LOYAL OPPOSITION AND THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF CONSCIENCE

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A crucial question which generally faces all rational minorities or individuals who do not fit into the intellectual mainstream is this: how do they justify the moral claims that they advance in the face of opposition and even ridicule? In other words, how do they make good their claims in the teeth of widespread contrary opinion?[1] In this exploratory paper I shall argue that one of the best ways to respond to this is by a theory of conscience. En route to this I shall attempt two other tasks. First, I shall briefly indicate why it is a good thing to have some kind of theoretical base for our minority reports. Second, I shall draw attention to the weaknesses of four common ways of dealing with the epistemic status of minority opinion. On the other side of my proposals concerning conscience, I shall conclude with a brief comment on the role of conscience in the empowerment of Christian minorities.

I

In posing the issue in the sharp manner represented by my opening question, I am not assuming that what is right is determined by majority opinion. That thesis is so obviously mistaken that there is no need to argue the negative case involved. What is at stake is more subtle than this, and it is more profound. What we want to know revolves around a series of concerns which are naturally directed towards those who stand outside the mainstream. How do they know they are right? What warrant do they have for their proposals? What ground(s) do they have for their confidence?

A clear example that comes to mind is the predicament faced by John Wesley and the early Methodists who challenged the prevailing theology, spirituality, morality, and evangelistic practices of the Anglican tradition of the eighteenth century. Wesley and his friends faced a barrage of objections which sooner or later had to be

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answered. Once this process began, they were driven to deal with the whole range of fundamental questions which lie below the surface of the initial controversies. This is far from being a merely political or prudential operation, for in time new insights emerge or old truths are rediscovered; invariably a whole new tradition arises to enrich our ecclesial and cultural life.

To be sure, a good case can be made that all opinions must face this kind of query sooner or later, for majorities as much as for those in the position of the loyal opposition. Moreover, there is a long and distinguished school in epistemology which has insisted that we can know nothing, including nothing in the field of morality, unless we have first established our position on a sound basis. Hence foundationalists of one kind or another have long maintained that nobody, not even an intelligent majority, has the right to claim they are correct unless they can logically trace their position back to adequate foundations represented by self-justifying or secure premises, axioms, first principles, and the like. Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative and John Stuart Mill's principle of utility seek to provide precisely such a secure foundation. Hence on at least one reading of our epistemic situation, everybody, and not only minorities, is required to explain and justify their position.

However, no such theory lies behind the present request for warrants. Moreover, it would be question-begging to rest on such a set of assumptions. What some minorities rightly will want to challenge is this whole approach to the foundations of morality. It is precisely this challenge against a central feature of the modern Enlightenment which puts them outside the mainstream in the first place. Hence they will correctly protest that their position is the kind of radical position that calls this line of inquiry into question. We had better have other reasons for pressing the issue before us than merely an appeal to some kind of classical foundationalism.

It is also worth noting that in some quarters the very idea of suggesting that minorities of any sort should be asked to give an account of their proposals of the kind envisaged here is otiose. We are all aware of the extent to which it has become fashionable to see this kind of request as a disguised form of oppression or violence; such questioning is perceived as a type of dominance in which those in the majority make demands of the minority as a means of keeping challengers out of the discussion and eventually out of positions of power.[2]

Not all minorities are prepared to take up this kind of defensive posture. For example, it is more than significant that many Evangelicals are extremely reluctant to play a card of victimization by oppression. There can be no doubting the historical reality behind their systematic exclusion from the academy and from crucial centers of power within mainline Protestant churches. Mature observers can readily identify the academic, political, and theological ideologies which have been developed to provide intellectual explanations for such exclusion. In these circumstances there is great temptation to take on the status of the victim and seek to gain power on the basis of past discrimination and exclusion. Some have succumbed to this strategy, but I suspect that it is thoroughly uncharacteristic of the Evangelical tradition as a whole. At least two important convictions underlie this hesitation.

