



Conscience as Judgment

More follows thinkers like Thomas Aquinas in understanding conscience as an act of practical judgment: “Conscience is nothing else than the application of knowledge to some action” (*Summa Theologica* I-II.19.5).

In this understanding, a well-working conscience reasons from first principles and laws that are recognized as just and true (cf. *Summa Theologiae* I.79.13).

As the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* explains, conscience is “the capacity for judging the rightness of actions, either considered generally, or actually proposed or already performed” (405).

Conscience in More’s Early Writings

- **Education and Conscience: More’s Letter to William Gonell (ca. 1518)**
“My learned Gonell, have the kindness to see that my daughters thoroughly learn these works of saintly men. From them they will learn in particular what goal thy should set for their studies, and the whole fruit of their endeavors should consist in the testimony of God and a good conscience. Thus they will be inwardly calm and at peace and neither stirred by praise of flatterers nor stung by the follies of unlearned mockers of learning.” (*EWTM*, 289)
- **Conscience, Peace, and Freedom**
 - In the letter to Gonnell, More contends that “solid joy” is one of the primary fruits of learning and a well-formed conscience (*EWTM*, 289).
 - More also suggests that a well-formed conscience affords a person the liberty to exercise good judgment in spite of opposition from false opinions or one’s own passions. The person will neither be “puffed up” nor “dejected” by such pressures, but free and at peace.
 - Elsewhere, More points out that acquiring a good conscience requires an active effort to control one’s thoughts and imagination. As he writes in *The Four Last Things*, vain curiosity must be combatted so as to acquire “not a false imagination, but a very true contemplation” of reality (*EWTM*, 488). He advises further: “I would have folk in their silence take good heed that their minds be occupied with good thoughts, for unoccupied be they never” (*EWTM*, 481).

Some Dangers to Conscience

- **A Gloss of One’s Own Making**
In *Treatise upon the Passion* (ca. 1534), More warns against the tendency of man to “boldly frame himself a conscience with a gloze* of his own making” (*EWTM*, 1075; see also 1210, 1314).
*gloss, interpretation
- **Desire and Distortions of Conscience**
More argues that appetites, ambitions, and the desire to conform to others’ opinions can distort the truth and pervert one’s conscience. More warns against allowing desire to influence conscience, rather than making conscience the guide of desire. More also discusses the danger of “framing oneself a conscience” elsewhere: e.g. 1317/93 – 1318/9.
- **Extremes of Scrupulosity and Laxity: “Tale of Mother Maud” from *A Dialogue of Comfort* (1534)**
Within the text of a *Dialogue of Comfort*, More includes a “merry” fable about an ass and a wolf who confess their sins to Father Reynard the fox. The main interlocutor Antony contrasts the ass’ scrupulosity with the wolf’s laxity in order to show that conscience is a form of judgment that steers between extremes. However, Antony concludes the tale by asserting that the scrupulosity of the ass “is less harm yet than a conscience overlarge, or such as for his own fantasy the man list to frame himself—now drawing it narrow, now stretching it in breadth...to serve on every side for his own commodity” (*EWTM*, 1163).
*For the full tale, see pp. 1160-1163.

- **The Influence of Other People: Letter from Margaret Roper to Alice Alington* (1534)**
 “Verily, daughter, I never intend (God being my good lord) to pin my soul at another man’s back, not even the best man I know this day living, for I know not whither he may hap to carry it. There is no man living of whom, while he liveth, I may make myself sure. Some may do for favor, and some may do for fear, and so might they carry my soul a wrong way. And some might hap to frame himself a conscience and think that, while he did it for fear, God would forgive it. And some may peradventure think that they will repent, and be shriven thereof, and that so God shall remit them. And some may be peradventure of that mind that, if they say one thing and think the while the contrary, God more regards their heart than their tongue, and that therefore their oath goeth upon that they think and not upon that they say...But in good faith, Marget, I can use no such ways in so great a matter; but like as if mine own conscience served me, I would not let to do it though other men refused, so though others refuse it not, I dare not do it, mine own conscience standing against it” (*EWTM*, 1314).

* Some believe More and his daughter Meg co-authored this letter; recent scholarship suggests that Thomas More is the author.

Conscience and Study: More’s Imprisonment and Trial (1534-35)

- **Letter to Margaret Roper: Tower of London, 1534**
 “[T]he clearness of my conscience hath made my heart hop for joy” (*EWTM*, 1324).
- **Letter from Margaret Roper to Alice Alington: 17 August, <1534>**
 “But since standing my conscience, I can in no wise do it—and that for the instruction of my conscience in the matter, I have not slightly looked, but by many years studied and advisedly considered, and never could yet see nor hear that thing, nor I think I never shall, that could induce mine own mind to think otherwise than I do—I have no manner remedy but God hath given me to the strait...And since I look in this matter but only unto God, it maketh little matter though men call it as it pleaseth them and say it is no conscience but a foolish scruple” (*EWTM*, 1311-12).
- **Letter to Margaret Roper: <Tower of London, 3 June, 1535>**
 “I thanked God that my case was such in this matter through the clearness of mine own conscience that though I might have pain, I could not have harm, for a man may in such case lose his head and have no harm” (*EWTM*, 1332).
- **Letter to Margaret Roper: <Tower of London, 3 June, 1535>**
 “I was very sure that mine own conscience, so informed as it is by such diligence as I have so long taken therein, may stand with mine own salvation. I meddle not with the conscience of them that think otherwise; every man *suo domino stat et cadit*.* I am no man’s judge” (*EWTM*, 1333). *Romans 14:4
- **The Paris Newsletter Account of More’s Trial and Execution: 4 August, 1535**
 “More then spoke as follows: ‘Since I am condemned, and God knows how, I wish to speak freely of your statute, for the discharge of my conscience. For the seven years that I have studied the matter, I have not read in any approved doctor of the Church that a temporal lord could or ought to be head of the spirituality.’ The Chancellor interrupting him, said, ‘What, More, you wish to be considered wiser and of better conscience than all the bishops and nobles of the realm?’ To this More replied, ‘My lord, for one bishop of your opinion I have a hundred saints of mine; and for one parliament of yours, and God knows of what kind, I have all the General Councils for 1,000 years, and for one kingdom I have France and all the kingdoms of Christendom’” (*EWTM*, 1385).

Final Points for Consideration

- In these writings, More argues that his conscience is informed by long and careful study; his final stance against the oath is neither rash nor obstinate, then, but the result of careful deliberation. According to these texts, More’s sure conscience is not based on subjective impressions or an autonomous sense of self, but on the conformity of his judgment to the truth. More’s writings further suggest that a clear conscience affords liberty, peace, and joy even in the midst of great adversity. How does More’s understanding compare to later views of conscience in modernity? Is he persuasive? Why or why not?