

CONSCIENCE AS MORAL IMAGINATION

Mark Johnson's Contribution to Moral Discourse

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Abstract

This paper attempts to problematize the concept of conscience and offers a perspective from cognitive science. As an alternative, we shall employ the idea of moral imagination as proposed by Mark Johnson. Johnson recovers the place of the human body and employs it in moral imagination. This imagination helps us understand the processes of making decisions and choices in deliberation. Moreover, he also underscores the place of human experience in structuring our cognition and making sense of the world.

Keywords: Cognition, Conscience, Metaphor, Moral Deliberation, Moral Imagination

"Without imagination, nothing in the world could be meaningful. Without imagination, we could never make sense of our experience. Without imagination, we could never reason toward knowledge of reality."¹

Conscience is traditionally a theological concept or, more specifically, a moral concept in any theological ethics literature. In a way, it has been long confined in that perspective and consequently its development has been stunted. Thus, that concept is dominated by theological discourse that has enclosed it in that framework. However, even in moral theology or theological ethics literature, the concept of conscience remains problematic as it is applied in

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¹Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination and Reason*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, ix.

everyday life.² As applied to the down-to-earth and taken-for-granted situation, a person is pragmatic in moral reasoning and is remiss of the transcendental or absolute principles. Instead of adding more theological moorings, we shall employ cognitive science in understanding conscience. This conscience is viewed from moral imagination. Cognitive science is an interdisciplinary branch of science that employs experimental methods and evolutionary theories in understanding the working or functioning of the brains or minds of people.³ Basically, cognitive science falls under psychology but in its development, it has entered into an interdisciplinary enterprise.⁴ We will concentrate on the contributions of cognitive science in moral reasoning using primarily the works of Mark Johnson who has devoted his recent writings on the impact of cognitive science on morality.⁵

Conscience

In moral theology, conscience is a practical judgment of the person regarding a present or actual situation that demands an immediate and prompt action in the here and now.⁶ Thus, conscience is a judgment that separates what is right/good and what is wrong/bad. In that judgment, the person is informed by his or her conscience and is impelled by his or her decision. Moreover, the concept of conscience links the human person and his/her God.⁷ There are metaphorical expressions that describe conscience such as “inner voice of God,” “light of God” and “life of God” that encapsulate that relationship. This linkage is uneasy and tensive because it tries to bring together the autonomy of the human person as well as the omnipotence of God. The problem is: how can the conscience of a

²See Paul Strohm, *Conscience: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 96-121.

³Jay Friedenberg & Gordon Silverman, *Cognitive Science: An Introduction to the Study of Mind*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2016.

⁴There is also a burgeoning literature on the relationship between social psychology and human conscience. See Joseph P. Forgas, Lee Jussim & Paul A.M. Van Lange, *The Social Psychology of Morality*, New York & London: Routledge, 2016.

⁵See John Dewey & John H. Tufts, *Ethics*, New York: Holt, 1936. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology*, New York: Modern Library, 1957.

⁶Vitaliano Gorospe, SJ, *Man's Search for Meaning: Filipino Philosophy in the Philippine Setting*, Manila: Jesuits Educational Association, 1974.

⁷Bernard Häring, *The Law of Chirst*, Vol. 1, Paramus, N.J.: Newman Press, 1966, 135-188. Karl H. Peschke, *Christian Ethics: Moral Theology in the Light of Vatican II*, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2012, 158-207.

person becomes unfettered if it is dictated by the law of God? This law of God belongs to the prerogatives of the teaching authority of the church that interprets divine will to humanity. Finally, the concept of conscience is connected with prudence in making judgments.⁸ Prudence is the use of practical reason where the person can anticipate or foresee the outcome or result of an action. It is assumed that the person endowed with prudence can already predict or sense the result of the action. That virtue of prudence enables him or her to make that decision or choice. However, there remains a residual problem on the tension between freedom of conscience and the divine law. If we grant freedom of conscience to the person, it is possible that he or she can violate or break the law in the exercise of his or her will in his or her decision or choice. The church seems to endorse the concept of 'guided conscience' because the person seems to be incapable or immature in making such an autonomous and responsible decision or choice so that the church is authorized to guide or direct his or her conscience in the right path. This guided conscience seems to revert to the dictation or authority of the church in a subtle way because it subordinates the conscience to its guidance or supervision.⁹

