

Jiminy Cricket
Conscience as the Ability to Say Yes to One's Self
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How big a price would you pay for a million bucks? Who would you be willing to sell out to be a success? How far are you willing to go to secure your own interests at the expense of others? Whose rights are you willing to ignore in the name of your own safety? How much does it mean for you to win, to win an argument, to win an election, to make sure what you say always goes? How many people are you willing to demonize, or lock away, or exclude to insure your own interests always come first? How big a chunk of your soul—cause that's the currency we're talking about here—are you willing to give for all these things? How much of yourself would you trade in exchange for wealth, fame, success, power, position, control?

Not that I'm suggesting everyone who has these things is without soul, only that some of the worst injustices and inhumanity occur in pursuit of greed, power, and control. We must all find ways to make a living, pursue our own interests, achieve our ideals, and do what we believe is right. The only question is where we draw the line between achieving these things and not. Do we draw it before anyone gets hurt in the process? Or, after just a few people, a minority of people, get hurt in the name of utility? Or do we draw it long after we have everything at the expense of almost everyone else? Where we draw the line, how far we are willing to go, how much we are willing to give up, how many we are willing to sell out, is a matter of conscience.

But what exactly is conscience? Is it, like Pinocchio's pal, Jiminy Cricket, a little voice that warns us when something we're doing isn't quite right? If so, how do we know it's our own voice and not the voice of society, the voice of others that we began internalizing almost the moment we were born? For, as Freud said, "It is in keeping with the course of human development that external coercion gradually becomes internalized..."¹ So how do we know this little voice following us around isn't really the voice of cultural shame that's conditioned us to help maintain the status quo? Is it our own innate sense of justice, of doing unto others as we would like done to ourselves, or a something that's been artificially inseminated by others? How do we know we're not under what Erich Fromm called, "...the illusion that [we know] what [we want], while [we] actually [want what we're] *supposed* to want."² Does the voice reflect what we expect of ourselves, or what others expect of us? How can we know the difference?

The word *conscience* is usually defined as an inner feeling or voice guiding us to do what is right. If we don't listen, we often end up with what we call a "guilty conscience." Its etymology suggest it most literally means "with knowledge." Thus, to act with conscience is to act "with knowledge." It means being aware of what we're doing, being aware of the consequences of our behavior, demonstrating executive function, thinking ahead, being thoughtful. According

¹ Freud, Sigmund, *The Future of an Illusion*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, NY, 1961, 1989, p.7f.

² *Ibid.*, p. 278.

to this definition—considering the consequences of our actions and being thoughtful of others—*conscience* sounds a lot like the evolved kind of thinking made possible by our frontal lobes, executive function and empathy. *Conscience* means thinking things through, especially with regard for others. Acting without such forethought and care, on the contrary, can lead to behaviors that are unconscionable.

So, having a conscience seems pretty important, and most, if not all of us, are born with a conscience, with the instinct, that is, to care about others and, thus, to care about the consequences of our actions. This is why, I suspect, the Golden Rule is universal in human cultures, because, no matter where we are from, what age we live in, or what our religious beliefs, we innately understand the feeling of pain and pleasure, and these feelings are essentially the same for all of us. I understand, for example, the pleasure of having a reliable income, the benefits of a good education, a nice home in a safe neighborhood, access to good healthcare for me and my family, clean water and nutritious food to eat, freedom to express myself, the freedom to be and to move about. Thus, as a person of conscience, I must work hard to create a world in which all my neighbors have these same pleasures, and I feel bad that so many don't.

But often, especially when we take more than our share, far more than we need, we have to work around Jiminy Cricket's nagging little voice. A symphony of crickets is a pleasant sound to sleep by, but I recall a night long ago, when I was still a lad in college, being awoken by the sound of one cricket chirping, not to be confused with the sound of one hand clapping. It was an annoying, innervating sound, that made sleep impossible. I didn't want to wake my roommate, so I tapped lightly on the wall and the cricket fell silent, for about two minutes, just as I was starting to fall back to sleep. I tapped again, and the same thing happened. Before long, I'd awoken my roommate, the lights were on, and I was frantically looking for the beast with murderous fury. I looked under the bed, behind the bed, knowing, from its thunderous sound, it had to be near. Finally, I saw it. The intruder was right there on my pillow, right next to where my ear had been. My roommate, angry it had also disrupted his sleep, demanded I kill it immediately, but, then it chirped again, seeming to stare up at me with its dark eyes, and my conscience got the best of me. Instead of killing it, I let it out the window, where it joined the choir of crickets giving music to the night, and, I'm sure, lived happily ever after.

