

## FOLLOW YOUR CONSCIENCE? A COMPARISON OF AQUINAS AND ARENDT

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### **Abstrak**

*Apakah kita harus selalu mengikuti suara hati kita? Melalui studi atas karya-karya Aquinas dan Arendt, makalah ini hendak menunjukkan bahwa suara hati semata tidak memadai untuk mencapai tindakan yang benar. Sesudah menyimak kesaksian Eichmann di pengadilan, Arendt mempertanyakan konsepsi tradisional tentang suara hati sebagai suara Tuhan dan pemandu moral yang pasti. Di sisi lain, Aquinas, seorang pemikir tradisional yang secara sistematis menulis tentang suara hati, tidak melihat suara hati sebagai suara Tuhan atau pemandu moral yang nirkekeliruan. Baginya, suara hati adalah putusan akal budi manusia saat menerapkan pengetahuan moral pada tindakan konkret. Maka, suara hati dapat keliru akibat kurang pengetahuan atau pengaruh tabiat buruk, sehingga membutuhkan topangan keutamaan moral, terutama kebijaksanaan praktis (prudentia), yakni keutamaan rasio praktis yang mengarahkan kehendak dan yang memungkinkan seseorang menentukan tindakan terbaik dalam situasi kompleks. Bagi Arendt, suara hati adalah produk sampingan dari aktivitas berpikir yang menilai kebenaran tindakan kita. Karena berpikir itu merupakan suatu dialog batin yang subjektif, suara hati membutuhkan 'pertimbangan' (judgment), yakni kemampuan menilai tindakan dari pluralitas perspektif orang lain dalam diskusi publik. Alhasil, prima facie, kita harus selalu mendengarkan suara hati kita, tetapi tidak tanpa refleksi kritis dan kebijaksanaan praktis.*

**Kata kunci:** suara hati, synderesis, Arendt, Aquinas, kebijaksanaan praktis, pertimbangan.

**Abstract**

*Should we always follow our conscience? Through a close reading of the works of Aquinas and Arendt, this paper argues that conscience alone is insufficient for determining right actions. After witnessing Eichmann's trial, Arendt questioned the reliability of conscience as traditionally understood. Traditionally, conscience is considered the voice of God and an infallible moral compass. Aquinas, a traditional thinker, developed a systematic theory of conscience. However, Aquinas does not view conscience as the voice of God or an infallible moral guide. Rather, conscience is an act of reason applying moral knowledge to particular actions. Consequently, conscience is fallible and must be supplemented by moral virtues and prudence (*prudentia*). Prudence is the practical wisdom that guides the will and helps one discern the best course of action in specific circumstances. For Arendt, conscience is a byproduct of thinking that evaluates one's actions. Since thinking is an inner dialogue, conscience is subjective and requires judgment—namely, the capacity to evaluate actions from others' viewpoints through mutual debate and enlightenment. In conclusion, *prima facie*, we must always listen to the voice of our conscience, but not without critical reflection and prudence.*

**Keywords:** *conscience, synderesis, Arendt, Aquinas, prudence, judgment.*

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**INTRODUCTION**

Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) is very critical of the traditional notion of conscience as an inner moral guide, the voice of God in the human mind, that infallibly leads people to do good. Arendt summarizes the traditional notion as follows: “conscience... supposedly is always present within us, just like consciousness... is also supposed to tell us what to do and what to repent of; it was the voice of God before it became the *lumen naturale* or Kant's practical reason” (1971: 444). In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), Arendt reveals how unreliable conscience is because under a totalitarian regime, one's conscience can be easily manipulated and distorted. Human conscience failed to prevent the 20<sup>th</sup> century's greatest crimes against humanity. Eichmann did have a conscience, but now,

according to Arendt, “it spoke with a ‘respectable voice,’ with the voice of respectable society around him” (1963: 126). Eichmann’s conscience merely reflected the voice of his Nazified German society.

Interestingly, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), a traditional thinker who provides the most detailed treatment of conscience, does not view conscience as the infallible voice of God but rather as an act of human practical reason. As such, conscience is not immune to error. According to Aquinas, conscience can make incorrect decisions because it depends both on the general principles of *synderesis* as the major premise and the specific knowledge provided by reason as the minor premise. If reason provides incorrect information, then the conscience’s decision will also be incorrect (*Scriptum super libros Sententiarum* [Sent.] II d.24, q.2, a.4)<sup>1</sup>. Conscience can also err due to the influence of passions or bad habits, causing one to perceive what is bad as good. Furthermore, even if the conscience is correct, one’s actions may be wrong if they lack moral virtues and strong will, causing them to choose the opposite of what the conscience suggests (Sent. II d.39. q.3, a.2).

This paper addresses the following question: If human conscience is fallible, as Arendt and Aquinas claim, should one always follow one's conscience? Thus far, little research has compared Aquinas’s and Arendt’s notions of conscience. Additionally, existing research does not specifically address the issue of the fallibility of conscience. Miceli Stout (2017) focuses more on the role of conscience in politics according to Aquinas and Arendt. Meanwhile, Serpe (2017) and Fisogni (2022) address evil as an existential void in the philosophy of Aquinas and Arendt, only briefly mentioning conscience. Other studies focus solely on the concept of conscience in either Arendt or Aquinas, without drawing comparisons. For instance, Wu (2022) only discusses the

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<sup>1</sup> It refers to *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, Book II, Distinction 24, Question 2, Article 4.

misjudgment of conscience in Aquinas, and Giertych (2024) investigates the relationship between conscience, free choice, and prudence in Aquinas's moral philosophy. Cain (2025), on the other hand, recently compared Arendt's concept of talkative conscience with Heidegger's concept of silent conscience. Thus, a lacuna remains in the comparison between Aquinas's and Arendt's notions of conscience, which this paper aims to address.

