


Is Conscience the Measure of a Person?

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ABSTRACT

One could say that we are human beings to the degree to which our conscience is developed. My paper analyses the conscience from an ethical point of view and states that it is to be understood as the measure of morality within a person. [‘Moral’ refers to a *sense* of right and wrong, and ethics to the *principles* of “good” and “bad” agreed by a society].

Taking into consideration that there are people who feel an acute sense of guilt when committing a crime and others who feel nothing, my work tries to identify the factors responsible for such a state of affairs. Therefore, it deals with the question, “Why are there considerable differences among people from the point of view of morality?”

I shall elaborate mainly on the role of education and genetic heritage, which are instrumental in the development of moral conscience within a person. Their influence in shaping it is ensured by the activity of the neurons and of other processes within the brain, which firstly produce the human consciousness. Other elements ‘grow’ on it.

Keywords: Consciousness, education, genetic heritage, moral conscience.

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1. INTRODUCTION

We function to a large extent on instinctive assessments of the physical and the phenomenal realities around us and within us; these resemble the intuitions we sometimes have. What really helps us in making decisions, nevertheless, is the capacity to plan ahead and to reflect on the implications of our decisions. In order to be able to do so, we need, *inter alia*, to use moral judgements and ethical principles. The process requires moral conscience. My paper questions why this type of conscience (obviously, an aspect of human consciousness) occurs and manifests itself in a very different manner among people—even among those who live in the same social conditions. (?)

In order to answer such a question, the article first engages to some extent with contemporary research about the larger notion of consciousness, then goes to the particular topic of moral conscience itself. Here, the notion of consciousness is understood to be the product of various processes to which the brain is subjected and that it accommodates, and which, in people, lead to a state of awareness with regard to their surroundings and their place within these. On this material base, the individual’s moral conscience develops. From the assertions I have just made, it becomes evident that the framework within which I treat both consciousness and conscience (including the moral kind) is a ‘soft’ physicalist one. I call this physicalism ‘soft’ because, in addition to considering that consciousness is produced by the physical system which the brain is, I also think that it is more than simply a combination of chemical processes within it. Nevertheless, the definition provided at the beginning of this paragraph and the concepts mentioned so far suffice to aid me in introducing the discussion about moral conscience.

The side of consciousness that involves morality covers what happens to a person in the process of learning to differentiate between the values of good and bad. It also relates to the process of people applying those values in their own lives and in their interactions with others. My **hypothesis** is twofold:

- 1) Its first part proposes that the factors that contribute to the differences among persons from the point of view of moral consciousness are education and heredity. Obviously, their influence manifests itself on the basis and depending on the manner in which the neurons connect among themselves within the brain.



- 2) I also consider that people develop morally in parallel with all other progressions they undergo throughout their lives; specifically, the development of moral conscience follows the evolution of the personality and cognition within an individual; therefore, its forging is a life-long process.

The content of my hypothesis might seem obvious, but it is not so; controversial theories existed in Philosophy and related fields disputing the role of one factor or another not so much in the occurrence and existence of moral conscience but in that of human personality it is a part of; in my project I discuss these theories.

Moral conscience as an object of research has not received the attention it deserves, and neither did that regarding its nexus to consciousness in general. Mary Midgley published a very interesting book about these topics, titled *The Ethical Primate: Humans, Freedom and Morality* (Midgley, 1994), and she complains about this state of affairs. Some of the information within that book needed updating. I have effected this upgrade in my paper, unaware of the existence of that publication at first, but I discovered it after writing my piece. The article should contribute to the improvement of the current state of research with regard to moral conscience. Also, since I study and write about this topic from the perspective of the Humanities (I do not have a laboratory to conduct experiments), I hope evidence from scientists will come in the future to further prove that my assumptions are correct.

In terms of **research methods**, since I undertake my work within the environment I mention above (classical studies), I only consult books within libraries and discuss various topics pertaining to moral conscience with my students and colleagues in university theatres and seminar rooms.

