ESSAY

We’re All In This Together: The Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Conscience

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Abstract
Conscience has become a casualty of modernist and postmodernist critiques of Western culture. This has thrown the history and institutions of this culture into doubt as embodying values worth internalizing in the form of conscience. Self-justification has replaced the self-examination inherent in conscience. The value of and ingredients for a reconstructed conscience adequate for a postmodern world are explored. It is proposed that a “reconstructed conscience” be characterized by 1. commitment to a chosen, but not exclusive or excluding, truth; 2. active compassion for all who suffer and are victimized; and 3. the willingness to acknowledge that, in all our actions, we reciprocally influence one another and, therefore, ‘we’re all in this together’.

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing wonder and awe the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.

~ Immanuel Kant

I’ve got nothin’ Ma to live up to.

~ Bob Dylan

Conscience is, I think, still thought of by most, even philosophers, behavioural and social scientists, as intrinsic to human consciousness. Indeed one cannot but be struck by the cognate relationship between the words conscience and consciousness. Both draw attention to the capacity, made possible by language, for humans to stand in relation to themselves. In the case of conscience we are able, better still driven, to evaluate our own actions. Consciousness permits us to know ourselves in relation to the world around us. In my work as a family therapist, or as I prefer to say, a relationship therapist, I have become increasingly troubled by a growing suspicion that self-justification seems almost to have replaced the self-examining activity of conscience when people give an accounting of their actions. My observation may, in part, reflect the context within which it occurs, namely defensive reactions to criticism.

Once I started paying attention to such a shift, I became further convinced that it went beyond mere defensiveness. I, therefore, remain - and am frankly appalled by it - convinced that self-justification is replacing critical self-examination as the dominant manner in which more and more people account for their problematic actions. This is especially the case when such actions occur in an interpersonal context. If we dare to call this conscience, it is the polar opposite of what it once was: less an accuser and more a soother.

Self-justification can even resemble conscience in that it is well able to use moral arguments to consolidate its position, particularly when it is used to justify one’s position at the expense of, or even against, the other person. As such it may become the “good conscience” of the self-satisfied or even of the self-righteous. The turnabout that I am addressing has also led to the replacement of self-respect by self-esteem as the desired goal by which to measure

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ourselves. It has also led me to the conviction that the modernist demystification of conscience introduced particularly by Nietzsche and Freud, and the postmodernist deconstruction of Western values that followed it, have played major roles in what I suggest is a crisis in conscience in the so-called postmodern Western world.

As a postscript to these opening words I would like to report that I began the paper as a postmodernist. As I wrestled with the role that I saw postmodern thought playing in this crisis of conscience I came to the conclusion that postmodernism as a position, characterized by Lyotard’s "incredulity toward metanarratives" (1984, p. xxiv), was itself a metanarrative. As such, postmodernism represents nothing so much as an incredulity toward any metanarrative but its own. The term postmodern remains an apt way to describe the condition that follows the bankruptcy of those metanarratives of the inevitability of progress and of the autonomy of the individual. These metanarratives had provided a moral and social consensus for Western culture in the era of modernity. Now events themselves have thrown these metanarratives into question and nothing remains to take their place. Postmodernism, however, tends to regard their demise as one more blow for the liberation from the dead hand of the past, to be celebrated rather than to be replaced.

I define metanarrative as those foundational assumptions or beliefs that make it possible to view cultural events as though they formed an identifiable narrative. In this light postmodernism becomes less the end of metanarratives than a metanarrative of its own, one that understands the dominant and formative events and institutions of Western culture as forming a twofold story. In one stream of the story what has been boasted of as the glories of Western civilization are seen as masking practices of consistent exploitation and hegemony over the rest of the world. In the other stream the doctrine of progress has been transmogrified into the death of God and the demise of the legitimacy of all claims to an objective truth as liberating developments following Nietzsche as its prophet and author. These two story lines form the basis for undermining the sources of the traditional conscience of the Western world. If conscience involves the internalization of the guiding values of a culture largely through one of its major mediating institutions, the family, and its major institutions are now regarded as being of dubious merit there is little left to internalize. Moreover, once the very possibility of objective truth is thrown into doubt there is nothing left to appeal to establish the rightness of a particular action. Immanuel Kant’s once unquestioned “moral voice within”, becomes a casualty of that metanarrative and Western culture is left with Bob Dylan’s plaint, "I’ve got nothing Ma to live up to."

Perhaps, after all, conscience is not so much the moral law within, but simply a feature of ourselves whereby we make our social world a part of ourselves, or, as Freud believed, because we are fearful of acting other than whatever we internalize dictates. Perhaps it was only moral in the first place because until recently in Western history at least, people have typically idealized the cultural values, institutions and heroes they have, willy-nilly, internalized. These became the standards by which we judged ourselves. But what do we internalize when the leading figures and institutions of a culture are thrown fundamentally in doubt as to their very legitimacy? This paper is an attempt to address this question. I will, to begin, trace how we got to this predicament. I will then make a series of proposals concerning what we might do about it.
Conscience And Modernity

Conscience has lost the virtually inarguable moral authority it had when Immanuel Kant described it as the moral law within over 200 years ago. Kant was attempting to cordon off a place of inviolability for conscience and transcendence in the midst of the 18th century Enlightenment during which reason was championed as an infallible human guide against the superstition and corruption the philosophers of that age saw in religion. For Kant conscience was virtually the divine voice within each of us. This divine voice was demystified or, in today’s postmodern language, deconstructed by Freud and modern psychotherapy to being simply the voice of entirely fallible parents and other often deeply flawed cultural authorities and institutions. As such conscience was one in a series of casualties of modernity.