The point of this little anecdote is to suggest that, while in theory, it seems having a conscience is a great thing, in reality, it isn't always a great experience. Like a lone cricket, our conscience disrupts our slumber, requiring us to be awake and aware when we'd rather remain unconscious. So, we find ways to ignore it, or even crush it. We convince ourselves we deserve more because we are special, or that others deserve less because they are bad people, with bad ideas, bad habits, bad lifestyles, or that they are lazy, criminal, and bring misery upon themselves. We create unjust economies that favor the smallest number of people at the expense of almost everyone and everything else, and tell ourselves greed is good, greed works, greed is freedom. We convince ourselves that thinking ahead, that looking toward the future, will kill jobs, that it's too high a price to pay right now, even though the whole world is drying up and burning up right before our eyes. There are so many clever ways we crush the cricket to keep from hearing its nagging song, that we might drift back to

sleepwalking, dreaming that water flows uphill, that we can walk among the clouds, that ponies crap rainbows, and that greed is good, news is fake, war makes peace, might makes right, and that silencing dissidents, imprisoning millions, and suppressing voters shall set us free.

We need conscience. We need to be aware of the consequences of our actions and care about how they impact others. But, again, how can we discern the difference between authentic conscience and our cultural conditioning? How can we be sure what the voice is telling us is the right thing to do isn't really the voice of greed and elitism justifying all the ways our society continues the exploitation of others? Freud, after all, considered the conscience just another word for guilt caused by the disapproval of others; of God for religious people, and of external authorities, like parents and teachers for others.

Some might conclude these are two separate voices, the genuine voice of conscience that's always concerned about the consequences of our actions and the welfare of others, and the internalized voice of groupthink. But I think society has intuitively learned to use our conscience against us, by twisting our natural desire to do the right thing into doing what is often most harmful, even to ourselves, by turning morality upside down. Instead of the innate instinct to share what we have, society says taking as much for yourself as possible is the right thing to do. Instead of playing fair, society says the rich should dominate the poor, men should dominate women, and white men should be superior to everyone else. Instead of caring for the sick, society says universal healthcare would be a disaster. Instead of safeguarding weapons of war, society says why not make a buck off anyone who wants them. Instead of caring about the environment, society says frack it. Instead of doing no harm, society says just obey the rules, move along, there's nothing more to see here. So that's the problem with conscience, that it often doesn't know up from down, let alone right from wrong. It gets turned on its head and, in the process, into a mechanism for maintaining the status quo.

An example I often like to use is from Mark Twain's, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, in which Huck struggles over the morality of helping his friend Jim, a runaway slave, escape. Huck's society has raised him to believe that helping a slave go free is wrong, the same as stealing. Just the idea of what others might think should they hear he'd done such a terrible thing disturbs his conscience so much that he says, "if I was ever to see anybody in that town again I'd be ready to get down and lick his boots for shame."³ Is this his conscience bugging him about an external idea he's internalized as his own? Before nightfall, Huck makes his decision, he'll get up the next day and do the right thing. He'll turn Jim in. Just the idea of doing so is like a conversion experience for a kid who is always in trouble for doing the wrong thing. "I felt so good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life,"⁴ he says.

So, he drifts off to sleep, his mind and his soul, finally at peace. But something must have disturbed his slumber? A lone cricket on his pillow perhaps? For the next morning, despite

³ Twain, Mark, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Bantam Books, New York, NY, 1884, 1986, p. 204.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

his earlier resolve, Huck awakens with a change of heart, a change of conscience. He looks at the letter he's written informing the authorities of Jim's whereabouts. "I took it up, and held it in my hand," he says, "I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: 'All right, then, I'll go to hell...'"⁵

Everything he knows, everything his society has taught him, makes him feel ashamed, to tremble, at the very thought of being the sort of person that would help a black man escape slavery. He knows, if he does, he'll burn forever. Yet, in the end, there is something else, something almost imperceptible driving him, that will not allow him to betray Jim. So, unable to ignore it, or crush it, Huck chooses eternal damnation instead.

Of course, this is a fictional example of how the innate voice within us, requiring us to do unto others as we would have done unto ourselves, gets confused with society's voice that we internalize over time. A real-life example concerns the Salem witch trials that swept through several towns near Salem, Massachusetts in 1692, resulting in the executions of 20 people, mostly girls, along with 5 more who died in prison. This tragic, shameful part of our history is often epitomized as an example of mass hysteria, but the reasons for it are far more insidious.

You see, up until about that time the Puritan leaders in the area had been granted the right of local rule according to a royal charter that'd already been in effect more than sixty years. But just before the witch trials erupted, England began reestablishing strict royal control of the colonies. Talk of rebellion was already at hand, including by Puritan minister, Increase Mather who declared, "God forbid, that I should give away the inheritance of my fathers."⁶ You see, the reason for the frenzy that led to the executions of innocents wasn't really about the fear of witches, but about the fear of those in charge losing power, especially over all they considered to be their property.

Increase Mather, and his even more famous son, Cotton Mather, were notorious supporters of slavery, and used their positions to justify the horrid practice on religious grounds. Cotton, a Harvard graduate, wrote a bestselling book about the existence of witches and devils in which he continuously associates them with the color black, and as the enemy of "White souls."⁷ Here again we see this ability to crush the conscience voice, the innate instinct to consider the welfare of others, by turning morality on its head and justifying cruelty as part of a righteous crusade in the name of all that is holy. Associate blacks with evil and you can do anything you want to them.