1.1. *Consciousness in General*

Useful ideas about the subject of consciousness in general are those introduced by Anil Seth in his book *Being You. A New Science of Consciousness* (Seth, 2021). They aid my own elaboration on the subject of moral conscience. In this publication, Seth underlines that when it comes to consciousness, one can speak about three essentials: its level, its content, and the (individual) self. When he comments with regard to (1) the level of consciousness, Seth has in mind various states of it, like fully awakened, coma, and psychedelic states. (Needless to say that, the disciplines with which I deal here, moral philosophy and ethics, have in focus a fully awaken level of consciousness). 2. For Seth—and also for me—the content of consciousness indicates that people are conscious of something **specific**. 3. The **self** can be considered a case of the latter—its distinct subject is ‘the herself/himself’ peculiar to human beings. Taking into consideration Seth’s (2021) distinction mentioned above, when remarking on the content of moral consciousness, I refer to judgments, opinions, prejudices, and other particulars related to those. I use the terms ‘ethical’ and ‘moral’ interchangeably because it is possible to do so here without altering the meaning of my ideas; but, of course, I am aware that, on one hand, morals refer to an intuit or understanding of right and wrong and, on the other, ethics is about **the principles** of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ that are generally agreed upon by a group of people. (I avoid on purpose to use ‘evil’ as opposed to ‘good’).

1.2. *Contemporary Theories about Consciousness*

I will now briefly survey a few contemporary theories that focus on various aspects of consciousness; one of them treats its moral facet. I do not elaborate on these at length because my perspective does not significantly engage with them. Among the most known theoretical models concerned with consciousness today are the following: 1. quantum approaches to consciousness (and mind); 2. the “naturalistic dualism” developed by David Chalmers; 3. panpsychism; 4. Functionalism, and 5. some trends were emerging within ethics. Here are a few details with respect to the above-mentioned scholarly trends that concentrate on the study of human consciousness.

- 1) Most of the quantum approaches to consciousness (and mind) are associated with the collapse of the wave function (Penrose, 2016a, pp. 321–325, 336–348; Penrose, 2016b, pp. 198–215). I include here a few lines about the most known of these, the theory of Orchestrated objective reduction (OR Orch) in the version Penrose & Hameroff (Stuart Hameroff from the USA and Prof. Roger Penrose from Oxford, UK; the latter received the Nobel Prize for Physics in 2022) (Hameroff & Penrose, 2013, 2014). The OR Orch holds that the origins of consciousness are to be found in the microtubules located inside the neurons. According to it, the conscience appears as a consequence of information processing within the microtubules. The microtubules, which belong to the structure of the cell, affect the objective reduction/collapse of the quantum wave function, and this process leads to the emergence of consciousness, hence producing a subjective experience (as we know, what is called the ‘hard problem’ in the study of consciousness tries to explain how such an experience is possible).

[A contemporary theory similar to some extent to this comes from chemistry and holds that the inactivity of the enzyme monoamine oxidase A/MAOA (Bulmer, 2003)¹ or the absence of particular enzymes is responsible for a certain type of human behaviour and, by implication, has an impact on the emergence of consciousness. But these ideas are not yet well elaborated and do not have many supporters].

