

Jeff Morgan

The Single Individual and the Searcher of Hearts

A RETRIEVAL OF CONSCIENCE
IN THE WORK OF IMMANUEL KANT
AND SØREN KIERKEGAARD

THE SINGLE INDIVIDUAL AND
THE SEARCHER OF HEARTS

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SEARCHER OF HEARTS**

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ABBREVIATIONS

Immanuel Kant's Writings

"Enlightenment"	"What Is Enlightenment"
<i>Groundwork</i>	<i>Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals</i>
<i>Lectures</i>	<i>Lectures on Ethics</i>
<i>Metaphysics of Morals</i>	<i>The Metaphysics of Morals</i>
<i>Practical Reason</i>	<i>Critique of Practical Reason</i>
<i>Religion</i>	<i>Religion within the Bounds of Reasons Alone</i>

Søren Kierkegaard's Writings

CD	<i>Christian Discourses</i>
CUP	<i>Concluding Unscientific Postscript</i>
DCF	<i>Discourses at the Communion on Friday</i>
FSE	<i>For Self-Examination</i>
JFY	<i>Judge for Yourself!</i>
JP	<i>Journals and Papers</i>
LR	<i>A Literary Review</i>
PC	<i>Practice in Christianity</i>
SUD	<i>The Sickness unto Death</i>
TA	<i>Two Ages</i>
UDVS	<i>Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits</i>
WL	<i>Works of Love</i>

INTRODUCTION

The Thesis: Knowing Myself as God Knows Me

The aim of this book is simple: I examine and retrieve a theory of conscience as a person's moral self-awareness before God. In other words, I examine and retrieve the idea that God makes a claim upon us and God knows us as God sees our hearts and judges us, and to have a conscience is to share with God in this knowledge. As a historical retrieval, this thesis seems uncontroversial to me. There are implicit warrants for it from the Hebrew Bible all the way to Ignatius of Loyola and there are explicit precedents for it from the New Testament to patristic theologians, from Bernard of Clairvaux to John Calvin to John Henry Newman.¹

1. From the Hebrew Bible I have in mind passages like Isaiah 6 or Psalm 139 wherein the presence of God to the individual is singularly self-disclosing. But I also have in mind a common pattern in which God singles out an individual, calls an individual out from a group (the patriarchs and prophets are all good examples), and the individual has a clear sense of self in light of this summons. I will develop these thoughts at greater length in the concluding chapter. The Daily Examen of Ignatian spirituality, in which an individual quietly, prayerfully reflects on God's intimate presence to her throughout her day has close connections with the theory of conscience I lift up here (see <http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen/how-can-i-pray>); conscience as singular moral self-awareness appears throughout the Pauline corpus, but I have in mind, in particular passages like Rom. 2:15-16 and 1 Cor. 12:11; we can hear Chrysostom working in this Pauline vein when he asks how it is that God has set within us a conscience to act as a watchful judge, holding us accountable before God (John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), 88); and on the similarity between figures as diverse as Calvin and Newman, consider the following claims: Conscience, Calvin writes, is a voice or witness within a person that brings a person before God; it "stands ... between God and man, not suffering man to suppress what he knows in himself" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1960), III.19.15). Newman, in a similar spirit, writes, "If, as is the case, we feel responsibility, are ashamed, are frightened, at transgressing the voice of conscience, this implies that there is One to whom we are responsible, before whom we are ashamed, whose claims upon us we fear. ... Thus conscience is a connecting principle between the creature and his Creator." In conscience, Newman concludes, striking a chord with Calvin, that

Such a thesis is controversial nonetheless, because it states that the knowledge we share with God in our conscience ultimately is distinct from the knowledge we have of ourselves before others. I retrieve the idea that our moral self-awareness before God is our *singular* moral self-awareness before God—it is a knowledge derived from a singular relation to God that cannot ultimately be reduced to our relationship with any particular community. This is not to say a community cannot be of help to an individual as she strives to hear her conscience. And it is not to say that our distinct, singular accountability before God precludes God claiming us through our neighbors (cf. Mt. 25). Nor is it to say that the conscientious individual cares little for the flourishing of community. As a conscientious individual, in fact, she cares a great deal. The knowledge we have of ourselves before God that is distinct from the knowledge we have of ourselves before others does profoundly concern our relationships with these others. Moreover, I do not mean to deny wholesale the ecclesial mediation of God's presence to us here and now. There is nothing inconsistent with the affirmation, for example, that Jesus Christ is known to us "in Scripture and the breaking of bread,"² and the affirmation that there is something deeply personal, private, and singular in our relation to God, that God knows us, claims us, and holds us each accountable for the life we live before God. But if we lose sight of this latter affirmation—and I think in contemporary Christian ethics we have lost sight of it—then we have lost something central about the Christian faith.

