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# AUTHENTIC BEING AND MORAL CONSCIENCE

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## **Abstract**

The paper analyses possibilities of authentic being in theological and philosophical reflection. Moral conscience of authentic being is understood here as a basic condition of authentic being. Moral conscience is interpreted in two ways. The first focuses on conscience as a tool for making decisions in the moral realm. It obeys exterior laws and norms, often identified with the Magisterium. Such conscience is called 'heteronomous'. The second way of interpretation shows conscience as the place where individual decisions are made without any interference from exterior authority and, therefore, based only on God's law. It is called 'autonomous' conscience. The contribution analyses approaches of Häring and Kierkegaard. It indicates resemblance in their interpretation of moral conscience and at the same time it follows the distinctive features of their approaches, which result from difference of their theological points of departure.

*Keywords:* Häring, Kierkegaard, moral conscience, authentic being

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## **1. Setting out the problem**

The concept of authentic being is tightly connected to the question of free decision in the tradition of European thought. Our contribution follows two possible ways of interpreting authentic being. Both approaches are theological, although they rest on distinctly philosophical and ethical foundations. Existentialist approach accentuates autonomy of deciding, which is no longer based or motivated rationally. The other is represented by anthropological approach. Both ways and both authors, we focus on in this study, share a common point of departure in their biblical interpretation of freedom, which is taken as a gift of God, and their interpretation of the presence of God's voice in man, which represents an institution of autonomous decision-making and a condition of authentic being. They, however, diverge in their interpretation of fulfilling God's command in man. Kierkegaard follows the path of existential turn and leap, Häring pursues the phenomenological interpretation of human being and that of rational explication of the concept of conscience. Our aim is to compare these approaches and to reveal the consequences exemplified by both authors.

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## 2. Conscience in Christian theology

Speaking about authentic being, one encounters the theme of moral conscience as significant. Its definition appears no earlier than in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for example by Häring himself. However, historicity of the concept is out of question. Hellenic thought already reflected on the presence of a specific human faculty which critically watches over one's action and pronounces it right or wrong. The concept of conscience, however, formed later. For example, in Egyptian culture, conscience is identified with heart, which represented a symbolic centre of human being and exemplified an integration of rational thought with feeling or even with the will. From theological point of view we could speak about a consequent conscience, which announces itself after the act. It, therefore, becomes a reflection of the committed act, or it reproaches evil action. Such conscience performs a pedagogical function: after the act one becomes conscious of the evil he willingly, although unconsciously, committed himself to before the act. One can see now, that his action makes others suffer, die, etc. One does not want to experience the agonizing feeling of reproach and for that reason eschews such acts in the future. In Hellenic culture, the role of consequent conscience is taken over by Erynias, who haunt the man who committed evil.

Socrates' conception of *daimonion* is closest to our understanding of conscience. In this case, we can no longer speak only about consequent, but also antecedent conscience. It appears as inner voice, which in its nature is logical and judgemental. It works not only after, but also before performing an act. For this reason, man is able to anticipate and comprehend consequences. One is, therefore, able to cease his action before committing any evil. Socrates' concept of conscience thus integrates all three theological-ethical components of conscience: antecedent conscience, concomitant and consequent conscience. This concept of conscience does not come out of feelings. The view of others suffering the consequences of my action does not make me become conscious of evil. On the contrary, authentic conscience is a rational instance in man. The wise do good while the ignorant ones do evil. Based on this relation a connection between evil and ignorance could appear at all. Socrates believed that having the right conscience, one cannot do evil, since one would find it illogical to do otherwise [1].

Stoics came near to the Christian concept of conscience. They believed that conscience is a sparkle of eternal logos. It represents an eternal wisdom being transformed into human soul and placed within a man. The order of cosmos becomes a part of the man. The wise one does good and acts divinely at the same time. On the contrary, the unreasonable one does evil and opposes the order of the universe. In the stoic context, we could even use a Christian metaphor: God is in us and watches over our deeds. Stoic philosophical legacy contains basic outlines of Christian concept of conscience. We, therefore, dare to say that even Church Fathers of the Patristic Period had been inspired by this way of thinking. Jurová writes about a permanent conflict the philosophers were

conscious of and in attempt to resolve it since the very beginning. Often there is a conflict between emotional and intellectual, which brings us to the norm of human rationality, which may be difficult to establish - we are not always as rational as we would like to be [2].

