



Saint Thomas Aquinas

Disputed Questions on Truth

Question Seventeen: On Conscience

1 In the First Article We Ask: IS CONSCIENCE A POWER, A HABIT, OR AN ACT?

REPLY:

5 ...[The] name conscience means the application of knowledge to something. Hence, to be conscious (conscire) means to know together (simul scire). But any knowledge can be applied to a thing. Hence, conscience cannot denote a special habit or power, but designates the act itself, which is the application of any habit or of any knowledge to some particular act.

10 Moreover, knowledge is applied to an act in two ways. According to one way, we consider whether the act exists or has existed; according to the other, whether it is correct or not. According to the first mode of application, we are said to have conscience [that is, consciousness] of an act inasmuch as we know that the act has been placed or has not been placed, as happens in the common manner of speaking when one says: "As far as my conscience [consciousness] is concerned, this has not taken
15 place; that is, I do not know or I did not know whether this took place." It is according to this manner of speaking that we understand the passage in Genesis (43:22): "We cannot tell [non est in conscientiis nostris] who put it (the money) in our bags"; and the passage in Ecclesiastes (7:23): "For thy conscience knoweth that thou also hast often spoken evil of others." It is according to this that conscience is said to bear witness of something, as in Romans (9:1): "my conscience bearing me
20 witness. . . ."

1 According to the second mode of application, by which knowledge is applied to an act, so that one
knows whether the act is right or not, there is a double course. There is one according to which we
are directed through the habit of scientific knowledge to do or not to do something. There is a
second according to which the act, after it has taken place, is examined with reference to the habit of
5 knowledge to see whether it was right or not. This double course in matters of action is distinguished
according to the double course which exists in things speculative, that is, the process of discovery and
the process of judging. For the process by which through scientific knowledge we look for what
should be done, as it were taking counsel with ourselves, is similar to discovery, through which we
proceed from principles to conclusions. The other process, through which we examine those things
10 which already have been done and consider whether they are right, is like the process of judging,
through which we reduce conclusions to principles.

We use the name conscience for both of these modes of application. For, in so far as knowledge is
applied to an act, as directive of that act, conscience is said to prod or urge or bind. But, in so far as
15 knowledge is applied to act, by way of examining things which have already taken place, conscience
is said to accuse or cause remorse, when that which has been done is found to be out of harmony
with the knowledge according to which it is examined; or to defend or excuse, when that which has
been done is found to have proceeded according to the form of the knowledge.

20 But we must bear in mind that in the first application, in which scientific knowledge is applied to an
act to know whether it has taken place, it is application to a particular act of sensitive knowledge, as
of memory, through which we recall what was done, or of sense, through which we perceive the
particular act in which we are now engaged. But in the second and third applications, by which we
deliberate about what should be done, or examine what has already been done, the operative habits
25 of reason are applied to an act. These are the habit of synderesis and the habit of wisdom, which
perfect higher reason, and the habit of scientific knowledge, which perfects lower reason. Of these,
either all are applied at the same time, or only one of them is applied. We examine what we have
done according to these habits, and, according to them, we take counsel about what should be done.
Examination, however, concerns not only what has been done, but also what is to be done. But
30 counsel concerns only what is to be done.

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1 woman is forbidden by the law of God," the application of conscience will be made by concluding:
"I must abstain from this intercourse."

5 Error has no place in the general judgment of synderesis, as is clear from what we have said
earlier,†10 but a mistake can occur in the judgment of higher reason, as happens when one judges
something to be licit or illicit which is not, as heretics who believe that oaths are forbidden by God.
Therefore, mistakes occur in conscience because of the error which existed in the higher part of
reason. Similarly, error can occur in conscience because of error which exists in the lower part of
reason, as happens when one is mistaken about civil norms of what is just or unjust, good or bad.
10 Error also occurs because conscience does not make a correct application to acts. For, as in
constructing speculative syllogisms one can neglect the proper form of argumentation, and thus
arrive at a false conclusion, so he can do the same in practical syllogisms, as has been said.†11

15 Still, we must remember that in some things conscience can never make a mistake, namely, when the
particular act to which conscience is applied has a universal judgment about it in synderesis. For, as
in speculative matters, error does not occur when we are dealing with particular conclusions which
are derived directly from universal principles and expressed in the same terms--as for instance, no
one is deceived in the judgment: "This whole is greater than its part," just as no one is deceived in
the judgment: "Every whole is greater than its part"--so, too, no conscience can err in the judgments:
20 "I should not love God" or "Some evil should be done." For, in each of these syllogisms, the
speculative as well as the practical, the major premise is self-evident in so far as it exists in the
universal judgment, and the minor, by means of which the particular predication of identity is made,
is also self-evident. This is the case when one says: "Every whole is greater than its part. This whole is
a whole. Therefore, it is greater than its part."