But none of these concessions will seem sufficient in our communitarian era of Christian ethics. Stanley Hauerwas's particular brand of ecclesial communitarianism has come under much scrutiny and criticism in recent years, but no one challenges the basic communitarian commitment. We can summarize this commitment as the belief that our moral identity comes into being as we are embedded in a public world, as we are given a role in the life of a particular, historical moral culture that lives according to particular sociolinguistic conventions. The task for the moral agent is one of acclimating to these conventions, finding her given role within them, and learning to live into that role. Theological renderings of this commitment find God working in and through the historical community. And so as the people of this time and place equip me to live into the identity they have given to me, I can believe God is at work in and through these people.

But in this case, it would probably be best not to make much of the individual's singular moral self-awareness in relation to God. If a community mediates to an individual her relationship to God, then it would be better to emphasize an individual's self-awareness in relation to the norms and prohibitions, habits,

God's creatures "are brought into His presence as that of a Living Person, and are able to hold converse with Him, and that with a directness and simplicity, with a confidence and intimacy" ("God in Conscience," in *The Heart of Newman*, ed. Erich Przywara, S. J. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 26, 30).

2. This is from the "Collect for the Presence of Christ" in *Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), 70.

practices, and conventions of the community. And it might be better not to work this out in terms of conscience because conscience carries with it too many strong individualistic connotations.³ Conscience might suggest a buffer space between the individual and the community and this buffer is untenable, so it goes, in our era of Christian ethics. It would be better to work out a theory of corporate casuistry, such as Hauerwas does, which sublimates the individual into the tradition-bearing community as the *community* examines the congruity between its actions and its principles.⁴

The (Non)place of Conscience in Contemporary Christian Ethics

I offer this brief account of the fate of conscience in contemporary Christian ethics as a plausible suggestion about why conscience as moral self-awareness has such a marginal place in it. I should note that in Catholic moral theology a trajectory of thinking about conscience is alive and well. Conscience in this trajectory plays a significant role in the practical application of prudence; it is, in this regard, a kind of God-given internal moral director.⁵ This trajectory and the one I retrieve in this book are not mutually exclusive, and I am not raising objections here. But they are different trajectories with different emphases. I also do not mean to say that one trajectory is Catholic and the other Protestant. Conscience as an individual's singular moral self-awareness, as I have already suggested above, has strong precedents throughout the broader Christian tradition.⁶

Nonetheless, this tradition of thinking about conscience is marginal at best and dangerous at worst in contemporary Christian ethics. A significant reason for this is the association of conscience with the work of Immanuel Kant. Douglas Langston's book *Conscience and Other Virtues* is representative in this regard. Langston finds Kant at the climax of a trajectory he thinks Luther inaugurates that takes conscience to be a faculty or "independent entity" that mediates God's judgment. Langston thinks this development is a "most unfortunate turn in the history of the concept of conscience," since Kant's theory of conscience, after

3. Cf. Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 168.

4. Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 120.

5. For an excellent recent discussion, see William C. Mattison III, *Introducing Moral Theology: True Happiness and the Virtues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 95–112.

6. There are hints and echoes of the theory of conscience I advance in this dissertation in *Gaudium et Spes* as well as in the work of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. See, for example, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World—Gaudium et Spes*, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter Abbott S. J. (London: Chapman Press, 1966), 16–17; John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (Boston, MA: Pauline Books, 1983), 57–8, 61; Benedict XVI, *On Conscience* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2007).

Kant, becomes the “standard view.”⁷ This is “most unfortunate” because it is just a short step from this view to the view that each individual is his or her own moral authority by virtue of conscience. In other words, it is just a short step from Kant’s theory of conscience to the view that, so long as I’m OK and you’re OK, I know myself as responsible to act in such and such a way, and who are you to tell me otherwise?