Modernity may be described as a uniquely Western phenomenon. Indeed it has become virtually synonymous with Western civilization itself, particularly in the eyes of much of the non-Western world. Modernity has questioned and undone virtually every constraint upon the unimpeded expression of the individual person. The first constraint removed was the unquestioned hegemony of the Church, which allowed for the freedom of scientific inquiry, then the divine right of kings which gradually allowed for the freedom of people to govern themselves. The result of this was the rule of reason and the sovereignty of the people. These came together in the French Revolution.

Nothing Is What It Claims To Be

These forces were given meaning by an overarching theme or metanarrative of the inevitability of progress toward the emergence of a world in which reason would lead all humanity toward the kind of freedom on earth that religion had promised in heaven. Kant's vision of conscience as the moral law within actually represented an attempt to hold a place for at least a core remnant of a theistically based morality in the face of the challenges posed by modernity's project of freeing the individual from all cultural constraints. Kant seemed to be saying that no matter how free the individual became from all such constraints she could never escape the moral voice which she carried within her. That liberating process consisted in demystifying these constraints to reveal a less savory hidden truth behind them, to reveal them as hindering us rather than helping us live better. Indeed it was the work of Marx, Freud and Nietzsche who looked behind the appearance of things to make the claim that nothing was what it claimed to be.

The philosophes of the French Enlightenment had already proposed that, in Rousseau's words, "Man was born free and everywhere he is in chains"(1762/1962, p. 169). It was the institutions of society that were the obstacles to human freedom and well-being. Moreover the most constraining and even tyrannizing of all such institutions was the Church. If, therefore, human institutions are the enemy rather than the friend of man, the truth of the human must be hidden behind the falsity and tyranny of its institutions. Access to its hiddenness was through transgressive thought and activity in the effort to shatter the hold of oppressive institutions. Thus, for Freud the lofty claims of civilization were driven by lust, for Marx they were driven by the drive for economic control, for Darwin by a struggle for survival and for Nietzsche by the will to power. Modernism, which is to say modernity as an ideological position, shocked the by now complacently successful world of bourgeois Europe to its foundations. Modernism became virtually identified with a process of unmasking. It
was Nietzsche who first introduced what he insisted were the pretended meanings in texts and utterances (Gadamer, 1982/1991, p. 217). Nothing was to be taken at face value. Behind often religiously sanctioned claims lurked darker truths of institutions which existed to keep people fearful and ignorant, and ultimately to be controlled. As liberating as these unmasking processes were, by challenging and discrediting almost all the major institutions of traditional Western culture, such as the churches, the monarchy, hierarchies of birth and conventional morality, they were having the effect of dismantling the very building blocks of conscience.

Accompanying these challenges to established assumptions was the expressly transgressive work of modernist art and literature, beginning with impressionism and later cubism in the graphic arts, the work of Mann, Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Yeats and many others in the literary arts. In overturning the conventions of representational art, narrative fiction, lyric and narrative poetry, the modernists were highly successful both in shocking their way into public attention and, in very short order, actually changing the way people saw and experienced the world. Their work also placed the emphasis away from how the viewer or reader was supposed to experience the world to how the individual, unencumbered by societal expectations, could view the world.

**Change And Undoing**

Society was changing at a breathtaking pace, putting massive pressure on the mores and practices of everyday life. The objectification of the world that science increasingly insisted upon, required a subjectification of experience. Where the Cartesian subject had been empty, the better to contemplate the object before him, the subject of modernism became both a problem and a preoccupation in himself. The ever-changing world in which he found himself left him dizzy with the freedom that came with the inability of the traditions and institutions of the Western world to keep up with all the changes and to provide either direction or solace. The dizzying effects of all this freedom made people often confusingly self-aware. This sense of uncertainty is captured with particular power and poignancy in the fiction of Franz Kafka, which describes characters weighed down with expectations that have no meaning, and are tyrannical yet anonymous. He thereby exposed the plight of the modern Western conscience.

Modernity possessed an accelerating dynamism that could neither be slowed nor diverted. It spread itself inexorably over the globe in its restless quest for national prestige and the natural resources that would fuel the engines of progress for the people of the West who also saw themselves duty-bound to bring civilization to the backward peoples of the world. For such purposes the brightest and best of people from India, China, Indo China and Africa came to the lands of their colonial masters to study. Their experiences made them, not so much grateful as angry, often at the racist slights they received. They then became determined to bring to their peoples the freedom their colonial masters extolled but denied to them. They also sought for their people the benefits of Western technology and science, but at the same time regarded the primary economic engine of Western success and capitalism, as heartless and exploitive. Gandhi and his followers in India were the first of what became a flood of Western educated leaders who struggled to gain freedom and independence for their peoples.

Even within the West itself, modernity's faith in progress came under question especially in the aftermath of World War II. Atrocities on a scale never before even imagined belied the hope that an improved,
and not just a more efficient humanity, had been born through the liberating power of science. The various national liberation movements that arose in virtually every colonial empire under European rule brought into prominence and identification the subjugated victims of European imperialism. The ever-lively French intellectual scene had already reflected on the horror of the Holocaust and its implications for humanity. During the emerging post-colonial era that followed World War II many of its leading lights, Sartre, Camus most prominently, began to champion those peoples seeking liberation. A sense of these as the other, as somehow less than human because they were not like us, became part of the vocabulary associated soon after with the emergence of a postmodernity that differed from the modernist sensibility which had been markedly Eurocentric.

