WHY CONSCIENCE MAKES COWARDS OF US ALL:
A CLASSICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

In this article I attempt to clarify the association, often found in literature, between conscience and cowardice, by tracing the modern notion of conscience back to the σοβαρός word group in classical Greek literature. The two basically divergent ways in which the association was viewed by the ancient Greeks, and how these perspectives have persisted to modern times, are also briefly discussed.

1 Introduction

Oh! Conscience! Conscience! man's most faithful friend,
Him canst thou comfort, ease, relieve, defend;
But if he will thy friendly checks forego,
Thou art, oh! woe for me, his deadlest foe!1

Statements such as these reflect a strong tradition in Western literature which has a high regard for the significance of conscience in society's moral machinery. Originating in classical antiquity from sayings like the pseudo-Menandrian 'conscience is a god to all mortals',2 this tradition survived into modern times. One needs only to be reminded of common metaphors for conscience, such as 'that little spark of celestial fire', as George Washington once put it, or 'God's vice-regent on earth... a revelation of the being

2. Σπάνης εύμην ἡ σωφρόνες θέα, Men. Monast. 81 Jäkel. It is not impossible that this monostiche is genuine: personifying and deifying abstract terms are foreign neither to the Greeks in general nor to Menander in particular—see H.-J. Klauck, Alte Welt und neuer Glaube: Beiträge zur Religionsgeschichte, Forschungsgeschichte und Theologie des Neuen Testaments, Freiburg Schweiz 1994, 54. However, the degree in which σωφρόνες in this instance already functions as a technical term suggests it to be from a later stage of the word's development, see already M. Kähler, Das Gewissen: Ethische Untersuchung. Die Entwicklung seiner Namen und seines Begriffes. Erster, geschichtlicher Teil: Geschichtliche Untersuchung zur Lehre von der Begründung der sittlichen Erkenntnis. Erste Hälfte: Altertum und Neues Testament, Darmstadt [1878] 1967, 30.
of a god, a divine voice in the human soul, making known the presence of its rightful sovereign, the author of the law of holiness and truth.\(^3\) Though the influence of conscience seems to have dwindled considerably during the course of our century, the notion still wields enough moral power to be included in our own country's new constitution. The constitution affords us the consolation that we may not be unfairly discriminated against on the grounds of conscience, and that we have the right to—amongst other things—freedom of conscience.\(^4\) Apart from the obscurity of these references to conscience,\(^5\) we might also reflect on Mark Twain's observation concerning 'those three unspeakably precious possessions' in his country of origin: 'freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, and the prudence never to practise either of them'.\(^6\)

Conscience is a phenomenon which has not always had a fixed set of properties. It has often been mentioned that the double focus which is attributed to the modern notion of conscience, namely both prescribing future actions and condemning or approving actions of the past, is lacking in its classical counterpart. The classical concept was restricted to a retrospective aspect, or the so-called conscientia consequens.\(^7\) The concept might best be seen as a 'basket', which in ancient times at first contained only negative, but subsequently also positive evaluations of past actions alone. The absence of conscience's prescriptive or guiding function—the conscientia antecedens—in the ancient Greco-Roman world already betrays the fact that history added other (though related) ethical functions to the basket. The fact that various aspects have been conflated and ascribed to a single agent, must be regarded as the main reason why we so often find it difficult to reconcile our notion of conscience with its connotations in older literature. For instance: in the present abortion debate it has been advocated in some quarters that no laws are needed to regulate an issue which belongs essentially to the domain of the individual conscience. The

\(^3\) Attributed to Francis Bowen, in T. Edwards (comp.), The new dictionary of thoughts, U.S.A. 1963, 104.


\(^5\) Fairly elaborate explaining is needed to determine how one can be discriminated against on the grounds of conscience. It presumably means that if a person acts according to the dictates of his conscience, it may not be counted against him in some way or another. Or does it also include that if someone does not act contrary to the dictates of his conscience, his actions may not be held against him either? Both positions will, from a legal point of view, be difficult to defend.