This paper uses a qualitative method—namely, a library study of the works of Aquinas and Arendt that discuss conscience—to analyze the similarities and differences between Aquinas and Arendt's concepts of conscience. The paper will focus on the fallibility of conscience and its binding force. It argues that *prima facie*, one should listen to one's conscience. Nevertheless, conscience alone is insufficient for moral behavior. Based on Aquinas's writings, this study emphasizes that conscience must be accompanied by moral virtues and prudence (*prudentia*) to function properly. Prudence transforms moral knowledge into wise and effective action by considering relevant circumstances and consequences. Although Aquinas's prudence involves docility, or the willingness to learn from others, it is fundamentally individual. In her later works, including *The Life of the Mind* (1978), Arendt understands conscience as a byproduct of thinking. By "thinking," she means a silent "dialogue between me and myself, in which I am both the one who asks and the one who answers" (1978, 185). As such, conscience is too individual and prone to error; so, Arendt reminds us of the importance of critical thinking and judgment. Judgment is the capacity to "think in the place of everybody else" (1993, 221), meaning the ability to consider multiple perspectives when making a decision. The paper concludes that one must always listen to one's conscience, but not without prudence and proper judgment.

The first section will begin with an outline of Aquinas's core ideas about conscience and then discuss some causes of an erring conscience. It will explain his distinction between *synderesis* and *conscientia*. Then, it will demonstrate why *synderesis* cannot err,

while *conscientia* can. The second section will examine Arendt's perspective on conscience and explain why Eichmann's conscience was flawed. Under a totalitarian regime, morality can revert to its original meaning as a mere set of *mores*—that is, the customs accepted by a society. Since Eichmann's conscience merely reflected society's prevailing standards of good and bad, it could not be a reliable moral guide. For Arendt, conscience should be a byproduct of thinking. Eichmann's thoughtlessness coincided with a disastrous failure of his conscience. Since Aquinas places great importance on prudence, and Arendt assigns a crucial role to judgment in making moral decisions, the third section will compare Aquinas's prudence and Arendt's judgment. In *Summa Theologiae* (ST) II-II, q. 47, a. 2 co.<sup>2</sup>, Aquinas describes the virtue of prudence as one's capacity to apply universal moral principles to specific situations. Arendt's judgment, however, is not private but rather a public and relational enterprise. It involves evaluating particular actions by imagining other perspectives and considering their broader implications, rather than merely applying fixed moral rules.

## DISCUSSION

### 1. Aquinas: *Synderesis* and Erring Conscience

Thomas Aquinas talks about conscience in several of his writings: *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum* (Sent.), *Quaestiones disputatae de Veritate* (DV), *Quaestiones de quodlibet I-XII* (Quodl.), *Summa Theologiae* (ST), and *In Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos* (In Rom.). Conscience as we understand it today, according to Aquinas, consists of two parts: *synderesis* and *conscientia*. Neither *synderesis* nor *conscientia* is a separate faculty of the soul because both are functions of reason. *Synderesis* is an innate habit consisting of

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<sup>2</sup> It refers to *Summa Theologiae*, Part Two of the Second Part, Question 47, Article 2. *Summa Theologiae* is divided into several parts: I, I-II, II-II, and III. In all Aquinas's oeuvres "co." means "corpus," the body of the article, that is Aquinas's own response to the question. "ad" means Aquinas's "replies to the objection". Thus, ad1 means replies to the objection 1.

knowledge of the first principles of practical reason, which are self-evident (*per se nota*). *Conscientia* is the act by which reason applies moral knowledge to a specific case.

In Aquinas's view, human beings are naturally oriented toward what is good, or that which perfects their being. He refers to this orientation as natural inclinations, which include the tendencies toward basic goods such as self-preservation, procreation, education, and the desire to know the truth and live in society. Human beings pursue these goods as their ends in accordance with reason. According to Aquinas, "every agent acts for an end under the aspect of good" (ST I-II, q.94, a.2 co.). If someone pursues evil, it is because they mistakenly believe it is good for them (*sub specie boni*). *Synderesis* is a habitual knowledge of the first principles of practical reason, that is, the first precept of natural law: "Good is to be done, and evil is to be avoided." In this way, *synderesis* always inclines humans to do good. Other principles known through *synderesis* include "one must live according to reason" and "nothing illicit should be done" (DV q.16, a.1 co.).<sup>3</sup> These principles are tacitly presupposed in practical reasoning and are made explicit only upon reflection.

As a natural habit, *synderesis* is still raw and general and thus in need of further education, order, training, and practice (Miceli Stout 2017: 76). In other words, in the process of practical reasoning, the moral principles known through *synderesis* are formal principles, not concrete moral norms. Everyone formally knows that they must pursue the good, but what the good is and how to act on it concretely must be determined further by reason. As knowledge of formal or universal principles, *synderesis* never errs. If an error occurs in judging particular acts, it must be because *conscientia* makes a mistake while drawing a conclusion about what is good to do. Aquinas writes,

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<sup>3</sup> It refers to *Disputed Questions on Truth*, Question 16, Article 1, in the body of the article.

In human actions, there must be some permanent principle which has unwavering integrity, ... that permanent principle will resist all evil and assent to all good. This is *synderesis* whose task is to warn against evil and incline to good. Therefore, we agree that there can be no error in it ... *Synderesis* never falls down in a general principle, but error happens in some application of a general principle to some particular case because of a false deduction, or because of a false assumption ... *conscientia*, which applies the general judgment of *synderesis* to particular matters, can err (DV q.16, a.2 co.).

Hence, *synderesis* cannot err or be extinguished, because, for Aquinas, *synderesis* is a habitual light that permanently and formally orients human beings toward the good.