The appeal of Langston’s argument against the theory of conscience he associates with Kant depends upon an overwrought assumption in contemporary Christian ethics, namely, that Kant is one of the principal architects (if not *the* architect) of the modern, self-asserting, atomistic, autonomous moral subject. The assumption is that Kant bequeaths to modernity the philosophical framework in which an individual is justified to create the personal morality he or she sees fit to create. As such, each individual is accountable to a self-given (i.e., self-created) law. Conscience, in this scheme, helps the individual monitor the consistency between his or her self-posed morality and actual behavior. It is a person’s means to be consistent with his or her self-created principles.⁸ This is not an attractive picture for the majority of Christian ethicists today, nor should it be. It is also not lacking in merit as a description of the present state of our contemporary cultural mores. And if this is what conscience has become in modern life, thanks to Kant, then it would be best to keep a healthy distance both from conscience and from Kant.

Over the past few decades, however, many scholars of Kant’s practical philosophy and philosophy of religion argue that Kant is not the ogre of modern autonomy many take him to be. In this picture Kant is a philosopher of divine command, in a certain sense, who is deeply committed to the absolute, transcendent, object lawfulness of law and, in turn, to the establishment of truly cosmopolitan goods.⁹ The verdict is still out in contemporary Christian ethics on the status of this relatively new picture of Kant. The communitarian turn in Christian ethics still has momentum and this turn has gained a great deal of traction by pushing against Kant as the villainous foil.

Kant is not an unproblematic figure, but he is also not unambiguous. There might actually be something in his thought worth our attention. Indeed, central

7. Douglas Langston, *Conscience and Other Virtues: From Bonaventure to MacIntyre* (State College: Penn State University Press, 2007), 77.

8. This account of Kant, modern moral autonomy, and conscience will be a central concern of Chapter 1.

9. See, for example, John Hare, *The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God’s Assistance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Karl Ameriks, *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy: Problems in the Appropriation of the Critical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), and “Vindicating Autonomy: Kant, Sartre, and O’Neill,” in *Kant on Moral Autonomy*, ed. Oliver Sensen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Andrew Chignell, “Rational Hope, Moral Order, and the Revolution of the Will,” in *Divine Order, Human Order, and the Order of Nature*, ed. Eric Watkins (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

elements of basic Christian ethics persist in his thought and we do well to consider what he makes of them. Conscience is one such element. His theory of conscience is not a buoy for the modern, autonomous, self-asserting individual; rather, it is corroborative of an important biblical and theological witness about the good for the moral life of self-examination and self-knowledge before the claim God makes upon us. We find this witness in Psalm 139, for example, a text I come back to at various points in this book. The central theme of the Psalm is that God sees each of our hearts and knows the quality of our hearts as we live before God. And if we would live well before God we have to have at least a glimpse of what God sees, we have to have some kind of share in the knowledge God has of us. It is this dynamic of being singularly known by the one who sees our hearts and of acquiring a share of this knowledge that New Testament writers and later theologians annex to conscience. My claim, so far, is that Kant's theory of conscience belongs in this trajectory; Kant, in his own way, directs us to this way of thinking about conscience.

What Kant and Kierkegaard Have to Offer

I have given this attention to Kant so far because I propose to defend a theory of conscience that has been dismissed in Christian ethics in large part because of its association with Kant and the alleged ramifications of Kant's practical philosophy. And so finding some leverage to put this claim for conscience back on the table requires these prefatory remarks about Kant and the theological witness his theory of conscience calls to mind. But Kant is not alone as he directs us in his own way to this witness. Søren Kierkegaard also offers his own distinct version of a theory of conscience as an individual's singular moral self-awareness in relation to God.

I am struck by how much Kierkegaard's theory of conscience sounds like Kant's theory of conscience. And this is reason enough to turn to Kierkegaard. They clearly seem to be operating within a common conceptual scheme about the nature and function of conscience. If there were but world enough and time we could consider more figures. But there are also strategic reasons to turn to Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard fares better than Kant in contemporary Christian ethics, but he too has come under criticism for fostering the detached interiority of the modern moral subject. Just as with our treatment of Kant, then, our treatment of Kierkegaard provides an opportunity, from a different rendering of this theory of conscience, to correct misinterpretations and challenge overreactions.

In short, Kierkegaard, as I will present him, shares in the tradition of thinking about conscience we find in Kant. But he does offer a distinct rendering of this understanding of conscience. Significantly, he differs from Kant on the final end conscience serves. While Kant thinks our moral self-awareness in relation to God helps us as we strive to conform our lives increasingly to the moral law that we should believe God gives to us, Kierkegaard believes this moral self-awareness ultimately serves us as we draw deeper into our relationship to God. And so I present Kant and Kierkegaard as each offering a distinct rendering of conscience as our singular moral self-awareness before God. Kant conceives of conscience as

a kind of knowledge we have in relation to God who, as Supreme Lawgiver, holds us accountable to the law we discern through our practical reason. Kierkegaard conceives of conscience as our singular moral self-awareness in relation to God who, as our loving creator, holds us accountable to live as one whom God has created for a distinct relationship to God.