From Self To Other
While Anglo-American thought remained essentially modernist in its focus on the vicissitudes of selfhood, French and European thought generally shifted its focus largely to a growing awareness posed to the self by the other. That focus emerged in the context of a challenge to, if not an explicit rejection of, practically the entire Western cultural heritage. Thus it became, less the healthy corrective it could have been, and more the beginning of a scapegoating practice in which every perceived injustice to a victim group was blamed on the morality and mores of Western culture. Never mind that the willingness from within a culture to submit its own assumptions to criticism is a uniquely Western development. Colonization was the term used to describe the way the other had been marginalized and exploited in various ways. This was the case, not only for people of color from the former colonies of the age of Western imperialism, but also for North Americans of African descent, women, gay and lesbian people, indigenous peoples, and indeed any group that insisted its identity had been thus compromised.

Hand in hand? with these developments have been the role that ideologies have played in the twentieth. Ideologies might be described as having filled the vacuum left by the discrediting of religion and the disorienting of conscience as guides for the weightless self of modernity. One of these ideologies, Nazism, invented a neo-pagan mythology of a racially pure past. Communism, another of these ideologies, was driven by a vision of a secularized messianic future. Both proved to be demonic, but the eventual disillusionment of intellectuals with the events which demonstrated the failures of the latter left many to give up their faith in the grand narratives and universal programs that had legitimated modernity. They settled instead for more modest goals and small narratives and called themselves postmodernists. Thus, while modernism might be described as an attitude that celebrated what can be done, postmodernism would seem to concern itself with what cannot not be done: no more grand theories or narratives, no more talk of truth, foundations or essentials.

All this has significant implications for the practice of psychotherapy, whichever the school or the approach. Psychotherapy, as I have already briefly mentioned, originated and developed with Freud's deconstruction of conscience, which he called super ego, as a fundamentally irrational, albeit necessary, force within us that needed to be tamed almost as much as did the seething cauldron of the id. And, indeed, the notorious Victorian conscience, which ruled so powerfully during the last time in Western history when people acted primarily out of regard for the expectations of society, needed to have its grip loosened. That, after
all, was all Freud was after, not its overthrow (Freud, 1928).

Since then psychotherapy has proven to be exceedingly good at helping those beleaguered by an oppressive conscience or sense of guilt to free themselves for a happier life. This, indeed, was Freud’s great contribution. He famously proposed that the sources of much guilt were irrational, not the voice of God or even of an objective morality, but simply of internalized threats and warnings of parents and other authority figures. In doing so, however, he also challenged to its core modernity’s faith in the autonomous self which had reached its zenith in the words of the Victorian poem, Invictus, with its famous lines: “I am the captain of my fate/I am the master of my soul.” After Freud, people of the Western world began to see themselves less as autonomous agents and increasingly as victims of punitive and insufficiently loving parents. In time their understanding of themselves became more and more characterized by what was done to them and less what they had done or could do to and for themselves. This also had the effect of increasing the tendency to blame others and justify or excuse oneself when problems arose in situations rather than accepting responsibility for one’s own role in what had happened.

In the meantime psychotherapy has become less successful in enabling individuals unhampered by any sense of guilt or remorse to find or build a conscience. Why, after all, should people feel guilty when they are simply products, or even victims, of what others have done to them? Likewise, psychotherapy has not been notably successful in assisting those who, lacking much of an internal governor, go to therapists to find someone who will tell them what or who is right as they wrestle with how to act in their intimate relationships. We have reached a time, whether it be termed late modernity or postmodernity, characterized by the collapse of any sense of an objective set of standards for how to act or even of any kind of social consensus on such matters. There simply are no universally valid external guides. The ideology of mental health only offers norms. Therefore it becomes urgent to look to a reconstruction of conscience in order that people might again be able to act according to its internal guidance.

Tools For The Reconstruction

Levinas and the Other

Many found that the great Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas (1989) gave a coherent voice to the troubled reflections of the French intelligentsia on the implications of both the Holocaust and the Algerian uprising against their French colonial masters. Deconstruction could be understood as an effort, similar to that of Levinas, to compensate for 2,500 years of privileging what the latter calls the Same, and of marginalizing the Other, the different. If the privileging of the Same has been characteristic of the Hellenistic heritage in Western thought going back to Plato, the significance of the Other has been the great contribution of Jewish thought and practice throughout its history reaching back to Biblical times.

For Levinas, in fact, the Torah, the Jewish Law, is not simply a list of prohibitions and obligatory practices, rather it is the distillation of all that is imposed on us by the very existence of others. Prior, then, to all other considerations or conceptualizations stands the other person whose very presence calls out to us to act in responsibility toward their very otherness. Indeed, responsibility towards the other is prior to one’s responsibility to oneself. As such, ethics precedes ontology and the other has a greater claim on oneself than the self.
has. The other, moreover, is to be regarded in their utter differentness from oneself and to be cherished accordingly. To live in this realization is to be freed from the tribalism that is the bane of human existence and the justification for wars and rivalries of all kinds. The Wholly Other calls us precisely as Otherness for it is only as such that one can become a self. Likewise the call of the other as the face of the neighbor is the precondition for being able to be true to oneself.

Badiou and the Truth Event
The French philosopher, Alain Badiou is critical of Levinas, yet from the viewpoint of a similar ethic of caring. His criticism raises the realization that what draws us in a feeling of obligation to the other in its difference is not all those things that separate us from those who are different from us, but that which we share in common, our humanity. We respond to the other amidst all their obvious differences of tradition and practice because we remind ourselves that these others cry in pain when hurt, weep when sorrowful, bleed when injured and laugh when happy, just like we do. It is the sameness in the difference that we acknowledge rather than the difference as such.