The concept of conscience did not always belong to the conceptual apparatus of the Christian thinkers. Jerome, who could be influenced even by stoic legacy at this point, was the first one to terminologically indicate a possible existence of conscience. Apart from that, he distinguished different faculties of the human soul, and next to rationality, emotion and appetite, man according to him possessed even a sparkle of conscience. He received it from God and did not lose it even after Adam was expelled from Paradise. It resides in each one of us, and it cannot be extinguished or removed. As Jerome added, the sparkle resided in Cain as well as in any other man, regardless of the difference between sinful or righteous ones. (Jerome in this respect makes a note that, Greeks use the term *syneidésis* for conscience, which was rewritten in Latin as *synderesis*.) Conscience works like a reliable tool, which helps one to see that he commits sin anytime he does.

Saint Augustine presented a complex and complete model of conscience. His thought displays an integration of biblical concept of conscience (as it was mentioned by Jerome) with the entire Greek philosophical tradition. He connects specific Christian interpretation of human freedom with possibilities of thought provided by Greek philosophy. Augustine sought for truth and understanding. This started his journey into philosophy and religion, which was to become his passion throughout his life [3]. His efforts lead into relating conscience to truth. Greeks believed that the pursuit of truth belonged to one of our fundamental needs, identified before by Aristotle with spiritual happiness. If we insert God as a creator of the world and truth itself, human happiness must in a certain way refer to God and His being. This attachment contains even the roots of authentic human being.

Augustine, therefore, writes about certitude of knowledge humans can enjoy thanks to their attachment to God. Pushing the interpretation further, the concept of conscience acquires the dimension of God's voice that speaks within man. It is reserved exclusively to the individual human being who lives in personal relation to God [4]. In this interpretation, conscience gathers an entirely individual dimension and it can lead one on his individual way to God. Upon this point, as it will be demonstrated later, Kierkegaard agrees with Häring. However, we can realize that conscience in Christian thought had not been primarily understood as a tribunal that judges one's deeds. It rather has been understood as a space of communication between man and God.

Unlike Socrates, Augustine does not confirm unambiguous relation between knowing goodness and doing good. The opposite would be a mechanistic model and doing good would only require a well-formed and truly knowledgeable conscience. Augustine, however, adds another dimension: freedom of will. It is not only a question of choosing between good and evil. Not only can reason deceive us, but the will itself can also draw us to evil, which is,

therefore, not caused by reason. The man is anthropologically constituted as the creation of God, is created to His image, and in accordance with the Creator's plan one should pursue goodness and avoid evil. Doing good mechanistically is impossible due to ancestral sin. The soul was given the opportunity to decide for good and do only good, however, it had refused the chance. Committing the original sin means, as if one had decided to also want to do evil. The original sin weakens capacities of our reason and will and on account of the weakness, one confuses evil with good. However, as Augustine comments, action coming from weakness or ignorance cannot be called sinful in the full meaning of the word. True sin is committed, when one refuses knowledge and help. This happens, when we stay deaf to the voice of conscience and oppose it. Pursuit of goodness is an individual claim and an essential mission of each person. Man is sinful and can never reach perfection during his mundane existence. However, one can treat the pursuit of goodness authentically, not mechanistically.

In the following historical periods, the existence of conscience as *synderesis* used to be derived from the theology of creation, as it was already mentioned. All comes out of God's creative act and all was created with certain purpose. The teleological principle of creation accentuates mainly medieval explanations inspired by Aristotle and represented by St. Thomas Aquinas. Creatures are almost able to fulfil their purposes using their drives and instincts. Even animals can be said to decide in certain sense, they need to consider whether the level of risk, possibly even death, associated with acquiring food, is not too high. Human being is authentic and always oriented towards the singular and unrepeatable aim. As far as one follows the Christ or obeys God's will, his path can be recognized as original. Thanks to conscience, one is able to decide even according to the moral categories, which mirror Creator's Plan as well as the final orientation of the singular existence, which points to God.

