**Conscience and Co-Knowledge in Hamlet and Classical Antiquity**

(A talk given at the annual meeting of the Association of Core Texts and Courses,

in Vancouver , April 8, 2005 )

When Hamlet nears the end of his “to be or not to be” soliloquy and says, “Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,/ And thus the native hue of resolution/ Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought” (III.1.83-85), we recognize that the modern use of the word, “conscience” in the sense of “an individual’s inner awareness of right and wrong,” will not yield us a full understanding of what Hamlet means. To help us recover the word’s significance for him we look for its origins in antiquity and learn that it derives from the Latin noun, conscientia. Conscientia in Latin has a broader range than “conscience” does in English. One way to suggest to ourselves its greater range is to remember that the related Latin adjective, conscius, has as its English derivatives the adjective, “conscious,” and the noun, “consciousness.” The Latin conscientia therefore contains the seeds of the two quite different English words, “conscience” and “consciousness.” A second way to suggest the greater range of the Latin word is to translate it literally as “co-knowledge,” for “co-knowledge” is the kernel of the word in its two fundamental Latin senses.

In the first sense conscience is co-knowledge between people, knowledge they share that ties them together ( obligentur...communi inter se conscientia = “they are bound by common co-knowledge between themselves,” Cicero, Ver. 2.177). With few exceptions, however, it is not a general awareness of something on the part of humans at large. This “co-knowledge of humans,” hominum conscientiam, that Cicero speaks of in De Finibus 1.51 is in fact what the wicked are able to protect themselves against by going undetected in their wickedness. More commonly, then, conscience is a specific sort of knowledge possessed by a group that separates the members of the group from other people, and the smaller the number is of those who are in the know, the more likely it is that what they share is a secret ( maxima beneficia...saepe intra tacitam duorum conscientiam latent = “the greatest benefits often lie hidden within the silent co-knowledge of two people,” Seneca, Ben. 3.10.2), and the more likely they are to be leagued in a conspiracy (in conscientiam facinoris pauci adsciti = “few were admitted into co-knowledge of the crime,” Tacitus, Hist. 1.25). Furthermore, these and other examples make clear that the knowledge shared is not neutral, that is to say, it is not knowledge of what is neither good nor bad. Typically, in fact the knowledge is of something bad that someone else has done or is going to do, and frequently the knower is in collusion with the perpetrator, either by not preventing him from doing something, or by having a hand in the deed himself. In this first sense, then, conscience is knowledge of something to be kept hidden between two or more people.

In the second sense conscience is co-knowledge that arises within a single individual. It refers to his own awareness of something he has done ( conscientia... peccati mutum atque exanimatum = “mute and dispirited from a sense of his crime,” Cicero, Ver. 2.189) or of some characteristic he possesses ( conscientiam rectae voluntatis = “his sense of his own good will,” Cicero, ad Fam. 6.4.2), and is a form of self-consciousness. Accordingly, as an adjective it often occurs with a reflexive pronoun in the dative case ( mens sibi conscia factis praemetuens = “a mind fearful in anticipation because conscious in itself of its misdeeds,” Lucretius 3.1018: mihi sim conscius me...dignitati rei publicae consuluisse = “I am conscious in myself that I have looked after the dignity of the state,” Cicero, ad Fam. 6.21.1). The examples show that here too conscientia contains a strong moral component, a sense of the rightness or wrongness of one’s actions, and this develops into our notion of conscience, both pure and guilty, depending on whether the action in question is good or bad, not done or done ( magna vis est conscientia...et magna in utramque partem, ut neque timeant qui nihil commiserint et poenam semper ante oculos versari putent qui peccarint = “great is the force of conscience, and great in either direction, so that those who have done nothing wrong do not fear, and those who have sinned think that punishment always hovers before their eyes,” Cicero, Mil. 61.).

On the basis of these examples of the various senses of the Latin conscientia and conscius two points suggest themselves. First, this kind of knowledge is something that involves two or more. It is shared either with others or with oneself. In the one instance it arises when different people become aware of some thought they possess in common. In the other it arises when an individual becomes aware that two parts of himself are thinking a common thought. The notion, “I think that I am right,” comes from a division of the self into an I and a you such that each can speak to the other. Mutually, for example, the two parts can say to each other, “I think that you are right and I realize that you think that I am too.” In Latin this would be the mens sibi conscia recti, “the mind in itself and for itself conscious of its own rightness” (Vergil, Aeneid I.604). But the mind in agreement with itself is not the condition that seems most to promote self-awareness. Rather the opposite, disagreement, is, and hence follows the second point suggested by the examples.

Consciousness, or self-awareness, occurs in the context of crime, when one part of the self can say to the other that it did something wrong. Whether the other part agrees or not, the split in perspectives reveals the twofoldness of the self. The knowledge of the difference between right and wrong within oneself becomes a potent stimulus to self-awareness. Knowledge of what is neutral, that is to say, of what is neither right nor wrong, is absorbed un-self-reflectively in the other, in the object of one’s knowledge, in arithmetical numbers or geometrical shapes [wherein any criminality lies below the horizon]. Self-consciousness, on the other hand, occurs when the object of one’s knowledge is oneself, but it appears that such attention to oneself is most stimulated by a guilty conscience. Hence there arises the strange connection between knowledge and crime, as a result of which knowledge is paradigmatically knowledge of good and evil, and this knowledge immediately produces both self-awareness and shame, such that when Adam and Eve eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they immediately become aware of themselves as naked and as criminals. They are filled with shame and wish to clothe themselves.