From his neo-Marxist perspective Badiou is impatient with postmodern defeatism and calls for a renewal of belief in the possibility of radical renewal and even revolution toward a better world. To this end he writes of what he calls a "truth event". He defines truth as "the real process of fidelity to an event: that which this fidelity produces in the situation" (2001, p. 42). Badiou uses the term ‘subject’ to refer to the individual or person. Thus a subject becomes convicted by a particular event in her world and commits herself and remains faithful to that event as a bearer of a transfiguring truth. This truth may be of a personal nature, as in a love relationship. It may be a political truth commitment to try to change the world in that domain. It may be an artistic truth commitment. In any event, once one is thus seized by a conviction of a particular event truth, one yields oneself, even one's identity, in fidelity to that truth. "As such, the subject is absolutely nonexistent in the situation before the event. We might say that the process of truth induces a subject" (p. 43).

"The subject becomes such only in the act of subjecting oneself to an event to which one resolves with utter fidelity. What constitutes fidelity to such an event? To be faithful to an event is to move within the situation that this event has supplemented by thinking . . . the situation according to the event" (p. 41). Badiou suggests examples of what he means by what he eventually calls a truth-event in the domains of politics, love, art and in science: "the French Revolution of 1792, the meeting of Heloise and Abelard, Galileo's creation of physics, Haydn's invention of the classical musical style . . . "(p. 43). In each of the situations, leading up to their discernment as an event, the one who subjects himself to its truth has responded to either an injustice, an emptiness, an insufficiency or an impasse that cries out to be answered. What is perceived to be the answer becomes the truth of the event to which the subject is then faithful. The completion of the perceived lack becomes the truth of the event. Such a truth is clearly not an objective truth. Indeed it is defined as a subjective truth, the truth for that subject who commits and defines himself according to an attitude of fidelity to that truth, come what may. Central to Badiou's aim, and in opposition to the postmodern aversion to the universal "is precisely the resuscitation of the politics of (universal) Truth in today’s conditions of global contingency" (Zizek, 1999 p. 132).
Finally, Badiou takes a harsh stand against contemporary doctrines of human rights and of the pursuit of any form of generalized ethics. Rights presuppose an understanding of human beings as fundamentally deficient and vulnerable, constantly in need of protection from a superior body, invariably an enlightened, Western liberal one. By contrast he proposes an ethic of Truths by which he means the actions demanded of one who subjects oneself in fidelity to their own fully assumed Truth-event. It is, therefore, a performative ethic in that it is not a set of prescriptions or standards but that which one constantly reminds oneself must be performed in order to bring the Event into its possibility of the impossible" (p. 39). Where is the beginning of this quote?

Character as Evaluated Narrative
The narrative theologian, Stanley Hauerwas, expresses a similar skepticism. He writes: "Ethical choice is always making do in the societal framework we inherit, because it is only in such a framework that we are able to have a problem at all . . . one can concentrate on the justification of moral decisions because one accepts the surrounding social order with its moral categories" (Hauerwas & Burrell, 1979, p. 164). Hauerwas' character-based approach to theological ethics argues that the way one acts is less apt to be influenced by a set of principles or prescriptions, but rather by the character that person has formed within the community to which they have committed themselves. In order to form a character one must consider one's actions as consistent with a narrative understanding of one's life. The fact is, say Hauerwas and Burrell, that the first person singular is seldom the assertion of the solitary I, but rather the narrative of that I. "It is exactly the category of narrative that helps us to see that we are forced to choose between some universal standpoint and the subjectivistic appeals to our own experience . . . I cannot make my life mean anything I want it to mean, for I have learned to understand my life from the stories I have learned from others" (p. 168).

Hauerwas' position is that moral decision-making is not actually ours to make. It is a gift that emerges out of a narrative. This has supplied the circumstances and other narrative examples that have made a particular decision possible. Character in his understanding, then, represents how one is likely to act when compelled if one is to continue to live consistently with the coherence provided by one's particular narrative. There is a choice, however, in the stories we live and as we choose particular stories over others we will be apt to live in ways consistent with those choices. One does not develop an ethical or virtuous character based on consistency with an individual narrative alone. Of even greater importance, and for Hauerwas utterly essential, is the centrality of a particular community. For Hauerwas, as a Christian theologian, the church is crucial for sustaining the Christian journey (Hauerwas, 1975/1985, p. xxxi). Character formation and consistency to a personal narrative virtually requires and tends to mirror the community to which one belongs.

"It is not enough to live one’s life simply according to a personal narrative. Character-formation is also aided by the presence of a canonical narrative. In short, we discover our human self more effectively through these stories, and so use them in judging the adequacy of alternate schemes for humankind" (Hauerwas & Burrell, p. 190). The authors conclude that there is an endemic tendency, in fact, for human beings to allow their lives to be lived according to the standards and inspiration provided by such canonical stories.
Self Interest Is Not In The Interests Of The Self

Yet another approach, which contains a challenge to go beyond the self is “crackpot realism”. It is the name given by the contemporary novelist, Richard Powers, to the narrator of the novel, Prisoner's Dilemma (1988). He has a sudden realization that, in the single-minded pursuit of each individual's self-interest, lies an ultimate, eventual worst case. Everyone who has ever taken a psychology course in college or university has likely been acquainted with the thought experiment of the Prisoner's Dilemma. Two people have been apprehended, charged with a crime they may or may not have committed. They are placed in separate rooms, completely out of touch with each other, and questioned. If they both squeal on each other, they each get ten years in prison. If one squeals and the other holds fast, the one who squeals gets off while the one who remains quiet pays the ultimate penalty: life in prison. If both stand firm each receives the minimum sentence of two years. Powers has one of his characters say that "the way out of the imaginary prison was merely for each man to say to himself and no other, I must choose not to compromise myself, as if no one else is implicated in the deal" (1988, p. 118). The second key to the dilemma is for each person to dare to trust the other, leaving the question of the others trustworthiness aside.