But these distinctions are intramural. My claim is that Kant and Kierkegaard each in their own way extend a tradition of inquiry about conscience as an individual's singular moral self-awareness before God. They each argue that this moral self-awareness is ultimately distinct from our moral self-awareness before our communities, including our ecclesial communities. Given the poor status of this tradition in contemporary Christian ethics, I do not want to distract from my broader goal of recommending it, and I am afraid that staging an adjudication between Kant and Kierkegaard that aims to find a hero for the book will be such a distraction. We will adjudicate between these figures from time to time in order to clarify what is going on in each figure's thought. But I do not mean to present Kant and Kierkegaard in a trajectory fashion, from good to better. Different readers will respond in different ways to these distinct renderings of conscience. But I leave such judgments to the reader. My aim is to present these theories of conscience thoroughly, clearly, and fairly. I hope this will provide at least a modest contribution to contemporary Christian ethics as well as to scholarship on Kant and Kierkegaard, since the secondary literature on conscience in their work is almost nonexistent.¹⁰

10. J. B. Schneewind's magisterial *The Invention of Autonomy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), to take a prominent example, offers an account of Kant's moral theory grounded in an extensive account of its background, but conscience is no more than an incidental matter. Michael Despland (nearly fifty years ago) pays some attention to conscience but in the service of a larger effort to defend Kant's understanding of hypocrisy and sincerity (see Despland, "Can Conscience Be Hypocritical? The Contrasting Analyses of Kant and Hegel," *Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 68, no. 3–4 (July–October 1975), 357–70); Thomas Hill situates some explication of conscience within an account of Kant's theory of punishment (see Hill, "Punishment, Conscience, and Moral Worth," in *Kant's Metaphysics of Morals: Interpretive Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 233–54). In short, what is lacking in scholarship on Kant and Kant's moral theory is a thorough treatment of Kant's theory of conscience as it appears across Kant's moral theory. A similar lacunae also characterizes scholarship on Kierkegaard, though there are several articles and book chapters that offer a glimpse into Kierkegaard's theory of conscience, either by exploring it in comparison to other figures or by locating the role of conscience in a particular work. See Philip Ziegler, "A Christian Context for Conscience? Reading Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* Beyond Hegel's Critique of Conscience," *European Journal of Theology*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2006); Randall Zachman has written two short, excellent treatments of Kierkegaard's understanding of conscience, one in relation to Luther's theory of conscience, and the other in relation to Calvin's (Zachman, "Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and Søren Kierkegaard," *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*, vol. 10, no. 12 (December 2010); *Reconsidering*

But, as I have said, I also intend to recommend the broader tradition of thinking about conscience they each distinctly uphold. That is my normative, constructive aim in these presentations of conscience. The Christian tradition certainly bears witness to a God who makes a covenant with a people, orders their life, and is present to them through their life together. Again, I do not mean to present this theory of conscience as a necessary denial of that affirmation. But the Christian tradition also clearly bears witness to a God who claims us and knows us as individuals, and who wants us as individuals to examine ourselves and live well singularly before God. And this means there is something about our relation to God, including our moral self-awareness before God, that is not mediated through or reducible to our relationships with others. To take the particular trek we are going to take through the work of Kant and Kierkegaard is to be reminded of this latter witness that has been dismissed in Christian ethics today.

What's Ahead

But first we have to understand how this witness has been forgotten. In Chapter 1 we will consider the contemporary dismissal of conscience. This dismissal comes in two stages. The first stage is constituted by a worry about the relationship between conscience and modern moral autonomy. MacIntyre and Hauerwas both argue that Kant bears significant responsibility for the presence in our midst of the self-asserting, atomistic autonomous individual. Paul Lehmann and Oliver O'Donovan, meanwhile, both find Kant's theory of conscience playing a central role in the rise of this modern moral subject. These diagnoses help to explain why there was a sense around the middle of the twentieth century that conscience was in need of a serious revision. But I conclude that this effort to revise conscience constitutes a Pyrrhic victory. I begin with H. Richard Niebuhr and turn, once again, to Stanley Hauerwas and find a trajectory of thinking about self-knowledge, moral identity, and moral accountability that begins as an effort to wrest conscience from its alleged Kantian captivity and ends with conscience quietly vanishing as the work of conscience dissipates in an emphasis on the priority of corporate life and corporate self-understanding.

