

Godless Conscience

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Forthcoming in the *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*

Abstract: John Cottingham suggests that “only a traditional theistic framework may be adequate for doing justice to the role of conscience in our lives.” Two main reasons for endorsing this proposition are assessed: the religious origins of conscience, and the need to explain its normative authority. I argue that Graeco-Roman conceptions of conscience cast doubt on this first historical claim, and that secular moral realisms can account for the obligatoriness of conscience. Nevertheless, the recognition of the need for an objective foundation for conscience which emerges from these debates should be embraced by both secular and religious ethicists alike.

I

Can we account for moral conscience without theism? John Cottingham has suggested that “only a traditional theistic framework may be adequate for doing justice to the role of conscience in our lives.”¹ Two main considerations speak in favour of this thesis. The first is historical: what Cottingham calls “the religious roots of the notion of ‘conscience’ in the Judaeo-Christian tradition”.² The second is normative: the difficulties faced by a secular empiricist naturalism in accounting for the authority of conscience, and the more fitting home that a “theistic account of morality” offers for this authority.³ My aim will be to assess the cogency of arguments for a theistic worldview that proceed on these grounds. Of course, looming in the background is the much larger and perennial question of the religious

¹ John Cottingham, “Conscience: What Is Its History and Does It Have a Future?”, *History of European Ideas* 45, no. 3 (2019), 338.

² Cottingham, “Conscience”, 388.

³ Cottingham, “Conscience”, 342.

foundations of morality.⁴ If morality itself presupposes theism, then it would seem to follow *eo ipso* that moral conscience does too. However, our focus will be narrower—asking whether dwelling on conscience in particular offers any distinctive dialectical purchase. Does moral conscience reveal a path to theism that may be overlooked if our eyes are only drawn to morality as a whole?

Some Christian thinkers are persuaded there are such routes leading from conscience to God. For instance, William Perkins says that a wrongdoer who feels “a griping in his conscience” thereby finds himself with “a strong reason to shew, that there is a God, before whose judgment seat he must answer”.⁵ Less flatly, John Henry Newman identifies in conscience “the materials for the real apprehension of a Divine Sovereign and Judge.”⁶ Cottingham provides a sophisticated and scrupulous contribution to this tradition. He interprets our moral experience through the lens of a conscience which acts as our “natural guide”, and whose naturalness ought to be construed in a “richer normative (and ultimately religious) sense” than would arise from the “empirical facts dispassionately analysed”.⁷ I am sceptical that reflection on the experience of conscience is justified in carrying us quite so far. Nevertheless, exploring such arguments can be highly constructive even for secular ethicists—demonstrating the limitations of conceptions of conscience that can find no room for moral transcendence (something religiously-minded philosophers have long sought to emphasise). Furthermore, these inquiries also allow us to appreciate the deep interlocking consistency of much theistic thought on the place of conscience in moral life.

Before turning to the details of conscience’s relationship to theism, we should ensure the phenomenon itself is securely within our grasp. Any strict definition of conscience is likely to be controversial given the concept’s long and contested history.⁸ But most understandings

⁴ For an overview of this broader topic, see J. E. Hare, *God and Morality: A Philosophical History* (Blackwell, 2007).

⁵ William Perkins, *The Foundation of the Christian Religion: Gathered into Sixe Principles* (John Legatt, 1616), 3.

⁶ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 102.

⁷ John Cottingham, “‘Our Natural Guide...’: Conscience, ‘Nature’, and Moral Experience”, in *Human Values: New Essays on Ethics and Natural Law*, ed. David Oderberg and Sophie-Grace Chappell (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 24.

⁸ Douglas Langston, *Conscience and Other Virtues: From Bonaventure to MacIntyre* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001); Paul Strohm, *Conscience: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2011);

of conscience characterise it as a capacity for self-directed evaluation.⁹ That is usually, although not always, an ethical self-evaluation—one that concerns moral rectitude. Furthermore, this self-evaluation has a personal and particularistic dimension, which concerns not merely general knowledge of right or wrong but rather right or wrong in someone’s own specific circumstances. For instance, conscience would not simply tell someone that exploitation is wrong, but impresses upon them the wrongness of particular cases in which they did or might take advantage of the vulnerable. Sometimes conscience has been aligned with beliefs about human conduct—but there is also a strand of thought associating it with feeling and sentiment.¹⁰