First, Evangelicals deep down are committed to the search for truth as a logically distinct value or good which cannot be reduced to political or social interest. This is deeply incom-

patible with any move which would make the formal commitment to truth equivalent to a quest for power. To be sure, Evangelicals are only too aware that the reality is often different.[3] Human beings, especially those in positions of power, all too easily can dress up the quest for dominance and power in the form of a quest for truth. Any tradition which takes sin seriously will be aware of such possible self-deception. However, the very claim that such self-deception is possible or actually has happened is a claim to truth which cannot be reduced to one more quest for power if we are to take it seriously. Hence any global theory of truth which reduces truth itself to power is self-referentially destructive.

Secondly, Evangelicals have learned over the years that the social institutions of the church and society depend on confessional claims which need to be sustained across the generations. These confessional claims are held to embody not just the reality of majority victory or the attainment of raw power; they are taken to embody nothing less than the revealed truth of God. Hence Evangelicals have very deep theological warrants for refusing to play the ideological card of victimization when they are hard pressed to do so by the example of other minority groups in the neighborhood.

Why, then, do we raise this deep question of warrant at all and present it as especially acute for minorities? On a general level we raise the matter because a rejection of foundationalism does not for one moment mean the end of the debate concerning the justification of moral claims. All it signals is that one way of resolving this complex matter has been abandoned. Moral foundationalists, like Kant and Mill, are sometimes wont to be perplexed by the rejection of their position. Somehow they think that if we reject their position we have rejected morality proper and maybe even epistemology proper. Worse still, they may think that we have automatically embraced some sort of relativism or nihilism. This is an illusion. All we have abandoned is one family of solutions for questions about the deep structure and justification of morality. We have simply rejected an important and illuminating alternative in the debate about the foundations of morality. Consequently, what we have before us is a tremendous moral and epistemological challenge. We now have to work out an alternative to what has stood as a prevailing consensus in the field.

As to the special case of minorities, there are three considerations which relate to their responsibilities. First, because they stand outside the mainstream, the onus of proof falls on them in the dynamic of debate. At the very least there is psychological and social pressure to explain their position. Indeed it is this sort of pressure which makes minorities such a valuable part of the social order. Often they provide the alternatives which are needed when the mainstream becomes exhausted. They constitute a kind of monastic renewal for the wider world they inhabit. Moreover, the vigor and urgency with which they usually present their claims can open up the issues and provide new perspectives in a refreshing manner.

Secondly, the courtesies of debate require that they explain the deeper convictions that lie behind their position. After all, the majority hold the territory in part because in years gone by they won the debate about the field as a whole. They earned the right to be heard because once upon a time they delivered the relevant goods. Indeed at one time they probably were the minority opinion. Hence the onus is now on the relevant minority to come through with the intellectual goods.

Thirdly, without some kind of critical check or some kind of reasoned account of their position, those in opposition repeatedly fall into various forms of fanaticism. They simply end up in the position of the dogmatist or zealot who requires us to take what they say as correct merely on their word. This helps nobody in the debate. It puts the opposition in the awkward position of having nothing substantial to say beyond repeating the point at issue; it prevents the majority from benefiting from the serious discussion of an alternative scenario; and, worst of all, it misses a golden opportunity to advance our understanding of the logic and justification of moral claims.

Christian minorities have an additional incentive to develop their position. They owe it as constitutive of their love of their neighbor. To misuse a standard text in apologetics, they have a duty to give a reason for the hope that is within them. They are called to think through and share their convictions so that the God they serve may be glorified and honored. In the past they have generally seized on this option gladly.

This does not mean that it is easy. There is always the temptation to take the line of least resistance and find an excuse to avoid answering hard questions or to short circuit the debate by turning the whole issue into an affair of sociology and politics. The latter is all too visible when the debate is transformed into a power struggle to be resolved by votes, caucuses, intrigue, and the like. Political action is always inescapable and sociological analysis is generally invaluable; yet without the patient attending to the moral, theological, and philosophical considerations which swirl around the discussion, the results can be socially disastrous. Such debate is not a substitute for war or violence; it may at times be part of the cure for our social and ecclesiastical strife.