There ensues a debate on the precise nature of conscience since its conceptualization is influenced by the modern idea of liberty and autonomy of the person. As we know, modernity proclaims the sovereign subject which refers to the bourgeois in modernity. This centrality of the individual is inscribed in philosophy of humanism.¹⁰ This individual is endowed with the power to decide on his or her own and makes law upon himself or herself by basing it from his or her own rationality or consciousness. In this sense, everything refers back to the self and takes its meaning from itself. This sovereign individual is not completely adopted by the official church since conscience is not completely independent and autonomous from God. Thus, conscience is still connected to God. However, God is mediated by the authority of the church since it has the teaching authority granted to it. So the conscience of the individual remains entangled with the authority of the church.¹¹

⁸Reginald Doherty, *The Judgments of Conscience and Prudence*, River Forest, Ill: Aquinas Library, 1960.

⁹Charles E. Curran, ed., *Conscience*, New York: Paulist Press, 2004, 3-62.

¹⁰See Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, trans. Robert T. Barr, Quezon City: Claretian Publication, 1983, 169-214.

¹¹Robert J. Smith, *Conscience and Catholicism*, Lanham: University Press of America, 1998, 117-132.

Thus, there is a tension between self-determination of the conscience of the individual and the authority of God or doctrine of the church. How do we balance the two poles in decision making in a concrete and particular situation? If we allow this trajectory, the person cannot just decide in his or her own; he or she needs to consult or obey the authority or doctrine of the church. Thus, the person is placed in a dilemma: whether he or she abides to the law or just follows his or her free-will. Here, we have a negotiation between the person and the law. The person is placed into an ordeal of decision making. The person deliberates with these two poles in making a decision or choice. In the final analysis, the person has to make a decision. The assumption is that the person is fragile and vulnerable. Thus he or she needs to be accompanied in spiritual direction or guidance. If ever he or she breaks or violates the law, he or she needs to confess his or her sin and the confessor absolves his or her sin. Thus, the confession brings back the person and repairs the broken relationship with God.

The question now boils down or zeroes in on the formation of the conscience. In moral theology, the conscience is formed or guided by the authority of God or by the teachings of the church. For example, *Humanae Vitae* is an official teaching of the church that guides couples on responsible parenthood and sexual morality. Notwithstanding the controversy surrounding it, the document has influenced decision-making of couples in the exercise of their responsibility.¹² In the Philippines, the Reproductive Health Law (RH Law) took time to be debated and decided by the congress and senate because of the strong opposition of the hierarchical church on the use contraceptives. Although it has been a law, the implementation remains problematic because of continuing opposition of the church on the possible repercussion of abortifacient substances to human life. In the debates, the church seems to dictate the right or correct decision and choice to the couples on their intimate relationship. In their criticisms, some couples see the church hierarchy as the ventriloquist of the couples. They argue that although the couples know best their situation, the church hierarchy tends to arrogate to itself the knowledge on these matters encroaching, if not depriving, the couples in making their own decisions.

¹²Charles E. Curran, *Dissent in and for the Church: Theologians and Humanae Vitae*, Chicago: Sheed & Ward, 1969, 133-152.

Morality in Cognitive Science

Etymologically, the word “conscience” is derived from the words “con” and “scire” which literally means in its verbal form ‘to know with’ or its nominal form ‘with knowledge.’ Thus, conscience implies a relational knowledge. Moreover, conscience is also connected with consciousness. In phenomenology, consciousness is a consciousness of an object. Thus, consciousness is linked with its knowledge of an object. Again, consciousness connotes a relational knowledge.¹³ Thus, both conscience and consciousness imply knowledge.¹⁴ In moral theology, it is a connection with God that dictates the conscience as the voice of God. In phenomenology, it is a connection with the object in the mind that produces intentionality. Thus, this relational knowledge is either personal (God) or objective (thing).