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Answers to Difficulties:

30 Reply to 7th objection: Not conscience, but synderesis, is the first rule of human activity. Conscience,
however, is a kind of rule which is itself regulated. Hence, it is not strange that it can make mistakes.

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1 **In the Third Article We Ask: DOES CONSCIENCE BIND?**

It seems that it does not, for ...

5 3rd Objection: One is bound only by something superior. But the conscience of a man is not superior to the man himself. Therefore, a man is not bound by his conscience.

To the contrary:

10 1. The Gloss on Ecclesiastes (7:23), "Your conscience knows," says: "No one who is guilty is set free by this judge." †1 But the command of a judge is binding. Therefore, the dictate of conscience binds.

15 2. On Romans (14:23), "All that is not of faith . . .," Origen says: "The Apostle desires that I say, think, or do nothing against conscience." †2 Therefore, conscience binds.

REPLY:

20 Conscience is certainly binding. But, to see how it binds, we must bear in mind that binding, taken metaphorically from corporeal things and applied to spiritual, means imposing necessity. For he who is bound must necessarily stay in the place where he is bound, and the power to go off to other places is taken away from him. Hence, it is clear that binding has no place in things which have internal necessity. For we cannot say that fire is bound to rise, although it is necessary for it to rise.
25 Binding, then, has place only in things which are necessary with a necessity imposed by something else.

30 Now, there is a twofold necessity which can be imposed by an outside agent. One is the necessity of coercion, through which someone with absolute necessity does that which the agent forces him to do. Otherwise, it is not properly called coercion, but inducement. The other necessity is conditional, on the presupposition, that is, of an end to be attained. In this way, necessity is so imposed on one that, if he does not do a certain thing, he will not receive his reward.

35 The first necessity, that of coercion, has no place in movements of the will, but only in physical things, because by its nature the will is free from coercion. The second necessity, however, can be

1 imposed on the will, so that one must, for example, choose this means if he is to acquire this good,
or avoid this evil. For, in such matters, avoiding evil is considered equivalent to achieving some
good, as is clear from the Philosopher.†3

5 Moreover, as necessity of coercion is imposed on physical things by means of some action, so, too, it
is by means of some action that conditional necessity is imposed on the will. But the action by which
the will is moved is the command of the one ruling or governing. Consequently, the Philosopher
says †4 that by means of his command the king is the source of movement.

10 Similarly, too, where the will is concerned, the relation between the command of a ruler and the
imposition of the kind of obligation by which the will can be bound is like the relation between
physical action and the binding of physical things through the necessity of coercion. However, the
action of a physical agent never imposes necessity on another thing except by the contact of its action
with the object on which it is acting. So, no one is bound by the command of a king or lord unless
15 the command reaches him who is commanded; and it reaches him through knowledge of it.

Hence, no one is bound by a precept except through his knowledge of the precept. Therefore, one
who is not capable of the knowledge of a precept is not bound by the precept. Nor is one who is
ignorant of a precept bound to carry out that precept except in so far as he is required to know it. If,
20 however, he is not required to know it, and does not know it, he is in no way bound by the precept.
Thus, as in physical things the physical agent acts only by means of contact, so in spiritual things a
precept binds only by means of knowledge. Therefore, just as it is the same power by which touch
acts and by which the power of the agent acts, since touch acts only by the power of the agent and
the power of the agent acts only through the mediation of touch, so it is the same power by which
25 the precept binds and by which knowledge binds, since the knowledge binds only through the power
of the precept, and the precept only through the knowledge. Consequently, since conscience is
nothing else but the application of knowledge to an act, it is obvious that conscience is said to bind
by the power of a divine precept.

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Answers to Difficulties:

Reply to 3rd objection: Although man is not higher than himself, the one whose precept he knows is
higher than man. This is how he is bound by his conscience.

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1 **In the Fourth Article We Ask: DOES A FALSE CONSCIENCE BIND?**

It seems that it does not, for...

5 3rd objection: According to Ambrose, sin is "a transgression of the divine law and disobedience to the heavenly commands."†3 Therefore, whoever disobeys the divine law sins. But a false conscience makes a man disobey the divine power when, for instance, his conscience tells him to do something which is forbidden by the divine law. Therefore, a false conscience leads one into sin if he follows it, rather than binds him under pain of sin if he does not follow it.

10 **To the Contrary:**

...