\(^6\) M. Twain, Following the equator: A journey around the world. Vol. 1, New York 1899, 175.

notion of conscience underlying this position is rather difficult to reconcile with Hamlet’s reflections while contemplating suicide, that ‘conscience does make cowards of us all’. On closer analysis, it seems as if Shakespeare himself refers to but slightly misplaces a classical maxim. To be fair, conscience and cowardice as a pair are not altogether absent from modern literature; they ‘are really the same things’, says Oscar Wilde’s subversive Lord Henry Watton in The picture of Dorian Gray, conscience is simply ‘the trade-name of the firm’. But it was most probably the obscurity of the combination to the modern mind which caused H.H. Munro to refer to that most peculiar proverb of the English, that ‘conscience makes cowboys of us all’!

In modern literature, two distinct vantage points with regard to conscience can be discerned. I have made mention of the tradition in which conscience is highly regarded. Generally speaking, this perspective springs from moral idealism, and often regards conscience as the vox dei, the voice of God, in humankind. From this perspective, the dreaded consequences of transgressing the moral code—seen as the inevitable results of the so-called ‘bad’ or ‘guilty’ conscience—can only be avoided by living a pure, ethical life. There is, however, another perspective which may rightfully be called Nietzschean, and which sees those (still dreaded) symptoms of a guilty conscience as the result of repressive morality. Conscience is then taken as the vox populi, the unwarranted enforcement of public values on the individual where he is at his most vulnerable. ‘Don’t you see’, exclaims one of Luigi Pirandello’s characters, ‘that that blessed conscience of yours is nothing but other people inside you’.

Both these positions have their counterparts in the classical world, and they can indeed be clarified by investigating the uses of the σύνονδα word group in classical Greek literature. To these we shall now turn our attention.

8. W. Shakespeare, Hamlet Act 3, sc. 1,1,83.
9. Eg. explicitly in Men. fr. 632: ὅσαντικο四方 αὐτῷ πάντα καὶ τραγικά, ἡ σύνεσις αὐτῶν καθίστων εἶναι κατὰ ἀλήθειαν, also implicitly in descriptions of typical behaviour, such as Philo Placent. 153–160; Philost. VA 7.14.
12. L. Pirandello, ‘Each in his own way’ Act 1, in E. Bentley (ed.), Naked Masks: Five plays by Luigi Pirandello, New York 1952, 282. See also W.S. Maugham, The moon and sixpence, New York 1919, 61: ‘I take it that conscience is the guardian in the individual of the rules which the community has evolved for its own preservation’.
2 Σύνολο οντος: The linguistic development\textsuperscript{13}

Without going into any detail, attention will have to be given to those broad linguistic and conceptual developments which resulted—approximately at the beginning of the previous millennium—in the classical retrospective concept of conscience. It can be stated as a fact that, in Western languages, the words denoting conscience all evolved from the substantive forms of the Greek verb σύνολο,\textsuperscript{14} making the verb our most direct source of information about the notion's origins.

2.1 The substantive's earliest occurrence

The substantive form συνείδησις occurs for the first time in a fragment attributed to Democritus:

\begin{quote}

\text{ζητω θετησεις διάλευσω ουκ ειδότης ανθρωπον, συνείδησε τε της \epsilon\ η\ \tauω \ βιω κακοπαθησονης, τόν \tauης \βιοτης \χρόνον \εν \ταραχαις κα\ α\ φρο\ δο\ς \ταλαμωρο\ δια, \ψευ\ δει \πε\ το\ με\ τη\ τη \τε\ λε\ τη \μυ\ θολ\ πα\ στέ\ ντες \χρό\ νον}.