For Aquinas *synderesis* represents a faculty capable of formulating the fundamentals of thought. It helps us carry out the radical choice, which is articulated in the most general moral and, as for its origin, rational commandment: do good, avoid evil. Such fundamental principle or primary choice is not enough to recognize particular goods in the particular situation. For this reason, another term was introduced: *conscientia*. It represents the ability to apply the highest norms, including the most fundamental requirement to do good, into everyday practice and particular action. On the grounds of the concept of *conscientia* a new space of one's self-realization was opened. As it has already been mentioned, it is not only the question of knowing good; the knowledge itself cannot suffice to establish happiness. In order to truly act as a relatively autonomous being, one needs another faculty, as well. It is the ability, even an art of applying the general moral rule in particular practical situation. Man is, therefore, endowed with a unique status, since he is called to fulfil God's will authentically, which means: in his own right. Valčová adds to this: "I also wish to emphasize that in our epistemological outlook we must go beyond the immediacy of knowledge. For one thing, knowledge in itself does not require a response of the knowing subject." [5]

An attempt to create the concept of autonomous conscience had resulted in doubt about the meaning and importance of Magisterium of the Catholic Church, as well as in doubts about its moral meaning in general. The concept of autonomy was transported into theological language with the wake of the Modern Era and it originally used to bear a juristic meaning. It used to refer to nations in context of their right for self-determination. The concept itself points to the facticity of one's own legislation, which included not only societies but also nations and individuals. In philosophical discourse, it had resonated with Kant's critique of moral decisions. According to him, man is able to formulate basic principles of morality with the help of practical reason. Autonomy of practical reason forms the essential condition of reaching for this type of knowledge.

Inspiration by Kant's Enlightenment belief in human reason had brought some authors to shifting the focus from belief in God, Bible and Church towards autonomous reason, which, in itself and by itself, is able to know the rules one ought to follow in his conduct. The German author Auer remarks in this respect, that man becomes his own law. The claim implies a sophistic assumption that man is a measure of all things and at the same time it points to one of typical features of postmodernity: anything goes. Moral norms are not introduced from outside, they rest in human reason and represent an essential and inner truth of things themselves. It forms an ontological condition of the belief that essential truth, knowledge of the truth and one's action are interconnected. Human reason, besides being autonomous, is creative. It forms the rule followed by individuals. Reason eventually forms the articulation of natural law, which becomes a fundament of human action. "The reason is not only a spokesman of order of things themselves, but according to Aquinas the order of reason precedes the order of things." [6]

The faith offers a new horizon of meaning of one's being. Standards are not naively derived from faith alone. Faith cannot be substituted for the responsibility of reason; however, it has an integrating, critical and stimulating effect on the process of thinking and decision-making. Christian and non-Christian ethics differ, because in Christian ethics, the motivation for moral conduct stands in the front. Christ calls us to love and use categorical rules discovered by our reason.

Auer and Häring both construe their theology of moral autonomy mainly in the context of *Humanae vitae* encyclical. Referring to autonomous morality Häring remarks, that man can be a good Catholic even in case he does not agree with the argumentation of the encyclical. In his understanding of authentic he comes out of the interpretation of the natural law. Natural law in his articulation represents connection of God's People and Teachers' Authority, and it is impossible that the teachings of Church and natural law would stand in contradiction. Matrimony provides a particular example and Häring maintains that the institution of matrimony is historically conditioned and is not subject to the influence of infallible Teachers' Authority. For this reason, redemption of believer's soul cannot be connected to the institution of Magisterium. He claims

that the role of theology and Magisterium rests in mediating between truth and human conscience. Theology is not scholarly or academic discipline; it is a relation between individual human conscience and God. Referring to Magisterium, Häring says, that hierarchical authority and theologians together represent both leaders and disciples of the pilgrimaging Church. Nobody has a monopoly on truth and no one can hope to be inspired by Spirit, unless he worships Spirit, who influences everything in anyone. No one should be surprised or fearful, when the Pope or theologians do not have their answers ready whenever new and burning questions are posed. In painful tension, they can differentiate the everlasting truth from the temporally conditioned one, they can interpret the signs of times and being attentive to all, they can free believers from the deformed enunciations and ideological reductions [7].

Häring also agrees upon so called ‘theology of protest’, however, his attitude is original. He does not support radically autonomous morality, but he defends authentic conscience. He refuses to abandon the tradition of Scriptures just to make theology open its borders to let creativity in. Such step would eventually lead to belief that commandments – grounding our everyday decision-making – have become unattainably ideal or utopian. He stands for autonomy of conscience and opposes the autonomy of morality. His approach leads him close to existentialist explanation and existential explication of the role of the conscience by Kierkegaard. Before we move to existentialist interpretation, we have to mention the basic definition of conscience taken from the teaching of Magisterium.