Aquinas clearly states, "*Synderesis* does not err in itself, but, in a sense, errs in conscience (*conscientia*)" (DV q.17, a.1 ad1). Conscience derives from *cum-scire*, meaning "to know together" (*simul scire*). It does not denote a special power or habit, but rather, "it is an application of the first law, namely, of the general principles, to particular acts" (Sent. II d.39, q.3, a.2 ad3). Therefore, conscience differs from *synderesis* and natural law. Natural law refers to the universal principles of law itself. *Synderesis* designates the habitual knowledge of these principles. Conscience refers to the act of applying these universal principles to a particular situation. In Aquinas's view, practical reasoning proceeds in a syllogistic manner. *Synderesis* provides the major premise. Although *synderesis* is formally a habit and not an act in Aquinas's account, it is a natural habit (*habitus naturalis*) whose essential character is to furnish the intellect with universal practical principles (ST I, q.79, a.12). These principles, as propositional outputs of *synderesis*, are legitimately employed as major premises in the practical syllogism (Hoffmann, 2012: 257-8; Cuddy, 2021: 123). Reason provides the minor premise, which is particular knowledge (*notitia*) regarding the case in question. Ultimately, "consideration of the elicited conclusion is the consideration of conscience" (Sent. II d.24, q.2, a.4). For example:

*Synderesis* : Every evil should be avoided.

Reason : Adultery is evil because it is unjust and ignoble.

Conscience : This act of adultery is to be avoided.

Conscience may err due to [1] the influence of bad habits, [2] the influence of pleasure or emotion, or [3] a false premise (assumption) or induction, i.e., when reason is deceived or lacks necessary information (Sent. II d.39, q.3, a.1; DV q.17, a.2). Good habits (virtues) lead to a correct conscience, while bad habits (vices) lead to an erroneous conscience. For example, according to Aquinas, a womanizer who has a bad habit of having sexual relationships with multiple women falls short in judging the end because he judges that taking pleasure in a woman is the essential good (Sent. II d.39, q.3, a.1 ad4). Bad habits or vices are ingrained dispositions of the soul that incline the person towards evil, believing that evil as a good for him. Formed through repeated act of sin, bad habits make it harder to choose the good and easier to perform those sinful acts. In other words, conscience can be “oppressed by some habit so that it does not follow the light of *synderesis* in making decisions” (DV q.16, a.3 co.).

Aquinas also argues that the conscience can be mistaken because it is engrossed by an emotion or passion (Sent. II d.39, q.3, a.2 ad5). For example, when hate absorbs reason, the universal judgment of *synderesis* may not be applied to the particular act when making a conclusion. Another way that error can occur is because of an error in reason, which can result in an error in conscience. For instance, one may be mistaken about the civil norms of what is just or unjust, or good or bad (DV q.17, a.2 co.). Aquinas provides an example of someone who comes from a culture that mistakenly thinks that some foods are unclean. Because this is common practice for them, their conscience erroneously judges it as unlawful (In Rom. ch.14, l.2, n.1118)<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> It refers to *Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, Chapter 4, Lesson 2, Number 1118.

Aquinas differentiates between the judgment of conscience (*iudicium conscientiae*) and the judgment of choice (*iudicium liberi arbitrii*). “Both conscience and choice are a kind of conclusion about a particular act to be done. But conscience is a conclusion of knowledge alone, while choice is a conclusion of affect” (Sent. II d.24, q.2, a.4, ad2). The judgment of conscience is purely cognitive (*cognitiva*) rather than affective (*affectiva*), so that it is not directly concerned with the inclinations to act (Wu, 2022: 277). The cognitive and affective components work simultaneously and not sequentially in the judgment of choice (Giertych 2025: 408). In Aquinas’s words, “the judgment of free choice consists in the application of knowledge to the inclination of the will” (DV q.17, a.1 co). It may happen that the judgment of conscience—at the level of knowing—is correct, yet the judgment of free choice—at the level of willing—goes astray. This typically occurs in an incontinent person who actually knows what is good to be done, but chooses to do the opposite instead. In this case, the incontinent person errs in choice, not in conscience: “he acts against conscience and is said to do this with an evil conscience” (DV q.17, a.1 co). His conscience is correct, yet he voluntarily chooses what is bad. For Aquinas, one sins when one intentionally acts contrary to one’s own conscience, since to do so is to act in defiance of one’s own rational apprehension of the good (ST I-II, q.19, a.5 co.).

What about an erroneous conscience? If one’s conscience errs in determining what is good to do, is it still binding? According to Aquinas, since the will only desires an object insofar as it is apprehended and proposed by reason, an erring conscience still binds the person. He explains,

For conscience is a dictate of reason. Now, the will is only moved to desire something presupposing some apprehension, for the object of the will is good or evil insofar as it is imagined or understood. Hence, ... the will’s act must proceed in accord with the judgment of reason and conscience. And conscience is said to bind in this way: if someone willingly flees what

reason dictates is a good, there is flight from the good, and this flight is an evil... Likewise if reason said that something good is an evil, the will cannot tend to it without being an evil will. For it tends to it as shown by reason, and it tends to it as to an evil simply due to an apparent good. Thus, whether reason or conscience judges rightly or not, the will is bound in such a way that if the will's act does not follow the judgment or dictate of reason, which is conscience, it is disordered (Sent. II d.39, q.3, a.3).

Aquinas further explains that while a right conscience binds simply and essentially, an erroneous conscience binds only incidentally and in a qualified sense. An erroneous conscience binds incidentally in that a person with a false conscience believes it is correct; otherwise, he would not be mistaken. He "clings to his false conscience because of the correctness he believes is there" (DV q.17, a.4 co.). An erring conscience still binds because "when a false conscience says that something must be done, it commands this under some aspect of good, either as a work of justice, or temperance, and so forth" (DV q.17, a.4 ad9).

