

Why You Shouldn't listen To Your Conscience Uncritically

How does one decide what is right and what is wrong? Many of us were brought up to refer to our conscience, but what is a conscience, and why should we give it so much sway?

Sigmund Freud thought that conscience was the product of our internalising the moral codes of our parents or other care-takers in childhood. Most modern day psychotherapists would tend to agree with Freud on this issue. There seems to be lots of evidence to support his idea. For one thing, morality seems to be quite strongly influenced by the culture and context we grew up in. We may believe things in opposition to our parents, but we even in doing this we are using them as a benchmark and identifying our own values in relation to theirs. Conscience clearly doesn't grow directly out of systems of spiritual belief. We often know that our faith directs us one-way, and our conscience another. Conscience generally manifests itself as a feeling. "I know I shouldn't feel guilty" we say, "but I do, just the same". Our feelings are true in the sense that they exist and must be acknowledged, but this does not necessarily make them true in the sense of being right. I see many clients who feel guilty and bad. Instead of being a helpful internal system for guidance, their conscience is a crushing, self-denying tyrant.

The way to decide what is right and what is wrong is by giving the matter careful thought, by consulting with those whose opinion we respect and value, and by seeking spiritual guidance through prayer and reference to people within our faith tradition. Yes, feelings need to be considered, but bear in mind that feelings can be misleading. If you suffer from guilty feelings that you can recognise are inappropriate, don't act on them as a way of trying to lessen them. Choose instead to re-educate your conscience. These questions may help you to think differently:

- Would other people judge me as harshly as I judge myself?
- Would I judge someone else in this position as harshly as I judge myself?
- Who else bears some responsibility for this situation, and how much responsibility should each person bear?
- If someone had done this to me, how seriously would I view it?
- If I knew when I took the action what I know now, would it have made a difference?
- Did I think of doing anything which would have been worse, and not do it?
- How bad will my actions seem in one month? One year? Five years?
- If I have done wrong, what can I do to make amends?

Many years ago I worked in a children's home. The officer in charge told me never to make a child feel guilty because "guilt corrodes the soul". Don't allow guilt to corrode your soul, and avoid trying to motivate other people through guilt. There is always something sour and life denying about actions taken out of guilt. Such actions breed resentment and erode care and emotional connection between people.

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Responses to this article are warmly welcomed.

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