

November 1968

The Honest Conscience

James O'Reilly

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq>

Recommended Citation

O'Reilly, James (1968) "The Honest Conscience," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 35 : No. 4 , Article 8.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol35/iss4/8>

The Honest Conscience

Rev. James O'Reilly, Ph. D.

Some will argue that as long as a person thinks that what he does is right he should go ahead and do it. A person must act according to his conscience. This statement is a dangerous half-truth. In an excessive anxiety to protect the claims of the individual conscience, the claims of the human community and the claims of the objective order of the universe are undermined. This cannot be done without betraying the honesty of the very conscience which we wish to protect. In the first place, it is together, in community, that we acquire knowledge at all. One cannot think in complete independence from a tradition of wisdom. We must think *for* ourselves but not *by* ourselves. In the second place, the honesty of one's conscience is not the only consideration that is of importance. Correctness also matters. There is more to morality than subjective goodness. In addition to goodness or badness of my performance of the action, there is the question of the goodness or badness of the act itself. If the act is objectively not good, harm and evil may flow from it to myself and others, regardless of how honest I was in thinking it to be right. It is simply not true to say that objective goodness or badness is of little account before God, that subjective disposition is the 'whole thing.' True, it is the latter that makes or unmakes the doer before God, but it is the former that does or undoes mankind and his world.

The person who faces a moral decision must therefore pause before two considerations — that of the moral tradition in which he was raised, and that of the objective order. By so doing he acts more fully in accord with his humanness, which is to say, more honestly. For humanness is not confined to being an individual person. Humanness includes a 'being with others' and a 'being in a world of cause and effect.' But since moral wisdom, even when well transmitted by the community, does not become clear to everyone equally and at the same time, and since the claims of the objective order become more inscrutable with increasing complexity of life, we must all exist in greater or lesser tension between individual conscience and community tradition, between subjective goodness and objective correctness, between conscience and law, between seeing with our own eyes and seeing through the eyes of others. It is in the face of this tension of the moral life that every man at some time in his struggle to be true to his humanness is led to suspect that more is needed than that we be 'together' and 'in a world.' We must also be 'under God.' We cannot contain our wisdom long, unless Wisdom contains us. This is the point at which honesty of individual conscience becomes inseparable from the desire, however incoherent, to become a part of a People of God.