

The Conscience's Lens on Ethical Decision Making in a Pluralistic Society

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This paper explores the role of conscience as a central lens through which individuals navigate moral dilemmas in such a complex environment (Pluralistic society) and also the study highlights how conscience enables individuals to remain authentic to their values while engaging empathetically with others. **Method:** The paper used carefully reading as source of information and secondary data guided by the research theory of "W.D. Ross's theory of prima facie duties" as a suitable guide in decision making in a pluralistic society where there are different beliefs, views, perceptions, ideologies, and culture. **Results:** It has been found that decision making based on utility, deontological (duty-based decisions), and teleological (end results-based decisions) does not foster ethical decisions that are both personally authentic and socially inclusive. **Novelty:** The study concludes that conscience should be treated as a vital, context-sensitive guide that grounds personal integrity while remaining open to public critique. Also, the study recommends that individuals must cultivate reflective conscience through moral education, exposure to diverse perspectives, and practices of humility and accountability for ethical decisions in a pluralistic society.

INTRODUCTION

Conscience is the internal moral faculty that evaluates actions and intentions as right or wrong. It integrates personal values, social norms, empathy, and practical reasoning to produce moral judgments and motivate behaviour. *Ethical decisions* are choices made when actions affect the well-being, rights, or values of others and must be judged by moral principles. They require weighing duties, consequences, virtues, and relevant norms to determine what ought to be done [1]. A *pluralistic society* is a political and social order in which multiple cultural, religious, ethnic, and ideological groups coexist with mutual recognition and legal protections, allowing diverse ways of life, beliefs, and practices to participate in public life and *The Theory of Prima Facie Duties*, articulated by W.D. Ross, holds that we have several morally significant obligations such as fidelity, reparation, gratitude, justice, beneficence, non-maleficence, and self-improvement.

The bold phrase of conscience's lens on ethical decision making is entitled to human nature as the criterion of value. The experience of the goodness and badness of the action of man in decision making is the criterion of what is true to himself rather than objective goodness and badness of an action. The nature of one's conscience births the pathway, perspective or framework through which man count on making ethical decisions in a society with diversities [2]. Conscience's lens suggests that one's conscience acts as guiding mechanism, shaping how a person interprets situations and determines what is wrong or right. In the context of ethical decision-making conscience's lens is influenced by personal experiences and beliefs, customs and traditions, values, cultural background

and religious doctrines, dogmas and teachings, allowing individuals to navigate complex moral dilemmas, especially in diverse or pluralistic society [3].

In a pluralistic society, ethical decision making unfolds against a backdrop of diverse belief systems, cultural traditions, and moral philosophies. Individuals no longer share a single, overarching moral authority; instead, they navigate a landscape where multiple, and often conflicting, values vie for legitimacy [4]. This environment challenges decision makers to consider not only the immediate consequences of their actions but also the myriad perspectives that define what is deemed right or wrong. By recognizing the plurality of values at play, one can appreciate how conscience operates as an internal compass, steering choices through moral complexity rather than relying on a singular doctrine or external mandate [5]. The study examines the role of conscience as a path or guiding lens for ethical decision-making, since conscience gives both inner sense of what is good or bad, right or wrong, correct or incorrect and intuitively authoritative judgments about the moral quality of an action regardless of the situation or diversity facing the actor. In many cases individuals often encounter conflicting values and beliefs that challenge their moral frameworks.

The conscience exists as a mediator between general law and a specific action. The judgement that we experience when we elevate our actions in order to ascertain whether they are right or wrong is called moral conscience, because at this point no one else can make this judgement for person. It is up to he himself, this judgement also involves comparing the act with the moral and one's final goal [6]. We know that the human being lives not with the satisfaction of what he already is but rather in the hope of that he ought to become and therefore, there is an ethical dimension or discipline in which a person shows that his life is a path towards his own fulfilment as a person. So, conscience is the light that orients and guides the person along this path of one's fulfilment, Warning, guiding or directing the person to perform the acts that helps him to achieve his dignity and not to perform acts which destroy it [7].