II

Let me pursue now our query in a quasi-historical manner. How might a loyal opposition resolve the question of the warrants for its position? Let us look very briefly at four possibilities. They involve in turn an appeal to one's identity in a community, to divine revelation, to intuition, and to empowerment.

In the first case we envisage that the grounding of one's decisions go back to one's formation in a community. Thus the minority may simply appeal to its membership in a community; it appeals to its identity in a particular tradition, group, or class. On the surface this appears a hopelessly simplistic solution to our problem. However, it would be a mistake to take it simplistically. What usually underlies the appeal to community is a much wider story about the human condition, about the formation of our moral identity, about the nature of human community itself, about the character of morality, and about the virtues and vices identified by a community in the pursuit of its preservation and welfare. It is precisely because the appeal to community can be spelled out to embrace such a rich network of material that it has become exceedingly attractive of late.

Unfortunately, this richness does not begin to deal with the fundamental objection that is naturally lodged against it. The chief problem with this proposal is that we want to know how we can be sure that our favored community is right. Explaining in great detail the various elements which are buried in this option does not begin to grapple with this problem, for the same question will break out with respect to these claims too. All along the line the critic will want to know: "What are the warrants for the particular claim or set

of claims proposed by the community in question?" Clearly this takes us right back to where we started.

Alternatively, as a second possibility, the minority might appeal to divine revelation. In this instance one's position is grounded in what God has revealed, say, in Scripture or in Christ. The warrant is the fact that God has spoken definitively and has made known what we should morally do; or, less strongly, we can infer what we ought to do from what God has told us to do. However, in this case, too, problems immediately surface.

First, questions will arise as to which revelation should be used. Which of the many putative revelations available should one accept as genuine? Unless this question is resolved, one will be at a loss as to how to proceed. Secondly, and more importantly, even if this issue is resolved, we will have to face the age-old question developed in tantalizing fashion by Plato in the Euthyphro. Granted that we now know what God requires of us, does God require action 'x' because it is good, or is 'x' good because it is required by God. If we take the first option, then morality is logically independent of religion, and we do not need to appeal to divine revelation to ground our moral claims. If we take the second option, the foundations of morality become purely arbitrary, for our moral claims are decided by the whim of the deity without there being any moral constraints on what can be deemed as required even by God.

If we cannot appeal to community or revelation as the way ahead, then what about an appeal to intuition? Here we meet a third epistemic scenario.[4] This would fit very naturally with our quest, for it is characteristic of minorities to take a stand at a very deep level on their convictions. In the end they often claim just to see the truth of what they are proclaiming. There is nothing below their claim on which it rests. As the legendary Luther put it in his famous phrase, "God help me, I can do no other." This strategy would fit nicely with the reluctance to argue. In this analysis there is no argument; arguments presuppose fundamental premises or axioms which in the nature of the case are taken for granted; so it would be futile to argue for their acceptance. In other words, it is the very expression of these fundamental premises or axioms which are at issue on this reading of the situation. These are seen to be true intuitively; they need no demonstration or support.

Once again it is not difficult to identify the difficulties with this sort of strategy. As the history of the debate about the value of intuitionism shows, critics have latched on to two primary objections. First, intuitionists are generally divided on the kind of propositions which they profess to see. Some see particular instances and then from these attempt to build general rules. Others claim to intuit the general rules and then apply them to particular cases. If intuition is a reliable faculty, there should be no such deep disagreement between those committed to its use. This defect in the formalties of what is perceived is then further compounded by the second objection. When we move from the formal to the material content of the supposed perceptions, we find even more disagreement. Intuitionists notoriously see different propositions to be true, whether the propositions have as their subject general rules or particular cases. They cannot agree on which cases genuinely count as examples of good or evil action or on which rules embody good or bad principles. In these circumstances, it is extremely tempting to look for non-rational causes of the beliefs of intuitionists, say, in terms of gender or class analysis.

