Does O.J. "The Juice" Simpson have a conscience?

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"CONSCIENCE DOES MAKE COWARDS OF US almost ALL"

--Shakespeare HAMLET 3.1.56

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Is Hillary "a congenital liar" (Wm.Safire) & thus not responsible for lying (as none of us should be held to account for whatever happened to us between conception & birth)?....Under great stress, wouldn't anybody commit perjury (as did Detective Fuhrman during the O.J. trial--or O.J. himself in pleading innocent if he isn't)? And are "all politicians liars"? No evidence that a Cape Cod Community College professor is penitent about formerly having written student papers for pay, & the school permits him to continue teaching. A Dennis Yarmouth (Cape Cod) High School teacher produces, acts in, & sells porn videos & for six days is only suspended (but today, 17 Jan 96, fired).

"Your Honor, my client has been watching the *Phil Donahue Show* for many years, and is therefore unable to distinguish right from wrong."

This Thinksheet thinks about what's been happening to **conscience** in America since Disney's Jimminy Cricket's nose stopped growing when he lies.

1 When consciousness is dominated, as now it is for many Americans, by commercial entertainment, which produces **virtual reality** as a substitute for reality, truth is debased into **virtual truth**, trust into **virtual trust**, & community into **virtual community**. The basis of conscience, viz the ability to "distinguish right from wrong" (as this 19June95 CHRISTIANITY TODAY cartoon, on a page of letters about clergy adultery, has it), is destroyed. And since conscience is in essence judgmental, & public-interview hosts such as Donahue practice & model nonjudgmentality, the public has been brainwashed into an easy-going, everything-goes tolerance whose antimorality appears in its intolerance of anyone who speaks out for right/wrong, ie anyone who's "judgmental."....Jesus' should not be prostituted into supporting this amorality. His Sermon on the Mount (at Mt.7.1) preaches not that no judgment should be passed but that the judger stands with the judged under the common judgment of God; & his Sermon on the Plain (at L.6.36-37) adduces the divine mercy as a dissuasive from condemning one's neighbor.

2 The Fall (Gn.3) does narratively what the Latin word *conscientia* does lexically. The latter means both moral consciousness (ie right/wrong awareness) & obligatory conscience (ie the impulse to do right & the guilt-pain of [1] having failed to do right or [2] having done wrong). In the former, the sequence is the divine command/ condemnation....The **consciousless**--the anomic, the psychopathic, the sociopathic--lack full consciousness, are not "all there," & so cannot be trusted to live freely in society--for free living presumes that one is inwardly programmed & persuaded to be unfree to fail to do right or to succeed in doing wrong: society cannot permit freedom to those who lack these inward unfreedoms..... And as the anomic (ie conscienceless) % of our populace increases, just so much must society deny them freedom. But here we face a lag: *codex criminalis*, our laws on crime, assume in the populace that degree & extent of conscience which obtained when the foundational laws were inscribed. But to the extent that that degree/extent has shrunk, the laws are now ineffective. But increasing the legal sanctions (ie teeth) is hindered by the ethical sanctions (ie supports) which themselves have weakened (eg the assumption that the citizenry's behavior is morally responsible). Perversely, the fact that the sense of right/wrong has declined is being used (as in this cartoon) to argue against punishment, esp. the death penalty: the conscience of "the righteous" is narrowly focused on the destiny of the individual, to the detriment of collective life. Outcome? If jurisprudence does not come up to society-speed, collective anomie (lawlessness) will lead to a socially intolerable anarchy, the people concluding that democracy is no longer workable. (Can a people adopt political-&-economic democracy before internalizing the ethical-moral unfreedoms it requires? Russia is now in the process of finding out).....On this general question, ½ century ago last Sunday, in Johns Hopkins University Baptist Church, I preached a pair of sermons: morning ("From I to Me") & evening ("The Divine Compulsion"). They are filed under F920E.1, never to be seen again: filing is more for brain-programing than for future reference. The chemistry dean, who introduced me, invented mustard gas just in time for WWI.

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3 To make Hamlet (Shakespeare) correct, I had to write a word into this Thinksheet's title. But despite his conscience, Hamlet is swept along to a double murder after saying "The play's the thing /wherein I'll catch /the conscience of the king." "Cowards" here is ironic, a positive double fear: (1) of violating inner law, (2) of abrogating outer law (as Ro.13.3-4). Good citizens, committed to the good & aided by the double fear, are those in whom society can have faith. They are trustable, reliable, responsible, accountable, & therefore worthy of freedom, which is a social construct & not a right (any more than driving an automobile is a right).