If you think this is a leap, consider this; the first reports of witch sightings in Salem were accompanied by witnesses who claimed to have seen "a little black bearded man," or, "a black think of considerable bigness," or with the body of a monkey "but the Face much like a

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Kendi, Ibram X, *Stamped from the Beginning*, Nation Book, New York, NY, 2017, p.57.

⁷ Ibid., p. 60.

man's," the "Black Devil," and so on.⁸ As Ibram Kendri says in his book, *Stamped from the Beginning*, "the Salem witch hunt ascribed a Black face to criminality—an ascription that remains to this day."⁹

Even more convincing, however, is the execution of George Burroughs, accused of being the leader of the "Black Devil's New England army of witches."¹⁰ Sorry ladies, apparently the Puritans felt that even among witches a man needs to be in charge. Cotton Mather himself came to witness Burroughs execution. When Burroughs surprised the crowd that gathered to witness his hanging, by reciting the Lords Prayer, "something the judges said witches could not do,"¹¹ Mathers shouted, "The black Man stood and dictated to him,"¹² further reminding the crowd the "Devil often transformed himself into an Angel of Light."¹³ So, despite his ability to recite holy words, Burroughs was hung while Cotton Mather, a member of the Puritan ruling elite watched. George Burroughs, on the other hand, though a Puritan himself, probably because he had to be, and a Harvard educated minister, preached, as Ibram Kendi says, "Anabaptist ideas of religious equality on the Northern frontier, the kind of ideas that had bred antiracism in Germantown."¹⁴ In light of this, is it more reasonable to think Burroughs was executed for witchcraft, the only proof of which was his ability to lift a musket with his finger in its muzzle, or because he posed some threat to the already threatened status quo, some political danger to the powers-that-be?

The point being, again, how simple it is to quiet the conscience, or to even use it against us by instilling us with upside down morality, a twisted sense of righteousness that violates every natural instinct toward what we are born knowing is good, doing for others as we would have done for ourselves. As Erich Fromm says, "there is hardly any act of cruelty or indifference against others or oneself that has not been rationalized as the dictate of conscience..."¹⁵ So the question remains, how can we know the difference? How do we know we are acting according to genuine conscience, or the artificial, collective conscience, society has imposed upon us?

To help answer this, Fromm distinguishes what he calls *Authoritarian Conscience* from *Humanistic Conscience*. "The authoritarian conscience," he says, "is the voice of the internalized external authority, the parents, the state, or whoever the authorities in a culture happen to be."¹⁶ Because it is based upon authority, this type of conscience is satisfied only to obey, and isn't concerned with who gets hurt in the process, even with crimes against humanity. It is able, as Fromm says, to hold "a conviction which is immune to all contradictory empirical evidence,"¹⁷ like continuing to burn fossil fuels in the face of global

⁸ Ibid., p. 61.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 62.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, Henry Holt & Company, New York, NY, 1947, p. 142.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 143f.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 146.

warming, or believing Barack Obama was born in Kenya. The authoritarian conscience also becomes an extension of the external authority. “[One] has found inner security by becoming, symbiotically, part of an authority felt to be more powerful than [oneself,]”¹⁸ Fromm says.

The Humanistic Conscience, by contrast, “is not the internalized voice of an authority whom we are eager to please and afraid of not pleasing,” Fromm explains, “it is our own voice, present in every human being and independent of external sanctions and rewards.”¹⁹ It is the voice that, at its core, always reminds us to care for ourselves and others, and that should cause us to feel remorse when we don’t. And such care, which Fromm considers the essence of love, always drives us to achieve our full potential and to help others do the same. Anything that gets in the way of this end should make us feel ashamed. Those who fail in this, no matter how wealthy or powerful they become, have failed in life because they have not achieved their full human potential, expressed in their capacity to genuinely love themselves and others. Those willing to cause others to suffer will die never having fully been born. “To crave that which is harmful,” Fromm says, “is the very essence of mental sickness.”²⁰

To care for oneself and others, on the other hand, he says, is the ability to say “yes” to life, but, more importantly, “to say yes to one’s self,”²¹ because the humanistic conscience, which is the only real conscience, demands that we achieve our full potential, that is, our capacity to love ourselves and others. Only two things get in the way of this, he says, not listening to ourselves because we’re busy listening to everyone else, and not being alone with ourselves, to hear our own thoughts. Today, with all the available distractions, listening to ourselves and being alone with ourselves is even harder than when Fromm said all this in 1947. But tuning out and unplugging, at least for a bit, is what it takes for us to tune in and connect with our own inner voice, with our conscience demanding us to pay attention, to care, to become who we are meant to be, loving beings in a world whose morality has been turned upside down. So next time a cricket leaps onto your pillow, no matter how sweet your dreams, wake up and listen.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 158.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 179.

²¹ Ibid., p. 159.