A fourth alternative is to ground one's proposals in the fact that they will be instrumental

in bringing about the empowerment of the oppressed or the marginalized. Here one argues that the ultimate norm or warrant for action is the potential changes embodied in the moral action proposed; the envisaged changes are constituted by the liberation or full personhood of the victimized group. However, once again, difficulties meet us at every turn.

First, this proposal rests on projected predictions which are precarious in the extreme. Merely because someone says that a particular moral stance will liberate some group or other is no guarantee that such a moral stance will actually do the job envisaged. We need some sort of empirical generalization or evidence that things will turn out as we think. Secondly, this option surrenders the epistemic value of our moral claims. It treats moral proposals as purely instrumental, as a means to an end, thus stripping them of any categorical content. Finally, this alternative begs the questions from the outset. It already assumes that we know that the end in view is morally obligatory, and it does this without telling us why we should take this as a given. It does not secure this end as justified or warranted. Note that the objection here is not that the end may not be in fact morally obligatory; on the contrary, it may well be morally required. The objection is that we have not advanced one whit in knowing whether the proposed liberation is morally obligatory.

The obvious lessons to be learned from this review is that any account of the warrants for our moral claims are likely to be highly ramified. Even though I have raised questions about the viability of each option, I do not at all hold that they should be rejected in toto. To the contrary, I want to suggest that each of them may well have a contribution to make to any comprehensive account of our moral existence. The challenge is to develop the kind of rich vision which will do justice to the relevant insights hidden in these proposals, while at the same time facing up to the epistemic queries with which we began our deliberations. Moreover, we need a central concept which can enable us to bring these insights together in coherent and natural manner. I suggest that we can make progress in this by deploying and developing the idea of conscience.

III

The root idea of conscience is that we are endowed by God with the competence to engage in moral discernment. In classical renderings of conscience such discernment has characteristically been constituted by our ability to see that we should do good rather than evil, a very formal first principle of morality, and by our ability to see what the good requires of us in various moral situations, the material content of morality.

Crucial to this understanding of conscience is the claim that conscience is a capacity given to us in creation by God. Minimalist descriptions of conscience as a moral sense, a faculty of the soul, the candle of the Lord, the voice of God, and the like, are really hopelessly reduced accounts of this very substantial metaphysical and theological proposal. Even less satisfactory are those accounts of conscience which reduce it to some abstract right to dissent from current orthodoxy or establishment opinion. In this case the appeal to conscience, seen in such expressions, "Well, I have a right to my conscience on this matter," is simply the dogmatic claim of an individual to hold to the contingent opinion of the moment. It does not begin to do justice to the epistemic weight assigned to the concept of conscience in the pre-modern Christian world.

Few have captured the issue in modern times as forcefully as John Henry Newman.[5]

His central points are laid out with characteristic forcefulness. To begin, conscience is rooted in a clear doctrine of creation.

> I say, then, that the Supreme Being is of a certain character, which, expressed in human language, we call ethical. He has the attributes of justice, truth, wisdom, sanctity, benevolence and mercy, as eternal characteristics in his nature, the very law of his being, identical with himself; and next, when he became creator, he implanted this law, which is himself, in the intelligence of all his rational creatures. The divine law, then, is the rule of ethical truth, the standard of right and wrong, a sovereign, irreversible, absolute authority in the presence of men and angels.... This law as apprehended in the minds of individual men, is called "conscience"; and though it may suffer refraction in passing into the intellectual medium of each, it is not therefore affected so as to lose its character of being the divine law, but still has, as such, the prerogative of commanding obedience.[6]

For Newman this view is shared across denominational boundaries.

> When Anglicans, Wesleyans, the various Presbyterian sects in Scotland, and other denominations speak of conscience, they mean what we mean, the voice of God in the nature and heart of man, as distinct from the voice of revelation. They speak of a principle planted within us, before we have had any training, although training and experience are necessary for its strength, growth, and formation. They consider it a constituent element of the mind, as our perception of our ideas may be, as our powers of reasoning, as our sense of order and the beautiful, and our other intellectual endowments.