Cognitive science deals also with consciousness. However, unlike phenomenology, it is not abstract but concrete in the sense that the mind or brain is placed into an experiment or observation in order to know its specific functions and particular works. Scientists ask the question: How does the mind work? Here we do not make a clear and distinct distinction between the material brain and the intellectual mind. The distinction is only artificial because they are connected to reliant on one another. The brain registers and stores information that enables it to process knowledge and to generate rational arguments. Cognitive science subjects the brain into observation in the laboratory or studies the evolutionary processes of the mind that relates cognition and morality in human reasoning. Their researches have produced volumes of literature and scholarship. Contemporary cognitive science relates bodily structures and imaginative characters in the process of moral reasoning. According to the three volume researches in cognitive science, cognition is marked by and linked with emotion, adaptation and intuition.¹⁵

¹³Michael Lewis & Tanja Staehler, *Phenomenology*, New York: Continuum, 2010. Jean-François Lyotard, *Phenomenology*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1991.

¹⁴In French, there is only one word for both conscience and consciousness which is ‘conscience’. Thus, in Emile Durkheim’s sociology, his term ‘conscience collective’ is translated into collective consciousness or collective conscience. However, we know that in the different disciplines, consciousness is basically a psychological concept, while conscience is fundamentally a theological concept. This disciplinary boundary leads to specialization of the concepts but also restricts their development. See Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, Trans. W.D. Halls, New York: Free Press, 1997.

¹⁵See the three volume works in moral psychology by researchers from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) who came up with different researchers relating cognition and morality in the field of cognitive psychology. Walter Sinnott-

Thus, conscience implicates the mind and the decision and choice of the person. To be reasonable, cognitive science explains the gap between the mind and the choice. How does the person decide? In making judgement on the course of action in the here and now, our mind works in a particular context. The mind neither depends on the transcendental principles that descend from above nor on the immanent principle that ascends from below. It neither depends on deductive reasoning that relies on general principle which it applies in particular situation nor on inductive reasoning which enumerates particular instances that eventually support the conclusion. It relies on the power of human imagination that provides resources for moral deliberation on a specific course of action that the person chooses to take as the best possible decision or choice in that situation. Moral imagination disrupts the dichotomy or binarism between mind and body, emotion and reason, imagination and intellection by combining them in moral deliberation. It underscores the place of human experiences in exploring the possibilities of decision making and choosing a meaningful action in a given situation.

Moral Imagination

According to Mark Johnson, ethical or moral theories are split into two, namely, absolutist ethics and the relativist ethics. The absolutist ethics posits universal and transcendental principles which once discovered by reason are applied to particular situations or actions. Thus, the reasoning is deductive: it begins with the general principles which are applied to specific situation or action in making decision or choice. The relativist ethics denies and opposes the position of the absolutist ethics because it believes in relativity as a basis in making decision or choice in every action or situation. Thus, the decision is dependent on the culture of a particular group or specific individual in question. In this way, this ethics is inductive: it begins with the particular situation or action and makes decision or choice based on that concrete experience without reference to absolute or transcendental principles. For Johnson, this division of ethical

Armstrong, ed., *Moral Psychology*, vol. 1: *The Evolution of Morality: Adaptations and Innateness*, Cambridge & London: MIT Press, 2008; Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, ed., *Mora Psychology*, vol. 2: *The Cognitive Science of Morality: Intuition and Diversity*, Cambridge & London: MIT Press, 2008; Water Sinnott-Armstrong, ed., *Moral Psychology*, vol. 3: *The Neuroscience of Morality: Emotion, Brain Disorders and Development*, Cambridge & London: MIT Press, 2008.

theories is fallacious because it assumes or presupposes a binary or dichotomous reality that can be neatly separated and opposed. This dichotomization narrows the options of people who are caught into this trap without a way out from this binary logic.

