The term conscience is so common and often so carelessly used that for many people it has little meaning. Precisely what is a conscience? Does everybody have one, or are some people born without one? Are all consciences "created equal"? Are our consciences influenced by the attitudes and values of our culture? Can we do anything to develop our consciences, or are they fixed and unchangeable? These important issues must be considered before we can decide whether conscience is a reliable moral guide.

One definition of conscience is an "inner voice," but what kind of voice exactly? The voice of desire or discernment? The voice of emotion or reason? Our own voice? (If so, how does it differ from ordinary reflection? The voice of society or custom? (If so, do we explain the many times when conscience urges us to defy custom?) The voice of God? (If so, do we explain cases in which conscience fails to inform us that an act is wrong as failures of God?)

Another definition of conscience is a special "moral sense" or "intuition" that is innate in human beings. This comes close to being a workable definition, but it also poses difficulties. The term sense usually associated with a physical organ—the sense of sight with the eyes, sense of hearing with the ears, and so on. Conscience cannot be that kind of sense. Similarly, equating conscience with intuition ignores the fact that conscience can be developed whereas intuition is inborn.

Conscience, it seems, cannot be defined in terms of what it is. It can only be defined in terms of what it does or how it occurs. Nor is it unique in this regard. A number of other terms are defined in the same way. In the physical realm, for example, electricity is defined as “a force that…” or “a phenomenon that occurs when…” In the metaphysical realms, intellect is defined as “the ability to…’ or “the capacity for…’ and mind is defined as “the faculty by which we…” Using the same kind of definition, we may define conscience as the faculty by which we determine that we are guilty of a moral offense.

We know our conscience has judged us harshly when we feel a sense of shame. The first definition of shame in the Oxford English Dictionary is "the painful emotion arising from the consciousness of something dishonoring, ridiculous, or indecorous in one’s own conduct or circumstances." Since shame is a phenomenon almost everyone has experienced, it is not surprising that it has been traditionally regarded as essentially wholesome.

Oddly, however, popular psychology regards it as a sign of emotional instability. One writer describes it as a scourge of the psyche, an emotion totally without redeeming value that is responsible for a broad range of psychological disorders, including depression, addiction, sexual dysfunction, and emotional problems linked to gender, age, and race. Shame, the writer argues, is never appropriate; instead, the proper, healthy emotion is always "self-acceptance."

If this view sounds profound, the reason is simply that we have heard it so often in books, in magazine articles, and on talk shows that we never think to question it. Yet the moment we test it against everyday reality, its absurdity becomes evident. Think back to a time in your childhood when you felt ashamed of something you said or did, such as being disrespectful to a parent or a teacher, hitting your brother or sister, or stealing something from a playmate. If your shame prompted you to apologize, or at least to do the person a kindness to make up for the wrong, your self-respect was restored.
Feeling bad about yourself was a necessary step toward feeling good about yourself again.

Think, too, of the "bad actors" you encounter each day or read about in the news: the employers who misuse their employees, the drivers who endanger the lives of others on the highway, the men and women who berate and belittle their spouses and children, and the irresponsible people who cheat and lie their way through life. When you see people behave this way and then show no sign of remorse, are you impressed with their emotional health? Is the fact that many rapists, child molesters, serial killers, and terrorists are not ashamed of their heinous deeds a positive development? Of course not.

The time for celebration is not when people lose their sense of shame but when, after having lost it, they manage to regain it. The following passage from a John Grisham novel describes such a moment:

At some undefined point in his life, pushed by his work and his addictions, [Nate] had lost his decency and shame. He had learned to lie, cheat, deceive, hide, badger, and attack innocent witnesses without the slightest twinge of guilt. But in the quiet of his car and the darkness of the night, Nate was ashamed. He had pity for the Phelan children. He felt sorry for Snead, a sad little man just trying to survive. He wished he hadn't attacked the new experts with such vigor. His shame was back, and Nate was pleased. He was proud of himself for feeling so ashamed. He was human after all.

**Individual Differences**

Simple observation will demonstrate that the intensity of conscience differs from person to person. Even as small children most of us have perceived, however vaguely, that our playmates and relatives appear to differ widely in this phenomenon. Preschoolers will often grab toys away from others. Some of them will never show (and, if externals are a mirror to internal states of mind, never feel) the slightest remorse. Yet others will be so aware of the offensiveness of such behavior that they will immediately be saddened and repentant; their remorse will be evident. Hours later they will still be trying to make amends.