Viewing ethical dilemmas through the lens of conscience involves deploying multiple moral frameworks such as deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics to enrich one's deliberation. Deontological insights highlight duties and rights that must be respected regardless of outcome, consequentialist reasoning draws attention to the broader impact of choices and virtue ethics encourages cultivation of moral character and practical wisdom [5]. Together, these theories provide conscience with a robust toolkit for evaluating complex scenarios, prompting decision makers to ask not only "What do I value?" but also "Which values deserve precedence when they collide?"

Fostering an ethically vibrant pluralistic society depends on a conscientious commitment to empathy, open dialogue, and humility. Empathy broadens the conscience's gaze, allowing us to inhabit others' perspectives and recognize shared humanity. Open dialogue invites critique and collaboration, enabling collective refinement of values. Humility keeps conscience vigilant against bias and overconfidence [8]. Through this triad, conscience evolves from a private judge into a communal beacon,

guiding us toward decisions that honour diversity while forging meaningful moral solidarity beyond our individual boundaries.

Therefore, this paper explores the role of conscience as a vital internal compass, guiding individuals through ethical complexities in a pluralistic society. It enables people to navigate moral dilemmas by integrating personal values with respect for diverse perspectives. While conscience may be shaped by culture, religion, and experience, it must remain open to dialogue and reflection. In pluralistic settings, ethical decision-making demands balancing individual convictions with collective well-being. Ultimately, conscience fosters responsible choices that honour both personal integrity and societal harmony.

RESEARCH METHOD

The main method used in the collection of information is a careful reading as a key method of accessing secondary data because it involves examining information that has already been collected, analysed, and published by others. This method makes the researcher to read books, academic journals, government reports, newspapers, or online articles as the way of engaging with data that was originally gathered for different purposes. This makes reading a powerful tool for building background knowledge, identifying trends, comparing findings, and supporting new research without the need to collect fresh data [9]. Since secondary data is often readily available and covers a wide range of topics, reading allows a researcher to efficiently tap into existing knowledge and apply it to their own questions or hypotheses as I did in this paper..

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this study the related theory is “**W.D. Ross’s theory of prima facie duties**” which is a pluralistic ethical framework that argues moral decision-making is guided by multiple, self-evident obligations rather than a single overarching principle. These duties such as fidelity, justice, beneficence, non-maleficence, gratitude, and self-improvement are considered binding unless they conflict with one another, in which individuals must use moral judgment to determine which duty is most pressing in the situation (Ross, 1930). Ross emphasized that these duties are known through moral intuition and are not absolute; they are “prima facie,” meaning they hold unless overridden by a stronger duty.

Historically, Sir William David Ross was born in 1877 and died in 1971. He was a Scottish philosopher and Aristotelian scholar best known for developing a pluralistic form of deontological ethics. In his influential book *The Right and the Good* (1930), Ross introduced the idea of prima facie duties moral obligations such as fidelity, reparation, gratitude, justice, beneficence, non-maleficence, and self-improvement [10]. This theory play a great significance in this research as it allows for flexibility and context-sensitive reasoning, making it especially useful in complex moral landscapes where competing values must be weighed for better choices to be made.

Theory began to gain traction in the early 20th century, particularly in Britain within the analytic philosophical tradition at Oxford, where Ross taught and served as a leading

academic figure [10]. While initially overshadowed by utilitarian and Kantian ethics, his framework has since been widely discussed in moral philosophy, especially in contexts that value common-sense morality and the balancing of competing obligations in pluralistic societies and it is still valid and dependable up to dates as it helps in ethical decision making from the conscience's approach.

In this study W.D. Ross's theory of prima facie duties offers a uniquely contribution in decision making under the central role of conscience in a pluralistic approach, where individuals hold varying beliefs, values, and cultural norms. Unlike monistic theories that prioritize a single moral principle such as utilitarianism's focus on utility or Kantian ethics' emphasis on duty Ross's framework acknowledges that moral life is inherently complex and multifaceted [8]. Ross's theory thus provides a flexible yet principled foundation for ethical decision-making, one that honours both the complexity of moral life and the diversity of conscience in a pluralistic world.