In contrast to Arendt (1972: 63-4), who holds that conscience only functions negatively by saying "This I can't do" or "I'd rather suffer than do it," Aquinas believes that conscience also functions positively by prescribing moral obligation. Prospectively, conscience acts as a directive of action, dictating that something should be done. Conscience is said to prod (*instigare*), urge (*inducere*), or bind (*ligare*) (DV q.17, a.1 co.). Retrospectively, by examining things that have already been done and considering whether they are right, conscience is said to [1] accuse (*accusare*) or cause remorse (*remodere*) when what has been done is found to be out of harmony with the knowledge by which it is examined or [2] defend (*defendere*) or excuse (*excusare*) when the act was right (DV q.17, a.1 co.). Conscience's ability to examine and judge is possible because it stands as a witness (*testificari*) to whether or not we have done something.

Can an erring conscience excuse one from an evil act? According to Aquinas, the answer depends on whether the person can be held responsible for the erring conscience. Aquinas distinguishes between vincible and invincible ignorance. If one has been negligent in forming his conscience or has wanted to remain ignorant of right and wrong, then his erring conscience does not excuse him. This is vincible ignorance because he could form his conscience by collecting necessary information about the matter and the prevailing moral norms. "Ignorance of the law does not excuse from sin unless, perhaps, it is invincible ignorance, just as with the mad and insane, which altogether excuses" (Quodl. III, q.12, a.2 ad.2)<sup>5</sup>. In vincible ignorance, one is to blame for the misinformation or lack of information. Aquinas writes, "When a man sins in making the error itself, an erroneous conscience is not enough to excuse him. This is the case when he makes a mistake about things which he is required to know" (DV q.17, a.3 ad4). Conversely, one is excused for an erring conscience if the error occurs due to invincible ignorance of particular circumstances and without any negligence. In this case, ignorance causes the act to be involuntary. Aquinas gives the example of a man who has sexual intercourse with a woman he believes to be his wife, but who is actually not his wife. In this case, the man is not responsible for his ignorance (DV q.17, a.3 ad4, ST I-II, q.19, a.6).

However, it should be noted that if our conscience erroneously concludes that we should commit an act of fornication, we are only subjectively bound to that act as long as the mistaken judgment remains (DV q.17, a.4 co.). The act of fornication itself is still objectively wrong and harmful. Bad actions—even if we mistakenly believe them to be good—never perfect the human person or society because only good actions promote human flourishing (Cuddy 2021: 129). That notwithstanding, God has implanted *synderesis* in us, which always inclines us toward goodness and truth. Our

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<sup>5</sup> It refers to *Quodlibetal Questions*, Volume III, Question 12, Article 2, Reply to Objection 2.

intellect is not indifferent to truth. For this reason, an erroneous conscience binds us only in a qualified way. Why? Because an erroneous conscience can be corrected and the error removed. Although the human intellect can err in a given instance, it never loses its orientation toward truth. The human intellect cannot stop seeking the truth.

What does it mean to correct one's erring conscience? Typically, one is unaware of the mistake in one's conscience; otherwise, it would not be erring. This might happen when one's erring conscience has become a doubtful conscience (Hoffmann, 2012: 262). Note that this dilemma only occurs in cases of vincible or voluntary ignorance. If one doubts whether the voice of one's conscience is in harmony with moral norms, one can reassess one's knowledge of the required moral norms. More importantly, one can seek advice from others, especially the wise in the community. The formation of the conscience's contents and judgments often requires the assistance of others. For example, in his commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans, Aquinas talks about members of the Christian community whose consciences mistakenly believe that eating certain foods violates God's law. Aquinas comments that the members of the community whose consciences guide them correctly are obligated not to engage in offensive behavior toward those with erroneous consciences. Rather, they must inform the latter while continuing to act in accordance with their correct consciences (In Rom., ch.14, l.2, n.1121).

## **2. Arendt: Eichmann's Faulty Conscience**

Arendt's reading of Augustine influenced her understanding of the traditional concept of conscience. In her dissertation on Augustine's concept of love, she wrote, "Conscience is of God and has the function of pointing to the Creator rather than to the creature" (1996: 84). According to Augustine, man's tendency to sin is not primarily caused by lust, but by worldly habits that mislead and ensnare man. Humans no longer listen to God, but in Augustine's thought, have become mesmerized by "another's

tongue" (*aliena lingua*), i.e., the language of the world. "Conscience speaks in ourselves against this alien tongue... and puts human beings *coram Deo*, in the presence of God" (1996: 84). If a man lives according to worldly habits, he is alienated from his true self and from God. To Augustine, "Conscience directs man beyond this world and away from habituation. As the voice of the Creator, conscience makes man's dependence on God clear..." (1996: 84). From this reading, Arendt infers that the conscience is traditionally understood as the voice of God and thus infallible.

Arendt's observations of Eichmann's behavior during his trial in Jerusalem led her to question the traditional concept of conscience. As a bureaucrat, Eichmann was responsible for sending thousands of people, including mothers and children, to concentration camps. Arendt notes that "his conscience functioned in the expected way for about four weeks, whereupon it began to function the other way around" (1963: 95). In September 1941, Eichmann organized his first shipment. He sent twenty thousand Jews and five thousand Gypsies not to Russian territory, where they would be shot dead instantly, but instead sent them to the Lodz ghetto. His conscience apparently urged him to save their lives. The turning point came three weeks later at the Wannsee Conference, which the Third Reich organized to appease the German people's consciences. At that conference, the most prominent people spoke about the Final Solution of the Jewish people. Eichmann did not find anyone who opposed the Final Solution. He said, "At that moment, I sensed a kind of Pontius Pilate feeling, for I felt free of guilt" (1963: 114). Arendt notes that "His conscience was indeed set at rest when he saw the zeal and eagerness with which 'good society' everywhere reacted as he did" (1963: 126). If everyone else is doing the same thing, why should he feel guilty?