The classmates of a grade-school stutterer will vary greatly in their attitude toward him. Many will treat him as a nonperson, an object to tease and taunt and mimic. Some will simply know no better and will be unaware that their actions are wrong. Others will at some moment sense that they have caused him pain and will feel ashamed of their behavior. Such differences in conscience are observable in adults as well. Some people are very sensitive to the effects of their actions, acutely aware when they have done wrong. Others are relatively insensitive, unconscious of their offenses, free from feelings-of remorse. They live their lives uninterested in self-examination or self-criticism, seldom even considering whether something should be done. Some see right and wrong as applying to only a limited number of matters—sexual behavior, for example, and deportment within the family.

The affairs of citizenship and business or professional conduct are, to them, outside the sphere of morality. Still others were at one time morally sensitive but have succeeded in neutralizing the promptings of conscience with elaborate rationalizations. When Claude's wife expresses disapproval of his cramming the hotel's soap and towels and rugs and bedspreads into his suitcase, he says, "Look, the hotels in this country expect you to take a few souvenirs. They build the cost into their room rates. If I take a bit more than they've allowed for, they write it off on their tax returns."

Finally, there are the extremists: the scrupulous and the lax. Scrupulous people are morally sensitive beyond reasonableness, often to the point of compulsion. They see moral faults where there are none. For them, every action, however trivial—whether to peel the potatoes or cook them whole, whether to
polish the car today or tomorrow—is an ex-cruciating moral dilemma. Their counterparts at the other pole are virtually without conscience, using other people as things, unmindful of their status as persons, pursuing only what satisfies the almighty me.

**The Shapers of Conscience**

Many people have the vague notion that their consciences are solely a product of their own intellectual efforts, not subject to outside influence. They imagine themselves as having devoted a period of time—precisely when they are not sure, perhaps during their teenage years—to carefully evaluating various ideas of right and wrong and then forming their own moral perspective. That this notion should exist is understandable. People are naturally more aware of their conscious mental life than of any outside influences, particularly subtle ones. In addition, the thought that one's life is and has always been completely under one's control is very reassuring. In any case, the notion is wrong.

Conscience is shaped by two forces that are essentially outside our control—natural endowment and social conditioning—and one that is, in some measure, within our control—moral choice. The specific attributes of our conscience, including its sensitivity to moral issues and the degree of its influence on our behavior, are due to one or more of these forces. Let's examine each of them in turn.

**Natural Endowment**

A person's basic temperament and level and kind of intelligence are largely in the genes. Both temperament and intelligence play a considerable role in shaping the total personality. The person with a practical intelligence and the person with a philosophic intelligence will not have the same potential for ethical analysis or the same potential for perceptiveness in moral issues. This is not to say that the two kinds of intelligence are mutually exclusive. Some people, happily, have both. There are, after all, philosophers of science and philosophers of technology; and the contributions of mathematicians to modern philosophy have been considerable. Neither is it to say that those with more philosophical potential always use that potential, nor that this factor is always so dominant as to make them have more developed consciences. It is to say that the kind of intelligence one has, like the degree of intelligence, opens some doors of potentiality and closes others.

Similarly, the basic temperament, largely a matter of one's metabolism, poses certain obstacles and opportunities in the development of conscience. For example, the vivacious, energetic person, quick of movement and speech, who constantly performs in metabolic overdrive may tend to be somewhat less disposed to careful analysis of past actions than is the slower, more reflective person. The impulsive person, impatient to do and have done, may be virtually incapable of prior reflection. Conscience, in this case, may operate only after the fact. It is not, of course, a matter of one disposition, one metabolic rate, being preferable to another. Each presents some fertile areas for the development and use of conscience, and each presents some barren ones.

**Social Conditioning**

Conditioning is the most neglected shaper of conscience. Yet, ironically, it is in many ways the most important. Conditioning may be defined as the myriad effects of our environment: the people, places, institutions, ideas, and values we are exposed to as we grow and develop. We are conditioned first by our early social and religious training from parents. This influence may be partly conscious and partly unconscious on their part and indirect as well as direct. It is so pervasive that all our later perspectives—political, economic, sociological, psychological, theological—in some way bear its imprint.

If children are brought up in an ethnocentric environment—that is, one in which the
group (race, nationality, culture, or special value system) believes it is superior to others—research shows that they will tend to be less tolerant than other people. More specifically, they will tend to make hard right-wrong, good-bad classifications. If they cannot identify with a group, they oppose it. In addition, they will tend to need an out-group, some outsiders whom they can blame for real and imagined wrongs. This, in turn, makes it difficult or impossible for them to identify with humanity as a whole or to achieve undistorted understanding of others.

In addition, ethnocentric people, even as children, show an inability to deal with complex situations. As a result, such people learn to see and think about their daily transactions with other people and ideas in an oversimplified manner. Their way of thinking demands simple solutions to problems, even problems that do not admit of simple solutions.