- 2) David D. Chalmers's "naturalistic dualism" maintains that, while reductive explanations are available in principle for all other natural phenomena, they are not so for consciousness (Chalmers, 1996, 2002, 2010).² The Australian/American professor who coined the above-mentioned expression in 1995 (Chalmers, 1995, pp. 80–86) and today is probably the most known theoretician who works on consciousness indicates that 'the hard problem' consists in trying to understand how the existence of physical phenomena such as brain processes is associated with the occurrence of mental awareness of something with phenomenal characteristics. According to Chalmers, the reason that reductive explanation fails for consciousness is that it cannot be functionally analyzed. He calls his view "naturalistic" because he believes that mental states supervene "naturally" on physical systems (such as brains) and "dualist" because he considers that these [states] are ontologically distinct from and not reducible to physical realities. Chalmers answers to the 'hard problem' of consciousness by saying that naturalistic psychophysical laws exist within the Universe (somehow analogous to the natural physical laws) which govern the relationship between mental and physical facts (Chalmers, 1996, pp. 87, 127–129, 138, 155, 170–172, 213–218, 242–246, 275–277, 286–287, 307–310, 316, 377, 385–386).³
- 3) Panpsychism, which comes in many varieties, affirms chiefly that 'mentality' exists even at the level of the smallest particles of the universe (Goff & Moran, 2021, pp. 9–15). Among the most known contemporary thinkers who consider themselves to represent this theory is Nagel (1993, pp. 1–7; Nagel, 1998, pp. 337–352). Strawson (2006, 2008) and, more recently, Goff (2023) are the most known; in fact, the latter is the adept of what he calls Russelian monism—a particular version of panpsychism, which considers the will to be the inner nature of all things (obviously, the influence of Arthur Schopenhauer, 1788–1860, is observable here). Panpsychism claims a long history that begins with Thales of Miletus, enlists Spinoza, 1632–1677 (Spinoza, 1994) and Leibniz (1646–1716), as well as Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), Friedrich Paulsen (1846–1908), Morton Prince (1854–1929), and the contemporary to us researchers just mentioned few lines above.
- 4) Functionalism, which also has a multitude of variants, mainly identifies consciousness with certain functional/behavioural abilities that an entity (human/animal/computer program) exhibits over time in its given environment. In the case of humans, this model is mainly concerned with the degree of access he/she has to the result of his/her identification with the mental states he/she goes through. It presumes that in order for consciousness to emerge, some phenomenological conditions (such as the level of intelligence) are necessary. The functionalists mainly try to answer the question: what is specific for a certain entity to be conscious, and sustain that a mental state and the ideas produced by the self-examination of it by an agent are always 'distinct existences' and only contingently connected. Among the most known researchers working within this field are Shoemaker (1993, pp. 14–42), Frank Jackson (Jackson & Pettit, 1995, pp. 20–40, Jackson & Pettit, 1996, pp. 82–86), Schwarz (2015, pp. 504–518), Van Gulick (1988, pp. 149–181), and McCullagh (2020, pp. 481–499) (the latter two designate "self-consciousness" as the core of their work).
- 5) A few varieties of notions about consciousness are within ethics; obviously, these focus on the moral aspects involved not so much in the appearance but within the existence of consciousness. One of these notions—the most known—is moral functionalism as conceived by Frank Jackson and Philip Pettit; these two researchers operate within the general framework of cognitivism (Jackson & Pettit, 1995, pp. 20–40; Jackson & Pettit, 1996, pp. 82–86). Moral functionalism employs the distinction between ethical, evaluative, and descriptive language. In Jackson and Pettit's version of moral functionalism, ethical and evaluative "supervene" on the descriptive. This means that the evaluative characteristics of the language are reduced to their natural properties, which is called reductive naturalism. But, in fact, reductive naturalism does not entail moral functionalism in order to explain consciousness. I think ethics still needs significant contributions in its treatment of consciousness and conscience. In spite of its name, moral functionalism does not help in my explanation of how moral conscience 'builds' on the 'general' human consciousness.

¹ See also a series of related articles published in the journal *Science*. (Among these, Caspi, A., McClay, J., Moffitt, T. E., Mill, J., Martin, J., Craig, I. W., Taylor, A., & Poulton, R. (2002). Role of genotype in the cycle of violence in maltreated children. *Science*, 297, 851–854).

² These works are among the most significant publications.

³ The author touches on these laws also in other places.

1.3. My View on the Emergence and Development of Moral Conscience

The cultivation of positive moral values within people is the core of any educational system. All societies are concerned with moral behaviour. As Teresa Morgan underlines:

“Like political, social and economic behaviour, moral behaviour is endemic in human societies. Like them, it helps groups to organize themselves, to negotiate their inevitable differences, and to survive. Like them, it has a grammar, a structure, which is as distinctive of the group as it is its language or religion.” (Morgan, 2007, p. 1).