That rather abstract and arid sketch of conscience can be supplemented by a phenomenologically richer consideration of some of the characteristic metaphors which have sought to bring it into view. Much of this imagery depicts conscience as something that wounds us. Think of the prick of conscience—the sharp pain of self-reproach. Conscience is also depicted as a biting, or a worm that eats away at us. For instance, in Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, Queen Margaret says to the eponymous Richard, “The worm of conscience still begnaw thy soul”.¹¹ All three of these images can be found within the most widely read poem in Middle English. This is a 14th century penitential text itself called the *Prik of Conscience*, and in speaking of sinners it tells us:

Then shul they fele how evel thay lyved
When concyence worme hath hem greved
That withinne hem shal gnaw and byte¹²

Mika Ojakangas, *The Voice of Conscience: A Political Genealogy of Western Ethical Experience* (Bloomsbury, 2013).

⁹ Richard Sorabji, *Moral Conscience through the Ages: Fifth Century BCE to the Present* (Chicago University Press, 2014), 15. For a broader philosophical overview of the concept, see the helpful survey in Alberto Giubilini, “Conscience”, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2021).

¹⁰ This second strand rises to prominence in the eighteenth century. For instance, Rousseau says, “The acts of the conscience are not judgments but sentiments.” Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: Or On Education* (Basic Books, 1979), 290.

¹¹ William Shakespeare, *Richard III* (Penguin, 2015), 1.3.233.

¹² James Morey, ed., *Prik of Conscience* (Medieval Institute Publications, 2012), 6.602-5.

Other language around conscience is less visceral. Hobbes and Kant both depict conscience as a kind of internal court—one which prosecutes but might also acquit us.¹³ Conscience is also sometimes represented as a voice or call. Tellingly, John Stuart Mill remarked that his conscience spoke to him in the voice of his father.¹⁴

Aquinas offers an important clarificatory distinction in approaching conscience, depending on whether “we deliberate what ought to be done or examine what has been done”.¹⁵ When taken in this first directive or prospective way, “conscience is said to goad or persuade or bind”.¹⁶ But in the second examining or retrospective sense, “conscience is said to accuse or worry when what was done is found to be out of harmony with the knowledge by which it is examined”.¹⁷ The function and phenomenology of conscience can therefore be quite different when conscience is turned towards past acts rather than potential future ones. Nevertheless, we might still construe each of these orientations as forms of self-directed evaluative ability that pertains to a person’s actions.

Conscience, in sum, is a capacity for self-directed evaluation with a personal and particularistic character, often thought to manifest itself as a painful pricking or gnawing, and sometimes represented on a juridical model as a court, or as a voice speaking to us. What, then, might be said to show that this conscience is best understood through a theistic lens?

II

Let us start with Cottingham’s claim that the notion of conscience has roots in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Why would it matter that conscience had such religious roots? Some histories of our moral ideas suppose that recounting their development may reveal an incoherence in the way they are currently used. Two of the great works of Catholic genealogy in twentieth century moral philosophy set out to do this. Take Elizabeth Anscombe’s ‘Modern

¹³ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: Or The Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil* (Hackett, 1994), 99; Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 189.

See also Samuel Butler, *Hudibras* (J Walker, 1817), II.ii.317-18.

¹⁴ John Stuart Mill, “Rejected Leaves of the Early Draft of the Autobiography”, in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*. Vol. 1, ed. John Robson and Jack Stillinger (University of Toronto Press, 1981), 613.

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Selected Writings* (Penguin, 1998), 220.

¹⁶ Aquinas, *Selected Writings*, 220.

¹⁷ Aquinas, *Selected Writings*, 220.

Moral Philosophy’, in which she claims we should attempt to jettison concepts such as moral obligation, moral duty, and the moral sense of ‘ought’. Anscombe tells us that it is “because they are survivals, or derivatives of survivals, from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives, and are only harmful without it.”¹⁸ In particular, she confronts us with a disjointedness that arises when ideas developed within a conception of ethics based on divine law are detached from their original home. We find a similar approach in Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*, which argues that the Enlightenment project of grounding moral injunctions in human nature was bound to fail. That is because transformations in how reason was understood had made a teleological conception of such human nature seem inaccessible. Thus, Enlightenment philosophers are said to have “inherited incoherent fragments of a once coherent scheme of thought and action and, since they did not recognize their own peculiar historical and cultural situation, they could not recognize the impossible and quixotic character of their self-appointed task.”¹⁹ Tracing the distance of a moral concept from its inception can thus reveal a deformation rather than a mere change or evolution. Might something similar be true of moral conscience? That without its early religious backdrop, it becomes the kind of incoherent fragment that Anscombe and MacIntyre sought to identify? Perhaps. However, this is a much more ambitious thesis than we shall be concerned with.

