# Conscience: A Survey Of Writers' Perceptions

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**Jack Opie**

Conscience, it would seem, is something on which people from many walks of life – statesmen, tyrants, generals, socialites, novelists, poets, dramatists, psychologists, political dissidents – feel compelled to express a view. And thereby provide a seemingly irreconcilable diversity of perceptions. There are those who see conscience as an infallible guide, and who cares what the rest think!

- "Rules of society are nothing; ones conscience is the umpire." Madame Dudevant
- "Reason often makes mistakes, but conscience never does." Josh Billings
- "Through pride we are ever deceiving ourselves. But deep down below the surface of the average conscience a still, small voice says to us, "something is out of tune"." Carl Jung
- "May the conscience and the common sense of the peoples be awakened so that we may reach a new stage in the life of nations, where people will look back on what was as an incomprehensible aberration of their forefathers." Albert Einstein
- "In matters of conscience, the law of majority has no place." Mahatma Gandhi
- "An individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for the law." Martin Luther King
- "Before I can live with other folks I"ve got to live with myself. The one thing that doesn"t abide by majority rule is a person"s conscience." Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- "I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year"s fashions." Lillian Hellman
- "I think we all have a little voice inside us that will guide us. It may be God, I don"t know. But I think that if we shut out all the noise and clutter from our lives and listen to that voice, it will tell us the right thing to do." Christopher Reeve

Some in this camp seem particularly aware of a link between individual conscience and social justice:

- "Conscience is the chamber of justice." Origen
- "The conscience is the sacred haven of the liberty of man." Napoleon Bonaparte
- "Justice is conscience, not a personal conscience but the conscience of the whole of humanity. Those who clearly recognise the voice of their own conscience usually recognise also the voice of justice." Alexander Solzhenitsyn

The fine words of Napoleon should not be taken as an endorsement of his actions, though he did do quite a nice job on parts of Paris. Some conscience–approvers go so far as to take its messages not just as advice but as a stern call to action:

- "Tis the business of little minds to shrink; but he whose heart is firm, and whose conscience approves his conduct, will pursue his principles unto death." Thomas Paine
- "To sin by silence when they should protest makes cowards of men." Abraham Lincoln
- "When will our consciences grow so tender that we will act to prevent human misery rather than avenge it?" Eleanor Roosevelt
- "Thou shalt not be a victim. Thou shalt not be a perpetrator. Above all, thou shalt not be a bystander." Holocaust Museum, Washington, DC

So much for those who claim to rely on conscience as a guide. Now for the majority.

Amongst these, diversity reigns, reminding one of Tolstoy"s observation: "All happy families resemble one another, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." A considerable number focus on the fallibility of conscience as a guide, though all manner of reasons are put forward. One unexpected contributor is George Washington who apparently finds conscience a bit fragile: "Labour to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire, called conscience." As for others:

- "You should not believe your conscience and your feelings more than the word which the Lord who receives sinners preaches to you." Martin Luther
- "We only labor to stuff the memory, and leave the conscience and the understanding unfurnished and void." De Montaigne
- "A man"s conscience and his judgment is the same thing; and as the judgment, so also the conscience, may be erroneous." Thomas Hobbes
- "Avoid lawsuits beyond all things; they pervert your conscience, impair your health, and dissipate your property." Jean De La Bruyere
- "Conscience in most men, is but the anticipation of the opinions of others." Jeremy Taylor
- "Conscience and cowardice are really the same things. Conscience is the trade–name. That is all." Oscar Wilde
- "People talk about the conscience, but it seems to me one must just bring it up to a certain point and leave it there. You can let your conscience alone if you"re nice to the second housemaid." Henry James
- "We grow with years more fragile in body, but morally stouter, and can throw off the chill of a bad conscience almost at once." Logan Pearsall Smith
- "Most people sell their souls, and live with a good conscience on the proceeds." Logan Pearsall Smith
- "The conscience of children is formed by the influences that surround them; their notions of good and evil are the result of the moral atmosphere they breathe." Jean Paul Richter
- "A lot of people mistake a short memory for a clear conscience." Doug Larson
- "First they came for the Jews. I was silent. I was not a Jew. Then they came for the Communists. I was silent. I was not a Communist. Then they came for the trade unionists. I was silent. I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for me. There was no one left to speak for me." Martin Niemöller
- "The paradoxical – and tragic – situation of man is that his conscience is weakest when he needs it most." Erich Fromm
- "What a man calls his "conscience" is merely the mental action that follows a sentimental reaction after too much wine or love." Helen Rowland
- "There is no self–delusion more fatal than that which makes the conscience dreamy with the anodyne of lofty sentiments, while the life is grovelling and sensual." James Russell Lowell
- "Film as dream, film as music. No art passes our conscience in the way film does, and goes directly to our feelings, deep down into the dark rooms of our souls." Ingmar Bergman.