The influence of such training on conscience is obvious. Although few of us are subjected to a purely ethnocentric environment as children, elements of ethnocentrism are common in most environments. The effects on us, though less dramatic and pronounced, are nevertheless real and a significant shaping force on our conscience.

Early in life we are also conditioned by our encounters with brothers, sisters, relatives, and friends. We see a sister's observance or disregard of family rules or her habit of lying to parents. An uncle brings a present he has stolen from work. Our playmates cheat in games. More important, we see not only these actions but the reactions of the people themselves and of others who observe them. We are witness to all the moral contradictions, all the petty hypocrisies of those around us. We ourselves act—now in observance of some parental rule, then against another—and we sense pleasure or pain. We also imitate others' strategies for justifying questionable behavior.

Next we are conditioned by our experiences in grade school, by our widening circle of acquaintances, and perhaps by our beginning contact with institutional religion. We perceive similarities and differences in the attitudes of our teachers and classmates. We observe their behavior, form impressions, sense (quite subliminally and vaguely, to be sure) the level of development of their consciences. We observe and learn from our priest, minister, or rabbi. Perhaps in all these situations, it is not the formal so much as the informal contact, the mere introduction to their personalities, habits, and patterns of behavior, that affects us in powerful, though subconscious, ways. Though memory may cloud, experience remains indelible.

Finally we are conditioned by our contact with people, places, and ideas through books, radio, Internet, newspapers, magazines, tapes and CDs, and especially television programming. What we see and hear makes an impact on our attitudes and values, sometimes blatantly, sometimes subtly. Situation comedies instruct us as to what may appropriately be laughed at and/or ridiculed. Soap operas and dramatic programs train our emotions to respond favorably or unfavorably to different behaviors. Talk shows inform us of what celebrities think about a variety of subjects, including right and wrong. And commercials incessantly tell us what possessions and living styles will make us happy and are therefore desirable. As the entertainment and communications media have grown more numerous and more sophisticated, the number of individuals and groups involved in social conditioning has multiplied, and their messages are often at odds with those of home, church, and school.

Moral Choice

Long before we were able to make authentic moral choices, heredity and social conditioning had already shaped our con-
science, and they continued the process even when, as small children, we made rudimentary choices. Young children's choices, after all, are not fully conscious acts but mere assertions of will that express their inherited traits or imitation of others' behavior. A toddler's obeying or defying her parents' directions is an example of such assertions. Only in later childhood do we develop the ability to weigh alternatives and make reasoned moral choices. The problem is that by then we will have already developed attitudes and patterns of response to situations and people, at least some of which are likely to be both morally undesirable and difficult to change.

That people tend to behave in ways that are consistent with their thinking is fairly well known. What is not so well known is that the reverse also occurs—they think in ways that justify their behavior. The eminent English scholar Dr. Samuel Johnson explained the two tendencies as follows:

Not only [do] our speculations influence our practice, but our practice reciprocally influences our speculations. We not only do what we approve, but there is danger lest in time we come to approve what we do ... for no other reason than that we do it. A man is always desirous of being at peace with himself; and when he cannot reconcile his passions to [his] conscience, he will attempt to reconcile his conscience to his passions.

Note the word passions, a synonym for the term that is causing so much moral confusion today—feelings. Dr. Johnson knew what was pointed out in the previous chapter, that feelings are not a reliable guide in moral matters. Furthermore, as he implies here, when feelings are allowed to overrule conscience, conscience loses its moral bearings. It becomes desire's puppet, telling us what we want to hear instead of what we need to hear. One doesn't have to be morally disreputable to be victimized by this process. It can ensnare respectable, well-intentioned people who not only want to make wise moral choices but honestly believe they are doing so, as the following examples illustrate:

A police detective was investigating a rape case in which the victim had recorded part of the perpetrator's license number. The detective eventually found a suspect who matched the description of a rapist in almost every way. There was only one problem—his license plate number did not match. Rather than lose the case on what seemed a technicality, the detective changed the victim's statement, inserting the suspect's plate number. The detective did not consider this action immoral; he believed he was just bolstering his case, even though his action effectively eliminated exoneration based on "reasonable doubt."

A number of newspapers around the country have a policy of including the cause of death in every obituary, even if the family of the deceased asks that it be omitted. (For example, the obituary might state that the cause of death was suicide by suffocation, slashed wrists, or a gunshot wound to the head.) The editorial staffs that make this policy apparently do so with a clear conscience, despite the fact that many grieving families suffer embarrassment and shame as a result.