Cottingham’s historical reflections are far more modest and do not make strong genealogical claims about the conceptual incoherence of secular conscience. They instead focus on the insights provided by the Judaeo-Christian tradition in accounting for the persistence of “our inherent *conflictedness*” as beings who feel the pull of something like a higher against a lower self.²⁰ It is a religiously-inflected moral psychology of conscience in particular that is thought to be particularly successful in capturing those perennial conflicts human beings experience. This affinity between conscience and religious modes of understanding is further strengthened by Cottingham’s suggestion that the idea of conscience itself has “religious roots”.²¹ That a moral tradition nourished by theistic sensibilities was able to offer us a profoundly original exploration of an enduring aspect of the human condition, which its non-theistic contemporaries overlooked, might suggest it had an important explanatory advantage in accounting for moral experience. Cottingham himself is often

¹⁸ G.E.M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy”, *Philosophy* 124 (1958), 1.

¹⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Duckworth & Co, 1981), 55.

²⁰ Cottingham, “Conscience”, 344.

²¹ Cottingham, “Conscience”, 338.

circumspect in his attempts to show that a Judaeo-Christian worldview offers especially felicitous resources for elucidating conscience's place in human life. But we do seem to be invited to find some merit in the rich moral-psychological lessons that emerged from its stories and teachings on conscience, particularly when contrasted with other non-theistic ancient traditions.

Is Cottingham correct to think the notion of conscience has religious roots? Furthermore, does conscience have an especially close connection to the Judaeo-Christian tradition in ways that might bolster the case for theism? Cottingham's historical account of conscience might leave readers with such an impression. His narrative begins with the claim that conscience is prefigured in Psalm 51 in King David's acknowledgement of his guilt after seducing Bathsheba and contriving to get her husband killed.²² The same psycho-ethical framework—organised around inner conflict—is then said to be taken up in much subsequent biblical writing and wider Christian moral philosophy. The *locus classicus* here is St Paul's claim that the Gentiles have the requirements of the law written in their hearts, to which their consciences bear witness.²³ Cottingham thinks the Judaeo-Christian worldview is such fertile ground for conscience because it presents us with a "sense of humans as essentially conflicted beings", and constitutes "a worldview in which a sense of sin, and its corollary conscience, has a pivotal place."²⁴ This is then contrasted with classical Greek philosophy, with Aristotle as its leading representative, who is said instead to focus on "harmonious moral development" and to lack a "developed idea of conscience".²⁵ While we are told in passing that "guilt and remorse are vividly present in much Greek tragedy", the Greek philosophical world is thought not to grapple with the same profound internal ethico-psychological tensions as the Judaeo-Christian tradition, which call for the notion of conscience.²⁶

This risks being too partial a picture of the early history of conscience. Conscience is a notion found at many points in Greek and Roman antiquity independently of Judaeo-Christian thought. For instance, we find explicit reference to conscience, rather than simply the general themes of guilt and remorse, among the Greek tragedians. This can take the form of references

²² John Cottingham, "Conscience, Guilt, and Shame", in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Ethics*, ed. Roger Crisp (Oxford University Press, 2013), 731.

²³ Romans 2:15.

²⁴ Cottingham, "Conscience, Guilt, and Shame", 732.

²⁵ Cottingham, "Conscience, Guilt, and Shame", 731.