In Chapter 2 I begin my challenge to this trajectory by offering a different interpretation of Kant's theory of conscience. I argue that for Kant conscience is the knowledge we have of ourselves in our relation to God as God judges us and holds us accountable to the moral law. To be more precise, I argue that for Kant conscience is an approximate knowledge in which we strive to recognize and endorse the knowledge God has of us in our actions. Kant claims that conscience is the "subjective principle" of our accountability to God, and I argue that he really

John Calvin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013)). Jamie Ferreira has a short chapter on the role of conscience in *Works of Love in Love's Grateful Striving: A Commentary on Kierkegaard's Works of Love* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001)).

means this, even as there is also an “as if” element to his theory of conscience (we should think of our conscience as holding us accountable to the moral law, and we do this well when we think of conscience “as if” it holds us accountable to God). Conscience, furthermore, becomes the means, Kant thinks, with which we strive to know the quality of our hearts before God. In this regard, conscience plays an essential role, according to Kant, in our duty to know ourselves. I conclude that the dismissal of conscience from Christian ethics rests, at least in part, on a severe misinterpretation of Kant’s theory of conscience. And in this overreaction to a misinterpretation of Kant’s theory of conscience, there has been, again, a consequent omission in Christian ethics of an important biblical and theological witness that Kant’s theory of conscience captures well: that God knows each individual and that each individual is singularly accountable before God.

I argue, in short, that for Kant an adequate, full understanding of conscience requires the belief that there is a God who sees our hearts and judges us. In Chapter 3 I turn to Kierkegaard who, like Kant, presents conscience as our singular moral self-awareness before God. But unlike Kant, Kierkegaard is not squeamish about the very personal and distinct relationship we each have with God and in which we are each personally disclosed. God creates each of us for a very distinct relationship to God. Kierkegaard insists that this distinct relationship to God is at the heart of the Christian faith. And he claims that we discover our distinct relationship to God as God encounters us in our conscience. As we break away from the many people who want to silence our conscience, we begin to hear conscience tell us who we are in relation to God and summon us to live into that relation. As we hear this summons and draw near to God, we find ourselves, Kierkegaard argues, before God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ. And here we discover that we are sinners who reject God and the summons God lays on us in our conscience; but here we also discover the help we need if we are to strive to be who God has created us to be.

In each of the chapters on Kant and Kierkegaard I bring their view of conscience into conversation with the communitarian trajectory we encounter in Chapter 1. I briefly suggest in these moments why the view of conscience Kant and Kierkegaard offer is preferable to the view of this trajectory. Kant and Kierkegaard each present a theory of conscience that effectively calls into question both the sublimation of self-knowledge to corporate self-understanding and the correlative conflation of our accountability before God and our accountability before others. Without something like conscience as Kant and Kierkegaard understand it, it is very difficult to understand on what grounds an individual formed by one community can come to identify with the cause of another community, or how an individual formed in one community can end up calling that community’s life into question. Kant and Kierkegaard have an answer here that resists the inadequate dichotomy the alternative, prevailing trajectory poses. This inadequate dichotomy contrasts the atomistic autonomous individual with the communitarian, socially constructed self. Kant and Kierkegaard resist this dichotomy because, each in his own way, they ground the individual’s moral identity and correlative moral self-awareness in the individual’s relation to God as God claims the individual with a

claim that transcends the life of any particular community. In the final chapter, I present an outline and defense of this way of thinking about conscience that draws on central themes from the chapters on Kant and Kierkegaard and situates those themes within a broader biblical and theological witness that deeply resonates with them. The aim is neither simply to “proof text” Kant’s and Kierkegaard’s theory of conscience nor to present a theory of conscience that is unqualifiedly Kantian or Kierkegaardian. The aim is to make the case that to pass through Kant’s and Kierkegaard’s theory of conscience as we do in this book is to be reminded of a deeply rooted Christian commitment to nature of an individual’s singular accountability and corresponding self-awareness before God. Neither Kant nor Kierkegaard would necessarily endorse the outline I present in the final chapter, but the point is that they can help us think more sharply about this Christian commitment and make good theological sense about what it means to have a conscience.