

DEFINITION OF CONSCIENCE: “Conscience is nothing else than the application of knowledge to some action.” (*ST* 1a.79.13, quoted in 1a2ae.19.5)

YOU MUST NOT ACT AGAINST YOUR CONSCIENCE (CONSCIENCE, EVEN WHEN ERRING, BINDS)

*The Basic Idea*

- You should never do – or even wish to do – what you think is bad.
- You should make every effort to know what is right.

*Premise*

In general, the will is good when it wants something good; it is evil, when it wants something evil. (*ST* 1a2ae.19.3)

Thus the will is good when it wants to do a good action; it is evil, when it wants a bad action.

*How Conscience Operates*

What enables the will to want a good or a bad action? The will has no knowledge. Whatever it wants, it does so because it has been proposed to it by reason. (Notice that in his discussion on conscience, Aquinas uses the terms ‘conscience’ and ‘reason’ interchangeably.)

Reason not only proposes to the will possible actions, but it also gives an evaluation. For example, reason may (falsely) judge as follows:

- Being chaste (refraining from fornication) is evil.
- Murdering is good when it is done for the sake of God.

Now the key point of Aquinas is this (*ST* 1a2ae.19.5):

“[F]rom the very fact that a thing is proposed by the reason as being evil, the will by tending thereto becomes evil. . . . [T]hat which is good can receive the character of evil, or that which is evil, can receive the character of goodness, on account of reason apprehending it as such.”

Accordingly, if a person falsely judges that one should not be chaste (i.e. that one should fornicate), then reason proposes “being chaste” to the will as something evil. If the person nevertheless wants to be chaste, then he or she wants something that reason (falsely) considers evil. Yet the will becomes bad if it wants something that reason proposes as evil. That which objectively and in truth is good is then subjectively considered to be evil.

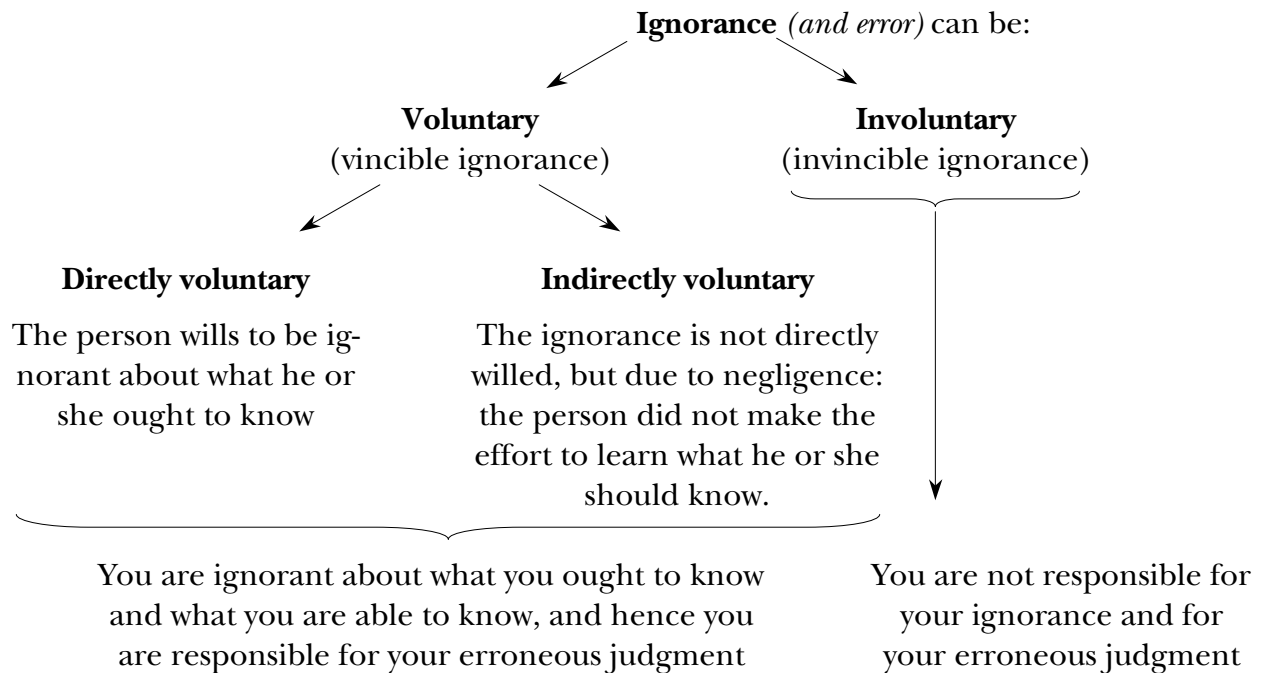
ACTING IN ACCORD WITH AN ERRING CONSCIENCE DOES NOT ALWAYS EXCUSE

*The Basic Idea*

You may be responsible for having an erring conscience. You are obliged to form your conscience. You must make the effort to know what is right and wrong.

*Responsibility for Having an Erring Conscience*

What caused you to have an erring conscience? – Ignorance of what is truly good and bad. Was it your fault that you were ignorant? – For this we must distinguish:



Aquinas's examples of ignorance and erring conscience:

- Someone thinks that he should commit adultery.
- Someone else thinks that he should sleep with this woman, thinking she is his wife, when in fact she is his wife's identical twin.

In the first case, erring conscience ("I have to commit this act of adultery") is no excuse for his act of adultery, because he could have and should have known that adultery is evil. In the second case, erring conscience ("I have to sleep with this woman") is indeed excused, because the man had no reason to believe that the person lying in his bed was not his own wife.

My own examples about ignorance:

- I drive 100 mph on the I-95. I did not know that in the United States there is a general speed limit. When I came to the U.S., I purposely did not study the traffic code, because I did not want to have any "bad surprises" (e.g. that in fact there is a speed limit).
- My brother drives 120 mph on the I-270, likewise not knowing that there is a speed limit – but he did not want to be ignorant; it simply did not occur to him that a country might have a general speed limit. (Although he is surprised that all the other cars are so slow!)
- My father drives 30 mph on Blair Road, because it is raining and he does not see the tiny, pale sign that is fixed to a tree, indicating 20 mph.

Each of us is stopped by the police. The police don't buy into my own and my brother's excuse, but they are lenient with my dad, because he claims that he could not have known that all of the sudden the speed limit decreases to 20 mph.

*What should you do if you have a doubtful conscience?*

Do not follow your doubtful conscience, but try to overcome the doubt by looking at the matter more carefully (cf. *ST* 1a2ae.19.6 ad 3). When your conscience is not doubtful, follow it.