person, etc.

Paul mentions conscience in the same epistle five times throughout five verses, also in the offering eating context (1 Cor. 10:25–30). Eating meat — any meat, even if offered to idols — does not by itself pollute one’s conscience. However, if A tells B that B eats meat offered to idols, B should stop eating (at least while A is watching) on account on A’s conscience, not B’s. It is interesting that although moral conviction concerning eating such meat in A’s conscience is erroneous, i.e., not Christian, B should, in a way, honor this erroneous conscience — at least not offend it — rather than act on account on B’s own conscience.¹² After

¹⁰ By analogy to the phrase “faith of Jesus Christ” (Gal. 2:16, 3:22; Rom. 3:22, 26; Phil. 3:9), which can be understood as objective or as subjective genitive, J. Stępień, *Syneidesis (Das gewissen) in der Anthropologie des Apostels Paulus*, “Collectanea Theologica” 48 (1978), Fasciculus specialis, p. 80.

¹¹ E.g., “a conscientious fear of the idol” (Conybeare), “familiarity ... with the idol” (Rotherham), “being accustomed to idols” (RSV), being “used to idols” (Jerusalem Bible), “thinking of idols as alive” (Living Bible), “thinking in terms of idols” (Modern Language).

¹² “Each conscience, even falsely educated conscience, must be respected,” O. Kuss, *Die Heiden und die Werke des Gesetzes (nach Röm 2,14–16)*, “Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift” 5 (1954) 2, p. 94. “One must respect another’s moral judgement upon his own life, even when one cannot follow it as a rule for one’s own,” J. Moffatt, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, London 1947, p. 144. “The conscience of one [person] is no norm for another [person],” R. Steinmetz, *Das Gewissen bei Paulus*, Gr. Lichterfelde–Berlin 1911, p. 20. “Conscience has an obligatory power even when it is in error,” W. Poplatek, *Istota*, p. 96.

all, each person should seek the neighbor's advantage, not one's own (10:24) and at this moment it appears to be more important not to stir someone's voice of conscience in the wrong way rather than to try to correct it, at least not by an in-your-face behavior.¹³

Conscience is also mentioned by itself. Paul assures the readers of his letter that he does not lie about the extent of his grief since "the conscience of mine in the Holy Spirit bears me witness" (Rom. 9:1), which can be understood as the individual conscience renewed in the Holy Spirit. Paul also referred to "the testimony of conscience of ours" in 2 Cor. 1:12. Having abandoned "the hidden things of shame," Paul also commended himself "to every conscience of man before God" (2 Cor. 4:2, "the common conscience" (NEB)); the judgment of individual conscience of fellow men should be done "before God," in His sight, with one eye on what God requires so that this conscience will judge justly. If such a reference to God is not made, Paul can only say that when persuading others, he can only hope that for their conscience everything will be open in him the way everything is open in God (2 Cor. 5:11) and just as everyone, including Paul, will appear before the judgment of Christ (5:10), so Paul exposes himself now to the judgment seat of their conscience. Also, obedience to authorities should be accepted on account of the practical reason — to prevent the authority's retribution — and "because of conscience" (διὰ τὴν συνείδησιν, Rom. 13:5), i.e., such submission is morally obligatory: because God providentially appoints authorities, then those who oppose authorities oppose God Himself and His decision (13:1–2). Woe to those whose individual conscience says otherwise. This means that for Paul, the obedience to authorities appears to be a moral precept of the universal conscience; at the very least, it should be part of the individual conscience of a Christian.

Conscience is thus an active faculty and acts in cooperation with other human dimensions which is best brought up by Paul in his discussion of the conscience of Gentiles when he said that the judgments of conscience are in confrontation with thoughts excusing or accusing one another (Rom. 2:15). An action of a Gentile can be morally unacceptable to his conscience; however, desires of the Gentile stir his intellect to planning and undertaking the action, and conscience is opposed to the thoughts associated with this action. Strong individual conscience can have an upper hand, but rationalization may win over, and thus the result of the conflict is not predetermined. However, the conflict does take place and, as Paul argued, Gentiles have no excuse before God for their misdeeds.