Moreover, both Protestants and Catholics recognize the deep and fundamental role conscience plays in moral deliberation.

> The rule and measure of duty is not utility, nor expedience, nor the happiness of the greatest number, nor state convenience, nor fitness, order, and the *pulchrum*. Conscience is not a long-sighted selfishness, nor a desire to be consistent with oneself; but it is a messenger from him, who both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil and teaches and rules us by his representatives. Conscience is the aboriginal vicar of Christ, a prophet in its informations, a monarch in its peremptoriness, a priest in its blessings and anathemas, and, even though the eternal priesthood throughout the church could cease to be, in it the sacerdotal principle would remain and would have a sway.[7]

This conception of conscience must be resolutely distinguished from the antagonistic accounts proposed by various philosophers.

> We are told that conscience is but a twist in primitive and untutored man; that its dictates is an imagination; that the very notion of guiltiness, which the dictate

> enforces, is simply irrational, for how can there possibly be freedom of the will, how can there be consequent responsibility, in that infinite eternal network of cause and effect, in which we helplessly lie? And what retribution have we to fear, when we have no real choice of good or evil?[8]

Equally it must be distinguished from the vulgar conception of conscience often found in the popular mind.

> When men advocate the rights of conscience, they in no sense mean the rights of the creator, nor the duty to him, in thought and deed of the creature; but the right of thinking, speaking, writing, and acting, according to their judgment or their humour, without any thought of God at all.... Conscience has rights because it has duties; but in this age, with a large portion of the public, it is the very right and freedom of conscience to dispense with conscience, to ignore a lawgiver and judge, to be independent of unseen obligations. It becomes a license to take up any or no religion, to take up this or that and let it go again, to go to church, to go to chapel, to boast of being above all religions and to be an impartial critic of each of them. Conscience is a stern monitor, but in this century it has been superseded by a counterfeit, which the eighteen centuries prior to it never heard of, and could not have been mistaken for it, if they had. It is the right of self-will.[9]

Finally, despite the fact that one's conscience can be distorted and that the very idea of conscience can be easily misunderstood in the popular mind, Newman is adamant about the finality of the deliberations of conscience in the moral life. For Newman we have " a duty of obeying our conscience at all hazards."[10] Even the authority of the pope, who for Newman is nothing less than the medium of divine revelation, must take second place to the authority of conscience. "Certainly, if I am obliged to bring religion into after-dinner toasts, (which indeed does not seem quite the thing) I shall drink, – to the pope, if you please, – still, to conscience first, and to the pope afterwards."[11]

IV

We can see in these remarks of Newman some of the themes which caught our eye in our earlier survey of the options often developed by cognitive minorities in the face of opposition. More precisely, we can see a place in the development of our moral existence for intuition, for divine revelation, and for community and tradition.[12] What is so attractive is the way in which these are held together in a compelling vision of morality. More especially, Newman's remarks open a door for the application of recent developments in epistemology which scarcely got a hearing in Newman's time. Before taking up this latter topic, I would like to restate in my own terms the crucial components of the moral vision suggested here by Newman.[13] It has four central elements.

1. First, in moral deliberation it is impossible to escape the tracing of our moral deliberations back to basic moral principles, insights, and judgments which form the foundations of our moral arguments. In moral debate, there simply comes a point where either we see or do not see the rightness of what is before us, whether that be a principle, a particular

state of affairs, or a particular moral judgment. There is no further reason or axiom which is more basic that we can summon in our attempts to persuade an opponent. We either see, or we do not see. This constitutes the natural resemblance there is between a theory of conscience and intuitionism. In both what is envisaged is a basic capacity, a fundamental competence, a non-reducible ability to know what is the case morally speaking.