In response, Johnson proposes a third ethics based on real experiences of people in making decisions and choices in their everyday life and in specific situation. He called this third ethics as moral imagination.¹⁶ Imagination has been debased in the history of western ideas because it does not fall into this binary logic of intellect (reason) and emotion (body) dichotomy. Moreover, imagination occupies a misnomer or ambivalence since it does not fit within this dichotomy. Applying imagination in morality, a person makes decisions and choices based on his or her embodied experiences in the world. As such moral imagination works in a process. It neither derives from the absolutist ethics nor emerges from the relativist ethics; it is neither a purely bodily sensation nor intellectual endeavour. Imagination blends both bodily sensation and intellectual capability. For him, "any adequate account of meaning and rationality must give a central place to embodied and imaginative structures of understanding by which we grasp the world."¹⁷ Thus, embodied imagination is a potent resource in understanding the meaning of the situation. Johnson argues that "meaning is always a matter of human understanding, which constitutes our experience of a common world that we can make some sense of."¹⁸ We understand by means of our imagination. In this sense, "moral understanding is fundamentally imaginative in character."¹⁹ In moral imagination, moral theory is fundamentally a theory of moral understanding in making deliberation in a situation.²⁰ Moral imagination explores possibilities and creates solutions in moral dilemma. This moral theory studies the nature of human moral understanding and increases the capacity of moral understanding.²¹

¹⁶In his another book, *Morality for Humans*, Johnson changes the label from moral imagination to ethical naturalism. Ethical naturalism is the imaginative moral deliberation that involves the processes of the unconscious, the conscious and the emotion. Mark Johnson, *Morality for Humans: Ethical Understanding from the Perspective of Cognitive Science*, Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2014.

¹⁷Johnson, *Body in the Mind*, xiii.

¹⁸Johnson, *Body in the Mind*, 174.

¹⁹Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, 189.

²⁰Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, 187-188.

²¹Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, 188-189.

In moral understanding, we employ our imaginative skill by using metaphors. Metaphor is essentially relational by means of comparison and attribution. We understand and experience one thing in terms of another.²² Thus, we compare one with another and attribute the characteristics of one to the other. Our understanding is not direct but mediated via metaphors that compare action and attribute reasons in understanding the situation. Our language is basically metaphorical; it uses concepts and images derived from our experience and situation in understanding something. These metaphors that we live by are commonly held by a community. "The metaphors" Johnson argues, "make up our shared understanding" [and] "inhabit a shared world."²³ Metaphors are useful since they stir our imagination due to their concreteness and vividness and they provide possible ways of understanding and conceptualizing a situation. "In general, we understand more abstract and less well-structured domains (such as our concepts of reason, knowledge, belief) via mappings from more concrete and highly structured domains of experience (such as our bodily experience of vision, movement, eating or manipulating objects)."²⁴ Thus, metaphors are familiar to people living in a common world and using them in understanding the world.

Metaphors do not preclude or impede moral critique; they in fact enable or facilitate moral critique. They open up our cognition for various possibilities in taking actions or making decisions "for they give us alternative viewpoints and concepts from which to evaluate the merits of a particular moral position."²⁵ Moreover, metaphors are derived from our experiences in the world. For Johnson, "experience involves everything that makes us human — our bodily, social, linguistic and intellectual being combined in complex interactions that make up our understanding of the world."²⁶ Thus, metaphors enable us "to learn from experiences by implications of our previous experiences for a present situation."²⁷ In this sense, metaphors facilitate us to compare and contrast the past and the present, and from there we can make better choice or decision on the situation at

²²Georg Lakoff & Mark Jonson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2003, 6.

²³Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, 3.

²⁴Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, 10.

²⁵Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, 3.

²⁶Johnson, *Body in the Mind*, xvi.