Paul spoke about conscience being scarred by the hot iron under the influence of the seductive spirit (1 Tim. 4:2), clearly a reference to individual conscience

¹³ In this lies the originality of Paul's use of conscience: a Gentile sage used the voice of his conscience, no matter what; a Christian "gives priority to charity as a rule of his conduct ... [whereas] paganism remained locked up in egoism," J. Dupont, *Syneidesis aux origines de la notion chrétienne de conscience morale*, "Studia Hellenistica" 5 (1948), p. 153.

and so is a reference to defilement of conscience (and the mind) of the impure (Tit. 1:15). Conscience cannot be purified by offerings (Heb. 9:9); it can be purified only by the blood of Christ, purified from dead works (Heb. 9:14). This purification is performed by God in the act of conversion and it can be understood as new birth: a person is born again by the removal of the stain of sin from his spirit and thereby its renewal. With the removal of sin from the individual conscience values and rules prompted by sin will also be removed and the conscience will be receptive to values and rules that agree with the will of God, with the values and rules which can be placed there directly by God Himself (cf. Jer. 31:33 quoted in Heb. 8:10). The universal conscience remains the same,¹⁴ but God writes a new content of the individual conscience, thereby providing Christian interpretations of general principles already inscribed in the universal conscience. The Sermon on the Mount is very instructive in that respect; Christ said, “I say to you, that anyone who is angry with his brother [without cause] will be held guilty by judgment. He who says to his brother, ‘fool’ will be held guilty by the council, and he who says ‘moron’ will be liable to the fire of hell” (Mt. 5:22). The general principle “do not kill” can be interpreted in so many ways and so many different interpretations are acquired by different people in different times and cultures. It can be interpreted by individual conscience to mean, “do not kill anyone from the same tribe, anyone else is a fair game”; “do not kill healthy infants, never mind the unhealthy”; this may even be carried to an extreme: “do not kill if you expose yourself to a danger of being caught”; would not psychopaths adopt such an interpretation? Christ provides a rather detailed interpretation that He finds obligatory for all people, but for converts in particular, demanding interpretation as it is (how effortlessly we call others morons...). Christ, it can be said, carries the interpretation of the “do not kill” to another extreme: words can be harmful, so much so, that even anger and name-calling deserve severe punishment.

This new birth is represented also in the New Testament by spiritual circumcision. Paul spoke about being a genuine Jew because of circumcision of the heart (*περιτομή καρδίας*, cf. Dt. 10:16, 30:6), in the spirit, not in the letter (Rom. 2:29), about circumcision made not with the hand, but the circumcision of Christ, whereby a person is complete in Him (Col. 2:10–11). This would indicate cutting

¹⁴ Cf. a remark made by Jerome that “the spark of conscience in the breast of Cain was not extinguished after he was ejected from paradise” (*Commentary on Ezekiel* 1.7). Jerome introduced the distinction between indelible *synteresis/synderesis* and extinguishable *conscientia* (cf. T.C. Potts, *Conscience in Medieval philosophy*, Cambridge 1998, pp. 10–11) which would correspond roughly to the universal and individual conscience discussed here. A similar sentiment can be found in the statement that “conscience was and remains for all times unchangeable sacredness in which the faith of man in God and in his eternal destiny under all storms of life and under all errors of cognition and of the will dwells like a sacred spark to be enkindled by the divine breath of grace at a determined hour to a luminous flame and to the fire of love that consumes sin,” H.T. Simar, *Das Gewissen und die Gewissensfreiheit: zehn Vorträge*, Freiburg im Breisgau 1874, pp. 53–54.

off human accretions of the individual conscience to make room for what Christ would like to see in people as their motivations.

However, individual conscience does not disappear. It works the same way as before conversion, but, presumably, its content will be much closer to the demands of the universal conscience than it was before conversion with the help of God-directed intellect, emotions, and will. Thus, it is useful to mention 1 Cor. 4:4 in which Paul said, οὐδὲν ἑμαυτῷ σὺνοῖδα, “I know nothing against myself” (ASV), but on account of using the verb *synoida*, it is also translated “my conscience does not reproach me” (Knox). The verse states that “I know nothing against myself, but I am not thereby justified, but he who judges me is the Lord.” This indicates that conscience is not the last instance.¹⁵ Although individual conscience is purified by the new birth, it still can be improperly influenced. Therefore, as important as the testimony and judgments of conscience of a believer are, the divine judgment is the true benchmark.