The answer that the character Artie comes to as the clue to the riddle of his father’s life he calls "crackpot realism". He gave it this designation because, while it seems a dubious and very risky way to live one’s life, it is realistic in that in the long term it serves the best interests of all. It promotes the common good and also happens to be, day in and day out, the best deal for the self. In this view, in the short term life is indeed a zero sum game: Sometimes you win all and the other loses all, just as often you lose all while the other wins all, and much of the time both lose considerably. If we are true to ourselves, regardless of the outcome, and risk trusting the other, both benefit by paying the minimum penalty, a kind of Kafkaesque consolation it must be said.

On the Side of the Victim

A final, and I think, decisive response to what I see as the crisis of conscience in today’s increasingly global society is offered by the revolution in thought posed by Rene Girard (1972/79, 1979/87, 1999/2001). Central to Girard's theory is what he calls mimetic desire. He challenges the assumption that desire is an urge that originates from within the individual person as a Romantic conceit. Humans are fundamentally imitative in our actions and inclinations. We learn to desire particular goods because we observe that a person or persons we admire or envy desires them. This urge is harmless enough as long as there is an inexhaustible supply of the particular good so that it can be readily shared. Once the good is seen to be in limited supply, competition develops and conflict ensues. Indeed, for Girard, this is the origin of conflict and violence in human affairs. Girard used the term mimetic rather than imitative because the contagion is intrinsic to our nature as social beings. It involves more than a conscious imitation of the admired or envied person. Nonetheless, conflict escalating into violence is such a potentially lethal force in human interaction that Girard posited a scenario in which our earliest human ancestors discovered that one way of containing conflict and violence was to focus it onto one person or group. That way the rest of the community could come together against the one who had, in some way, offended the community by anything from possessing a physical deformity to having transgressed one of its norms or
such an individual was thus scapegoated by being made the focus of the community’s accumulated animosity and sacrificed. When peace subsequently broke out in the previously conflicted and discontented group the community experienced itself as cleansed. Since the scapegoat was associated with the peace that had come that figure was often then divinised and worshipped. Thus violence and the sacred came to be virtually inseparable.

Girard found vast amounts of anthropological and archeological evidence in support of this link between violence and the sacred in rituals of sacrifice the world over. He found that the mythologies of the world almost always masked a founding act of violence in the form of a sacred murder or sacrifice. Myths, he said, are the stories that those in power tell of their origins as a people. In telling such stories, however, they invariably hide or deny the originating act of violence, only hints of which can be gleaned from the myth. Indeed, he points out, the clue to this is found within the word itself. Myth comes from the Greek word muthos, meaning hidden.

There is one historical exception to this process. The tales found in the sacred writings of the people of Israel, the Bible, are stories told from the point of view of a victim people. What non-Jews call the Old Testament is often accused of being horrendously violent. That is because the Israelites made no effort to hide the violence associated with their founding as a people. Moreover theirs is a story, not of triumph but of escape from bondage and repeated conquest, persecution and victimization. It is also the story of a gradual abandonment of sacrifice as a means of propitiating their deity and reconciling opposing forces in their community. First there was the repudiation of human sacrifice through to the scorn directed at the rituals of sacrifice by the prophets to the final abandonment of these when the Romans destroyed the Jerusalem Temple. For Girard the final act in this drama occurs when Jesus willingly accepts the role of victimary scapegoat at the combined hands of the secular authority of Rome and the sacred authority of the Sanhedrin. In doing so he brings to light the secret of sanctioned violence in sacrificing and silencing the various scapegoats and victims as, until then, the central dynamic of history.

The work of victimization at the hands of the world’s victimizers by no means ended at this point. Indeed Christians and the churches themselves all too frequently joined in to keep scapegoating and the use of violence to attack violence very much alive in the world. Nevertheless, the force which had entered the world when the people of Israel began to give meaning to history from the perspective of the victim rather than of the victors, went out from that tiny corner of the world into the Roman Empire itself. From there it entered into a new civilization which itself spread its influence over the entire world. That voice of sympathy for the victim, an entirely new and unique force in human affairs, began modestly enough, and was as often violated as it was amplified. Even though there have been many inconsistencies and history's most horrifying planned atrocity, fittingly called the Holocaust, took place in the West, it has stood as its own most admired and sought after virtue and its mark of the highest spiritual attainment.

One of the central characteristics of those who call themselves postmodern is its sustained criticism and deriding of the values and accomplishments of Western society itself. Since the Enlightenment, which postmodernism also derides, the institutions of religion, particularly the Christian Church, has tended to be the most readily vilified of all things Western. It is as
if the postmodern mentality takes for
granted all things good and admirable about
the West and its religious heritage, while
visiting all its concentrated scorn and fury
on the admittedly many crimes and excesses
of this most dynamic of all the world's
civilizations. Thus its sympathy and
identification with the Western world's
many victims, women, gay people,
indigenous and once colonized peoples
tends to be viewed as a product of a more or
less uniquely postmodern sensibility
pertaining to its sense of justice. Indeed
many of these injustices are frequently
attributed to either instigation or abetment
by the churches. In fact, Girard points out,
the very practice of sympathy for the victim
is an intrinsic and unique product of the
Judeo-Christian view of history. While the
churches have gradually widened their
sphere of sympathies until they now
embrace many victims that they themselves
have made this central Biblical insight and
virtue, having once entered the world at that
point of origin, is now unstoppable. It
virtually defines decency and justice even
where and when it is too little observed.