The Role of Conscience in Ethical Decision Decisions in a Pluralistic Society

Conscience functions as an internal moral compass that sense the difference between right and wrong. It draws on a person's upbringing, principles and reasoned judgments to produce moral emotions such as guilt, shame or integrity that motivates or deter actions. Conscience guides ethical decision making by prompting reflection before action, spotlighting overlooked consequences and prioritizing duties or virtues. Some of the spotted roles of conscience that helps in ethical decision making in person's life regardless of the societal settings are as follows.

Examination of Conscience in Decision Making

Examination of Conscience generally is a contemplative practice that consists in examining daily actions. Examination of conscience play a significant role in increasing person's sensitivity that is the ability to judge one's action (good or bad, right or wrong, correct or incorrect) and efficiency, that is subjective sensitivity with respect to certain level of task performance [11]. Conscience in this regard initiate the process in which the general norms of the moral law are applied to a concrete action by an individual through moral assessment of what is to be performed or has been performed. It tells the person what is his obligation in an action or responsibility of the past acts (praise or blame).

The practice of examining one's conscience starts as an intimate pause an active, honest audit of values, fears, desires, and commitments. In a pluralistic society, where we're constantly buffeted by competing worldviews, this inward turn anchors decision making in principles that feel genuinely ours. By tracking how we respond emotionally and morally to different scenarios, we sharpen our awareness of where we tend toward prejudice or self-interest [5]. That self-scrutiny builds the capacity to distinguish gut reactions born of habit from convictions that withstand critical reflection.

Examination of Conscience is not the work of reason because conscience is not mere reason since reason apply only the laws to concrete situations. Therefore, considering conscience as a mere reason will mean that persons with sharpest intellect ought to posses the best conscience while it is not the case. Reason alone is not sufficient to explain the strong elements of an emotional nature connected with judgements of conscience [12].

Conscience is not identical with the power of the will because man may will and do what is against his conscience.

Conscience is the place where a person is called to carefully do what is right and avoid what is wrong as a moral obligation of his existence. Examination of conscience brings an awareness and knowledge to go into action when the morality of concrete line of conducts is to be judged [13]. Conscience in this sense is defined as an ultimate, practical judgement on the morality of a concrete action commanding to do what is good and to avoid what is evil.

This inner work also cultivates humility. When we routinely subject our intuitions to questioning, why do I feel disturbed by this action? Whose interests am I privileging? we become conscious that our conscience, while powerful, is fallible. In a context of diverse beliefs, that humility keeps us from dogmatism. We learn to hold our convictions lightly enough to reconsider them when presented with arguments grounded in other traditions or lived experiences [5]. The habit of conscientious review thus primes us for genuine dialogue rather than debate aiming to "win."

Generally, in shaping the culture of a pluralistic society and social change, decisions informed by an examined conscience tend to strive for the common good rather than narrow advantage. Leaders who ground their choices in a disciplined inner audit are more apt to translate religious or philosophical convictions into arguments about human dignity, equity, and sustainability values that resonate across faiths and philosophies. In doing so, they model how deeply held beliefs can enrich pluralistic debate without trampling dissent [13]. The ongoing practice of conscience examination thus becomes both a safeguard against moral myopia and a bridge to collective flourishing.

Synderesis in Ethical Decision-Making

Synderesis refers to the innate habit of the human intellect that grasps the first principles of moral action, such as "good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided." Rooted in medieval scholastic thought and prominently articulated by Thomas Aquinas, it functions as an almost instinctive orientation toward fundamental moral truths. This inner faculty provides the groundwork for ethical reasoning by supplying self-evident major premises from which concrete judgments can be drawn. This is the elementary ground and nucleus of conscience (Peschke). It is the habitus of the ultimate moral principle which are not reducible to principles still more basic and are immediately perceived by the practical understanding.

The most universal principle of synderesis is that the good must be done and evil must be avoided. according to Bonaventure the synderesis is not only the perceptive faculty but a faculty with volitive qualitative which inclines and urges a person to accept the known good and realize it, therefore both perceptive and the volatile must be attributed to synderesis. Synderesis together with the practical moral knowledge that develop and is acquired under the impulse of synderesis constitutes the habitus of conscience (Peschke). The habitus is the presupposing and source of the practical judgments and dictates which tell a person his moral obligation in the concrete situation.