In short, the Final Solution to eliminate the Jews was further elaborated into regulations and directives drafted by expert lawyers and legal advisors. The Führer's order was then treated as a new law of the land. As a good citizen, Eichmann abided by the law and understood very well that he not only obeyed orders but also

obeyed the law. For Eichmann, “the words of the Führer posit the law” (*Führerworte haben Gesetzkraft*). He claimed to follow Kantian imperative categories, which, in this case, would be mistakenly interpreted as, “Act as if the principle of your actions were the same as that of the legislator of the law of the land.” (1963: 136) Eichmann knew that, for Kant, a law was a law, and there could be no exceptions. For this reason, from that moment, everything “went more or less smoothly and soon became routine. He quickly becomes an expert in ‘forced evacuation’” (1963: 114). He did not need to feel anything at all. Sending thousands of Jewish people to concentration camps became his daily routine, a habit. Thus, his conscience, which is traditionally supposed to keep man vigilant against worldly habits, remained silent. “Eichmann was troubled by no question of conscience. His thoughts were entirely taken up with the staggering job of organization and administration” (1963: 277).

Eichmann did not actually lose his conscience; rather, it was distorted by legalized practices that became a habit because of indoctrination or totalitarian ideology implemented by the Nazi regime. Now, his conscience only echoes the voice of the “good society” around him. Indeed, Eichmann’s conscience reflected only the behavioral standards of his society. His conscience, as Villa Dana (1999: 45) rightly points out, conflates morality with legality. His conscience is not completely silenced, as it continues to tell him what his duty is: to abide by the law of the land. The regime made murder a law, a legal—and, for Eichmann, moral—obligation. Arendt notes that, until the end of the war, Eichmann was very law-abiding. “It was not his fanaticism, but his conscience, that prompted Eichmann to adopt his uncompromising attitude during the last year of the war” (1963, 146).

The Nazi regime was ingenious in exploiting the fears and sense of inferiority of German citizens to garner their support. They obtained citizen support through policies and laws that appeared legitimate. In such a situation, the conscience—traditionally understood as the yardstick for determining right from wrong and believed to be a God-given moral compass—could no longer be

relied upon. The organization of sending people to concentration camps became normal and did not raise questions or disturb conscience. As Arendt writes, “This normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together.... [Eichmann] commits his crimes under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong” (1963: 276).

In Eichmann, Arendt discovered that evil does not require wickedness. Eichmann is not demonic or monstrous, but rather an ordinary officer. In her later works, Arendt argued that our ability to discern right from wrong is connected to our ability to think. It was not Eichmann’s evil intentions, but rather his thoughtlessness, that led him to commit evil acts (1971: 418; 1978: 4). His lack of thinking made him a conformist who easily complied with the standards of right and wrong upheld by his society. As a result, his conscience was co-opted and corrupted by society (Vetlesen 2001: 13). For Arendt, Socrates is a model of a thinking person. Socrates never stops asking questions, and in this way, thinking interrupts all doing and ordinary activities, no matter what they happen to be. Through thinking, Socrates questions all established criteria, values, and measurements of good and evil—in short, all customs and rules of conduct (1971: 433). As a thinking person, Socrates’ *daimonion* (conscience) warns him against easily conforming to societal standards lest he contradict himself. Thus, in Arendt’s latter works, her model of conscience changed from an Augustinian one (traditional) to her own version of the Socratic model (Petherbridge, 2016: 2).

In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt states that for the thinking ego, he is not only for others, but also for himself. Thus, the essence of thought is a *two-in-one* that conducts a soundless dialogue between him and himself. Thinking happens in solitude, and Arendt explains it this way:

It is this *duality* of myself with myself that makes thinking true activity, in which I am both the one who asks and the one who answers. Thinking can become dialectical and critical because

it goes through this questioning and answering process, through the dialogue of *dialegesthai*, ... The criterion of the mental dialogue is no longer truth... The only criterion of Socratic thinking is agreement, to be consistent with oneself, *homologeîn autos heautō*; its opposite to be in contradiction with oneself, *enantia legeîn autos heautō* (1978: 187-88).

Therefore, in thinking I am in dialogue with myself, and this happens when I don't drift into the crowd—*das Mann* in Heidegger's language—or do not get caught up in worldly habits. Instead, I come home to my dialectical consciousness. The partner of this soundless dialogue is myself, the other me within myself. This partner can be either a friend or an adversary. For example, if I were to commit a murder, I would live with a murderer within myself. According to Socrates, "it is better to be at odds with the whole world than, being one, to be at odds with myself" (2003: 105). This is why Socrates says it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong. If I am wronged, I live in harmony with my inner self, i.e., my partner within myself. Conversely, if I commit a wrongdoing, I contradict myself, and thus, I am at odds with myself because I live with an adversary, a wrongdoer, within myself.

For Arendt, conscience is a byproduct of thinking. She observes that, in all languages, the original meaning of conscience is not a faculty of knowing and judging right from wrong, but rather what we now call consciousness. Even today, the French language has only one word, *conscience*, which refers to both conscience and consciousness. It was only with the rise of Christianity that conscience gained its moral character and was distinguished from mere consciousness. "Conscience acquires its specific moral character only when it is understood as an organ through which man hears the word of God rather than his own words" (2003: 89). Now, at a time when people no longer believe in eternal rewards or punishments, Arendt wants to discuss conscience in secular terms. For this reason, she turns to pre-Christian philosophy. In Socrates,

Arendt found a promising concept of conscience as a byproduct of human thinking. She defines conscience as follows:

For the thinking ego and its experience, conscience that 'fills a man full of obstacle' is a side effect. No matter what thought-trains the thinking ego thinks through, the self that we all must take care not to do anything that would make it impossible for the two-in-one to be friends and live in harmony... Its criterion for action will not be the usual rules, recognized by multitudes and agreed upon by society—[unlike Eichmann], but whether I shall be able to live with myself in peace when the time has come to think about my deeds and words. Conscience is the anticipation of the fellow who awaits you when you come home (1978: 191).

Thus, for Arendt, conscience is not the voice of God; rather, it is the voice of man. It is the voice of the self-directed toward the self in the process of thinking.