A second contribution of the Biblical
tradition, and one that has been a key to the
greatest accomplishments of Western
civilization has been the principle of self-
criticism. A major theme that runs through
both Testaments of the Bible is that of
paying more attention to one’s own failings
than to those of the other. As such it is the
antithesis of the blaming that lies at the heart
of scapegoating and the kinds of violence to
which the virtuous seem dangerously prone.
Indeed self-righteousness seems to be the
most condemned of all human failings in the
Gospels. This encouragement of humility
has passed into Western secular life as the
practice of self-criticism, not only of each
person toward himself but of the serious
practitioner toward her discipline, and of
institutions toward their own inclinations
toward the complacency and blindness that
comes out of undue pride and self-
satisfaction. Indeed this capacity is virtually
what we mean by conscience. It is the key to
the advancements of science and
technological wizardry, probably the most
admired and envied of Western
achievements.

The Reconstruction Of Conscience

What is Conscience?

If it is to be reconstructed it would be well to
ask ourselves anew the question, "What is
conscience after all?". In an attempt to
answer this question what if we employ a
‘hermeneutics of trust’ rather than one of
modernist and postmodern suspicion? The
former would begin with an attitude of
respect for the mystery of conscience, which
would then allow us to grasp something of
its peculiar hold over us. Both cognate
words, consciousness and conscience, imply
that human awareness, particularly of the
role of self in what we do and observe, is
categorized by the capacity to form a
relationship with oneself. It is this capacity
that enables us to direct our own actions
and, to a lesser degree, our thoughts, by
instructing ourselves to do or not do, or
think, certain things. The point at which
conscience and consciousness differentiate
has to do with the fact that the former has an
obligatory quality that is not intrinsic to the
latter. When we ignore or violate the
injunctions of conscience we suffer from a
peculiar inner pain often referred to as the
pangs of conscience.

Why should this be so? Is it perhaps, as
Levinas reminds us, that our relation to the
other person is intrinsically a call to
responsibility which, when violated or
ignored, shrinks our very personhood to that
extent? A further question might then arise:
Might it be that the relationship we have
even with ourselves is a direct function of
the quality of relationships we have with others? When, for instance, one’s relationship with oneself involves an active consideration or reflection upon the impact of one’s actions on the other person then conscience is at work, complete with the feelings of obligation toward the other that it commands. A person with such a relationship with self will not be able to undertake any action without taking into consideration the effect of her actions on the other. Another person might develop a relationship with self that builds in a fear of what the other, or the generalized other, is apt to do if he violates its expectations or perceived demands. The contemporary project of replacing the critical relationship with self with one that is congratulatory would essentially attempt to subordinate the effect of one’s actions on the other to the primacy of their effect on oneself.

The conscience that Nietzsche and then Freud began the process of deconstructing was a function of relationships with self that involved internalized degrees of authority that had increasingly come to seem tyrannical and irrational. Thanks to the continuing influence of Freud and psychotherapy as an institution, relationships with self that involved undue regard or fear of internalized authorities came to be scorned colloquially as “guilt trips”. This development came to a head as recently as the 1960s when virtually all representatives of vested authority, the leaders of nations, heads of corporations, teachers, religious leaders, even parents, came to be doubted concerning the directives they issued. These were regarded as ideological smokescreens for maintaining their respective powers. That pivotal decade combined an unpopular war and a sexual revolution, which stemmed from advances in birth control technology, with a challenge to cultural norms across a spectrum of tastes and activities. These factors led, not only to a questioning of the conventional truths and nostrums of what had preceded that decade, but to a generalized practice of questioning and doubting virtually all authority. How then could people be expected to internalize the values and actions of people they looked up to when they looked up to no one? People in authority were seen as holding the positions they did strictly for their own power and advantage. With no one to look up to whose values and actions to judge oneself by to the point of internalizing these the relationship with oneself increasingly became one of self-excusing and self-justifying. Self-esteem replaced self-respect as the mark of a healthy relationship with oneself.

The process of respecting society's vested authorities had previously been effective because these were internalized to the point where they became intrinsic to the relationship each had with oneself. It was a relationship of questioning and examining, not so much others nor those in authority, but rather oneself. It embodied the self-critical faculty that I have already suggested is one of the most significant aspects of the Biblical legacy. The self-criticism that the traditional conscience exhibited, however, tended to represent the internalized voice of conventional authority behind which, in Girard's terms, stood the threat of punishment, invariably a form of violence. As a result of the latter, conscience had assumed an immediate, fear-ridden quality. A reconstructed conscience, by contrast, would be dialogic. Rather than self-blaming it might better be self-implicating. By this I mean that such a conscience would respond to any problematic action involving another by asking oneself, “How might I have contributed to the very action I am criticizing?” This would also require that the perspective of the other be considered as, not any more or less correct, but certainly as valid as one’s own; Gadamer’s famous
“possibility that the other person may be right . . . ” (quoted in Limacher, 2003).