²⁶ Cottingham, "Conscience, Guilt, and Shame", 731.

to what was originally called ‘suneidenai’ or later ‘syneidesis’: sharing knowledge with oneself.²⁷ So, in Euripides, when Orestes is asked, “What ails thee? What is thy deadly sickness?”, he replies, “My conscience (σύνεσις); I know that I am guilty of an awful crime.”²⁸ Admittedly, Orestes goes on to say that grief especially has ruined him, which his interlocutor calls a dreadful goddess; so this is not an entirely secular linguistic context, even if it is a decidedly non-Christian one.²⁹

It is not only in Greek tragedy that conscience appears. Take Aristophanes’ comic play *The Wasps*, where Philocleon is fooled into voting the wrong way during a trial. He says, “And so I have charged my conscience (ξυνείσομαι) with the acquittal of an accused being! [...] I did it despite myself; it is not in my character.”³⁰ Again, this is not an entirely secular context, because Philocleon quickly adds, “Sacred gods! forgive me.” But despite the comic setting, it does suggest a conception of conscience that can capture inner turmoil—acting in conflict with oneself, or a part of oneself—yet which is not grounded in a Judaeo-Christian framework.

Consider too the secular model of conscience advanced by Epicurus.³¹ According to Cicero, Epicurus held that people have troubled consciences because they believe they are being watched by the gods even if their bad deeds escape notice by humans.³² But he thought this was wrongheaded—the gods have far better things to do than watch us. Nevertheless, Epicurus told his followers that in order to avert wrongdoing, they should imagine that *he* was watching them.³³ This proposal shares something of the Pauline idea of conscience as a witness but gives it a secular interpretation. Relatedly, Seneca tells us that Epicurus thought we should imagine an admired philosopher as an exemplum.³⁴ Here it is imagined human judgements

²⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Studies in Words* (Cambridge University Press, 1967), chap. 8; Ojakangas, *The Voice of Conscience: A Political Genealogy of Western Ethical Experience*, 70.

²⁸ Euripides, *Orestes* (George Bell & Sons, 1893), ll. 395–6.

²⁹ For further discussion of the influence of this passage on the understanding of conscience among Platonic philosophers, see Jed Atkins, “Euripides’s *Orestes* and the Concept of Conscience in Greek Philosophy”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 75, no. 1 (2014).

³⁰ Aristophanes, “Wasps”, in *The Complete Greek Drama*. Vol. 2, trans. Eugene O’Neill (Random House, 1938), ll. 1000–1003.

³¹ I am significantly indebted here to the discussion of Epicurus in Sorabji, *Moral Conscience through the Ages*, 23–25.

³² Cicero, *On Ends*, sec. 1.16.51.

³³ Seneca, *Letters*, sec. 25.5.

³⁴ Seneca, *Letters*, sec. 11.8–10.

rather than divine judgements that underpin conscience. Likewise, the Epicurean poet Lucretius makes a similar attack on religious conceptions of conscience when he claims it is misguided to have a troubled conscience that fears divine punishment, since there is no such thing as supernatural punishment and nothing can harm us after death because our atoms will simply be scattered.³⁵ So, we seem to find among the Epicureans an understanding of conscience that is fundamentally secular, but which can support a distinction within the person between a felt ethical authority and a self whose past or prospective acts are morally judged. In Epicurus, this takes the form of an imagined human witness possessed of wisdom, and whose projected gaze helps us avoid wrongdoing and act well.

There is, then, some basis for doubting the notion of conscience has especially Judaeo-Christian roots. Indeed, we find the language as well as the phenomena of conscience not merely in Greek tragedy, but in Greek and Roman comedy, as well as poets and philosophers in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds—none of whom are Jewish or Christian.³⁶ These discussions of conscience include a recognition of significant inner conflict, which is far from the special preserve of Christianity, such as the ‘acting despite myself’ mentioned by Aristophanes. Some early conceptions of conscience also had a predominantly secular character—Epicurus being the strongest example, with his model of conscience as an imagined human witness. Moreover, if Cicero is to be believed, then even Aristotelians can be found acknowledging a natural biting of our consciences.³⁷ These cases grapple with the moral conflictedness of the human psyche with respect to both of the Thomist orientations of conscience: examination of past deeds, as seen in the characters of Euripides and Aristophanes, and direction of future deeds, with the imagined witness of Epicurus. So, even setting aside the narrower question of whether the notion of conscience has decidedly religious roots, there are numerous phenomenologically rich accounts of conscience in the ancient world outside of a strictly Judaeo-Christian context. That unsettles attempts to suggest that conscience is closely aligned with the Judaeo-Christian tradition either in its origins or the moral psychology of intrapersonal conflict that tradition can bring to bear. Nevertheless, this is not a decisive blow,

³⁵ Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, sec. 3.1011-24.