In *summa theologica* Aquinas explained *synderesis* as a knowledge of first principles or an innate habit of thinking. So, we have an innate desire to do good and avoid evil. *Synderesis* is not a power but a habit, it is not a reason but a nature within man. We know that speculative reason argues about speculative things and practical reason argues about practical things the first speculative principles bestowed on us by nature belong to a special habit which is called the understanding of principles given us by nature and it is called *synderesis* which induce us to do good and avoid evil [14]. In pluralistic settings, agents must supplement their instinctive grasp of good and evil with empathetic engagement and cross-cultural understanding, ensuring that universal moral orientations take concrete, respectful, and inclusive form.

According to Aquinas, *synderesis* is the habit that yields those universal premises often framed within natural law that guide every person's basic moral compass. He likens *synderesis* to "the law of our mind," furnishing the self-evident first principles needed for practical syllogisms in moral deliberation (Rhonheimer). While intellect furnishes first principles for theoretical reasoning, *synderesis* does the same for practical reasoning, ensuring that everyone shares a common set of foundational truths before applying them to particular situations [14]. Decision making should account for both intuitive and reflective processes that is *synderesis* and conscience respectively in order to attain that which is good for man and the society at large. When our decisions account for both *synderesis* and conscience some of the speculative principles or precepts which are deeper and non-negotiable and helpful in concrete decision-making.

In a pluralistic society marked by divergent beliefs and cultural norms, *synderesis* serves as a unifying bedrock. By positing an inborn capacity to recognize fundamental goods such as honesty, justice, and benevolence. It offers interlocutors from different traditions a shared starting point for ethical dialogue (Rhonheimer). When various communities appeal to this universal instinct, they can more readily negotiate conflicts by returning to those precepts that transcend cultural particularities. In many cases and situations concrete choices on doing good and avoid evil or bad should be triggered by self-evident and spontaneous obligation [14]. Explicit cultivation of *synderesis* that is the understanding of first principles brings about self and direct awareness of what should be done and what should be avoided at effect because it provides an internal compass in our choices. Concrete choices should be made in situations where corruption, injustices and injuries is eminent through the role of education and moral formation as crucial processes on activating the implicit guidance of *synderesis* without excusable neglect of ignorance (Peschke).

Conscience Function as a God's Voice

The voice of God is that inner dialogue often draws upon prayerful stillness, reflection on sacred texts, and the gentle convictions of the heart. In these moments, God's voice isn't experienced as a booming decree but as the whisper of peace or disquiet, guiding a person toward actions that align with deeply held values of love, justice, and mercy. According to St. Augustine conscience is the divine centre of a person where man assess the voice of God commanding him to do good and avoid bad. It is also called the

spark of the soul or peak of the soul where man encounters [15]. The inner voice is understood by many as the silent narrator that participates in daily decision guiding, berating and reflecting. Inner voice influences ethical judgements, personal choices and practical reasoning. It is also understood as a God-given interior monitor that bears witness to moral law.

Inner voice appears as the ability of discerning morality and the person with health conscience has the ability to discern quality and good choices, have spiritual well being. A person with unhealth conscience, a seared or corrupt conscience align to moral decay as a result of poor decision making of what is good and what is bad. Maintaining a clear conscience vial reflection, meditation and continuous alignment to what is really good and what is really bad helps the inner voice to be qualitatively good as an instrument of good choices and spiritual discipline [16].

The inner voice operates as both a compass and a council offering subjective truth grounded through experience, society or culture, religion and personal reasoning. Also inner voice can bring sound ethical decision when there is an exercise of spiritual discipline such as prayer, meditation and moral reflection as practised in religion and wisdom traditions, refine and clarify the inner voice aligning it with universal values. Inner voice can be shaped and refined by experience, culture, reasoning and faith. It is the cornerstone of sound ethical judgement, resilient, personal choice and practical wisdom on how to choose and do good in the society.