The most complex definition can be found in constitution *Gaudium et Spes*: „In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged.” [<http://www.ourladywarriors.org/teach/gaudspes.htm>]

Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths [8]. In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbour [9]. In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals from social relationships. Hence the more right conscience holds sway, the more persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and strive to be guided by the objective norms of morality. Conscience frequently errs from invincible ignorance without losing its dignity. The same cannot be said for a man who cares but little for truth and goodness, or for a conscience which by degrees grows practically sightless as a result of habitual sin [<http://www.ourladywarriors.org/teach/gaudspes.htm>].

### **3. Existentialist concept of a free conscience**

Existentialist-theological approach differs in many respects from the anthropological-theological one. However, one can spot number of common points in their explication of conscience. If we want to compare these two approaches, we have to realize, that, as for the philosophers of existence, only Kierkegaard offers specific existentialist, and at the same time at least up to a point, theological way of interpretation. With other philosophers, we can speak about rather phenomenological motivation, which is focused on solitude of man, for whom God is too distant (Jaspers and his all-embracing transcendence) or does not exist at all (Sartre and his materialism) [10].

Existentialism basically poses questions directly tied to the authentic decision-making and conscience. Once again, God wants man to make a decision – to choose [11]. In contrast to anthropological and legalistic interpretation of the morality, existentialism focuses directly on the individual. It is no longer the question, what is to be done by us, humans, but more likely, what is to be done by me, individually. The individual lives her own individual existence, which is filled with freedom, necessity of choice and responsibility. [12].

In this sense, we can follow Kierkegaard's critique of rationality and systemacity which leads to paralysis of the decision-making conscience. Kierkegaard defines the human soul as a relationship of the self that tries to find a balanced ratio in the relationships of its existence. It is a relationship to the finality, reality, to one's self, to the human choice and freedom [8]. He reminds us, that our decisions do not grow out of logical calculus, but they are formed through a paradox. Similar to Häring's critique of Magisterium, he points to the fact that our anthropological reality is subject to a historical evolution, which can often be misleading. Historically formed and proved propositions can become cornerstones of our idols, beliefs that reality truly conforms to what tradition has introduced it to be like. On the other hand, it is only the fiction of reality, interpreted by social use, usual models of estimation and interpretation. Freedom cannot be accomplished, when bound by the rule.

Decision done by the moral conscience is a jump, not a logically ordered knowledge and comprehension of the immutable law, as it was introduced by Hegel. It means a jump into the unknown; conscience is no mechanism functioning without any hesitation, exception, contingency or mistake. It is a living voice of God in man, the voice that calls us to permanently overcome ourselves. Overcoming oneself and overcoming the everyday routine leads to action which is unique, original and unrepeatable. Simultaneously, one acts according to a direct confrontation of our beliefs with idea God has about our action. Such action is thus not only peaceful or happy one.

'Either-or' is another existential category. Moral conscience in Kierkegaard's thought does not act like an alibistic voice which can be lied to. Contrary to that, it is a radical voice that calls for an uncompromising decision, which is not given in advance [11]. Even though the council later dealt with

conscience that announces itself even during the act and works as a permanent inspector, however, not as a constantly present authority ready to solve one's problems unambiguously and right on the spot. If it ever worked like this, we would never have the opportunity to confront ourselves with despair or other such categories. How could one ever become desperate, if he knew what to do? And how could one bear responsibility for his decisions, when he cannot rely on a firm knowledge of the law and rules he is bound to be guided by.

Could we answer with a question, what would one's decisions be like, if his conscience was programmed to decide according to the rule in advance? Why would then anyone do evil? From the biblical point of view the answer would be quite simple. One commits evil due to his will weakened by the ancestral sin. This assumption can be found in the basis of all the European interpretation of human freedom. To what extent, however, does one take responsibility for his decisions, if with the guilt of Adam one loses his competence and becomes a plaything in the hands of the weakened will and the reason always liable to error? We must ask, if, based on existential questioning the absolute function of conscience, one is ever able to bear responsibility for his deeds at all? Naturally, it would be too simple to rely on external instance that represents infallible truth, although even despite knowledge we encounter here two problems.