³⁶ See also Richard Sorabji, “Graeco-Roman Origins of the Idea of Moral Conscience”, *Studia Patristica* 44 (2010).

³⁷ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, sec. 4.45.

since the core of the argument in support of a theistic approach lies elsewhere—namely, in accounting for the *authority* of conscience.

III

What is meant by conscience’s authority? Joseph Butler described conscience as “a faculty in kind and in nature supreme over all others, and which bears its own authority of being so”.³⁸ So understood, conscience has a normative force, insofar as it gives us either compelling or conclusive reasons to follow its dictates. We still tend to think something broadly similar today, insofar as one’s conscience has far greater weight than a passing whim or idiosyncratic habit. When we are deliberating about what to do or who to be, then its verdicts ought to be taken seriously. We should not act against it lightly—if at all. Similarly, when we examine our past acts, the accusations of conscience ought to weigh heavily with us. Butler has a ready answer to why that is. Conscience is said to be our “natural guide, the guide assigned to us by the Author of our nature”.³⁹ The authority of conscience ultimately derives from God. Of course, this response is not available to non-theists, and so they face a dilemma: either give up on the notion that conscience has a special authority—with all the revisionary consequences this would have for our moral life—or proceed down the thorny path of finding some other grounding for conscience.

Cottingham shows why many attempts to embark on this second route will soon face difficulties. In particular, an empirical naturalist explanation of conscience struggles to explain conscience’s normative force.⁴⁰ Cottingham points to J.S. Mill, who offers a non-theist account of conscience as “a feeling in our own mind; a pain more or less intense, attendant on violation of duty”.⁴¹ These painful feelings then act as an “internal sanction of duty”.⁴² It does not seem to me that Mill is attempting to explain the normative authority of conscience *per se* in these passages. Nevertheless, he considers a relevant objection here concerning the implications of his theory:

³⁸ Samuel Butler, “Fifteen Sermons”, in *British Moralists 1650-1800*, ed. D.D. Raphael (Hackett, 1991), 351.

³⁹ Butler, “Fifteen Sermons”, 356–57.

⁴⁰ Cottingham, “Conscience”, 343.

⁴¹ John Stuart Mill, “Utilitarianism”, in *On Liberty, Utilitarianism, and Other Essays* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 141.

⁴² J. S. Mill, “Utilitarianism”, 141.

if a person is able to say to himself, ‘This which is restraining me, and which is called my conscience, is only a feeling in my own mind’, he may possibly draw the conclusion that when the feeling ceases the obligation ceases, and that if he find the feeling inconvenient, he may disregard it, and endeavour to get rid of it.⁴³

Mill’s response is to assure us that a person who believes in God is in fact no more likely to obey his conscience than someone who thinks his conscience is simply an internal sanction. But Cottingham points out that this leaves the *normative* problem unresolved. He goes on to tell us:

Anyone who supposes a merely contingent feeling can ground the normative power of conscience is faced with the absurd consequence that if I’m troubled by conscience I would just have to take a drug to eliminate the feeling and everything would then be all right.⁴⁴

In sum: attempts to ground the authority of conscience in our own feelings can seem to get into difficulty. Indeed, this Millian approach appears to get things the wrong way round. We feel pain *because* we recognise we have violated a prior obligation. The obligation itself cannot therefore be founded on the subsequent feeling of pain. Conscience’s authority appears to require stronger foundations beyond the emotional disposition of individuals.

Is the secular philosopher out of options? Cottingham does not discuss the most common explanation for conscience’s authority in contemporary ethics, which holds that conscience is significant because it protects our integrity. For instance, Mark Wicclair asks, “Why should any moral weight be given to claims of conscience? The primary reason is to protect the agent’s moral integrity.”⁴⁵ We find a similar appeal to integrity as the ground of conscience in plenty of other thinkers too—from Charles Taylor to Hannah Arendt.⁴⁶ However,

⁴³ J. S. Mill, “Utilitarianism”, 143.

⁴⁴ Cottingham, “Conscience”, 343–44.

⁴⁵ Mark Wicclair, “The Moral Significance of Claims of Conscience in Healthcare”, *The American Journal of Bioethics* 12 (2007), 31.

