

Conscience

A well formed conscience is a conscience formed by the *truth*.
Developing a well formed conscience is a huge task!

Q: How do you make choices? What do you do when you are choosing well? How do you choose to buy a pair of shoes? How do you choose what to wear in the morning? How do you choose a career path?

The decision process has to do with coming up with a series of options and selecting from among them. But these choices are never made in a vacuum, they are made within our mental *horizon* – it is the limit of our cares and concerns and of our understanding of the world in which we live. Things beyond our mental horizon don't enter into the decision making process. If our horizons are limited, if our cares and concerns are distorted in some way, we are likely to make poor choices --- consistently.

In making a choice, don't we have a tendency to choose to do whatever we want or, at best, select the option that appears to be the most worthwhile? How do we know if what *appears* worthwhile to us is *truly* worthwhile? Do we just pick what is agreeable and avoid what is disagreeable? Who gets to decide what is *truly worthwhile*? In Prison? On the Outside? YOU! But, your judgment about what to do is trustworthy *only* if you have developed a *well formed conscience*!

Where does that come from? It comes from a desire in us to put forth our best effort irrespective of whether that effort is agreeable or disagreeable. It may feel great some days and anything but great on other days. Gradually, we learn to put forward our best effort because we judge that course of action to be *truly* worthwhile and putting forward that level of effort comes to be what our conscience demands. As we repeatedly strive for excellence, we develop *habits of the heart* that constitute our moral character.

Feelings, which are spontaneous, can only be modified over the long term. Best effort, however, is a choice that determines our behaviour in the here and now. Advice: if needed, fake it until you make it. Why? Because over time doing what is genuinely worthwhile becomes second nature.

Q: How do we expand our horizon? Group, Enneagram, Education, life/work experience, new challenges . . .

Intellectual Character

1. We can't make good choices without basing them on knowledge of reality (not wishful thinking or fantasy). We need to *know* what makes us human beings tick. To have good intentions are necessary but not sufficient. Intellectual character is the habitual willingness to pursue the truth wherever it leads (a well formed conscience).

2. In doing this we are not just making choices about which course of action to follow but we are also choosing the sort of person we are becoming.

Opinions vs. Deliberation:

We need to learn to distinguish between merely *voicing opinions* (or conventional wisdom) and engaging in *genuine deliberations* about what to do.

Exposing Biases:

Bias of Egocentricism – taking care of “number one”, even at the expense of others. This bias restricts and distorts my horizon (i.e., my cares and concerns)

Group Bias – arises when we fail to extend our cares and concerns (horizon) beyond our own group (national, racial and ethnic, gender, social class, religious, political/ideological, work or income related . . .); perhaps even seeking to advance our group at the expense of others.

General Bias – Dramatic Bias

Clearly, a person in the grip of some form of bias is not likely to engage in objective deliberation. We are often blind to our own biases; yet others can easily spot them!

Learning to Listen to Others:

Because each person is limited in terms of life experiences and perspectives, we have to be willing to broaden our horizons. We must allow ourselves to HEAR (not necessarily agree with) the viewpoint of others. We know we are doing this if we are able to restate that viewpoint in our own words in such a way that those who hold it can accept our reformulation. This is not easy; requires effort.

Avoid Compartmentalizing (“boxing”) Our Thinking:

Freedom has two meanings:

- (a) freedom to do what I want (perhaps with the rider “as long it doesn’t infringe on freedom of others), we are often different people in various situations
- (b) freedom to choose well (implies that there are things that are truly worthwhile and not just agreeable to me) --- ideally all the time

Tolerance:

- (a) corresponding to ‘freedom to do what I want’, tolerance means that, because values are subjective, I have no basis for judging the values and actions of others --- live and let live; who am I to judge.

(b) corresponding to 'freedom to choose well' tolerance implies that I respect the dignity and worth of each person, even when their values and way of behaving is quite different from mine.

Q: Who am I?

Conscience lies at the core of our being (deeply personal). But, even though we are oriented towards finding what is true and really of value, we do not always choose to act in accord with what is at the core of who we are.

We are beings who live in tension – pulled to our subjective likes and desires (whether they REALLY lead to what is genuine and worthwhile) and also drawn to towards what is REALLY true and worthwhile.

Freedom of choice is at the essence of being a human being. Ultimately, the choices we make determine the kind of person we are. I have to KNOW (realize, come to see) that I have to DECIDE (make choices) what kind of a PERSON I am becoming.