Arendt's understanding of conscience differs from the traditional conception. Traditionally, it was assumed that "every sane man carried within himself a voice that tells him what is right and what is wrong, and this regardless of the law of the land and regardless of the voices of his fellowmen" (2003: 61). In the religious tradition, acting against one's conscience is considered a sin because it is disobeying God, who is considered the origin of the voice of conscience. Subsequently, in Kant's concept of autonomy, which liberates morality from religion, conscience threatens a wrongdoer with self-contempt. In the case of Socrates, according to Arendt, conscience threatens with self-contradiction. "Unlike the voice of God within us or the *lumen naturale*," writes Arendt, "this conscience gives no positive prescriptions—even the Socratic *daimonion*, his divine voice, only tells him what not to do" (1971: 444). Conscience operates negatively in that it does not tell one what to do; rather, it says, "You *cannot* do this." Conscience has no obligatory character because it does not say, "This I *ought not* to do," but rather, "This I *cannot* do" (200: 78). Conscience does not urge one to act but rather

holds one back from bad actions that would lead to self-contradiction. Arendt says, “These are the rules of conscience... They do not say what to do; they say what *not* to do” (1972: 63-64).

In popular conception, conscience is a feeling or knowledge about right and wrong. For Arendt, however, conscience is not a feeling, but a form of thinking. Arendt acknowledges that people experience guilt or innocence in their conscience. However, she warns that “these feelings are not reliable indications, are in fact no indications at all of right and wrong” (2003: 107). She argues that people can also feel guilty for following a new order that goes against old habits. Therefore, these feelings only indicate conformity or non-conformity; they do not indicate morality. In secular terms, Arendt claims that when one experiences conflicts of conscience, one experiences “nothing but deliberations between me and myself. They are not resolve through feeling but through thinking” (2003: 108). Thinking unfreezes frozen thoughts by questioning the established criteria, values, and measurements of good and evil—that is, all existing customs and rules of conduct (1971: 433).

In sum, since conscience is a byproduct of thinking, according to Arendt, it is not always present and cannot determine “the good” once and for all. Rather, it only speaks out in boundary situations or when special emergencies arise (2003: 104). By questioning unexamined opinions such as values, doctrines, theories, and convictions, conscience dissolves accepted rules of conduct. Accordingly, conscience can prevent someone from doing the same bad things everyone else does. This is precisely why Eichmann’s conscience errs: he does not think, because everyone around him is doing the same thing. His conscience is at peace because he does not question existing rules of conduct, but rather complies with them, believing he is just doing his rightful duty.

**Table 1.** Comparison of Aquinas’s and Arendt’s Concepts of Conscience

Aspect	Aquinas’s Conscience	Arendt’s Conscience
Nature of Conscience	An act of practical reason that uses the universal moral	A byproduct of thinking, i.e., is an inner dialog with

Aspect	Aquinas's Conscience	Arendt's Conscience
	principles of natural law to judge whether a particular action is right or wrong.	oneself, that occurs when one "goes home" to his private self and evaluates his actions.
<b>Source of Conscience</b>	Derived from eternal law and human reason, mediated through natural law that is knowable by all humans.	Arises from the individual's inner voice, influenced by his experiences and socio-historical context.
<b>Function of Conscience</b>	An inner witness that retrospectively evaluates the righteousness of one's actions, thereby excusing, accusing, or tormenting; prospectively it tells one what should be done, thereby inciting or binding someone.	As a "two-in-one" relationship with oneself, it distinguishes right from wrong and holds one accountable for their actions; it does not tell positively what to do, but only tells negatively what <i>not</i> to do (prohibition).
<b>Moral Force</b>	It binds and obligates the person even when it makes a mistaken judgment.	It has no obligatory force, since it does not say "This I ought not to do," but rather, "This I <i>can't</i> do".
<b>Fragility</b>	Its judgment can be erroneous due to ignorance, negligence, or the influence of passions or bad habits.	Without critical thinking, it can easily be co-opted and corrupted by an ideology or external authority.

### 3. Aquinas's Prudence and Arendt's Judgment

According to Aquinas's moral theory, conscience alone is insufficient for moral behavior. While all human beings have the natural light of *synderesis*, which always orients them toward the good, only those who cultivate the virtue of prudence can eventually have a right conscience (Sultana, 2012: 2). It is only in modern times that the centrality of conscience has replaced the centrality of prudence. In Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, prudence (*prudentialia*) lies at the center, coordinating the moral life (Ryan, 2022: 1). Prudence is the virtue of practical wisdom that enables one to apply general moral principles to particular situations. Prudence includes several capabilities: memory, understanding of first principles, docility, shrewdness, discursive reasoning, foresight, circumspection, and caution (ST II-II, qq. 48-49). In a prudent

person, these capabilities work together to enable effective deliberation (thinking carefully about the options available), sound judgment (deciding the best course of action), and proper execution of decisions. Therefore, prudence encompasses more than conscience (Hoffmann, 2012: 259). A person's conscience only operates at the cognitive level. With conscience, one knows what good to do or what evil to avoid. It considers and determines the goodness of an action, but it cannot actually perform a good action since human action requires more than knowledge alone.

Prudence takes moral knowledge from the abstract and applies it to concrete action. "It is necessary for the prudent man to know both the universal principles of reason, and the singulars about which actions are concerned (ST II-II, q.47, a.3)." The prudent person not only discerns what is true, but considers what is good in specific circumstances, and acts accordingly. In other words, conscience considers what constitutes goodness, while prudence discerns the circumstances and the necessary means to achieve it through effective action. Unlike the incontinent person, the prudent person's affections and passions are ordered with the help of other moral virtues, such as temperance, fortitude, and justice (Hoffmann, 2012: 259). Thus, the prudent person not only *knows* what is good, but also *loves* and eagerly *does* what is good in accordance with the relevant circumstances. "It belongs to prudence to apply right reason to action, and this is not done without right appetite (ST II-II, q.47, a.4)." The prudent person's passions and will have been trained to align with right reason (*recta ratio*). In sum, while judgment of conscience ends in an understood "ought," the judgment of prudence ends in actually doing what ought to be done (Cuddy, 2021: 127).