\end{quote}

Some people, ignorant of the decomposition of their mortal nature and because of the συνείδησις of detestable behaviour in life, spend their time being anxious and fearful, because of lies which they fabricate about the time after death.\textsuperscript{15}

In this passage the word does not refer to an inner entity. Democritus does not use συνείδησις in an absolute form, but adds to it an objective genitive to describe the content of the 'knowledge shared'. The early stage of the concept's development in the Democritean passage becomes clearer when its usage in this passage is contrasted with later occurrences of the word συνείδησις. In the following exhortation inserted into Dionysius of Halicarnassus' De Thucydide, the word clearly does refer to an inner entity:

\begin{quote}

\text{χρ\ α\ τι\ σου \ δε \ π\ αν\ τω \ το \ μη\ δε \ έκ\ ου\ ς\ \ ψευ\ δε\ ση\ ση\ η\ τη \ α\ ν\ το\ συ\ νε\ ι\ δη\ σιν}.

\end{quote}

Most important of all is never to lie voluntarily nor to defile your own συνείδησις.\textsuperscript{16}

\begin{flushright}
13. For surveys see Pierce (above, note 7), 21–28; 132–137; H.-J. Eckstein, Der Be
griiff Syneidesis bei Paulus: Eine neustamentlich-exegetische Untersuchung zum
della "con-scientia" nella Grecia antica, Roma 1970.

14. The English and French 'conscience' stems from the Latin conscientia, which
was probably formed analogous to the undoubtedly older Greek συνείδησις and
συνειδος. The German 'Gewissen' and the Dutch/Afrikaans 'geweten' were also
formed analogous to conscientia and are thus also morphologically dependent on
the Greek substantives.


\end{flushright}
Συνεδήσας seems to have acquired reference to a component of the soul by the first century B.C., when the introspective ethical preoccupations of the times fostered such a development. Comparing to later occurrences, it is clear that Democritus uses συνεδήσας in the sense of ‘being conscious of’. This usage is closer to the verbal phrases in which the verb σύνονοια occurs than to its later, absolute usage. Therefore, it can be argued that the meaning of the substantive in early Greek literature is closely bound to the meaning and connotations of the verb σύνονοια, especially when used in reflexive phrases. A survey of the word’s usage up to Philo of Alexandria confirms this conclusion.

Scholars differ, however, as to whether the substantive in the Democritus fragment functions as substitute for a non-reflexive σύνονοια-phrase (I know with others/others know with me) or for a reflexive phrase (I know with myself/they know with themselves). The context seems to favour a reflexive interpretation: Democritus criticizes—on the basis of his atomistic cosmology—those people living in fear of the punishment which, they believe, the gods will inflict on them after death. Their anxiety is caused by their own transgressions and their own awareness of them, not primarily by the fact that what they did is known to others or to the gods.

It may therefore be concluded that συνεδήσας in its earliest usage represents the reflexive verbal phrase. We may thus proceed to investigate these phrases in early Greek literature to establish the history of both the reflexive σύνονοια phrases and their substantive συνεδήσας.

2.2 The reflexive σύνονοια phrases: an outline of their history

The Greek verb σύνονοια occurs fairly commonly in texts from the classical era, and in a variety of combinations. Typically the σύνονοια phrases consist of three components, which may be schematized as follows:

σύνονοια + A + B

in which A is to be read with the prefix σύν and B as the object of the verb stem.

18. Cf. Paul’s usage of the word in the first century: Rom. 2:15; 9:1; 13:5; 1 Cor. 4:4; 8:7–12; 10:23–28; 2 Cor. 1:12; 4:2; 5:11. Interestingly, Philo consistently uses a qualifying genitive with συνεδήσας, e.g., Deter. 146; Spec. 2:49; Virt. 124.
19. For instance, in Heres. 6–7 Philo uses the substantive συνεδήσας in close proximity and obviously parallel to the (negated) reflexive phrase καταποιείν συνεδήσας.
The most obvious distinction to be drawn in the usages is between reflexive phrases (where σόνοια is accompanied by a reflexive pronoun) and non-reflexive phrases (where the ‘knowing’ is not shared with the subject of the verb, but with another person). Thus, A can be a reflexive pronoun (A (reflexive)) or indicate someone else (A (others)). As argued above, our interest lies in the former usage, as it is the reflexive phrase from which the substantive forms most probably developed.