God's voice shapes the moral imagination of faith communities, helping them interpret current challenges against the backdrop of longstanding traditions. Congregations, mosques, temples, and other spiritual forums become laboratories of discernment where scriptures, rituals, and communal wisdom interact. When believers step into the public square, the role of God's voice must negotiate the diversity of worldviews that pluralism entails [17]. In this way, God's voice enriches civic discourse without trampling the pluralistic commitment to religious freedom and mutual respect.

The role of God's voice in decision making within a pluralistic society is both a gift and a responsibility. It offers individuals and communities a transcendent horizon that inspires courage, compassion, and hope. Yet it also demands humility, humility to be held accountable by one's peers, to engage in interfaith dialogue, and to translate divine promptings into actions that serve the entire human family [18]. When believers embrace this dual mandate listening intently and acting justly, they ensure that the voice they discern not only shapes their own lives but also contributes to the flourishing of a richly diverse society.

The Bites of Conscience in Decision Making

Bites of conscience are those sharp, guilty or inner pangs we feel when our choices clash with our moral values. It is that uncomfortable tug, a whisper or a roar that tells us that something is not quite right. The bites of conscience function as our internal moral alarm that often act as reminder of ethical standards that prompt reflection, shape choices and steers us toward actions aligned with deep held values. The bites of conscience play a profound role in shaping individual decision making in a pluralistic society because of

its internal moral tugs often arise when a person feels that a particular action conflicts with their deeply held beliefs or ethical standards [11]. The bites of conscience make a person to pause, reflect and resist choices in order to be able to make concrete decisions in different concrete situations in a pluralistic society.

Bites of conscience is one of the most powerful moral emotions that shapes human decision making, especially in a pluralistic society where diverse values and worldviews coexist. Bites of conscience arises when individuals perceive that they have violated their own moral standards or harmed others [19]. This feeling of inner discomfort pushes people to reconsider their choices, repair relationships, or avoid repeating the same mistake. In decision making, bites of conscience often act as a corrective force, steering individuals toward actions that restore integrity, fairness, or social harmony rather than purely self-interested outcomes. Bites of conscience serve as a moral safeguard in pluralistic societies, reminding individuals and institutions alike that ethical decision making is not merely about compliance but about integrity. They challenge people to think beyond convenience or conformity and to act in ways that reflect their deepest values even when doing so is uncomfortable [20]. In this way, conscience becomes a vital force for ethical pluralism, encouraging dialogue, mutual respect, and the ongoing search for just and inclusive solutions.

Since pluralistic societies are built on the coexistence of differing worldviews, what triggers a bite of conscience in one person may be seen as unreasonable, illogical and irrelevant. For the individual, making a conscientious decision in a pluralistic society often involves not just moral clarity but also civic responsibility: the need to express dissent respectfully, justify one's stance publicly, and accept reasonable limits to personal freedom [20]. Bites of conscience also plays a social role in pluralistic contexts by encouraging cooperation and reconciliation. Many people when they express their guilt because of the bites of conscience this wrongdoing can rebuild trust and foster cooperation between groups, even when values differ. In this way, guilt serves as a bridge between conflicting perspectives, motivating individuals to act in ways that acknowledge harm and seek repair [11]. This is particularly important in diverse societies, where maintaining peaceful coexistence requires mechanisms that encourage accountability and empathy across cultural lines.

Generally, the bites of conscience influences decision making in pluralistic societies by acting as an internal regulator of moral behaviour, a motivator for repair and cooperation, and a source of tension when diverse moral codes collide. It reminds individuals that their choices carry ethical weight, not only within their own worldview but also in relation to the broader, diverse community in which they live. Through these bites of conscience helps sustain both personal integrity and social cohesion in environments marked by moral diversity.