In Aquinas, the judgment given by conscience, whether right or wrong, always has a binding force. A false conscience always obliges, no matter why it is false, and acting deliberately against the judgment of conscience is wrong. The prospective conscience, which directs action, is subject to error yet endowed with a force of obligation. For this reason, according to Aquinas, one is responsible

for ensuring that one's conscience is rightly formed. By developing the virtue of prudence over time and through experience, one becomes virtuous and less likely to be a victim of a false conscience. A prudent person is characterized by docility, willing to listen to those more experienced (*ab alio erudiri, et praecipue ex senibus*) before determining a course of action (ST II-II, q.49, a.3). The conscience tells him what action is good, while prudence finds the means to bring the judgment of conscience into action in a way that is wise, proportionate, and fitting way for the specific circumstances, and, in this sense, prudence is right conscience accomplished (Ryan, 2022: 9).

For Aquinas, "because the individual good is impossible without the common good of the family, state, or kingdom," prudence "regards not only the private good of the individuals, but also the common good of the multitude" (ST II-II q.47, a.10). Aquinas calls the prudence directed toward the common good political prudence (*prudentia politica*). However, Aquinas does not further explain how political prudence works. In contrast, Arendt's concept of judgment is political by nature, since her human subject is always a situated subject to the extent that "when one judge, one judges as a member of a community" (Arendt, 1992: 72). Arendt claims that judgment is a political ability because it is "the ability to see things not only from one's own point of view but from the perspectives of all those who happen to be present... as it enables him to orient himself in the public realm, in the common world" (1961: 221). And she claims that this ability is what the Greeks called *phronesis*. The term *phronesis* was later translated into Latin as *prudentia*.

Arendt did not actually develop a systematic account of judgment. *The Life of the Mind* was intended to explore the three faculties of the mind—thinking, willing, and judging—but Arendt only wrote about the first two before her death in 1975. Some commentators have attempted to reconstruct her conception of judgment based on her other works, including *Thinking and Willing*, *Kant's Lectures on Political Philosophy*, *Between Past and Future*, and

“Thinking and Moral Considerations.” In these works, Arendt attempts to blend Aristotelian *phronesis* with Kantian aesthetic judgment. She developed two distinct models of judgment (d’Entrèves, 2006: 368): [1] one based on the standpoint of the actor (judgment as the faculty of the *zoon politikon* acting in the public realm), and [2] one based on the standpoint of the spectator (judgment as the faculty through which a spectator derives meaning from the past actions).

Like Aristotle, Arendt conceives of judgment as “the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly” (1978: 193). As a member of a political community, one employs judgment to tell right from wrong when navigating the public realm of intersubjective meanings. Judgment enables the political actor to consider which objectives are most appropriate or worth of pursuing and which course of action to take in the public sphere. Similar to Aristotle’s *phronesis*, Arendt’s judgment concerns particular actions or events in their specific circumstances, without subsuming them under general rules (1978: 193). However, whereas *phronesis* is the privilege of a few experienced individuals (*phronimoi*), who have shown themselves to be wise in practical matters over time, Arendt, drawing inspiration from Kant’s aesthetic judgment, argues that judgment can be exercised by all political beings insofar as they are able to think representatively—that is from the standpoint of everyone else—so that they can look at the world from different perspectives. For one’s judgment to be valid, one must transcend one’s subjective conditions in favor of intersubjective ones. As with judgments of taste, the validity of one’s judgment depends on the consent of the community of differently situated subjects (d’Entrèves 2006: 380). Arendt writes:

The validity of these judgments never has the validity of cognitive or scientific propositions ... (If one says, “The sky is blue” or “Two and two are four,” one is not “judging”; one is saying what is, compelled by the evidence either of one’s senses or one’s mind). Similarly, one can never compel anyone

to agree with one's judgments—"This is beautiful" or "This is wrong"... one can only "woo" or "court" the agreement of everyone else. And in this persuasive activity one actually appeals to the "community sense." In other words, when one judges, one judges as a member of a community (1992: 72).

Arendt invokes Kant's notion of "enlarged mentality" (*erweiterte Denkungsart*), which allows one to think from the standpoint of others. This capacity is called "thinking representatively." Arendt emphasizes the importance of reflective judgment, or the ability to consider particulars in their particularity and without subsuming them under a pre-given universal, but rather actively searching for the universal within the particulars. This type of judgment is that of the spectator, for whom imagination and community sense (*sensus communis*) are of vital importance. Imagination is the capacity to represent objects that are no longer present, and in this way, the spectator can create the necessary distance to reflect on different perspectives and arrive at an impartial judgment. The capacity to appeal to community sense is also crucial because it enables the spectator to overcome their individual idiosyncrasies and share in the judgments of others. For Arendt, "enlarged mentality" is a *conditio sine qua non* of right judgment. She writes, "One's community sense makes it possible to enlarge one's mentality... Private conditions condition us; imagination and reflection enable us to *liberate* ourselves from them and to attain that relative impartiality that is the specific virtue of judgment" (1992: 73).

With the well-known expression of "banality of evil," Arendt wants to emphasize that the enormity and unprecedentedness of Nazi totalitarianism have destroyed our accepted moral and political standards of judgment. Nevertheless, we have not lost our capacity for judgment. "Even though we have lost yardsticks by which to measure, and rules under which to subsume the particular, a being whose essence is beginning may have enough of origin within himself to understand without preconceived categories and

to judge without the set of customary rules which is morality" (1953: 391). In the face of the collapse of traditional moral and political standards, we can turn to our imagination and community sense, so that we can view things from different perspectives and judge them autonomously without the benefit of pre-given universal rules. Obviously, the validity of one's judgment should be tested publicly through a process of mutual debate and enlightenment. This did not happen with Eichmann, who was marked by an "almost inability ever to look at anything from the other fellow's point of view" (Arendt, 1963: 48). He had no ability to imagine the situation from a different perspective or to think critically about the time and place in which he found himself. He failed to judge correctly, and thus he followed his false conscience.