The reflexive phrase seems to have come into popular usage during the latter part of the fifth century B.C., and quickly attained traits of a fixed expression with a more or less fixed number of typical components. Typically its three components were the following:

σόνοια + A (reflexive) + B (specific)

where B (specific) refers to some kind of transgression by the subject of the verb him/herself. When the phrase became a fixed expression, it was possible for B (specific) initially not to be explicitly indicated (thus becoming B (unspecific)), and finally even to be dropped altogether, without loss in semantic transfer. The partial expression σόνοια + A (reflexive) was in popular speech still able to conjure up the complete phrase in the mind of a mother-tongue language user.

From the extant textual evidence, the following general pattern emerges:

The complete reflexive phrase,

(i) *I know with myself that I have done something bad*

(eg. Eur. Or. 396: σόνοια [ἐμετρό] δειν’ εργασμένος),

sometimes becomes,

(ii) *I know with myself of something bad*


with which it is assumed that the ‘something bad’ was done by the subject of the verb.

Finally it may even become simply,

(iii) *I know with myself*

(eg. Isocr. Or. 1.16: μηδέποτε μηδέν αἰσχρόν ποιήσας ἔλπιζε λήσειν καὶ γὰρ ἰν τοὺς ἄλλους λάθης, σεσυμφω νευδέσεις),

in which, again, the complete reflexive phrase is assumed.

22. The significant increase in usage during the fourth century B.C. seems to indicate this trend: see Pierce (above, note 7), 132; Eckstein (above, note 13), 46; P.R. Bosman, ‘Pathology of a guilty conscience: The legacy of Euripides’ Orestes’, Acta Classica 36 (1993), 22 note 20.
2.3 The substantive συνείδησις: a parallel history

The use of the substantive developed along similar lines, though probably lagging behind the development of the verbal phrases: apart from the Democritus fragment, our earliest indisputable evidence of συνείδησις comes from the first century B.C. The (hypothetical) initial construction,

(i) the consciousness (shared knowledge) of something bad that I have done,

which assumes that the knowledge is shared by the person with himself, is abbreviated to,

(iiia) the consciousness of something bad

(eg. Diod. 4.65.7: διὰ τὴν συνείδησιν τοῦ μόσους εἰς μανάν περίνησση).

Sometimes the content of the knowledge is described with an adjective rather than with a genitive of the object, with the result that judgment of the content of consciousness is transferred to the nature of consciousness itself:

(iiib) the bad consciousness

(eg. Dion. Hal. Ant. 8.48.5: πάσης τ' ἁδίκου καὶ ἁνοσίου συνείδησις καθάρα).

Finally, all forms of description may be dropped altogether, leaving only the

(iii) consciousness/shared knowledge

(eg. Dion. Hal. Ant. 8.1.3: ἐκάτοτε δ' αὐτῶν ἡ συνείδησις),

but assuming the whole phrase.

When this last phase in the development had taken place, the possibility arose for the substantive to refer to some specific form of consciousness, some independent, almost personified inner entity or component of the soul. 'Consciousness' became an inner monitor, the so-called retrospective conscience. The Attic neuter participle, συνείδησις, is consistently used in this way by Philo, as is συνείδησις by Paul.

23. Dating the various Stobaius quotations and the Menander fragments is too hazardous an undertaking to be included in a history of linguistic development, while the Chrysippus fragment in Diog. Laert. 7.85.3-4 is suspect on different grounds, see M. Pohlenz, Paulus und die Stoer, Darmstadt 1964, 15 note 22.


25. Eg. Deut. 128. Philo uses the word 32 times in his extant writings, frequently uniting it with the noun ἔλεγχος into a syntagmatic unity', Klauck (above, note 2), 40.

3 Conceptual development

It cannot be denied that the substantive form took on a life of its own ever since it was regarded as a component of the soul which reacts to moral transgression. However, some aspects of meaning associated with the verbal phrases which preceded it were retained throughout the history of its conceptual development, even in our contemporary usages of the concept. To clarify the initial settings of these associations, we need to go back to the earliest conceptual stages of the later substantives, that is, to the usages of the verbal phrases.