⁴⁶ Jocelyn Maclure and Charles Taylor, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 13 and 76; Hannah Arendt, “Civil Disobedience”, in *Crises of the Republic* (Harcourt, 1969), 61; James Childress, “Appeals to Conscience”, *Ethics* 89 (1979); Jeffrey Blustein, “Doing What the Patient Orders: Maintaining Integrity in the Doctor-Patient Relationship”, *Bioethics* 7 (1993), 297; Daniel Sulmasy, “What Is Conscience and Why Is Respect for It so Important?”, *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 29 (2008), 144.

there is reason to think that such appeals to integrity do not work as free-standing explanations of the authority of conscience.⁴⁷

To suppose the authority of conscience is derived from the personal integrity it secures pushes the problem back one step. Why think integrity has a claim on us? Consider a formal integrity that consists in consistency between our commitments, as well as between those commitments and our actions. Conscience which sought this kind of integrity might appear to be valuable by averting hypocrisy and promoting a purposive singlemindedness. However, the pursuit of some formal integrities can be actively harmful. For example, take someone who is psychologically conflicted: they find themselves in a situation where their desire for social approval conflicts with their recognition of the demands of justice. They resolve the conflict and achieve integrity only by giving up on the ideal of justice that conflicted with their other desires. Conscience would be playing a malign role if it brought about this kind of integrity. The lesson is that not simply any integrity is authoritative.

Let us instead suppose it is not formal integrity but substantive moral integrity which underpins conscience's authority. Someone with this substantive integrity has a life which coheres around genuine moral commitments rather than beliefs, desires, or values which are amoral or immoral. Conscience would then be authoritative insofar as acting against it instrumentally or constitutively undermined moral integrity. But the value of moral integrity is merely a cipher: its source is moral action and character itself, which the moral integrity of individuals is but one means of securing and advancing. Moral conscience is not then authoritative because it safeguards moral integrity. Conscience and integrity are both authoritative insofar as they incline us towards moral virtue.

Cottingham has himself argued in similar fashion against what he calls "mere integrity" and for "true integrity".⁴⁸ That kind of true integrity ultimately requires that we "bring our projects into line with enduring objective values that we did not create, and which we cannot alter."⁴⁹ In case the implication is lost on us, Cottingham sums all this up by saying, "integrity has an inescapably moral and (I would myself add) a spiritual dimension".⁵⁰ So, whichever

⁴⁷ For a fuller version of the following argument, see Tom O'Shea, "Modern Moral Conscience", *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 26, no. 4 (2018).

⁴⁸ John Cottingham, "Integrity and Fragmentation", *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 27, no. 1 (2010), 13.

⁴⁹ Cottingham, "Integrity and Fragmentation", 2.

⁵⁰ Cottingham, "Integrity and Fragmentation", 13.

way we look for some account of conscience's authority, theism seems to be on the horizon. The difficulties of Millian empirical accounts of conscience in accounting for the relevant normativity seems to push us back to Butler's theistic approach. If we try to avoid that by following more recent accounts of the authority of conscience which appeal to integrity, a theistic framework is again there to meet us as the resource needed to account for substantive moral or true integrity.

IV

Conceptions of conscience within the Christian tradition have sought the objective foundations which Cottingham's critique of empiricist naturalism supposes it needs. The most influential model of that external normative orientation is found in those early Christian accounts of conscience that associate it with an awareness of a natural law which is universal and divine. For example, the Church father John Chrysostom tells us: "All men have always had the natural law that dictated from within what is good and what is evil, for when God created man, he placed in him this incorruptible judge: the judgement of conscience."⁵¹ Later medieval theologians were more fine-grained in taking fallible acts of *conscientia* to be rooted in a deeper *synderesis*: that is, an unerring disposition towards the precepts of natural law, which would then provide the major premise in a practical syllogism.⁵² In both cases, conscience's authority as a moral guide bears the imprimatur of God.

Can we hold onto this idea that the authority of conscience depends upon objective normative orientation, yet without this presupposing a religious worldview? Responsiveness to natural law is not the only way that conscience might exhibit the necessary ethical receptivity. Other forms of realist metaethics supporting enduring moral values are available without an appeal to natural law. To take one of many examples, think of John McDowell's relaxed naturalism.⁵³ It is also animated by distaste for a reductive empiricist naturalism—rejecting a scientific conception of nature as a space of causes but devoid of value. But McDowell's understanding of nature is not avowedly religious in character. He looks to Aristotle, rather

⁵¹ John Chrysostom, "Expositio in Psalmos", in *Patrologia Cursus Completus*. Vol. 55, ed. J.P. Migne (1857), 482C. Cited and translated in Ojakangas, *The Voice of Conscience: A Political Genealogy of Western Ethical Experience*, 35.