2. In a developed theory of conscience, this capacity is construed in theistic categories. Conscience is understood as given by an all-good and almighty Creator who has made human beings in his own image and has thus transmitted to them his own capacity to know what is good and evil. This immediately provides a deep warrant for taking conscience with the utmost seriousness. Because conscience is given by God, to go against conscience is to rebel against the voice of God given to us by nature in creation. More positively, to obey conscience is to fulfill one's destiny as a creature designed to operate in a certain way by one's Creator.

Given the way that the nature of conscience is embedded in a theistic universe, it is not at all surprising that the very idea of conscience should become suspect or even be transformed beyond all recognition, once the theistic universe it inhabits is abandoned. Thus we should expect thorough-going secularists, whether Marxists or Durkheimians or Freudians, to provide a radically different construal of what theists will identify as conscience. They will see the deliberations of conscience as merely the outcome of economic, social, and psychological forces which have no causal relation to truth. Hence they will reject the deliberations of conscience as radically misguided. Now, to be sure, if we knew that these secularist positions were metaphysically correct, then this consequence would follow. In reality, however, these remain at best thoroughly contested proposals; a mature theist will have her own reasons for rejecting them or for accepting them only in a deeply modified form.[14] Moreover, as a theist, she will have her own reasons for adopting a theistic conception of the universe. Hence the minimalist, reduced accounts of conscience so popular in current philosophical and popular circles will be rejected as radically inadequate.

3. In this account of conscience, conscience is construed in thoroughly dynamic terms. It is not an all-or-nothing capacity. It is a divinely given competence which clearly develops in infancy, through adolescence, and beyond. Conscience can be hurt and healed; it can be distorted and sharpened; it can be lost and regained; it can be dulled and renewed. Hence a full description of the growth and inner dynamic of conscience is an extraordinary achievement. Moreover, any attempt to plot the relation, say, between conscience, intellect, sentiment, guilt, remorse, and the like, will be a major undertaking requiring exquisite perceptual and conceptual skill.

4. Fourth, it is precisely because conscience is construed as a capacity or as a competence that it can be corrected and healed by divine revelation and rightly influenced, for good or ill, by tradition and community.

Thus Christian theists will insist that the ultimate norm of good is revealed in the life and work of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God. In him are hidden the full riches of holiness. Through the working of the Holy Spirit, fellowship with Christ in the body of the church so heals and enriches human agents that eventually they share the very mind of Christ and see the world as he does.[15] Hence the Christian looks to the saints of the church as models of enlightenment to be emulated and consulted on moral issues. In

these circumstances the inner voice of God enables one to discern the moral authority of Christ and his saints; in turn conscience itself is healed and corrected by the Word of God enshrined in the Scriptures and made fully manifest in Christ. In these circumstances, there can be no playing of conscience off against divine revelation.[16] Special revelation in the Word of God confirms, corrects, and deepens the natural revelation given through the light which enlightens everyone who comes into the world.[17] From the point of view of our moral experience, such transformation is not a quick and easy matter either for the individual or for the Christian community. Individuals may need years and the Christian church may need centuries before the rightness and wrongness of certain moral claims are recognized. Such moral development is entirely natural on this account of our competence in moral discernment.

V

We are now in a position to tackle the last segment of our project. The reader will recall that our fundamental concern was ultimately to address queries about warrants which naturally arise with the appearance of cognitive minorities. In terms of our vision of conscience the question which arises is this: How do we know that appeal to conscience provides us with adequate justification or warrant for our moral claims? To this we now turn.

The point of entry is Newman's claim that conscience is "a constituent element of the mind, as our perception of other ideas may be, as our powers of reasoning may be, as our sense of order and the beautiful, and other intellectual endowments."[18] Newman's suggestion is that we should construe conscience as similar to such other intellectual capacities as perception, memory, deductive and inductive reasoning, and the like. Thus, just as we have recourse to memory in making judgments about the past, so do we have recourse to conscience in making judgments about the moral worth of actions. How does this help us in developing our account of conscience so that it addresses the quest for knowledge?