New birth affects the whole of human spirit, not only individual conscience, but also the intellect, will, and affects. The deductive skill may not be necessarily affected, but the assumptions made in the deductions, principles upon which reasoning is base will surely be affected along with the importance assigned to them. The new born do certain things not only out of obligation, not only because certain actions and behavior are mandated, but because they want to imitate Christ in their lives, because they desire to live a morally pure life. However, just as in the case of individual conscience, the intellect, will, and affects remain faculties on the human scale, that is, they may not — and usually will not — stay the same; the outside influences still can and do exercise pressure affecting will and emotions. The believers know now that they can rely on the divine help and that God is the providential God ready to help when believers prayerfully turn to Him. The body still has a very strong voice in anyone’s life and even Paul himself in exasperation complained about his pitiful condition of serving with the body to the law of sin even though he submitted himself to the law of God with his mind (Rom. 7:24–25).

Most of the time the New Testament speaks about individual conscience, malleable, changeable, formed by inner and outer influences, by the idols of Bacon. It can be a good conscience but it seems like most of the time it is not quite good — it is weak, it is outright bad. However, the good news offered by the New Testament is that it can be perfectly cleansed by the divine help: through the blood of Christ individual conscience can be purified. However, this pure state of conscience is not permanent; it can become defiled again and thus the life of

¹⁵ “Conscience is a directing [factor] in respect to justification judgment, but it is not the [ultimately] deciding instance,” T. Schneider, *Der paulinische Begriff des Gewissens (Syneidesis)*, “Bonner Zeitschrift für Theologie und Seelsorge” 6 (1929), p. 200.

a person and the person's relation to God, the person's commitment to Christian principles can keep this defilement away.

Sometimes when the New Testament speaks about conscience, it may be understood as a reference to both the universal and individual conscience. When Peter spoke about the conscience of God, he spoke about the universal conscience, but the clearest reference to it is not by using the name "conscience." When arguing for the inexcusability of Gentiles before the judgment of God, Paul said that they have the law inscribed in their hearts (Rom. 2:15). The heart mentioned here is the universal conscience, the seat of moral principles with which God endows every human being coming to this world. Thus, Gentiles do have the moral principles and thus they have no excuse that they did not have any chance to know what sin is.

The vexing problem remains as to what exactly is inscribed, which leads to the problem of natural law, and centuries-long rich discussions of the problem did not quite arrive at a unique solution.

The inscribed law

Here is the context in which a pronouncement about the inscribed law was made: "For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things of the law, they are law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them" (Rom. 2:14–15). This has been one of the most widely discussed Biblical passages and pretty much every word was interpreted in a variety of ways, beginning with the starting "for" considered by some problematic since it is not clear with which of the preceding statements these two verses are connected,¹⁶ or the word "and" for which it is disputed what it exactly connects.¹⁷ Who are the Gentiles? Any Gentiles or only the ones converted to Christianity? What are the things of the law (τὰ τοῦ νόμου ποιεῖν) that they do and by nature at that? What nature? How can Gentiles be the law to themselves? Would that mean that their salvation is possible by their own efforts alone without God's saving grace? What is the law mentioned five times in these two verses? Most importantly for us here, what exactly is written on the hearts (γραπτὸν ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις)?¹⁸

¹⁶ "The correct ascription of the γάρ in v. 14 is — until today — a very important exegetical point," G. Bornkamm, *Gesetz und Natur* (Röm 2:14–2:16), in his *Studien zu Antike und Christentum*, München 1959, p. 100 note 8.

¹⁷ R.H. Bell, *No one seeks for God: an exegetical and theological study of Romans 1.18–3.20*, Tübingen 1998, p. 149.

¹⁸ Cf. J. Riedl, Die Auslegung von R 2,14–16 in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart [in:] *Studiorum Paulinorum Congressus Internationalis Catholicus 1961*, Romae 1963, vol. 1, pp. 271–281. For a comprehensive discussion of Rom. 2:14–15, see W. Bleibtreu, *Die drei ersten Kapitel des Römerbriefes*,