Conscience Function as Personal Moral Guide

This is an internal framework of values, beliefs and principles that steers how you determine right from wrong and informs your decisions and actions. It influences everyday choices, fosters trust in relationships and helps you navigate complex situations

such as pluralistic society. These core values, beliefs and principles help individuals maintain integrity by ensuring that their decisions align with their core principles in a pluralistic society [5]. Personal moral guide gives room for consistence in behaviour of which it builds trust with others, whether in personal relationships or professional settings in a diverse society. A moral guided person who is lead by fairness and empathy is more likely to make decisions that consider the well-being of their team, even under pressure. In contrast, when someone acts against their moral guide, they may experience guilt, regret, or inner conflict, which can affect their confidence and peace of mind and hence the society being affect by careless people as a result of lack of personal moral guide [21].

A personal moral guide acts like an internal compass that shapes how individuals interpret situations and choose their actions. It is built from values, beliefs, cultural background, upbringing, and life experiences. When faced with a decision, people often filter their options through this moral framework, asking themselves whether a choice aligns with their sense of right and wrong. In pluralistic societies, decision-making often requires compromise and dialogue [11]. A person's moral compass can determine whether they approach disagreements with tolerance and respect or with rigidity and exclusion. Those whose moral guides emphasize empathy and fairness may be more open to finding common ground, while others may hold firmly to absolute principles, making consensus more difficult and this is a defining feature of pluralistic society [21].

Another crucial point of a personal moral guide is how it responds to ethical dilemmas. In complex situations where choices have to be made and there are no clear right or wrong answers, moral reasoning helps individuals weigh competing values [22]. Personal moral guides shape how individuals respond to ethical dilemmas that affect the wider community. In pluralistic contexts, decisions often involve balancing personal convictions with collective responsibilities [23]. This means that a strong moral guide not only directs choices but also deepens the reasoning process, encouraging individuals to think beyond immediate consequences and consider long-term impacts on others and society at large.

Generally, in a pluralistic society where people live together with diverse cultures, religions, and worldviews a personal moral guide plays a crucial role in shaping how individuals make decisions. Unlike in more homogenous settings, people are constantly exposed to competing values and perspectives. A personal moral guide helps individuals navigate this complexity by providing an internal framework for distinguishing right from wrong, even when external norms may conflict. Personal moral guides act as both anchors and filters. They anchor individuals in their own values, giving them stability in a sea of diverse opinions, while also filtering how they interpret and respond to the moral claims of others.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding : This paper discovered that conscience plays a crucial role in helping individuals translate abstract moral principles into concrete decisions,

ensuring that these choices align with deeply held values. In a pluralistic society, where laws, norms, and traditions differ, conscience provides a stabilizing source of integrity that guides individuals to act consistently across varying contexts. Furthermore, the study revealed that approaching decisions through the lens of conscience promotes moral responsibility and accountability, encouraging decision-makers to focus on reasons for action beyond mere expedience or social pressure. By emphasizing sincerity and principled commitment, conscience fosters respectful disagreement and creates an environment for reasoned negotiation and compromise, rather than coercion or dismissiveness. **Implication** : The study suggests that the application of conscience in ethical decision-making fosters moral responsibility and strengthens social cohesion in a pluralistic society. By recognizing that others may also be guided by an informed conscience, individuals can reduce dismissive attitudes, facilitating dialogue and mutual learning. This dynamic provides a platform for individuals to reflect on their decisions, revise their assumptions, and reach shared values, which can inform policy-making processes affecting diverse communities. Conscience, therefore, acts as both a personal guide and a bridge for ethical coexistence, balancing individual authenticity with collective responsibility, fostering social harmony. **Limitation** : One limitation of this study is that it primarily focuses on the role of conscience in guiding ethical decision-making in a pluralistic context, without considering other influencing factors such as cultural biases, emotional responses, or external pressures that might conflict with an individual's moral compass. Additionally, the study does not explore the practical challenges or limitations of implementing conscience-based decision-making in highly polarized or politically sensitive environments. **Future Research** : Future research could investigate how various cultural, religious, and socio-political contexts shape the role of conscience in decision-making. Additionally, exploring how individuals can effectively cultivate and apply conscience through education, moral training, and exposure to diverse perspectives may provide further insights into enhancing ethical decision-making in pluralistic societies. Future studies could also examine potential conflicts between personal conscience and institutional pressures, and how individuals navigate these challenges to maintain both authenticity and social responsibility.

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