In recent years epistemologists have been recovering and exploring an approach to knowledge in general which is especially pertinent to this issue. From the time of Descartes and Locke, the two great pillars of the Enlightenment experiment in epistemology, the general tendency has been to construe knowledge in terms of true, justified belief. The most troublesome element in this tradition has been the problem of securing justification. The favored approach to this matter has been to pursue the quest for justification in internalist categories. Thus a person is justified in holding to a particular proposition, p, if that person has good reason for holding p, and that reason is known to the person as a reason for p. On this analysis justification for a belief is secured by being aware of good propositional evidence for that belief.

An obvious difficulty which attends this proposal is how to secure the foundations of one's beliefs. After all, every time one cites a reason for any belief, that reason itself constitutes a further belief, and questions will naturally arise about the status of that belief. Justification, on this view, becomes a chain of inference and argument which either goes on forever or which must come to a halt at an appropriate foundation. In moral theory intuitionism represents an attempt to stop the infinite regress of argument by insisting that at some point the agent just sees something to be the case. Not surprisingly, philosophers

have seen such a move as empty theorizing, as a kind of intellectual hand-waving to flag down questions. Equally, attempts to speak of a moral sense, of a faculty of discernment, and the like, have been construed as vacuous proposals which verbally fool their proponents into thinking that they are making epistemic progress. In this intellectual environment a theory of conscience will appear thoroughly dubious.

However, in recent years we have become acutely aware that all is far from well with this kind of internalist account of justification and its attendant account of knowledge. Thus many have turned of late to explore an alternative, externalist account of knowledge which proceeds in a radically different direction. The crux of the turn is this. Rather than look for propositional evidence, say, for our basic perceptual or memory beliefs, we ask a very different question. We ask if the practice of memory or the practice perception is a reliable one. If it is, then we can *prima facie* take the beliefs which arise from such practices as knowledge. This conceptual shift utterly transforms the way we think about knowledge and justification.

It also transforms the way we should weigh the epistemic status of conscience. On the old internalist model the question we asked was how we could find further propositional evidence for those beliefs arising from conscience. On this analysis the concept of conscience was useless. On the new externalist model we ask if we have good reason for taking conscience to be reliable. Once we ask that question, the answer is obvious. For the Christian theist the answer clearly must be yes. Conscience is a God-given capacity; it is a constituent part of our nature given by a gracious and loving God. Hence, other things being equal, conscience is a reliable medium of moral knowledge. It is this simple and revolutionary notion which makes manifest the extraordinary epistemic significance of conscience. *Prima facie,* conscience is to be trusted to yield knowledge because it is a basic competence given to us by God.[19]

A consequence of this analysis is worth noting. On the internalist account of knowledge, one can only know something if one also knows how one knows. Thus I know p, if and only if I believe p, if p is true, if p is justified, say, by q, if I know q, and if I know that q justifies p. The obvious problem with this analysis is that it eliminates a host of things which most normal people would insist they knew. For instance a child can know that it is raining, or my dog can know that she is about to go for a walk without satisfying such stringent conditions. On the externalist account one knows p if one has arrived at p through a reliable process. It is not at all essential that one also know how or why the process is reliable, although clearly knowing why the process is reliable may enhance one's epistemic status. It is precisely this feature of our externalist account of conscience which shows why conscience has been taken so seriously in the Christian tradition. Even the conscience of the unbeliever, that is, the deliberations of one who may explicitly deny its divine origin, is to be taken seriously. The reason for this is that one may well know moral truth even though one may not know how one knows such truth. Just as through perception I may know immediately that it is snowing, even though I may not have a clue how to defend the reliability of perception, equally through conscience I may know immediatedly that it wrong to roast people for fun, even though I may not have a clue about where my conscience comes from or why it should be normally relied on in my moral deliberations.