In order to present here my own position about the occurrence and development of moral conscience, as said, I do not need to directly involve the explanatory models presented earlier more than to say that there is no certainty that we will ever have one definitive theory about it or a unified view of nature (about how its physical and phenomenological elements co-exist). That is despite some researchers’ optimism, which is still to be commended. Among these optimists, in addition to Chalmers (1996, p. xii), Steven Pinker is to be noted. Pinker clearly states that today, “scientists more or less know what to look for, and with enough brainpower and funding, they would probably crack it [the hard problem of consciousness] in this century” (Pinker, 2007); he means the twenty-first century. Even though I state that it is uncertain whether we will ever be able to say how human consciousness came about and still does so, I do not consider myself a mysticist. Mysticism, which is a physicalist point of view, sustains that the human mind does not have the ability to understand how consciousness emerges from the brain, even though people can understand that there is a problem with comprehending such a situation. Its most known representative is McGinn (1982, 1989, 2004).

I do not think, as McGinn does, that the impossibility of solving the dilemma of consciousness is due to the way in which our mind is devised. In any case, we shall always put forward theories about the ‘hard problem’ despite the fact that it is not certain that we will definitely be able to prove a stronger explicative power of one above that of another. I assume that the future upshot of the puzzle concerning consciousness is, as has been the case with other intellectual dilemmas, that as soon as one paradigm to explain it establishes itself well enough, another one will come to challenge it. Nevertheless, by researching the topic, we shall manage to know ourselves and the societies in which we live better; additionally, each theory comes with a plus of information.

Moving now to the issue of ‘**having a conscience**,’ i.e., moral conscience, I thought it is worth inquiring why when faced with the same moral problems, people react differently—sometimes two individuals react in a completely opposite manner. This state of affairs manifests itself even when the agents are confronted with a grave crime they committed themselves. In the latter case, some of them are open and admit that they perpetrated it; they do so during a well-known process of ‘easing the conscience’ (when some people feel guilty about something, they get relief from that feeling by talking with someone else about it). Others do not do so. This, obviously, has something to do with the fact that human conscience manifests itself in ‘degrees,’ so to speak. Despite being aware of this situation, the main question asked above and a few others contiguous to it remain: Is the difference in attitude vis-à-vis crime a part of the controversy *nature-nurture*? Is there something innate or acquired that makes some people more morally sensitive than others, even when they live in the same social conditions?

It would not be surprising if it were so since the propensity to murder itself has, at times, been explained in terms of heredity. This was not only done by the famous Cesare Lombroso, 1835–1909 (Lombroso *et al.*, 2006). In the twentieth century, research was carried out that seemed to justify what the Italian scientists believed; an example of such work is the studies undertaken by Francis Galton, 1822–1911 (Galton, 1914).⁴ In our century, within the UK, Michael G. Bulmer thought along similar lines (Bulmer, 2003).⁵ An anthology dedicated to the study of human behavior as “controlled” by genetics was published relatively recently (Kim, 2009). There is no doubt nowadays that some of our behaviour is due to inherited elements within us. **I consider the variety regarding the extent to which heredity is transmitted among the members of various generations in a family to be partially responsible for the array of ways moral conscience manifests itself within people. Nevertheless, such a process never comes only to heredity—it does not reduce moral consciousness to that. Education, both formal and informal, is always a factor in the development of moral conscience.**

1.4. Theories in Support of the Positive Role Education Plays in the Formation of Moral Conscience

Today, there are theories that take further and diversify the implications of Jean Piaget’s idea that the cognitive development of a person is due to the influence of the environment, mainly of education (Piaget, 1975; Piaget & Inhelder, 1971). Some researchers even take his wrong further, in my opinion, and think that it is exclusively so (i.e., education is the only factor in that development). Notions along the same lines of thought as those of Piaget circulated in the twentieth century and, as said,

⁴ Among the many books and articles published by him.