⁵² Thomas Aquinas, *Questiones Disputatae de Veritate*, question 17, article 2, reply.

⁵³ John McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Harvard University Press, 1998).

than the Judaeo-Christian tradition, for inspiration in dispelling anxieties about hard-nosed physicalism. There is sufficient room in his ethical outlook for a secular understanding of a conscience which is nevertheless rationally responsive to moral reality. For instance, McDowell's metaethical worldview allows that "the dictates of reason are there anyway, whether or not one's eyes are opened to them."⁵⁴ This promises to offer the moral transcendence necessary to make sense of a conscience appropriately sensitive to ethical truth that outruns our merely contingent feelings or impulses.

We might suspect that McDowellian opposition to moral anti-realism and scientism is ultimately a disavowed religious view or dependent on such views for its intelligibility—that the "partial re-enchantment of nature" he proposes cannot be achieved without a divine ordering of the natural world.⁵⁵ Similar charges might be laid at the feet of other metaethical realisms which are more metaphysically ambitious than McDowell's, and which could provide external normative support for conscientious convictions.⁵⁶ But this leads us back to the familiar debate about the very possibility of a secular ethics. The introduction of McDowell's position—along with other moral realisms that are more metaphysically robust—was simply intended to show that the demands of moral conscience can be met by philosophical resources which are provisionally secular, rather than that these secular positions are immune from criticism by theists within wider debates about the foundations of morality. Thus, the distinctive dialectical advantages for the theist of focusing on conscience as opposed to the metaphysics of morals more generally begin to fade from view.

Another related objection concerns not the possibility of non-theistic moral realism but *how* something like conscience might be receptive to moral reality without divine assistance to make the necessary epistemic connections. Non-theistic realists may struggle to defend an innate disposition of conscience towards the objective moral good. There is little room for them to embrace an analogue of the Christian scintilla of conscience—the divine spark that survives

⁵⁴ John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Harvard University Press, 1994).

⁵⁵ McDowell, *Mind and World*, 88. The most sophisticated discussion of the relationship between McDowell's naturalism and a religious metaphysics can be found in Fiona Ellis, *God, Value, and Nature* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁵⁶ Among these more standard metaethical realisms, we can count Peter Railton, "Moral Realism", *Philosophical Review* 95 (1986); Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defense* (Oxford University Press, 2003); Charles Larmore, *The Autonomy of Morality* (Cambridge University Press, 2008); David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense of Robust Realism* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

the Fall. Likewise, raw animalistic instinct often inclines us against rather than towards ethical action. Nevertheless, secular conscience can be undergirded by familiar forms of moral education and learning in its gradual development as we age. The need for this education and social formation has long been recognised, with Voltaire telling us that without innate moral knowledge to guide conscience, it becomes “necessary to instil just ideas and good principles into the mind”.⁵⁷ Our conscience’s examining and directive capacities would be formed and refined alongside other abilities, such as those for practical reason or ethical discernment. Indeed, that is not so different to many figures in the Christian tradition who think that the conscience is only fully operative among the mature and socialised.⁵⁸

A final problem for secular realists might be found in the need to explain the *obligatoriness* of conscience.⁵⁹ The thought is that conscience not only gives valuable advice or informs us of what would be good to do: its verdicts bind us. That obligatoriness is implicit in Butler’s claims concerning prospective action that “Conscience does not only offer itself to show us the way we should walk in, but it likewise carries its own authority with it”.⁶⁰ We must obey conscience—at least, unless a higher authority or duty obliges us to do otherwise. Some philosophical theologians have sought to build upon this phenomenology of conscientious obligation—Iltyd Trethowan going as far to claim that “the awareness of obligation is an awareness of God”.⁶¹ He heads off the most obvious retort by denying he is “proposing an argument from conscience according to which an inference is made from the existence of a law to the existence of a lawgiver”, and instead claims to be merely proposing an interpretation of our actual moral experience, relative to which more secular glosses are implausible.⁶² But we can accept that conscience makes us aware of moral obligatoriness without sharing Trethowan’s own puzzlement at the possibility of ethical obligations to other people “regarded as finite beings with no relationship to the infinite”.⁶³ Our prior ethical and theological commitments are as liable to affect our interpretation of such experiences of moral obligation

⁵⁷ Voltaire, “Conscience”, in *Philosophical Dictionary*. Vol. 3 (Du Mont, 1901), 234.