²⁷Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, 3.

hand. This comparison is possible because of the metaphors that permit us to imagine possibilities of action by making projections in our deliberations. However, there are also constraints of these projections. We cannot imagine all possibilities and we cannot execute all possibilities. These constraints are imposed by “the ways we can frame the situation” that “limits the range of possible moral evaluations of a particular case.”²⁸ However, these limits should be viewed in positive sense because they are constant reminders that we should always keep on thinking and reasoning. “It is precisely by recognizing the always partial nature of our metaphors, schemas and narratives that we can keep ourselves alerted to the constant necessity of stretching ourselves beyond our present identity and context.”²⁹

Social Schema

The situation is confronted by a person who constructs a frame used to categorize his or her experiences. We need to comprehend our experiences in the world. The cultural world provides the available resources in constructing a frame and categorizing the situation into intelligible forms. There are many possible ways of conceptualizing the situation. Johnson defines schema as “a recurrent pattern, shape and regularity in, or of, these ongoing ordering activities.”³⁰ The conceptualization of the situation depends on the available schemas of the community and the pertinence of the schemas in that situation. If we have decided or chosen the appropriate schema in framing and categorizing the situation, we can deliberate on the morality of the situation. “In other words, the way we frame and categorize a given situation will determine how we reason about it, and how we frame it will depend on which metaphorical concepts we are using.”³¹ Thus, the schema that we apply to a situation is crucial in understanding the situation and making a moral deliberation of the action. “These frames are not objectively in the situation they allow us to understand. Rather, they are idealized models and frameworks that grow out of our experience and that we bring to our understanding of the situations.”³²

²⁸Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, 10.

²⁹Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, 203.

³⁰Johnson, *Body in the Mind*, 29.

³¹Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, 2.

³²Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, 9.

Cognition operates according to ideal schema whereby the person sorts out the different situation or action according to a prototype. If the person uses that prototype, then he can easily and immediately decide or choose the action applying that schema. Thus, the decision or choice is easy and immediate. The problem arises when the situation is new and different where the person cannot readily use the prototype in that situation. That new situation demands a different way of reasoning. Thus, we have a non-prototypical situation that the person has to confront and to deliberate. When we face a new and different situation, we try to imagine the possible schemas. We try to stretch the possibility and extent of the prototype as much as possible so that we can understand the situation. In this case, we need to reconstruct our schema which "involves coming to some awareness and understanding of the nature of the problem one is facing."³³ The reconstruction is possible because the prototype is malleable and flexible. We can then reorganize and reorder the prototype so that it remains usable and applicable in another situation.³⁴ There are of course many ideas that crop up in our confrontation with that situation. Some ideas can be mixed; others cannot go together. If the ideas can be blended in categorizing the situation, then they can compose a new schema. However, if the ideas cannot mix, then we need to isolate them and reserve them in the future. We do look at different views and perspectives and try to harmonize those views or perspective. As much as possible we want to put them all together. But our schema is selective and partial. "Consequently, we cannot simply assume that our intuitive, non-reflective appraisals and valuing are adequate when we encounter new conditions and complexities."³⁵

Moral Deliberation

According to Johnson, human being confronted with moral problems does not necessarily rely on absolute moral principle to back up his or her choice or decision in his or her everyday action. This absolutist ethics is a moral fundamentalism because it restricts conceptualization and imposes categorization of the situation. Using the research findings of cognitive science, he argues that human beings base their action "entirely on human needs, values and cultural arrangements without any reliance on notions such as the

³³Johnson, *Morality for Humans*, 103.

³⁴Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, 191.

³⁵Johnson, *Morality for Humans*, 92.

eternal, the transcendent or the supernatural."³⁶ Moreover, human being strives for moral ideal as he or she deliberates the best course of action that he or she will take. Moral decency, as he preferred to call it, "concerns the kinds of persons we ought to strive to become and how we ought to treat others, are entirely human notions, rooted in human nature, human needs, human thought, human interaction and human desires for a meaningful and fulfilled life."³⁷ Deliberation is crucial in understanding the situation and in making a certain decision. "When a process of deliberation achieves a sufficiently broad and comprehensive perspective, we can correctly describe the outcome (in action) of such deliberations as reasonable."³⁸

He compares moral deliberation into a problem-solving situation where the individual grapples with the ordeals of making decisions or choices. In doing a problem-solving, we imaginatively explore "possible courses of action available to us, in order to determine which imagined course best resolves our actual moral problem."³⁹ This problem-solving process relies on our available human capacity and creativity in solving problem. Like problem solving, moral reasoning should be seen as "an ongoing imaginative exploration of possibilities for dealing with our problems, enhancing the quality of our communal relations and forming significant personal attachments that grow."⁴⁰ Problem-solving expands our experiences and enhances our understanding of different situations. In this way, "we achieve growth of meaning and enrich possibilities of human flourishing."⁴¹ Deliberation as problem-solving relies on our lived experiences in the world. This "imaginative moral deliberation is embedded, embodied and enacted within our changing, malleable experience."⁴² Thus, "moral deliberation is a process of interwoven imagination, emotion and reasoning."⁴³ Human beings are capable of moral problem-solving based on their experiences in their everyday life.