Paul accuses the Jews for their misdeeds in spite of the fact that they have the Mosaic law which spells out the revealed rules of conduct. When it comes to Gentiles, they cannot use as an excuse the fact that the Mosaic law was not revealed to them, since God wrote the law on their hearts. The law in these verses has to be the Mosaic law. However, Paul did not say that the law is written on the hearts, but the work of the law (ἔργον τοῦ νόμου). What this work is we can only surmise. Not the entire Mosaic law spelled out in the Torah with its 613 rules is to be found in the hearts of Gentiles but, as it were, its summary, its core, the principles overarching these laws which may be considered to be summarized in the Decalogue. The word “written” seems to be quite significant here since the work of the law was written on the heart by the same hand that wrote the Decalogue on the stone tablets (cf. 2 Cor. 3:3).¹⁹ What the Jews received in a very tangible form the Gentiles received inscribed in their universal conscience which is immutable although not always, not easily, and not directly accessible. Yet, it is there, it waits for discovery and for serious treatment by each person. To that end, God revealed Himself in nature, in its orderliness and harmony; His majesty and divinity is manifested in the working of nature for everyone to see as Paul taught in the very same Epistle to the Romans. This is a way of natural theology, the way of discovering the unknown God in one’s own natural surrounding because God is not far away from anyone, as Paul also preached on the Areopagus. Natural theology goes hand in hand with the natural law of conduct. Presumably, the recognition of the existence and majesty of God will lead a person to seeking God’s guidance in the life’s matters — and answers can be found in oneself, in the universal conscience implanted by God. Listening to nature leads to discovery of God, listening to oneself, to one’s conscience leads to the discovery of God’s voice.

It seem that the verses should be read thus: “For when Gentiles, who do not have the [Mosaic] law, by nature do the things of the [Mosaic] law, they are law to themselves,²⁰ even though they do not have the [Mosaic] law. They show that the work of the [Mosaic] law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also

Göttingen 1884; M. Lackmann, *Vom Geheimnis der Schöpfung. Die Geschichte der Exegese von Römer I, 18–23, II, 14–16 und Acta XIV, 15–17, XVII, 22–29 vom 2. Jahrhundert bis zum Beginn der Orthodoxie*, Stuttgart 1952; J. Riedl, *Das Heil der Heiden nach R 2, 14–16.26.27*, Mödling bei Wien 1965; R.H. Bell, *No one seeks*.

¹⁹ “The writing in the hearts is the counterpart of the writing on the tablets,” A. Schlatter, *Gottes Gerechtigkeit: ein Kommentar zum Römerbrief*, Stuttgart 1975 [1935], p. 91.

²⁰ In fact, it is possible to read, “they are [the Mosaic] law to themselves” if the lack of article before “law” is found rather unimportant; in this case, the interpretation would be that the Gentiles “are for themselves what the Mosaic law is for the Jews,” P. Bläser, *Das Gesetz bei Paulus*, Münster 1941, p. 21. A possibility is raised that “law” in the entire chs. 2–3 of the Romans should be understood as “the divine moral norm which manifests itself for the Jews in their Mosaic law and for the Gentiles in the so-called natural law,” J. Riedl, *Das Heil der Heiden*, p. 198, but with this interpretation, it is difficult to understand the statement that the Gentiles have no law and are law to themselves.

bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them” (Rom. 2:14–15). Obviously, the Gentiles do not have the Mosaic law and yet they can follow it; they can be doers of this law (ποιηταὶ τοῦ νόμου, 2:13), in which way they are law to themselves because as such doers, they would follow the law that they do have, the one which is inborn — the content of the universal conscience — and the one which is acquired — the content of the individual conscience.²¹ Although they could not follow — not knowing them — all the minutia of the Mosaic law, their moral conduct could be acceptable from the point of view of this law.

The Decalogue can be considered an outline of the Mosaic law, a set of general principles which need to be made specific to be applied in a particular situation. Consider again the command, “do not kill.” Is this an unconditional command? Do not kill any one in any situation? The command might be interpreted as saying, do you best not to kill anyone at any time anywhere, unless... — and this is where particular guidelines are needed accompanied by human reasoning and emotive powers to make the right decision in a particular case. The Mosaic law with its hundreds of rules tries to do just that — provide specific guidelines for specific situations. Thus, killing in self-defense is permitted, and so is killing an enemy on the battlefield. However, even the specific rules of the Mosaic law are insufficient to cover all possible bases. Killing a family member on the battlefield who is on the opposing side? Killing a mortally wounded person to end the person’s suffering? Aborting a fetus? In any event, the Gentiles, in fact, all people, have written in their universal conscience general moral principles which the Jews had written on the stone tablets. Therefore, if rules of behavior brought to the world are counted as part of the natural law, then the work of the law mentioned by Paul can be identified with the natural law. Specificity of moral behavior is the work of individual conscience and this conscience and its rules will be molded by the person’s rational and emotive faculties and the outside influences.

The content of the universal conscience: since Paul stated that all people have the work of the law inscribed in their hearts by which they can be judged just as the Jews will be judged by the Mosaic law, this can be interpreted to mean that all people have the same essence in their universal conscience which can be considered a form of the Decalogue which represents the essence of the Mosaic law.