For Arendt, judgment is the counterpart of conscience. "Both faculties relate to the question of right and wrong, but while conscience directs attention to the self, judgment directs attention to the world" (d'Entrèves 2006: 373). As mentioned earlier, conscience is a byproduct of thinking. A silent dialogue between me and myself (the two-in-one), thinking dissolves fixed habits and accepted rules of conduct. In this way, thinking paves the way for judging the particulars without relying on pre-established universals. Thinking liberates one from frozen categories and conventional standards of valuation, allowing individuals to judge for themselves instead of being carried away by the opinions of the majority or common habits. Arendt says that judgment is the "byproduct of the liberating effect of thinking" (1978: 193). While conscience is the product of an inner dialogue with oneself (the "two-in-one"), through which one subjectively evaluates one's actions, judgment is an outward-facing act of evaluating actions based on reflection and consideration of different viewpoints. Conscience is a passive and inward sense of moral discomfort when the two-in-one is no longer in harmony. Judgment, by contrast, is an active and outward-looking process of moral and political evaluation.

At this point, we can compare Aquinas's prudence with Arendt's judgment. It should be noted that they come from different

historical, cultural, and philosophical backgrounds, as well as the different aspects of human life they address. Aquinas works within Christian theology, while Arendt writes in a secular, existential, and political context. Aquinas defines prudence as an intellectual virtue that guides a person to act according to reason and the ultimate good by applying moral knowledge to specific situations. Arendt defines judgment as the ability to think and decide reflectively about what is right and what is wrong in the context of human plurality, respecting particulars and considering others' perspectives. Thus, while Aquinas's prudence uses a "top-down" approach, applying reason to particular circumstances, Arendt's judgment uses a "bottom-up" approach, taking into account the plurality of perspectives.

While Aquinas's prudence may involve consulting others (docility), it is fundamentally an individual intellectual virtue. It does not emphasize a plural perspective; rather, it is more concerned with an individual's capacity to discern the best course of action in accordance with reason and moral principles. In contrast, Arendt's judgment takes place in the public sphere, where individuals present their viewpoints and engage in genuine discussion and mutual debate. Judgment is a collective process involving imagination and an understanding of situations from others' perspectives. Prudence aims for certainty and clarity in moral decision-making. It ensures that one's actions align with virtue and are in harmony with the natural law. Thus, prudence is intrinsically tied to morality and is teleological in the sense of guiding individuals toward their ultimate good—union with God. Conversely, for Arendt, judgment does not seek certainty and embraces ambiguity, given that political life is unpredictable and full of diverse views. Instead, judgment involves navigating the public realm and engaging with others, often without moral certainty or clarity. Arendt's concept of judgment is more existential because it concerns living in the world with all its complexities and contradictions, without a transcendental goal in mind.

Despite their differences, both Aquinas's prudence and Arendt's judgment involve rational deliberation. Both require reflection and engagement with specific situations rather than the mechanical application of general rules or abstract principles. Both concepts are action-oriented. Aquinas's prudence leads to virtuous action that contributes to a good life, while Arendt's judgment leads to political action in the public realm.

**Table 2.** Comparison of Aquinas's and Arendt's Concepts of Prudence

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>Aquinas's Prudence</b>	<b>Arendt's Judgment</b>
<b>Definition</b>	A virtue of practical reason that enables a person to apply universal moral principles to particular actions in accordance with moral virtues and after deliberating over relevant means and circumstances.	An ability to reflect and to tell right from wrong that involves "enlarged mentality" in the sense of considering others' viewpoints and the particularities of situations.
<b>Relation to Morality</b>	Intrinsically moral, for it organizes several human capacities and aims at achieving the ultimate good in accordance with moral virtues and natural law.	Not inherently moral, since it focuses on navigating multiple perspectives and making decisions in a world of uncertainty.
<b>Role of Deliberation</b>	Involving careful deliberation of options to discern the best course of action in a specific situation.	Involving reflective thinking, considering diverse perspectives before making a decision.
<b>Private vs Public</b>	Despite involving willingness to acquire opinion from those who are more experienced, it is primarily an individual virtue that guides personal moral decisions.	Involving consideration of others' viewpoints and exchange of opinions, judgment is primarily public and is exercised in political and social contexts.
<b>Relation to Conscience</b>	Conscience requires prudence to ensure that its judgment is correct and can be applied effectively to particular circumstances.	As a byproduct of inner dialogue, the validity of conscience is subjective. Judgment is the counterpart of conscience through which one intersubjectively evaluates one's action.

## CONCLUSIONS

Should we always follow our conscience? Yes, *prima facie*, everyone must follow their conscience, insofar as it is properly formed and critically examined. According to Aquinas, the conscience is the application of reason to concrete situations, grounded in an innate understanding of moral principles (*synderesis*). However, because the conscience can be erroneous due to ignorance, false beliefs, or bad habits, it must be educated in the moral law and strengthened by virtues—especially prudence (*prudentia*), which enables sound judgment about relevant circumstances and the effective pursuit of the good. If it is poorly formed (e.g., based on false beliefs), the conscience can lead a person to make immoral decisions, even if they believe they are acting morally. Arendt makes a similar point when she says that conscience alone is too fragile and isn't enough to make a moral decision, since it can be shaped by social pressures, political indoctrination, or unexamined assumptions, as illustrated by the case of Eichmann, whose failure to think critically led to grave wrongdoing. Thus, while the conscience is binding, reflective judgment should accompany it—an “enlarged mentality” that considers diverse perspectives and the broader consequences of one's actions—so that moral decisions are both personally sincere and publicly responsible.

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