15 3: Sin is principally in the will. But whoever decides to transgress a divine commandment has an evil will. Therefore, he sins. Whoever believes that something is a command and decides to violate it wills to break the law. Therefore, he sins. Moreover, one who has a false conscience, whether in things intrinsically evil or in anything at all, believes that what is opposed to his conscience is
20 contrary to the law of God. Therefore, if he decides to do that, he decides to act contrary to the law of God, and, so, he sins. Consequently, conscience, no matter how false it is, obliges under pain of sin.

25 4: According to Damascene: "Conscience is the law of our understanding."†6 But to act contrary to a law is a sin. Therefore, it is also a sin to act against conscience in any way.

5: One is bound by a precept. But that which conscience dictates becomes a precept. Therefore, conscience binds, no matter how false it may be.

30 **REPLY:**

35 There are different opinions on this matter. For some †7 say that conscience can be mistaken both in things which are intrinsically evil and also with regard to indifferent things. Furthermore, a mistaken conscience does not bind in things which are intrinsically evil, but does bind with regard to

1 indifferent things. But those who say this do not seem to understand in what sense conscience
imposes an obligation. For conscience is said to bind in so far as one sins if he does not follow his
conscience, but not in the sense that he acts correctly if he does follow it. Otherwise, a counsel
would be called obligatory, for one who fulfills a counsel acts correctly. Still, we do not say that we
5 are bound to counsels, since one who neglects what is of counsel does not sin. But we say that we are
bound to precepts because, if we do not keep them, we commit sin. Therefore, conscience is not said
to bind in the sense that what one does according to such a conscience will be good, but in the sense
that in not following it he will sin.

10 Moreover, it does not seem possible for a man to avoid sin if his conscience, no matter how
mistaken, declares that something which is indifferent or intrinsically evil is a command of God, and
with such a conscience he decides to do the opposite. For, as far as he can, he has by this very fact
decided not to observe the law of God. Consequently, he sins mortally. Accordingly, although such a
false conscience can be changed, nevertheless, as long as it remains, it is binding, since one who acts
15 against it necessarily commits a sin.

However, a correct conscience and a false conscience bind in different ways. The correct conscience
binds absolutely and for an intrinsic reason; the false binds in a qualified way and for an extrinsic
reason.

20 I say that a correct conscience binds absolutely because it binds without qualification and in every
circumstance. For, if one's conscience tells him to avoid adultery, he cannot change that conscience
without sin, since he would commit a serious sin in the very error of changing such a conscience.
Moreover, as long as it remains, it cannot actually be set aside without sin. Thus, it binds absolutely
and in every event. But a false conscience binds only in a qualified way, since it binds conditionally.
25 For one whose conscience tells him he must fornicate is not obliged in such a way that he cannot
omit the fornication without sin except on condition that such a conscience remains. But this
situation can be changed, and without sin. Hence, such a conscience does not oblige in every event.
For something can happen, namely, a change of conscience, and, when this takes place, one is no
30 longer bound. That which is only conditional is said to be qualified.

I also say that a correct conscience binds for an intrinsic reason, and a false conscience binds for an
extrinsic reason. This is clear from the following. For one who wishes or desires something because
of something else desires that because of which he desires the others for an intrinsic reason, and the
other for an extrinsic reason, as it were. Thus, one who loves wine because of its sweetness loves
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1 sweetness for an intrinsic reason, and wine for an extrinsic reason. But one who has a false conscience
and believes that it is correct (otherwise, he would not be mistaken), clings to his false conscience
because of the correctness he believes is there, and, strictly speaking, clings to a correct conscience,
but one which is false accidentally, as it were, in so far as this conscience, which he believes to be
5 correct, happens to be false. It is for this reason that, strictly speaking, he is bound by a correct
conscience, but accidentally by a false conscience.

We can find this solution from what the Philosopher says †8 when he asks almost the same question,
that is, whether one is guilty of excess only if he departs from right reason, or also if he departs from
10 a mistaken reason. His solution is that one who departs from right reason goes to excess essentially,
and one who departs from mistaken reason goes to excess accidentally. And a man departs absolutely
from the former and with some qualification from the latter, for what is essential is absolute, and
what is accidental is qualified.

15 **Answers to Difficulties:**

Reply to 3rd objection: A false conscience which is mistaken in things which are intrinsically evil
commands something which is contrary to the law of God. Nevertheless, it says that what it
20 commands is the law of God. Accordingly, one who acts against such a conscience becomes a kind of
transgressor of the law of God, although one who follows such a conscience and acts according to it
acts against the law of God and sins mortally. For there was sin in the error itself, since it happened
because of ignorance of that which one should have known.