VI

In conclusion we can now connect this account of conscience to the empowering of Christian minorities. We noted earlier that the concept of conscience has had a precarious place in the moral theorizing of the last two centuries. As Newman rightly suggested, both philosophical and popular conceptions of conscience in his day totally failed to convey the full force of the idea as developed in the Christian tradition. Since then the situation has not improved; on the contrary, the progressive secularization of Western culture has made talk of conscience even more precarious than it was in the nineteenth century. With the increasing secularization of the Church, it is now common to find the idea of conscience treated as a hostile stranger even within its sacred precincts. As Christendom collapses, and as mainline churches loosen their intellectual moorings from Scripture and tradition, then those committed to talk of conscience and to its healing by the grace of Jesus Christ will become even more of a minority than they have been in the past. The gap between the working conscience of serious believers and their neighbor is likely to grow wider and wider.

In these circumstances retrieving the riches of the tradition buried in and around the idea of conscience is a salutary exercise in at least two ways. First, it will help keep alive the Christian tradition in bleak and difficult times. One cannot take conscience seriously without also taking seriously a whole range of theological themes and convictions which naturally circle round it. Secondly, it will put heart into Christians as they live and witness in a hostile environment. At one level a sound grasp of the nature and role of conscience will give intellectual and spiritual protection from the moral degeneration which is so clearly visible in the world around us. At another level it will help Christians cultivate a deep respect for the neighbor. On the reading of the human situation proposed here, even enemies are to be respected and heard. Even though one's opponents may be radically different in outlook, even though from a Christian perspective they may be corrupt in their conscience, and even though they may be totally opposed to a theistic account of conscience, they are to be treated as agents made in the image of God who can always be redeemed and transformed–or as Newman says, they are to be urged to obey their conscience against all hazards. In the meantime Christians can draw on the full resources of grace made available in the gospel and in the teachers and members of the church. Among the latter I am pleased to acknowledge my deep gratitude to Professor Robert Lyon whose strong and sensitive conscience as a scholar, as a teacher, and as Christian believer leaves so many of us in his debt.

NOTES

1. I limit my concern here to moral claims. Our question easily can be extended to encompass theological and other claims.

2. This is so much a part of the contemporary mainline academic scene that documentation would be superfluous. It has become so embedded in some circles that merely to question the new status quo will be seen in terms of backlash. See for example, Susan Thistlethwaite's "Beyond dualism: Rosemary Radford Ruether's New Women/New Earth," *The Christian Century* (April 24, 1993): 339-402.

3. George Marsden's work on the secularization of the academy and on the history of fundamentalism are especially helpful treatments of aspects of this theme. See George M. Marsden,

Reforming Fundamentalism: A History of Fuller Theological Seminary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) and George M. Marsden and Bradley L. Longfield, eds., *The Secularization of the Academy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992).

4. Note that I am using "intuition" here as almost a technical term in moral philosophy. I do not mean by intuition some kind of non-rational hunch. On the contrary, intuition is intended to signify the kind of rationality appropriate to morality.

5. John Henry Newman, *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching Considered* (London: Pickering, 1976), pp. 246-261.

6. Ibid., p. 246.

7. Ibid., pp. 248-249.

8. Ibid., p. 249.

9. Ibid., p. 250.

10. Ibid., p. 259.

11. Ibid., p. 261.

12. I leave aside for the moment any reference to empowerment.

13. Needless to say the account which follows will be much more Protestant in orientation and content than what one will find in Newman.

14. Some modern Protestant treatments of conscience all too readily succumb to the implications of entirely secular, non-theistic conceptions of human agents at this point. See, for example, C. Ellis Nelson, *Don't Let Conscience Be your Guide* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1978).

15. This is beautifully captured in Romans 12:1-4.

16. That we may be tempted to do this, that is, insist on one and only one source of moral enlightenment, in this case either conscience or Christ, is part of the legacy of standard Enlightenment epistemologies, such as we find in Descartes, which posit one final, certain source of moral inquiry. In a sense there is ultimately only one source for the theist, namely the creative activity of the living God. However, it is an elementary truth of Christian theology that the triune God's creative activity is not confined to conscience.

17. John 1:9.

18. Newman, *Difficulties*, p. 248.

19. It is worth noting that Descartes makes exactly the same epistemic suggestion with respect to ordinary perception. See for example his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1980), p. 94.