As Häring pointed out, Magisterium's attempt to define matrimony has proven to be an attempt to bind the believer by her conscience. One, therefore, has to be guided by Magisterium. Häring calls attention to the fact, that logic of the particular historical period is not necessarily the logic of God. Similarly, logic of the Spirit does not need to be the only way of understanding world and one's role in the world. In Repar's words, it can eventually be even scandalous [9]. The paradox of making a decision is exemplified on the case of Abraham and Isaac. God called Abraham to sacrifice his son, a claim in discord with conscience and logic, even with the logic of the day. Sacrificing one's son, supposing it is unlikely to conceive another one, means the end of the kin. It would therefore mean that the promise regarding progeny will not be fulfilled. If Abraham held on to his conscience, he would have to refuse God, oppose Him, since it would have run counter to the natural law, to his promise and to a common sense.

Kierkegaard uses Abraham's case to show that our rational decisions do not always necessarily follow the logic of God's plan and its divine historicity. With Häring, they would agree, that one can hardly expect blowing and inspiration by the Spirit, if he does not invite, worship him or pray to him. Kierkegaard himself criticizes religious formalism which reduced faith to performing gestures in the absence of the Spirit. The critique of formalism is manifested by both authors as the critique of passive conscience. Being guided by an authority, that determines how one is to identify good and avoid the opposite, one does not live as an authentic being. One rather resembles a pilgrim, who follows the signs being left by someone else along the way. However, one cannot be sure that these signs will lead him to the right end, since

they belong to someone else, someone with different needs and different relation to God.

The formalism of moral orders followed by conscience in its decisions conforms rather to the man of the crowd, who leaves the responsibility for his decisions to a law-giving instance. However, we can assume that from time to time a conflict appears. As long as the logic of my existence corresponds to the logic of a law-giver, I am willing to accept it. If my ideas about the good contradict the teachings of the Church, I demand the instance of free conscience, which I prefer to a heteronomous law. Such attitude, however, would not be accepted by Kierkegaard and Häring. The autonomy of conscience is based on unmediated relation of the autonomous conscience to God and it is affected by the Spirit that operates in between.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Had Abraham been guided by rational conscience, he would never have decided to sacrifice his son. If our conscience keeps on deciding according to heteronomous law and extrinsic rules, it will never lead us to authentic being. Redemption, encounter of God and man, is the goal of one's life, when, reaching the end of the journey, one is called on to undertake. In one's singularity, one can find his own way, a unique way of heading towards God and being guided by the Spirit, not by the law. Both cited authors prefer to be authentically guided by the Spirit to relying on the perspicuous and general law. Neither Kierkegaard nor Häring demand that one should irrationally roam along the way to God. They rather ask us to change destination of our journey.

We know that one can make decisions autonomously, not arbitrarily, but in the sense of focusing on the final goal. Belief in the reason of Enlightenment has shown us that reason can lead one also to idea of concentration camps, killing, persecution and committing evil which appears as goodness or is made to look alike. Rationality is treacherous. It attempts to dictate to the Spirit, however, we tend to forget that it represents only one of the ways we can communicate with the Spirit. On the other hand, we ask how we can be sure we will not err after we ignore the rationality of the world. Will we not intuitively miss good for evil, not unlike we did, when we were guided by rationality?

Faith does not need logical argumentation. It can get across unfamiliar or incomprehensible places. Whenever guided by the Spirit, it is capable of making the right decisions, even though these are not necessarily rational. Sometimes they can be right precisely because they are not rational. Authentic being is being with God through the Spirit. In case, we would despite need a support for making our decisions, then one can rely on the one and only certitude of the biblical „by their fruit you will know them“. Our deeds bear fruit, however, we often do not recognize reasons why should we act the way the Spirit call us to. Authentic being means a being in uncertainty, as authors, to whom we have dedicated the study, both indicate. Uncertainty, however, is not for them the sign that God has forsaken man. God's presence is manifested in our uncertainty

itself and our inability to comprehend God's will. On the other hand, uncertainty proves the presence of the Spirit, who leads one on the often unfamiliar or incomprehensible paths. These are the paths of the seekers, who believe but do not understand. Uncertainty does not signify weak faith, but rather proves that we allowed Spirit to guide us along the authentic path of our own being with God.

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