St Thomas Aquinas – conscience is the power of reason

The problems with Augustine’s view of the conscience led to it being superseded by Aquinas’s.

- 13th century monk, influenced by Aristotle
- Distinguished between an innate source of good and evil, synderesis, and a judgement derived from our reason, conscientia
  “Conscience is reason making right decisions and not a voice giving us commands”

Synderesis

- Synderesis is placed within us by God. Defined as “a natural disposition of the human mind by which we instinctively understand the first principles of morality”. Aquinas thought people tended towards goodness and away from evil (the synderesis rule).
- It is essentially the basic moral principles and understanding that we should do good and avoid evil.

Conscientia

- Conscientia is the power of reason to work out what is good and what is evil, the “application of knowledge to activity”. This is closer to moral judgement rather than instinct.
- Conscience can make mistakes and needs to be trained in wisdom.
- If people make a mistake in discriminating good from evil, then their mistaken conscience is not to blame (errorneous conscience).
- Used the example of a man who sleeps with another’s wife thinking she was his wife. Aquinas argued he is not morally blameworthy because he acted in “good faith”
- Conscience deliberates between good and bad

“Man’s reasoning is a kind of movement which begins with the understanding of certain things that are naturally known as immutable principles without investigation. It ends in the intellectual activity by which we make judgements on the basis of those principles.”

- So for Aquinas conscience is “the mind of man making moral judgements”
- Conscience is not just a voice inside you, but reasoning used correctly to find out what God sees is good
- When Aquinas says it is always right to follow your conscience he means that it is always right to apply your moral principles to each situation as best you can
- If your principles are wrong your conscience will be too

Evaluation

- Aquinas understood that different societies have different views on what is right and what is wrong
- Allows people to make mistakes – the conscience is sometimes wrong
- Positive theory that is optimistic about human nature, emphasis that people naturally true to do good
- Doesn’t rely on religion as conscience is not just God giving us commands
- Believable – in the world we see people using their reason to make decisions
- Some Christians would say Aquinas’ rationalistic approach does not consider revelation that comes directly from God
### Evaluation of religious theories

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<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
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<td>Conscience must be obeyed because placed by God, secular theories don’t have the same weight – there is also incentive to follow the conscience</td>
<td>Says knowledge of ‘the law’ is inherent, so doesn’t always explain why people sin or don’t realise misdoing</td>
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<td>Generally honest theories that realise people sin and give both explanation and leeway for this</td>
<td>If conscience is the voice of God then there is an implication people should act morally all the time – the conscience should be reliable but it isn’t always</td>
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<td>Wrongdoing can be explained as people not having built up a sufficiently sensitive conscience to hear God’s voice clearly – it is our fault, not God’s</td>
<td>It should be impossible to disobey the conscience if our nature is to obey it</td>
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<td>Doesn’t really include emotion and reason which from experience seem like crucial components of decision making</td>
<td>People often have doubts about what to do – goes against intuitionist views and the definition that conscience is God speaking to us</td>
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<td>Explains why some things – such as murder – are generally seen as wrong</td>
<td>Deciding what to do isn’t always as clear cut as ‘God’s voice’ – e.g. Christian denominations still disagree on moral matters such as abortion</td>
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<td>Atheists may see the conscience as important, so religious views don’t fit with this – also some theories imply that non-believers are immoral which isn’t the case</td>
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Eric Fromm – conscience is the internalized voice of external authority

- 1900-1980, experienced Nazi regime first hand
- Post-holocaust Fromm developed new theory of the humanitarian conscience
- Wrote his books to reflect on how conscience and freedom can be subverted in even the most civilised societies
- E.g. Adolf Eichmann pleaded at his trial for mass murder in 1961 that he was only “following orders”
- Nazi government in Germany in 1930s manipulated the consciences of its people to feel guilty about helping Jews

Authoritarian conscience

- **Internalised voice of external authority**, close to Freud’s concept of the superego
- May be backed up by fear of punishment, or spurred on by admiration, or created by idolisation of an authority figure
  - People become blinded to the faults of the idolised figure
  - Causes us to become subject to that person's will, so that “the laws and sanctions of the externalised authority become part of oneself”
- The voice of authority is obeyed not because it is good but because it is in authority
- As with the Nazis, civilised humans do atrocious acts because they are subject to a voice which comes essentially from outside them – bypassing their own moral sense
- The presence of the authority figure is necessary to strengthen and maintain this voice, otherwise, it loses its power and the humanitarian conscience can reassert itself
- This authoritarian conscience can come from:
  - Projection onto someone of an image of perfection
  - The experience of parental rules or expectations
  - An adopted belief system, such as a religion, with its own authority structure
- So for Christians Fromm would say God is the authority – respect and fear

“Good conscience is consciousness of pleasing authority; guilty conscience is consciousness of displeasing it”

- The individual's identity and sense of security thus becomes wrapped up in the authority figure – the voice outside is someone else's voice
- Obedience becomes the cardinal virtue – the individual feels they have no choice but to obey
- The individual gives up the right to criticise, to reflect and to evaluate what the authoritarian conscience dictates
- A guilty conscience is the result of displeasing authority
- Disobedience produces guilt which in turn weakens our power and makes us more submissive to authority

“Those subject to him are means to his end and, consequently his property, and used by him for his purposes”