Now that"s diversity. Far from being a guide, this group sees conscience variously as malleable,

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fallible, impermanent, blinkered, narrow, weak, sophisticated, uncontrolled, malnourished, sentimental, complacent, or superficial. Let us turn now to another group whom we might term conscience–sufferers. They see it as a scourge, tormentor, goad:

- "Though the dungeon, the scourge, and the executioner be absent, the guilty mind can apply the goad and scorch with blows." Lucretius
- "O coward conscience, how thou dost afflict me!" Shakespeare, *King Richard III*
- "It is always term time in the court of conscience." T. Fuller
- "The innocent seldom find an uncomfortable pillow." William Cowper
- "No ear can hear nor tongue can tell the tortures of the inward hell." Lord Byron
- "While conscience is our friend, all is at peace; however once it is offended, farewell to a tranquil mind." Lady Mary Wortley Montagu
- "Conscience is the worst sentence of all because every bad thing that happens to a guilty man is deemed a punishment." Rachel Hozier
- "Conscience is the still, small voice that is sometimes too loud for comfort." Bert Murray
- "Conscience is what hurts when everything else feels so good." Anon.
- "There is only one way to achieve happiness on this terrestrial ball, And that is to have a clear conscience or none at all." Ogden Nash
- "You don"t get ulcers from what you eat. You get them from what"s eating you." Vicki Baum
- "A politician would do well to remember that he has to live with his conscience longer than he does with his constituents." Melvin R. Laird

A third, very important group, seem to suggest that conscience is at best a hindrance, even an illness, something dispensable, which might or should be cast off.

- "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all." Shakespeare, *Hamlet*
- "To hell, allegiance! vows, to the blackest devil! Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit! I dare damnation." Shakespeare: Laertes in *Hamlet IV*, v/131
- "Conscience avaunt, Richard"s himself again." Colley Cibber

These three views are drawn not from life but drama. No so, unhappily, the lamentable:

- "I am freeing men from . . . dirty and degrading self–mortifications of a false vision called conscience and morality, and from the demands of a freedom and personal independence which only a very few can bear." Adolph Hitler

Others, including some of our most beloved humorists, see conscience as a mere nuisance, a killjoy.

- "It is by the goodness of God that in our country we have those three unspeakably precious things: freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, and the prudence never to practice either." Mark Twain
- "Good friends, good books and a sleepy conscience: this is the ideal life." Mark Twain
- "Conscience is a mother–in–law whose visit never ends." H.L. Mencken
- "The New England conscience doesn"t keep you from doing what you shouldn"t – it just keeps you from enjoying it." Isaac Bashevis Singer
- "Conscience is the inner voice which warns us that someone may be looking." H. L. Mencken

The survey reveals some strange bedfellows. Thus Cardinal Newman, with his famous statement, "If I am obliged to bring religion into after–dinner toasts, I shall drink – to the Pope if you please – still, to conscience first and to the Pope afterwards" seems to position himself heart–warmingly close to Martin Luther, with his equally famous, "I am more afraid of my own heart than of the pope and all his cardinals. I have within me the great pope, Self." In another bed, as it were,

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*Hamlet* (though not necessarily Shakespeare, of course) with his: "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all" moves uncomfortably close to Adolph Hitler and his lamentable "false vision called conscience and morality". And compare Abraham Lincoln"s, "When I do good I feel good. When I do bad, I feel bad. That"s my religion." with Winston Churchill"s, "There is only one duty, only one safe course, and that is to try to be right." Are those two great statesmen, though undoubtedly in the same bed, really talking about conscience – or is it judgement?

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