3.1 Conscience as concept

When the conceptual nature of conscience is thoroughly taken into account, it becomes clear that the phenomenon is not something 'out there'. It is not a physical or some other type of entity independent of human cognitive processes, but rather a name tag attached to a common human experience. As mentioned above, a number of other features have in the course of time also become attached to the same tag. Therefore, conscience should be seen as essentially a product of our cognitive ordering of experience. The differences between our concept and that of the ancients consist precisely in differences of cognitive ordering. In order to explain the essential features of the ancient concept, the conceptual frame within which the σωνοδά word group featured needs to be described. Of course the conceptual frame in these early stages encompassed a number of other terms as well, such as the verbs συγγιγνώσκω and συμιστρέω. It also implicates various other factors, such as the cultural values of the era. It is not my intention to limit the conceptual frame in which the σωνοδά word group featured exclusively to this word group. But, as the later concept of conscience undoubtedly evolved by means of σωνοδά and its variants, our results will be the most accurate if we maintain our investigation within their proximity.

3.2 The ἐγκαταφύσεως

As a comprehensive description of such a conceptual frame falls outside our immediate purposes, an introduction to the most prominent aspect of the classical, pre-Hellenistic conceptual frame will suffice. This aspect will


be referred to as the παρρησία-topos. Unfortunately, for this period we have to rely almost solely on the evidence of the verbal phrases, because of the lack of occurrences of the substantive forms in the pre-Hellenistic era. It is significant, however, that the παρρησία-topos survived undiminished in the writings of Philo, Epictetus, Philostratus and other authors of the first centuries A.D.

The relation between παρρησία (frankness of speech, candour), and the σύνεδρον group of words is quite simple: in classical literature, ‘knowing something with yourself’ and having ‘free speech’ exclude one another. To support my argument, I will consider again a single example, namely from Euripides’ Hippolytus, lines 419-425. When Phaedra explains to the chorus why she would rather commit suicide than yield to her passion for her stepson, she offers as reason the shame such a deed would cause her husband and children: she would like them to continue flourishing in Athens as ἀλεθέροι, that is, as having παρρησία. For, Phaedra continues, however stout-hearted a person might be, he becomes a slave whenever he knows of something bad about his mother or father:

εἰς μέγα γὰρ αὐτῷ τοῦτ’ ἐποκτείνει, φιλά, ὡς μήποτε ἄνδρα τὸν ἐμὸν αἰσχύνασθαι ἄλω, μὴ παῖδας οὐς ἔτικτον ἄλλ’ ἐλεύθεροι παρρησία θάλλοντες οὐκοίν πολιν κλέισον Ἀθηνῶν, μητρὸς οἶνεκ’ εὐκλείσεις, δουλοῖ γὰρ ἄνδρα, καὶ τραβηγμολατρίχως τις ἵ, ὅταν ὑπειδή μητρὸς ἡ πατρὸς κακά.34

Being aware of something bad leads to loss of παρρησία, which in democratic Athens was placed on a par with acting like a slave, and therefore with


30. Ἐν. Prob. 99; Ἰο. 47; Ἱερ. 6–7.
31. Ἐν. Epict. 3.22.94–96.
utterly shameful behaviour. Barrett succinctly describes the cultural-psychological phenomenon as follows:

True freedom involves παρεξήγησις, free speech between equals ... Once let a man feel himself (for whatever reason) the inferior of others, and his tongue is tied for shame: his παρεξήγησις has deserted him with his self-respect, and he is no better than the slave who must be seen and not heard. When taking into account that the term παρεξήγησις was first used by Euripides at the end of the fifth century, and that what it refers to was very highly regarded as a democratic value, the link between conscience and cowardice again emerges. In fifth century Athens courage was required not only on the battlefield, but also as part of the inner-city democratic process: while the courageous hoplite had to possess soldierly abilities as well as the necessary inner strength to conquer the enemy, the democratic citizen had to have the skills and the inner strength to voice his views and even to try and persuade the demos. Thus παρεξήγησις was the intra-κόλας equivalent of ἀνόησις; not to possess either of them was regarded as a sure sign of cowardice. The particular cause for the loss of παρεξήγησις, namely 'knowing something with yourself', was consequently regarded as one of the primary sources of cowardice.