A Balanced View of Conscience

The unpleasant realities we have noted about conscience demonstrate that it is not an infallible moral guide. However, to leap from that evidence to the conclusion that conscience is without value would be a mistake. For all its imperfections, conscience is the most important single guide to right and wrong an individual can have. It is, as the saying goes, the "proximate norm of morality." For this reason, when circumstances demand an immediate moral choice, we should follow our conscience. (The only alternative would be to violate it, to choose to do what at that moment seems immoral.) However, whenever circumstances allow us time to reflect on the choice conscience recommends, we should use that time to analyze the issue critically and to consider the possibility that a different choice might be better.

In short, we should follow our conscience, but not blindly. True freedom, true individuality and real moral growth lie in examining conscience, evaluating its
promptings, purging it of negative influences and error, and reinforcing it with searching ethical inquiry and penetrating ethical judgment.

The answer "It's a matter for the individual's conscience to decide" is inappropriate. Let's consider a few cases to see exactly why.

A high school girl hears a rumor that a classmate is a shoplifter. Is she morally justified in repeating the story to her best friend if she makes the friend promise not to "tell a soul"?

A 13-year-old boy walks into his neighborhood grocery store and asks the grocer for a pack of cigarettes "for my mother." The grocer knows the mother doesn't smoke and that the boy is too young to buy cigarettes legally. Should she sell them to him?

A weapons manufacturer has an opportunity to make a big and very profitable sale to the ruler of a small foreign country. He knows the ruler is a tyrant who oppresses his people and governs by terror. Is it right for him to sell the weapons?

A college student's friends are sexually promiscuous. She has always regarded promiscuity as immoral, but lately she has wondered whether she has been too scrupulous. What should she do?

Whatever we decide is right in these cases, our decision should be based on more than saying "Leave the matter to the individual's conscience." If we say that in the first three cases, we are saying, in effect, "Any action is acceptable," for we can have no way of knowing exactly what those people's consciences will prompt them to do. If we say it in the case of the college student, we are evading the issue, for her dilemma is deciding whether the promptings of her conscience are reasonable.

**Inquiries**

1. After *U.S. News and World Report* published an article that discussed cheating in school and pointed out why it is wrong, a student wrote a letter to the magazine arguing that cheating is not morally wrong but merely an efficient way to avoid "busywork" and produce a quality piece of work. Instead of a reprimand, he suggested that cheaters deserve praise for being enterprising and effective. Do you agree with this student? If so, explain why.

2. A number of medical centers around the United States now offer "finders' fees" to physicians for referring patients to researchers who are conducting trials of new drug therapies, the side effects of which are not yet known. One researcher, for example, was offering physicians a $350 payment for each referred patient who enrolled in the research project. Many physicians accept the fees and make the referrals, apparently without suffering pangs of conscience. Are their actions ethical?

3. From 1940 to 1970, more than 4,000 radiation experiments were performed on tens of thousands of Americans, many of them poor and uneducated, without their informed consent. Examples of alleged incidents: children in a Massachusetts orphanage were fed radioisotopes; 829 pregnant Tennessee women were fed radioactive iron; patients in Rochester, New York, were injected with plutonium; cancer patients in Cincinnati received heavy doses of gamma rays. Not all of these experiments can be attributed to researchers' ignorance of the harmful effects of radiation; the main purpose of the experiments was to identify those effects rather than to cure the patients. Even so, the researchers do not seem to have thought they were conunitting a moral offense. Were they?
4. Marvin manufactures locks and keys for automobiles, and his biggest customers are General Motors, Chrysler, and Ford. But he also has a mail-order business, in which he offers (among other products) master keys for automobile locks. He realizes that his mail order customers include more than a few car thieves, but that does not trouble his conscience. He reasons that he is not responsible for the illegal ways his products might be used. Is he correct?

5. Animal lovers in a suburb of Los Angeles picketed a parochial school to protest the action of a priest-educator. The priest had drowned ten cats because they were too noisy and messy. He explained that his action had been "humane" and added, "I buried them. They're fertilizing our rose bushes." Apparently, the priest's conscience didn't bother him. Should it have?

6. A cosmetologist in a local beauty salon enjoys a high sales record and popularity with his clients. He believes that being attractive is extremely important and that his job is to help his clients feel that they are or could be attractive. Although he realizes that some of his compliments are false and that some of the products he sells do not live up to advertising claims, he feels he is performing a public service by making people feel good about themselves.

7. Rhoda enjoys socializing with fellow employees at work, but their discussion usually consists of gossiping about other people, including several of her friends. At first Rhoda feels uncomfortable talking in this way about people she is close to, but then she decides it does no real harm and so she feels no remorse for joining in.

Based on Thinking Critically About Moral Issues by Vincent Ruggiero