⁵⁸ For discussion, Sorabji, *Moral Conscience through the Ages*, 62.

⁵⁹ On the significance of obligatoriness in morality, see Robert Stern, *Understanding Moral Obligation* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁶⁰ Butler, “Fifteen Sermons”, 356.

⁶¹ Iltyd Trethowan, *Absolute Value: A Study in Christian Theism* (Allen & Unwin, 1970), 84.

⁶² Trethowan, *Absolute Value*, 87.

⁶³ Trethowan, *Absolute Value*, 89.

as those experiences are to influence our broader commitments. That does not rule out appeals to moral experience, but there needs to be a less contestable phenomenological basis than the bare feeling of moral obligation in order to convince the non-theist that God lies behind the experience of conscience.

Whether or not we find these interpretations of moral experience compelling, the problem of conscientious obligation invites a corresponding worry for the theist. If the obligatoriness of conscience is rooted merely in God's will, then that threatens to make the dictates of conscience into heteronomous impositions. God would come to resemble Pharaoh, and the conscience would simply be His enforcer.⁶⁴ Our autonomy seems to require that we find some reason to accept the injunctions of conscience as authoritative beyond God's sheer will alone. Let us then suppose then that conscience's authority is not grounded solely in the divine will but rather the *cosmos* God has created. It would be conscience's attunement and receptivity to the order of nature which provides reasons for accepting its particular verdicts. Something like this model seems to be operative when Cottingham aligns conscience with Wordsworth's understanding of the natural world as a guide, implicit in which Cottingham finds the idea that nature is the handmaiden of its divine author.⁶⁵ Cottingham accords great weight to the "unmistakably theistic" tenor of Wordsworth's language, but a more religiously ambivalent understanding of nature in Wordsworth's poetry anticipates a different conclusion.⁶⁶ When the divine will fades into the background, there does not seem to be the same pressure to find a superior authority other than nature itself. If sensitivity to a morally charged order of nature is all that is needed to explain conscientious moral obligations, many secular ethical naturalisms promise to supply this too.⁶⁷ Therefore, the singular advantages of a theistic approach are no longer so obvious.

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⁶⁴ On the desirability of a non-pharaonic conception of God, see Kenneth Seeskin, *Autonomy in Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 29.

⁶⁵ Cottingham, "Our Natural Guide", 20.

⁶⁶ Cottingham, "Our Natural Guide", 21.

⁶⁷ In addition to McDowell's relaxed naturalism, we might also look to contributions like Phillipa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

I have argued that there is insufficient reason to think reflection on conscience should lead us to theism. Neither considerations of history, authority, natural law, epistemology, or obligatoriness are decisive in this respect. But this does not prevent us from coming to appreciate that a theistic comportment, particularly one shaped by the Christian tradition, offers an especially consistent and interlocking framework for explaining the role of conscientious conviction in our moral lives. Indeed, the recognition within the Christian tradition of the need for an objective normative orientation of conscience—what Cottingham sometimes terms *transcendence*—is a valuable insight often lost to contemporary secular ethicists. This should give pause to those tempted to breezily dismiss the contribution that religious thought can make within moral philosophy.

Cottingham's appeals to the moral psychology of human conflictedness and a need for moral transcendence in how we approach conscience are both persuasive. Furthermore, I have not sought to cast doubt on the resources available to the theist for explaining either the moral experience or normative authority of conscience. Instead, I have argued that there is nothing unique in conscience itself that the theist can locate in support of their commitments which does not rest on wider and more diffuse arguments about the religious grounds of morality itself. Thus, I remain sceptical that attention to conscience should lead us to theism in particular rather than those secular worldviews that can sustain a rich moral psychology and a broadly realist or objectivist metaethics.⁶⁸

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⁶⁸ I would like to thank the audience at the University of Roehampton's *Centre for Philosophy of Religion* for their feedback on an early version of this paper, especially Fiona Ellis and John Cottingham. Two anonymous referees for the journal also deserve thanks for their constructive engagement with the paper.

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