

KENNETH GOODPASTER

Kenneth Goodpaster earned his A.B. in mathematics from the University of Notre Dame and his A.M. and Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Michigan. Goodpaster taught graduate and undergraduate philosophy at the University of Notre Dame throughout the 1970's before joining the Harvard Business School faculty in 1980, where he developed the ethics curriculum. In 1990 Goodpaster left Harvard to accept the David and Barbara Koch Endowed Chair in Business Ethics at the University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, MN. At St. Thomas, he teaches in undergraduate, MBA and executive educational programs.

QUESTIONS: Goodpaster suggests that conscience can be extended beyond individual persons to be applied to organizations. Do you agree with this application? What are the implications of this as we educate our students?

CONSCIENCE

KENNETH E. GOODPASTER¹

Bishop Joseph Butler (1692-1752) in his famous *Sermons*, said of conscience that it was a “principle in man” by which he approves or disapproves his attitudes and actions. He added that this faculty tends to restrain us from doing “mischief” and incline us toward doing good.

The history of the concept of conscience is instructive as one seeks to understand its contemporary meaning. Originally, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *conscience* was understood as a common quality in which individuals *shared*: “a man or a people had more or less conscience,” as persons or groups had more or less science, knowledge, intelligence, prudence, etc. The word came gradually to be used as an individual faculty or attribute, so that “*my conscience*” and “*your conscience*” were understood no longer as “our respective shares or amounts of the common quality *conscience*,” but as “two distinct individual consciences, mine and yours.”

This individualization of the meaning of “conscience” is significant not only etymologically, but philosophically. It signals a polarity at the core of our moral awareness: On the one hand, conscience is our subjective touchstone for ethical decision making. On the other hand, an appeal to conscience in moral argument (or dialogue) usually lays claim to *common* ground, a warrant for our ethical convictions that reaches *beyond* the merely subjective. Insofar as conscience must respond in actual decision making situations, it has a certain private authority, both in relation to non-moral decision guides and in relation to the consciences of others. We can refer to this as the *autonomy dimension* of conscience. But because conscience can be “undeveloped,” “neglected,” or “out of touch,” philosophers have looked to it for a broader kind of authority, less private and more rooted in human nature or reason. We can refer to this as the *discernment dimension* of conscience.

In either of its dimensions, conscience can be effective or not in actually guiding action, a fact which no doubt led Bishop Butler to exclaim that if it had strength, as it has right, and if it had power, as it has authority, “it would absolutely govern the world!” At its strongest, conscience prevents wrongdoing. Accounts of “guilty consciences,” “weakness of will” (*akrasia*), and relief at being caught on the part of some criminals also testifies to the influence of conscience subsequent to wrongdoing.

The Autonomy Dimension: Freedom and Dignity

Commentators on conscience often emphasize its role in providing a zone of freedom and dignity around each human person. It is the capacity and the need to decide about right and wrong, good and bad, virtue and vice. But this capacity also calls for respect from others, even if they disagree. The right to “freedom of conscience” is frequently cited as among the most basic of human rights. Most of us believe that a person ought to follow his/her conscience, but just as surely, we believe that a person ought to be *allowed* to follow his/her conscience – at least up...

¹ Goodpaster, Kenneth, 2007, *Encyclopedia of Business Ethics and Society*. Sage Publishers. 407-410.