**Conscience as Commitment**
If conscience be the felt claim that the other has upon us, as Levinas more than any modern thinker has reminded us, then each of the ingredients of a reconstructed conscience should reflect this. Commitment, as its first ingredient, is to the primacy of that claim. It then proceeds to a commitment to an event that transcends our own small narrative. This is what gives life meaning. There is no way that a personal life, no matter how pleasantly or successfully lived, can be described as meaningful unless it is by virtue of a commitment and an enduring fidelity to a truth to which we subject ourselves that lies beyond ourselves. A singular attention to the cultivation of one's personal narrative is not only insufficient and ultimately meaningless, but it risks an endless engagement in the cultivation of narrative as simply the stories we tell ourselves and others to excuse and build up ourselves. To the extent, by contrast, that one measures and evaluates one's own ongoing narrative according to a canonical narrative and does so with fidelity then one's own narrative assumes a performative quality. It stands in less risk of continually justifying one's actions, which then tends to make the self-image one's canonical narrative. Instead one commits oneself to act consistently within the imperatives necessary to advance the canonical or, as I prefer to call it, truth narrative. One's truth narrative might be the story or personality around which one's religion is built. It may refer to the standard or code to which one holds and measures oneself. It might refer to how one would feel obligated to live one's life to be true to one's marriage, family, community, religion or nation. Commitment to the felt truth of an ongoing story of making the world a better place and as the standard according to which one evaluates oneself also makes for a more meaningful journey to the extent that it is shared by others committed to act according to a similar truth.

The crackpot realism of Richard Powers’ novel follows upon this. One of his characters reflects that "it was merely for each man to say to himself and no other I must choose not to compromise myself, as if no one else is implicated in the deal. Forget the complex consequences; damn the other guy’s doublethinking. If Ailene had learned anything by living a life attending to the needs of others, it was that the two in the trap could only escape conviction through conviction. So simple: they had to do what they thought was right, no matter where it led" (1988, p. 118). Conscience thus understood offers a decidable refuge in an otherwise undecidable postmodern world.

**Conscience as Compassion**
The claim of the other that we allow to speak to us does so with compassion. Without compassion conscience simply remains an onerous demand. Girard's theories of mimetic desire and the origins of violence also call us to reach out to the excluded other with compassion. His argument that the history of the West has been marked by an ongoing struggle against its own participation in the exercise of righteous and even sacred violence in favor of a growing sympathy and compassion for the victims of injustice and violence, seems to me to be very germane. The conscience that Freud, in effect, deconstructed and, in doing so, largely discredited, reflected identification with the righteous. As such it was a judgmental, often punitive, conscience that represented the voice of societal morality. Once it began to be understood as but the internalized voice of the threatening parent it quickly lost its Kantian aura of the wondrous moral law within. Indeed it was
more of an inner accuser, the role and translation of Satan in the New Testament (Girard, 2001, p. 2).

It was well to challenge conscience when it played the role of accuser. In its haste to do so, however, the modernist impulse, with its focus on the liberation of the self from all constraints, tended to leave us with self-justification as a most questionable replacement of conscience. Indeed, self-justification is almost an anti-conscience for, rather than demanding that the individual engage in self-examination before throwing the first stone a tendency quickly develops to look to the other and blame her. The Biblically engendered sympathy for the victim as a consequence turns into sympathy for oneself as victim and goes looking for a scapegoat, someone to blame when something goes wrong. Such has even become a kind of postmodern ethic, the search for victims whose causes to plead, Nietzsche being stood on his head, as it were. It is an ethic that means well certainly, except that, in the process, it has tended to embrace rhetoric of polarization that tends to demonize those it designates as the oppressors of said victims. Moreover, it does so in a disconcertingly similar way as the marginalized have, until now, been regarded historically. This represents a sea change in human consciousness. Hitherto it has been, as Girard has effectively argued, the weak and the powerless that have been scapegoated and blamed for the ills of the community. According to the postmodern metanarrative the only society that actually does subject its own injustices, and even if need be, its own institutions, to relentless criticism is the one that is at times demonized for the failings that it itself helps expose. In doing so the postmodernists deprive those they attack of virtually any vestige of intended decency. While it mocks those who use such terms as “evil doers” for using such apocalyptic language it tends to regard them in much the same way. Such a stance represents, often in the name of castigating violence, a violence of its own, albeit rhetorical, against those it judges to be the victimizers of the age. It is certainly well to denounce victimization in all its forms. The Biblical indictment of the powerful and privileged, from which the postmodern ethic unknowingly draws most of its inspiration even as it condemns that tradition as part of the oppression it attacks, was and remains the most severe denunciation of victimizing practices. The Hebrew prophets who, in the Christian tradition, culminate in Jesus, sought not only to condemn the guilty, but also to demand that, before condemning, one look first to oneself. That is what is missing in the postmodern attempt to fashion an ethic and a conscience that seeks justice for the oppressed.

Although Derrida does not accept the designation postmodern to describe his positions, deconstruction as both a concept and a practice has been incorporated into what may at best be loosely described as part of the postmodern turn. While very much about including the excluded (Parry, 1999) deconstruction as a practice exposes a philosophical fault line that runs through Western thought since Plato privileged the spoken over the written word. Of this development Derrida explains this in one of his more lucid yet evocative statements. He writes: “The signifier/signified opposition lives only off the signifier it nonetheless attempts to erase . . . What one tries to keep outside inhabits the inside and there would be no inside without that fact . . . We could say, for example, that the term excluded by the binary divide returns in some sense . . . to sign the act of its own exclusion . . . (Bennington & Derrida, 1992, p. 17). The effect of this fault line, which privileges not only the latter but also the male over the female, nature over society, cognition over emotion, presence over absence, being over
nonbeing and so one, tends to be described therefore as a Western aberration. This may account for much of the postmodern assault on most things Western so that it becomes implied that non-Western cultures are largely free of this tendency toward binary thinking, except to the degree that they have been contaminated. Girard’s approach likewise traces a fault line between victimizers and victims, but sees it as blighting all human cultures alike, even the one most influenced by the Judeo-Christian privileging of the victims of history. Thus the one approach, identified largely with the postmodern, tends to make things Western the culprit, while the other accepts that we are all in this together.