4 Ontological question: Conscience being something you *experience* as a moral (decisional right/wrong) tension before/during/after action, is it also something you *have*? The second theory is called into question by the existence of the anomic personality, eg a subcategory on the steep increase, viz the consciousless child criminal. The anomic also call the first theory into question: while it's a fact that everyone experiences decisional tension, is it not a fact that some experience the tension as only pragmatic (a favorable/unfavorable choice) rather than moral (right/wrong)?

Another way to get at this perplexity is to ask **how many players** are in the decisional situation? If conscience is something you have (the position of the late ancient Greek thinkers), the answer is **one**: your being & act coincide in the deciding, your conscience is limited to self-reflection, (D.Bonhoeffer, ACT & BEING [Harper/56/61], 161) "the attempt to understand oneself from oneself remains in sin." Of course the biblical answer is **two**: in one's reach of spirit toward the right, God's spirit is reaching.

If, then, conscience is defined nonmorally-objectively as the power of self-reflection, it's something we have, something "natural." But the power of self-transcendence, the power to escape (Luther) self-incurvature, that we do not have by nature but may receive by grace. That is the subject of Bonhoeffer's most philosophical work. On the same page as above, this: "Luther's countless admonitions not to look on one's own remorse, own faith, but to look on the Lord Christ himself"--in which sense grace by faith kills the old in-Adam conscience. 170: "man no longer looks on himself but on salvation alone, which has come to him from without. He finds himself in Christ because he is already in Christ from the fact of seeing himself there." 170-171: The human being is delivered from "self-encapsulation,....escaping from the I's dominion into the lordship of Christ, where for the first time in original freedom it recognizes itself as the creature of God." 179: "repentance in the confidence of forgiveness" is "not a self-losing to oneself, but a self-finding in Christ." Faith sees "sin henceforth only in the context of forgiveness by Christ within the communion" of the church, in which by grace through faith act & being become one....Luther's has often been called the religion of conscience. Bonhoeffer's ACT & BEING is Luther reborn & talking with subsequent German thinkers, chiefly Kant, Heidegger, Barth, & Brunner. (He presented it as his professorial inaugural in 1931, two years before Hitler came to power. An American parallel: Martin Luther King, Jr., presented his PhD dissertation shortly before Rosa Parks thrust him into anti-power, confrontation with anti-human power in law & action.)

5 The **Bible** is a book of conscience, as the "conscience" article in any good biblical resource will show. One node is Adam & Eve in Gn.3, an inexhaustible parable of the religiomoral life. In the Gospels, most of Jesus' confrontations have a conscience dimension. In 1&2 Cor. we encounter the conscience problems of a bicultural (Jewish/gentile) church: Paul takes the middle way between (1) making no witness toward an emerging distinctive Christian ethic & (2) violating the conscience of "the weak," who've not overcome now-dysfunctional scruples from their pre-Christian pasts: Christians are to live in mutual respect, "the strong" (in whom the conscience gap has been closed) being considerate of those with a knotty, scrupulous conscience (called "the weak," for Paul himself exercises freedom from scrupulosity under only the constraint that everything be done "to the glory of God" [1Cor.10. 31]). Conscience here is intermediate: God-conscience-church, as in Bonhoeffer. So he could use it last night (21 Jan 96) just before closing our local-church annual meeting with prayer, our interim pastor, a Methodist, asked me to write Jn. Wesley's form of a 16th-c. formulation of this social location of Christian conscience. I wrote "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity." This is

shorthand, in effect, for Paul to the Corinthians. And the interpersonal/societal/institutional tension inevitable with the functioning of differing consciences-in-community will be the subject, July 15-19, of Craigville Theological Colloquy XIII: how is the church to live in the stretch between the Lord's call to unity (Jn.17.21; Gk., "catholicity") & his sending us on missions of mercy, justice, & peace (eg, Mt.24-25; Gk., being "prophetic," with wide differences among & within the churches as to what specifically, here & now, that means)?

In Ro., conscience appears first as knowledge of God through reflection on nature (1.18-23), but rejectors of God "repress the truth"; but God's character as "righteous" requires revelation "through faith for faith" (v.17): reason & revelation are, thus, the two legs of conscience. (By "reason" here, I mean, besides ratiocination, these: self-reflection, intuition, imagination.) Hellenistic Judaism had come to understand conscience as a revelation-independent human power, an autonomous agency alerting to one's violation of an internalized code & as such a worker together with God without divine coercion: conscience & revelation point in the same direction, viz the doing of God's will in covenant/torah submission. A Hellenistic Jew, Paul assumed all that & brought it into captivity to Christ in the Spirit, as we can see in Cor.: 1.4.4, 8.1,4-6,7,11,12, 10.23-30, 10.31; 2.1.21, 4.2, 5.11, 11.4-15. Here in Ro., 13.5, he uses conscience to support submission to the state: bad citizenship, bad conscience (though in 2.15 conscience "bears witness" to truth "written on...[our] hearts," & in 9.1 conscience "confirms...by the Holy Spirit").