4 Conscience, cowardice, and fear: the anthropological origins

Maintaining the early Greek conceptualization, but taking it to a level less specifically bound to fifth century democracy, one may further elucidate the foundations of those common human experiences, which we have labelled the 'pangs of conscience'. The whole process of cause and effect in which the ἀνόησις phrases played their part, may be schematized as follows:

\[
\text{transgression} \rightarrow \text{inner disharmony} \rightarrow \text{outward vulnerability} \rightarrow \text{shame}
\]

We have already dealt with the latter two aspects, the loss of παρεξήγησις and the consequent bestowal of shame on such a person. These aspects were of course only the outward manifestations, the symptoms, of a particular state of mind that had this shamefully inhibiting effect on social interaction.

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37. See E. Craik, Euripides Phoenician women, Warminster, Wiltshire 1988, 193; Foucault (above, note 27), 7.
39. Cf. Lys. Or. 7.16.3; Dem. Or. 18.263.
The inward condition, on the other hand, was dominated by one emotion, namely fear. The kind of fear involved is not only that which can be rationally accounted for as the fear of being discovered, punished, and humiliated, or fear of the wrath of the gods, but also fear as a socially conditioned and therefore inevitable reaction that followed on consciously transgressing the moral code.40

It was exactly this sense of anxiety and emotional turmoil which the Greeks identified as the perilous source of shame and cowardice. They seem to have conceptualized this inner state analogous to the situation in the πόλει that was subject to στάσεις.41 It was common knowledge that, while disturbed by internal factions and lack of ὑμνόνεια, the ancient polis was at its most vulnerable.42 In the same way, the citizen experiencing inner turmoil suffered all sorts of anxieties, insomnia and even attacks of insanity, which hampered him in maintaining the prerequisites of social convention. Traditionally ascribed to the workings of the Furies,43 this state of mind and its symptoms were eventually seen as caused by reason itself. Reason was usually regarded as a ‘safe haven’ against the capricious behaviour of the passions and the lower parts of the soul.44 To keep the soul’s harmony intact was the main force behind the great ethical programmes of Hellenistic philosophy, which aimed at producing ideal states of mind such as γυγρατία, ἅμαρα and ὀπάθεια. In all of these ideal states, reason played the dominant part.45 That a condition of inner turmoil could be directly linked to what was usually regarded as refuge from inner turmoil, made this particular condition all the more threatening.

What exactly causes this particular state of inner disharmony? In the above reconstruction of the conceptual frame an act of transgression is taken as igniting energy. This in turn involves recognising the particular act as a transgression, and having to live with the knowledge that a transgression has been committed. The essential nature of what is called a transgression involves two opposing factors: on the one hand, the deed as an accomplished fact; on the other, the moral code, compounded by the individual’s knowledge that his/her deed deviated from what is considered

42. Antiph. fr. 44a; Xen. Mem. 4.4.16; Lis. Or. 18.17.
good and right. These two factors can further be broken down to the
two basic forces driving human behaviour: self-interest and communal
restraints. The primary instinct of self-preservation and self-interest often
constitutes the automatic reaction in a specific situation, and sometimes
comes into conflict with the secondary, not always successfully engraved
societal instincts, those values required from the individual to live in
relative harmony with his neighbour.

