

## Must One Obey One's Conscience?

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If you do what you are convinced is wrong, though it is in truth *not* wrong, are you doing wrong? Or if you decide *not* to do something which you believe is no obligation for you to do – though in fact it *is* what you ought to do – are you acting wrongly?

Perhaps it is clearer to ask: is your *will* wrong in these cases? Aristotle reports someone as saying that bad principles plus

weakness of will in acting according to them would mean your actions were all right. But he clearly doesn't believe this and it may have been a joke. At any rate he certainly thought that wrongness about principles was a cause of wickedness, if it was easy to be right.

Let's say that in the cases imagined, what you have is a false conscience. We can then ask our question in the form: is a false conscience *binding*?

'I know *what* he did was wrong, but since he thought it was right to do that sort of thing, *he* wasn't doing wrong – at least subjectively he wasn't doing wrong.' Someone might say: Isn't subjectivity the important thing here? If it is correct to say that, then that would give an answer to the question as we first raised it, which was: you do what you are convinced is wrong, though it isn't. Well then, subjectively you are doing wrong in that case.

\* Text of an unpublished and undated manuscript of notes for a lecture; description of the examples to be referred to in the lecture was left unscripted.

The question whether a false conscience is *binding* arises only where it says — falsely — that you *must*, or again *must not*, do something. A conscience that says you *may* do something or not do it, you have a right to do it but you need not do it, obviously would not *bind* you to do or not do the thing, whatever it was. That is the case — the sort of case — considered in the argument ‘What he did was wrong *but* he thought it was right, i.e. all right, so *he* wasn’t doing wrong subjectively speaking’. However, there is something the argument is being *used* for and that is to *excuse*. So there are two different questions: ‘Does a false conscience *bind*?’ — where it falsely commands or forbids; and: ‘Does a false conscience *excuse*?’ — when it *lets* you do something wrong. We can of course ask whether it excuses *also* in the cases where it commands or forbids wrongly. Here it might be said to *excuse* wrong action because the man with the false conscience obeys it *believing* that that action is obligatory; and to excuse wrong *failure* to do something where the man with the false conscience consults it and believes that the thing he does not do would be wrong to do though there’s nothing wrong with it. (Gambling, betting)

However in connexion with *excusing* there is also false conscience believing that something is permissible which is in fact not permissible. This makes an extra possibility about false conscience *excusing*, which doesn’t apply to the question whether a false conscience *binds*.

‘Does a false conscience *bind* one?’ is equivalent to the question: ‘Suppose a will that *does not conform* to a false conscience forbidding what is in fact obligatory or commanding what is in fact impermissible — is that a bad will?’

And ‘Does a false conscience *excuse*?’ is equivalent to the question ‘Suppose a will that *conforms* to a false conscience wrongly forbidding or commanding or *allowing* something — is that a good will?’

What I mean by a will conforming to a conscience is the voluntary action or voluntary omission being according to what the

conscience says. Conscience is judgment about what is all right, or wrong, or obligatory to do, so when I speak of conscience commanding something I mean its judging that that thing is obligatory, that one *must* do it on pain of doing wrong if one doesn’t. Similarly when I speak of conscience forbidding something, I mean its judging that one *must not* do that thing on pain of doing wrong if one does it. And when I speak of conscience allowing something I mean its judging that one may do it, but need not; one won’t be doing wrong if one does it, nor yet if one doesn’t.

So I hope it is clear what the question ‘Is a will conforming to a false conscience which wrongly forbids or commands or allows something a good will?’ means. Similarly for the question about a will *not* conforming to a conscience.

Some people might object that a will is only a *good* will if it means the will in a voluntary action which is a good action, and that it isn’t a good will if one merely does what one may do but need not. Or that it has got to be an action with a specially good purpose. So writing a story to earn some money which one does not seriously need would not be either a good or a bad action as far as my description goes, and so the will in it would not be a *good* will though perhaps not a bad one either. Well, here and now I will only say I don’t agree, but I won’t go into the matter which is quite complicated.

Now reverting to the questions about false conscience binding or excusing a will that conforms to it, I will remind you that some people will say: There’s no such thing as false conscience. Conscience is conscience and infallibly tells you what is right and what is wrong. So conscience *always* binds, or else legitimately leaves you morally free to do or not do, and the answer to the question of my title ‘Must one obey one’s conscience?’ is simply ‘Of course one must’.

Well, in comment on that, consider Huckleberry Finn.

Or as Mark Twain is really being highly satirical in all that bit of the story, consider the German politician and member of Hitler's government, Himmler.

In face of these examples, particularly the second, one might say: Clearly a false conscience does not bind, nor does it excuse. And so one might want to say: the will that is *in conformity with* a false conscience is *simply* bad and can't be good.

This is, however, a very severe sort of case to consider — I consider it only to upset the suggestion that conscience is infallible. But this observation does carry in it the suggestion that a will *in conformity with* a false conscience is good just because it is in conformity with a conscience, *if* the error in the conscience is not a very serious error leading to what are *obviously* enormously wicked actions. Apart from such frightfulness in what one thinks one ought to do, it is always bad to go against one's conscience. And that would carry with it the suggestion that apart from frightful cases, conscience, even if it is in error, does excuse and the will that conforms to it is a good will. For, given not too unreasonable mistakes making one's conscience a 'false' conscience, conscience simply does bind and one must be doing wrong in going against it even if it consists of mistaken judgment about what things are right and wrong in the situation one is in.

As the frightful cases have to be treated as *exceptional* for what one thinks along these lines, it is perhaps clearest to stick to the question 'Is a will that does *not* conform to a false judgment, a false conscience, a bad will?' — and to amplify this by saying 'Is it always a bad will?' For *that* was the equivalent of the question whether a false conscience *binds*.

The question whether it is — at least sometimes — a *good* will is then firmly fixed as equivalent to whether a false conscience *excuses*.

Here I will point to the opinion, clearly maintained by some, that a false conscience always *binds*. That is, that the will in someone *not* conforming to a *false* conscience, at least in doing what in

fact he ought not, or failing to do what he ought, is always a *bad* will. But also that it does not excuse — i.e. that *conforming* to a false conscience is not something containing goodness of will.

In short, it is wrong to act contrary to your false conscience but not right to act according to it.

I think we might modify this by saying that if your false judgment about what you ought to do is based on a *blameless* mistake about the particular facts of the case, then your false judgment about what you ought to do *is* itself blameless and your action in conformity with it *is* excused by the fact that you *are* acting in conformity with a conscience which is mistaken.

But otherwise, there seems to be no way out, no way of acting rightly. If you act *against* your conscience you are doing wrong because you are doing what you *think* wrong, i.e. you are willing to do wrong. And if you act in accordance with your conscience you are doing whatever *is* the wrong that your conscience allows, or failing to carry out the obligation that your conscience says is none.

There is a way out, but you have to know that you need one and it may well take time. The way out is to *find out* that your conscience is a wrong one.