Heb. calls on us Christians to "purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (9.14). The old order cannot remove the burden of guilt, ie a bad conscience (9.9, 10.2), but Christ's atoning work frees the conscience (9.14, 10.22). A "clear conscience" (13.18) is a gift of grace, not a reward for good deeds, & it motivates the desire "to act honorably in all things." Salvation, in this NT book, is movement from a guilty to a clear conscience: from this Thinksheet's point of view, what's important here is the prominence given to conscience as an ethicoreligious category.

The treatments of conscience in the rest of the NT & in other early Christian literature complete the picture of the functioning of this **boundaries** human trait: the UNDERsocialized (anomics) fail to cross the boundary into community, & the OVERsocialized (conformists) fail to cross the boundary out of community into socially responsible, independent personhood. (The struggle is most dramatically displayed, after Paul, in THE SENTENCES OF SEXTUS [Sextus Julius Africanus, d.c.240], as I showed pp.139-168, SANCTIONS..., Chicago PhD T2624 BT9999.)....Early Christians who saw themselves as the "third race" saw their ethics as between-beyond that of pagans, who let it all hang out & got all hung up, & Jews, who let it all hang in & were all hung up. The conscience of pagans & heretics was asleep (1Tim.1.3-7, 4.1-2; Tit.1.15). But to the extent that conscience is captive to a code (Ac.23.1-2; 24.10-16; contrast 2Ti.1.3), it's overdomesticated & unable to serve its autonomous-critical-independent function. Christians thought that their break with Judaism would solve this problem, but the church itself was soon in danger of suppressing conscience by correlating conscience with faith-as-dogma (1Ti.1.19, "faith and a good conscience"; 3.9, "hold fast to the...faith with a clear conscience"): the problem of the oversocialized, captive conscience is human, not uniquely Jewish....For a fresh, creative understanding of conscience in the early church, study 1P.3: baptism erases a guilty conscience, which must be kept clear by not turning antagonistic toward persecutors--for a rebellious spirit would compromise the Christian cause.

6 Is conscience **natural**? If your thing is to correlate conscience and revelation (as the 18th c.'s Wm.Paley & Bp.Butler), conscience is natural-under-God. But if your thing involves separating conscience from God (as in secular humanism & today's public schools), conscience is natural-in-itself-without-God. Again, conscience can be affirmed as natural whether viewed as inherent or as socially constructed. As the "symbol-making animal" (Ernst Cassirer, d.'45), we are aware of the obligation to participate responsibly in our society's symbols, which are for us both public & private whether or not we see them as universal.

7 The current **Bubba hubbub** on Cape Cod (with national notice, including a CNN

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crew from NYC) provides us with a case for grounding this Thinksheet's meditation on conscience. Bubba (his senior-high English pupils called him) has a clear conscience about producing, acting in, and distributing pornographic videos, which on the Cape have been on sale in the "adult" sections of vidstores & (!) from his home, the address of "Bob's Videos" on each cassette. He's a left-over hippie from the '60s & looks & feels & thinks like one & has been teaching in the public-school system for a quarter century. When his sideline became public, he was suspended &--five days later--fired. Of course he's being defended by the usual free-expression police; 500 kids signed for his reinstatement; & the police had to arrest a number of demonstrating kids. Notes on the **moral confusion** of our time & this place:

(1) The public's divided on whether a public-school teacher need be a role model off hours. The right to privacy & all that.

(2) You don't have to be PC to agree that pornography is sexist, demeaning to women & distortive of male/female relationships. But isn't Bubba's right to do his own thing superior to the right of women to be free of denigration?

(3) Do our public schools teach that pornography is wrong? If not, wasn't it hypocritical to fire Bubba? One of my two "Bubba" letters to the CAPE COD TIMES made this teaching-moment point: what morals are the public schools teaching?

(4) Said a mother, "Who has the right to say what is moral?" When anything goes, everything's gone.

(5) Since porn is constitutionally protected speech, isn't it moral? Would it be legal if it weren't moral?

(6) Yes, Bubba pushed the envelop. But let's not be puritanical. After all, nobody's perfect. And we should be tolerant & forgiving (even if no repentance).

(7) Let's not be too hard on Bubba the counterculturalist. We live in a self-indulgent culture of moral relativism & multiculturalism. "It's not like he murdered someone." Don't turn our schools over to narrow-minded morality police.

(8) If ya want respect, ya gotta be respectable.

(9) A fellow-teacher: "Nothing is either black or white."

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