In defining conscience as a product of the tension between primary and
social instincts in humankind I find myself not only in the distinguished
company of Charles Darwin, but also in the midst of the φυσις-νόμος
antithesis debate in the sophistic and philosophical circles of the late fifth
and fourth century B.C. The philosophies of the fourth century tried
to resolve the antithesis—as far as that is possible—by integrating νόμος
into φυσις in a variety of ingenious ways. Plato, for instance, claimed that
the axes of φυσις and νόμος converge in the metaphysical realm, while the
Stoics maintained that the social virtues are aligned to the νόμος φύσεως,
the universal pattern of the cosmos and its rational ordering principle. Of
course there were even in antiquity those critical of morality as a whole,
mostly the radical upholders of φυσις. One of its most forceful advocates
was, paradoxically, a Platonic character: Callicles, that ‘most intimate
enemy’ of Plato, because in him Plato saw the true challenge to his
idealism. Callicles claims that all rules of society are part of a plot of the
weak majority to curb the natural passion and aggression of the strong;

πλάτοντες τούς βελτίστους καὶ ἐρρομενεστάτους ἡμῶν αὐτῶν, ἐκ
νέων λαμβάνοντες ὅπερ λέοντας, κατεπάθοντες τε καὶ γορτεύοντες
καταδουλομεθαλέγοντες ὡς τὸ ἱσον χρῆ ἐχειν καὶ τοῦτό ἑστιν τὸ
καλὸν καὶ τὸ δίκαιον. ἕν δὲ γε ὁμία φύσιν ἰσαν χεν γένηται ἐγὼν ἀνήρ,
πάντα ταύτα ὑποσειδόμενος καὶ διαφρήσας καὶ διαφυγόν, καταπτήσας
τὰ ἡμέτερα γράμματα καὶ μαγγανύματα καὶ ἐπόδες καὶ νόμους τοὺς
παρὰ φύσιν ἅπαντας, ἐπαναστὰς ἀνεφάνη δεσπότης ἡμέτερος ὁ δούλος,
καὶ ἐναύθα ἔξελαμψεν τὸ τῆς φύσεως δίκαιον.

We mould the best and strongest amongst us, taking them from their
infancy like young lions, and utterly enthral them by our spells and
witchcraft, telling them the while that they must have but their equal

46. C. Darwin, The origin of species by means of natural selection. The descent of
47. The antithesis is perhaps most comprehensively discussed in W.K.C. Guthrie, A
history of Greek philosophy Vol. 3: The fifth century Enlightenment, Cambridge
1969, 55-134. See also F. Heinimann, Nomos und Physis: Herkunft und Bedeutung
einer Antithese im griechischen Denkens des 5. Jahrhunderts, Basel 1965; H.
Koster, "ψυχικά κτιλ". ThWNT 9 (1973), 254-256.
share, and that this is what is fair and just. But, I fancy, when some
man arises with a nature of sufficient force, he shakes off all that
we have taught him, bursts his bonds, and breaks free; he tramples
underfoot our codes and juggleries, our charms and 'laws', which are
all against nature; our slave rises in revolt and shows himself our
master, and there dawns the full light of natural justice. 49

Callides found one of his most loyal soul-mates in Friedrich Nietzsche,
who regarded the bad conscience as a serious malady which humankind
contracted when it became part of society:

Ich nehme das schlechte Gewissen als die tiefe Erkrankung, welcher
der Mensch unter dem Druck jener gründlichsten aller Veränderungen
verfallen musste, die er überhaupt erlebt hat—jener Veränderung,
as er sich endgültig in den Bann der Gesellschaft und des Friedens
ingeschlossen fand. 50

To conclude: humanity seems destined to bear the tension between being
mere ζητον and being ζητον πολιτευον. Despite endeavours such as that of
Erich Fromm to domesticate the Nietzschean impulse into a 'humanistic
conscience', 51 humankind seems irredeemably to linger at the cross-roads,
always hesitating whether to follow the high ethical road or to submit to
the pull of the low one. Conscience reduces us to cowards, not only when we
have neglected our social instincts, but also by the very act of hesitating
in our moral choices. These choices still involve trying to evade the pangs
of conscience and the resultant inner disintegration, either by strictly
following the dictates of conscience or by destroying or deconstructing the
morality of which it is a function.

50. F. Nietzsche, 'Zur Genealogie der Moral', in K. Schlechta (Hrsg.), *Nietzsche: Werke
in drei Bänden*, 2. Bd, München 1962, 824. On the relation Callicles–Nietzsche, see
Dodds (above, note 40) 387–391.
1947, 141–172.
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