⁵ Bulmer worked on quantitative genetics.

now undergo a resurgence. I find support for my research and reinforcement for my hypothesis in these neo-Piagetian theories. Neo-Piagetians understand cognitive development in a dynamic way, and in order to describe the stages of this process, they introduced different perspectives from Piaget's genetic epistemology in their studies. While the Swiss psychologist was concerned with the **universal psychological aspects** involved in the process of acquiring knowledge about reality as a person, his contemporary followers researched variations of cognitive development with respect to very specific issues pertaining to the same fields of research.

Among the current theories that refer to the cognitive and affective evolution of a person—and in some cases offer instructions about how these can be managed via education—are the following:

- 1) Alvaro Pascual-Leone's Theory of Constructive Operators (TCO): This is a model referring to the **developmental and neuropsychological** aspects of cognition and affective processes (e.g., [Amedi et al., 2008](#)). It also deals with the volume and nature of information that an individual can process. Its main tenet is that cognitive processes are similar to **constructive operators**. The latter are like mental tools that allow us to make sense of things (create 'meaning'), process information, and orient ourselves in the world. They play a crucial role in shaping our cognitive abilities, problem-solving skills, and adaptive behaviours.
- 2) Robert Kegan's **constructive-developmental theory**: This theory promotes what its author calls 'transformational learning' as opposed to 'informational learning' ([Kegan, 1982, 1994](#)). The transformational type emphasizes that the 'learning past' and the 'history of past transformations' of the student should always be central to the educational process. Kegan also maintains that the evolution of the self is based on 'meaning-making' through various activities.
- 3) **Dynamic systems theory in child education/DST** (e.g., [Smith & Thelen, 2003](#), pp. 343–348). Its representatives argue that child development is complex and **time-dependent** and that **adequate understanding of this development requires the study of the interactions between the child, the environment, and the task at hand**. In DST, the most important dimension is the **relative stability over time of behaviour in a particular context**.
- 4) Various models were proposed by the authors who contributed to the collection *Contemporary Theories of Learnings*, edited by [Illeris \(2018\)](#).⁶ These are Knud Illeris himself, John T. Hattie and Gregory M. Donoghue, Sharan B. Merriam, Gert Biesta, Carolyn Jackson, Peter Jarvis, Robert Kegan, Yrjö Engeström, Bente Elkjaer, Jack Mezirow, Howard Gardner, Peter Alheit, Mark Tennant, Jerome Bruner, Robin Usher, Thomas Ziehe, Ettiene Wenger, Danny Wildemeersch, and Veerle Stroobants.

I call all the thinkers mentioned above Neo-Piagetians because they follow Piaget's ideas to various extents. Additionally, they integrate the information processing theory within Piaget's constructivist system and emphasize the role of action in cognitive development. Eduardo Martí summarizes within an article some of the neo-Piagetian theories ([Martí, 2020](#)).

When Piaget and his later followers describe the processes concerning the acquisition of knowledge and the evolution of the human personality, they also explain, at least partially, how morality and moral conscience come about. It means that they offer some information with regard to the fact that, while going through various stages of development in its mental and emotional formation, a human being learns gradually how to distinguish between what is good and what is bad.

2. CONCLUSIONS

Both assumptions that I pointed out in the paper as trying to explain how moral consciousness appears and evolves have truth in them. I am speaking about that which holds that people are morally different because of their genetic heritage and that which states that it is so because of education. **What needs to be emphasized is that the actions of the two factors (inborn elements and instruction) are manifested differently in each person: in some people heredity is predominant in the reaction vis-à-vis criminal actions, and in others, the level of education as well as the internalization of the knowledge obtained through it is what dictates their behaviour, including their choices.** Obviously, the reason for the differentiation concerning the moral conscience among people also has something to do with the activities of the neurons within the brain.

It also has to be underlined that the social environment seems to decide which of the two elements becomes predominant in the expression of moral conscience.

In order to strengthen the content of my latter assertions in this section with even more scientific evidence, and to find out more about moral conscience, additional research is needed, especially

⁶ This is the year of the second edition of his book; the first edition, that from 2008, has fewer contributions.

experimental in nature and on a larger scale. In any case, we can securely affirm that conscience—especially moral conscience—is the measure of a human being.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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