Moreover, Johnson elaborates moral deliberation in the use of intuition. Human cognition operates beneath the conscious level

³⁶Johnson, *Morality for Humans*, x-xi.

³⁷Johnson, *Morality for Humans*, xi.

³⁸Johnson, *Morality for Humans*, 90.

³⁹Johnson, *Morality for Humans*, xi.

⁴⁰Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, 209.

⁴¹Johnson, *Morality for Humans*, 1.

⁴²Johnson, *Morality for Humans*, xii.

⁴³Johnson, *Morality for Humans*, 27.

involving intuition. Intuition engages the human body and emotion that inform and support reason to operate. These sensory-motor areas of the brain motivate our moral deliberation. "Our intuitive judgment comes first, followed later, if at all, by patterns of rational justification."⁴⁴ Faced with different and new situation, the person experiences tension and contradiction. The person wants to achieve equilibrium in his or her situation. Thus, the person continually monitors and modulates its bodily state.⁴⁵ Consciousness enters into this intuition only in "our way of being aware of the changes of our body state in response to changes in our interactions with the world" and our way of assessing and determining the "strategies for action [that] seems best to resolve the tensions inherent in the troubled situation."⁴⁶ Intuition endeavours to harmonize relationship with the situation. By achieving harmony, the person flourishes in the process. "Flourishing is no longer merely a bio-regulation, growth of the organisms, and fluid action in the physical environment, but also includes many forms of individual, interpersonal and group flourishing and meaning-making."⁴⁷

Conclusion

Conscience is not just the domain of theological ethics or moral theology but it has been considered by cognitive science as applied in morality. Cognitive science studies the working and functioning of the mind in moral situations. Although cognitive science does not use explicitly the word "conscience" but the implication of its theories on moral imagination in our understanding of conscience is paramount. Johnson debunks the binary opposition between the absolutist ethics and relativist ethics dominant in moral theories. Instead he argues for a moral understanding that highlights the role of the human body in moral imagination. He offers a naturalist ethics that explores the down-to-earth moral deliberation in making decisions or choices in our actions based on our human experiences in the world.

Moral imagination is an alternative to the binary moral theories of absolutist ethics and the relativist ethics because it offers more cogent arguments that seriously considers the lived experience of people in making sense of the world. Moreover, moral imagination disrupts the dichotomy between intellect and emotion because it is a combination

⁴⁴Johnson, *Morality for Humans*, 75.

⁴⁵Johnson, *Morality for Humans*, 78.

⁴⁶Johnson, *Morality for Humans*, 78-79.

⁴⁷Johnson, *Morality for Humans*, 87.

of bodily sensation and intellectual endeavour in making decision and choice. The embodied imagination provides cognitive structures to our experiences in the world. The person possesses cognitive, affective and imaginative resources that he or she employs in facing his or her situation. Moral reasoning begins with a situation that an individual faces in his or her life. The crucial part in reasoning is the definition of a situation that frames and categorizes it in a certain way by the use of schema. After the definition of the situation, the individual acts by making decision and choice based on that schema that frames the situation. There are tensions and contradictions in the definition of the situation. The individual will choose the best option by achieving an equilibrium that balances the forces in his or her surroundings. The decision or choice of an action is reasonable when it achieves satisfaction in resolving the problematic situation. Thus, moral reasoning is the understanding of the situation. We expand and widen our imagination in our confrontation of different situations and understanding the nuances and details of these situations. In this reasoning, the person employs abductive inferences in the sense that he or she chooses the best value in resolving the problematic situation.