Christ said that the entire law and prophets are based on two commandments, loving God with all one’s heart and mind and loving neighbors as oneself (Mt. 22:36–40), which are the two commandments provided in the Torah (Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18). If the former is considered the summary of the so-called first table of the Decalogue, which includes commandments regulating divine-human

²¹ “Even though the Gentiles do not have the Mosaic law, they in effect possess the law (presumably the moral norms of the Mosaic law) as evidenced by their occasionally keeping the commands of that law,” T.R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Grand Rapids 1998, pp. 121–122.

relationship, then the latter summarizes the second table, which includes commandments regulating inter-human relations, and in respect to the latter, this is very much what Paul explicitly stated: the one who loves another has fulfilled the law since “you should not commit adultery, you should not kill, you should not steal, you should not bear false witness, you should not covet and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up (ἀνακεφαλαιοῦται) in this word, namely, you should love your neighbor as yourself” (Rom. 13:8–9). Emphasizing the second tablet, Christ also said in the Sermon of the Mount: “all that you want that people do to you, do that also to them, since such is the law and prophets” (Mt. 7:12), which is the Golden Rule that should be considered a rule engraved in the universal conscience content, which is confirmed by the fact that it really is universally recognized, very often in the negative form, as a Silver Rule: “Do not do to others as you would not them do to you,” as a fundamental ethical rule, including the deuterocanonical Book of Tobit (4:15).²² Interestingly, Christ also said, “I give you a new commandment, love one another as I loved you,” which should be a distinguishing characteristic of Christians (J. 13:34–35). Love your neighbor is, so to speak, one-directional love: love your neighbor regardless of whether you are loved back and in this, rely on the store of your own affections — not an easy task, to put it mildly. Also, the Golden Rule may be interpreted in a variety of ways and hardly, to have an extreme example, an interpretation promoted by a masochist would be desirable. Christ not only wanted disciples to love one another but love the way He loved them, which includes putting one’s life for someone, the ultimate sacrifice. What is new here is this addition, “as I loved you”; believers become temples of the Holy Spirit and thus of Christ and thus loving one another will be, as it were, motivated by the divinely enhanced affection.²³ This would make possible to love others not only as oneself, but also more than oneself.²⁴ That would be a new law in the sense of desirable content of the individual conscience as a Christian understanding of the Golden Rule which was and remains part of the universal conscience.

The Golden Rule and the Decalogue were the favorite choices of authors, at least Christian authors beginning from patristic times. However, these were not

²² J. Wattles, *The golden rule*, New York 1996, pp. 16, 29, 34, 191, 192.

²³ Love spoken of in here “is a love new in its very *nature* ... [namely] *of the same nature* as which Jesus testifies to the believer (x. 15); each one, so to speak, loves his brother with the love with which Jesus loves both him and this brother,” F.L. Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, New York 1886 [1864], vol. 2, p. 266.

²⁴ As stated at the beginning of the 5th century, “in the law is was commanded that everyone should love his neighbor as himself. But the voice of our Lord wants our companions in faith to be loved even more that ourselves because he is ordering us to imitate his love for us,” Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Downers Grove 2010, p. 121. This sentiment is also conveyed in Paul’s urging each person to seek the neighbor’s advantage, not one’s own (1 Cor. 10:24).

the only possibilities. The Jewish rabbis spoke about the so-called Noachian covenant that God established with Noah after the flood and with his progeny, which is the whole of the humankind, in fact, a covenant with the whole of creation (Gen. 9:8–17). The covenant included seven Noahide commandments obligatory for all humans, which are prohibitions against idolatry, blasphemy, murder, sexual immorality, theft, tearing a limb of a living animal and a command to establish a court of justice. They were considered to be the natural law that was in view of some, rationally knowable, since, in Maimonides' words, the Noahides' reason compels them to follow its precepts.²⁵ As part of the natural law, its precepts could also be considered to be "written in the human heart." In fact, Maimonides considered six Noahide commandments to be Adamic; that is, present from the beginning of the humankind.²⁶

Natural law was often considered to be recognizable by the mind as composed of self-evident truths. That is, the mind was so created that it inevitably recognized some truths as self-evident. Self-evidence is not as much property of the truths as it rather depends on the human cognitive apparatus. Therefore, there is a tenuous difference between some truths being inscribed in the human mind from birth and the same truths being self-evident since, in the latter case, they are not inscribed, but the mind is so constructed that they, as it were, must inscribe themselves in the mind when the mind begins to work. That is, *tabula* may be *rasa*, but the makeup of the *tabula* determines what, as it were, writes itself on it.

