

## Conscience vs. Authoritarianism

**Conscience:** “Conscience is nothing else than the application of knowledge to some action.”  
(*Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 19, art. 5)

**Authoritarianism:** A theory of knowledge that favors acceptance of authority in preference to use of one's own reason. Also the tendency to subject people to authority as opposed to allowing them individual freedom..” (Fr. John Hardon’s *Modern Catholic Dictionary*)

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*“While nothing need be added to the one redemptive sacrifice of Christ, it remains true that our free refusal can prevent the heart of Christ from spreading the ‘waves of his infinite tenderness’ in this world. Again, this is because the Lord wishes to respect our freedom.” – Dilexit nos, ¶197*

Saint Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801–1890), who is soon to become a Doctor of the Church, famously writes in his *Letter the Duke of Norfolk* that, “conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ.” If this is indeed true, manipulation and coercion — two tactics deployed by authoritarians — have no power. Better said, if man recognizes his conscience as the highest authority, and is obedient unto that conscience over and above everything else, then there is nothing other than his conscience that can control his actions. This conscience, though, must be well-formed and cultivated by truth and grace.

As alluded to, conscience can be wielded properly or improperly. When it is wielded properly and accords with truth, man’s conscience binds substantially and always. When it is wielded improperly and does not accord with truth, man’s conscience binds accidentally and conditionally (on the condition that he changes it). So conscience has binding power, meaning that man must obey it, simply because it is always perceived to be the voice of reason — the voice that tells man to do good and avoid evil. This is why Pieper says that the “primordial conscience is always ‘right.’” It is not because one’s interpretation of right and wrong is infallible; rather, it is because the voice of conscience is always and every time perceived to be the voice of truth, and to act against the voice of truth is always wrong. On this point, Catholic theologian Tobias Hoffman writes,

“Regardless of whether my action is objectively good, evil or indifferent, conscience binds, for it is by means of conscience that an action is proposed to me as good, bad, or indifferent” (*Aquinas and Intellectual Determinism*, 260).

The simplest way to put this is that although an erring conscience binds, it does not negate the wrong or evil act. Kant was wrong in his belief that conscience is restricted to reason alone, and Freud was wrong in teaching that conscience ought to be formed based on one’s social and cultural surroundings. The judgement of how one ought to live, which is the role of conscience, is a matter of natural and divine truth. In this manner, “conscience is the voice of God,” as Newman says. And as such, he continues, it has “supreme authority.” Unlike Kant, Newman taught that conscience ought to be formed by reason *and faith*; and unlike Freud, he taught that conscience ought to be shaped by objective truth and the timeless natural and divine law.

John Henry Newman was an Anglican priest at one point, who decided to convert to Catholicism. But when he converted, many people detracted against him. The lies being told about him during and after his conversion are some of the reasons why he wrote so much about conscience. “In embracing Catholic dogma,” one academic man wrote about him, “[he] had to abandon his reason and submit blindly to Church authority” (Levering, *Newman on Doctrinal Corruption*, 194). Other high intellectuals claimed that his embrace of Catholic dogma “was a noble-minded delusion made due to a psychological need to obey” (ibid.). These attacks against Newman’s conversion not only pit Catholic dogma against reason, but they pit submission to Church authority against submission to truth. Thus, in their eyes, Newman is either acting irrationally or unfaithfully — both of which entail servile obedience and blind submission.

To these claims that insinuated that Newman’s mind was imprisoned and he was robotically echoing whatever the Church authorities taught, “Newman answers that on the contrary, Catholicism frees the intellect to be what it should be, by upholding the mind in certain fundamental truths, given to us by Jesus Christ and constituting ‘the Apostolic depositum of faith’” (*Newman on Doctrinal Corruption*, 222). Unlike the right of private judgement proposed by the Protestants, who reject the authority of the Church, Newman identifies private judgement with reasoning, saying that it “seeks to understand what has been defined by the Church” (*Newman on Doctrinal Corruption*, 223).

Manipulators, because they control those who do not have the courage to make their own decisions, have zero power over those who do. Although making one’s own decisions and judgements is difficult, especially when many people are looking to make them for you, it is nevertheless a human and Christian obligation. In the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right” (¶1778). To ignore one’s conscience is to imprison one’s own mind, leaving man enslaved under the false pretense of obedience. Following one’s conscience, on the other hand, frees man and opens him up to true human flourishing, wherein he recognizes and obeys truth, which is the highest authority.