Conscience, Conversation and Self-criticism
Conscience as the call to responsibility toward the other is a call to conversation. Levinas tells us: “The original function of speech consists not in designating an object in order to communicate with the other in a game with no consequences but in assuming toward someone a responsibility on behalf of someone else. To speak is to engage the interests of men. Responsibility would be the essence of language” (1963/1990, p. 21). Hand in hand with such responsibility would be the kind of self-criticism that searches oneself and repents of the part one might be playing in any and all victimization of any other. This would also be a conscience that reflects upon actions in terms, therefore, of one's solidarity with others. It would regard the other, not as someone to look at with envy, resentment, or even pity, but with a compassionate respect confident enough in its own truth commitments that it is willing to deal with those with whom it agrees and disagrees alike through conversation rather than polarization.

We Are All in This Together
As a family therapist I have long reflected on my profession’s failure as a discipline to have a greater societal influence than it has had thus far. In both its theories and practices it offers fully as great a cultural challenge to its time as psychoanalysis did in its modernist heyday. In its systemic and narrative approaches it embodies a metanarrative of its own, one which these apocalyptic times requires: We’re all in this together. A family that enters therapy invariably comes with the assumption that one of its members is a problem. The family is locked in a crisis of mimetic conflict. Anger and accusations often abound. The family discovers, however, that they will continue to go around in circles until and unless its members start to realize and accept the fact that each individual is doing what he or she is doing in reaction to what the others are doing. To each other it seems as if they are at odds about their escalating differences. What is most evident to the therapist is how much each is becoming a mirror of the other. Only to the extent that each family member accepts his or her own contribution to the presenting problem and begins to correct his or her own actions and attitudes accordingly, will healing and harmony return to the family.

At its very core family therapy as a discipline challenges the fundamental thrust of modernity, while being indisputably a part of it, concerning the liberation of the individual from all social and cultural constraints. It offers a point of view that is much more in keeping with the interdependent, global society toward which the world seems to be moving today. As such it makes room for, indeed demands, recognition of the fact that we are irreducibly and inescapably social at the core of our being. We simultaneously influence and are influenced by the other person in our every action. This entails a realization of our obligation to each other.
Accordingly a great deal of self-examination is required in order to consider how and to what degree we are implicated in the lives of those we presume to judge and criticize.

A turnaround such as this can best take place through the cultivation of conversation between all participants, however much they might be at odds with one another. One is most likely to be able to look at oneself and one's role in the perpetuation of a conflict to the extent that each is willing to listen to how the situation appears to the other person and to consider the other’s perspective also to be a legitimate one. It is humbling then to take seriously the possibility that oneself is actually seen by the other in quite a different light than one sees oneself. Such realizations can only take place amidst the sharing and listening that occur in a conversation. Encouraging members of a family to move from a stance of constant confrontation to one of conversation is, of course, the essence of family therapy, regardless of the theoretical orientation. The world has perhaps never before needed the healing possibilities of conversation. Rabbi Sacks addresses the question of how we are to live in a world in which there is no longer a moral consensus concerning truth in the social and cultural domains. He writes: "The answer is conversation--not mere debate but the disciplined act of communication (making my views intelligible to someone who does not share them) and listening (entering into the inner world of someone whose views are opposed to my own)"

(Sacks, 2002, p. 83).

Such realizations could indeed play a reconstructing role that replaces the conscience that was deconstructed by Freud. Psychotherapy after Freud tended to find that conscience or super ego was a factor that, if anything, needed to be lessened of its harshness. It was seen as part of the problem. For family therapy a reconstructed conscience would be an ally in the therapeutic process. Such a conscience can play that role because it regards the individual as inescapably bound by ties of reciprocal influence and obligation to the other. Regarding anything that concerns me or upsets me about the other with whom I am in relation, I must, if I would have their actions corrected, first look to how I can correct myself and by what standard and according to what story I will make that correction. The story to which I have chosen to commit myself and according to which I measure myself stands as the antidote to the reactivity which otherwise traps people in interaction with each other to the endless circularity of mutual blame. Once I am committed to a particular narrative that takes me beyond myself I can then respond to the other as another person. I am willing to take the first step of trusting in her the hope that my trust will bring forth her trustworthiness rather than the other way around?? . Just as each person’s actions influence the other, often problematically, they can as easily influence the other in a healing direction. The path of least resistance, which is the path of mimetic desire, is the path of pathologizing circularity and of escalating conflict without end. If we choose, instead, to subject ourselves to a reconstructed conscience built upon the realization that we are all in this together we may find that such a conscience rewards even more than it demands. As Dante tells us:

For when your longings center on things such that sharing them apportions less to each, then envy stirs the bellows of your sighs. But if the love within the Highest Sphere should turn your longings heavenward, the fear inhabiting your breast would disappear; For there, the more there are who would say ours, so much the greater is the good possessed by each... (Purgatorio, canto 15: 49-57, Allen Mandelbaum, tr. 1982)
Conclusion
A reconstructed conscience would be one marked by commitment and fidelity to a canonical or truth narrative according to which one constantly examines oneself. It also requires a disposition to trust the other because one is prepared to approach her with compassion, without design and with the realization that we are all in this together. My actions cannot but influence the other so that, in anything I would presume to find wanting there, I must look to myself for how I may have been an influence in the other life for good or ill.

References

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