If the Decalogue in some form is inscribed in the universal conscience, what is the need for the revelation, at least the part of revelation that includes the Decalogue? Wouldn't the inscribed Decalogue be sufficient? This is a type of question that Augustine had also asked — and answered. "The hand of the Creator inscribed in the human heart, don't do to other what would not like them do to you. This is what no one was free to ignore even before the law was given." However, to avoid an excuse that the law was incomplete, God inscribed on stone tables the laws that people had in their hearts, but they did not read them. That is, these precepts had already been in the human conscience, but people just did not want to read them. Therefore, God put them in front of their eyes so that they would be compelled to see them also in their hearts. Through the law, God was bringing people to their own selves, through the law God has made a proclamation, "return, transgressors, to your heart" (Is. 46:8) (*Expositions on the Psalms* 57.1). This can be termed the Augustine principle: the essence of the written law is already inscribed in human conscience, but because people disobey it, God also gave the same moral precepts in form of the written, Mosaic law. In other words,

²⁵ D. Novak, Response [in:] A.M. Emon, M. Levering, D. Novak, *Natural law: a Jewish, Christian, and Islamic dialogue*, Oxford 2014, pp. 135, 138. Cf. idem, *Natural law in Judaism*, Cambridge, 2008 [1992], ch. 6.

²⁶ Idem, Response, p. 136.

the same core values can be found in the universal conscience and in religious values. Thus, at least the Israelites since the Mosaic law was issued, would be doubly condemned: by their conscience and by the written law. The Augustine principle was later developed as a doctrine of complementarity of the natural law and the divine law as “two different yet mutually complementary ways in which God’s will is expressed to human beings,”²⁷ and still as a doctrine of two books, a book of nature and the Scripture, both speaking about God’s majesty and God’s will, the view promoted by physico-theology.

A universal version of the Augustine principle would be that the same core moral values and precepts are inscribed in the human universal conscience and are also included in all major religions. A significant overlap of moral codes given by the religious systems would point to the validity of this principle.

To return to and end with the New Testament: Paul started his letter to the Romans with the admonition concerning the wrath of God which will befall those who are impious and unjust and who through their injustice suppress the truth (1:18). The emphasis is clearly in the moral aspect of the accusation. People will not expose themselves to God’s wrath by making mistakes in their reasoning by not following properly deductive reasoning, in making a mistake in a statistical assessment of a phenomenon, in making a mistake by falling to an optical illusion when gathering some observational data, and the like. They will become a subject to God’s condemnation when they act immorally knowing what is right or wrong (2:18) and yet ignoring the ethics. God will reward those who persevere in their good work (2:7) and will punish those who succumb to injustice (2:8). Paul says, therefore, that the moral aspect of human life is the most important, more important than the human rationality. This rationality should be used in order to learn what can be learned about God (1:20) and then respect or glorify Him (1:21), glorify through their moral life; otherwise, they fall into idolatry (1:23, 25) and profound immorality by listening to the desires of their flesh (1:26–31) rather than to their conscience (2:14–15). Thus, it appears that Paul would agree with the view that the moral dimension of man is, from the divine perspective, more important than the rational dimension; the latter should be used as a tool to accomplish the demands of the former and the essence of humanness lies in the moral dimension.²⁸

²⁷ J. Porter, *Natural and divine law: reclaiming the tradition for Christian ethics*, Ottawa 1999, p. 133.

²⁸ “It would be no exaggeration to say that for him [Paul] conscience was the man himself,” C. Spicq, *La conscience dans le Nouveau Testament*, “Revue biblique” 47 (1938), p. 80. “Conscience is not a part of man’s nature, it is the man itself,” W.T. Davison, *The Christian conscience*, London 1910 [1888], p. 10.

Problem sumienia w świetle nauki apostoła Pawła

Streszczenie

W artykule przedstawiono pogląd, że sumienie jest zasadniczym czynnikiem konstytuującym naturę ludzką. Sumienie podzielone jest na wspólne wszystkim ludziom i niezmiennie sumienie uniwersalne oraz sumienie indywidualne, które jest kształtowane w każdym człowieku przez czynniki wewnętrzne i zewnętrzne. Pogląd ten porównany jest z nowotestamentowym poglądem na sumienie zaprezentowanym przede wszystkim przez apostoła Pawła.

Słowa kluczowe

sumienie, Biblia, apostoł Paweł

Keywords

conscience, Bible, apostle Paul

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