What is a classical version of this story? The difference between knowledge of what is other than oneself and self-knowledge can be sought in their representatives among the gods. Athena is a goddess of practical knowledge, that is, of the knowledge of how to deal with other people. Odysseus, her favorite, knows how to do this. And she, along with Hephaestus and Prometheus, is a god of productive knowledge, of putting things together, such as the warp and the woof, and of making the products of various other arts, such as boats and beds, that Odysseus is also good at, but the god of self-knowledge is Apollo. On his temple at Delphi was inscribed the injunction, γν ῶ θι σαυτόν (“know thyself”). A glance at how the Greek language expresses co-knowledge may help illuminate what Apollo meant by this injunction.

In reviewing the Greek words that are equivalent or parallel to Latin conscientia and conscius, one remarks that whereas Latin almost never uses the verb that lies beneath the noun and the adjective, conscire (to “co-know”), the two words in Greek that especially represent the idea of co-knowing are two very common verbs, συγγιγνώσκω (“I co-know” in the sense cognate with English “know,” “ken” and “can”) and σύνοιδα (“I co-know” in the sense cognate with English “wit,” “witness” and “wisdom”). Both Greek verbs contain the Latin notions of knowledge as a form of complicity between different persons or within an individual, both bear the meanings “to be conscious,” and, especially with the dative reflexive pronoun, “to be self-conscious,” and both frequently entail an acute awareness of one’s own failings that has shame as its concomitant. Peculiar to the Greek, and significant, is that in the classical period there is no noun like the Latin conscientia that is equivalent to our sense of conscience as an individual’s awareness of the difference between right and wrong. [Here I take note of the fact that the noun does appear later in the New Testament notion of συνείδησις ] . The Greek verbs can both describe a person’s sense in himself that he is on any occasion either right or wrong, but of the two verbs only συγγιγνώσκω is associated with a cognate noun, and this noun, συγγνώμη , means “pardon” or “forgiveness,” not “conscience.” Greek speaks not of “conscience” but of “shame” ( α ἰ σχύνη or α ἰ δώς ). A Greek word that comes close to conveying something of what is meant by English “conscience” as a power that emerges suddenly within us at crucial moments and keeps us from erring is daimonion, but this is a power peculiar to Socrates.

Generally speaking, however, both Greek and Latin connect co-knowledge, complicity, crime and self-consciousness, and a moment ago, to understand the connection by finding a classical version of the story of Adam and Eve, we had turned to Apollo as the god of self-knowledge. The terrible story that he is the cause of and that shows the link between self-knowledge and crime is the story of Oedipus, a man with a great gift for knowing, who demonstrated it when he solved the riddle, the clue to which was his own name, “Know-foot,” and whose answer was “man.” Long before the play begins he is driven by Apollo’s oracle and by his sense of shame, that is to say, his abhorrence of the crimes he is fated to commit, to escape from being who he thinks he is, the child of Polybus and Merope. Just before the play begins he is driven by another oracle of Apollo and by his own desire to discover who the criminal is that has caused the pollution of Thebes . The action of the play shows how his desire to know the identity of the criminal is replaced by his desire to know who he himself is. When he proves that the two desires are the same, by forcing their co-incidence he wins for himself his self-knowledge, and he reveals to us that though his story in its details makes him unique, he himself is a paradigm of man qua man.[1](http://udallasclassics.org/sweet_files/Conscience%20%26%20Co-knowledge%20UC.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22_edn1)

The other great Apollonian hero, Socrates, was also driven by an oracle to know himself in the guise of a quest he undertook to find another person who was wiser than he. Socrates interpreted the response that Apollo gave to his comrade, Chaerephon, that no one was wiser than Socrates, to be a riddle. When he heard the response, he thought to himself, “What ever does the god mean and what ever is he riddling? For I co-know with myself that I am not wise either much or little” ( τί ποτε λέγει ὁ θεός; κα ὶ τί ποτε α ἰ νίττεται; ἐ γ ὼ γ ὰ ρ δ ὴ ο ὔ τε μέγα ο ὔ τε σμικρ ὸ ν σύνοιδα ἐ μαυτ ῷ σοφ ὸ ς . n. Apology 21b ) whereupon he set out on a life-long quest, that, like Oedipus’, was impious in the sense that proving the oracle wrong would have resulted in the diminution of the god (cf. Oedipus Tyrannus 897-910), but, again like Oedipus, in the end Socrates proved that Apollo was right, because he was the only man who really heeded the god’s injunction and truly knew himself. The consequence of this self-knowledge, however, seems to be that it is attained only at the cost of knowing nothing else. Self-consciousness is a continuous action of the mind conversing with itself that is similar to a Socratic conversation in which the results are like the statues of Daedalus; no sooner are they made than they run off leaving the speakers constantly perplexed and constantly laboring to fashion replacements for them. In Socrates’ case, therefore, co-knowing is associated not with crime but with ignorance, and this ignorance is not a vice but a virtue, such that one might understand the Socratic paradox that virtue is knowledge to mean that virtue in action is continuous self-knowing through conversation with what is other, whether in oneself or in another.

The story of Oedipus, however, is much darker and more consistent with the pervasive classical connections between co-knowledge, conspiracy, shame and self-consciousness. These connections that are latent in the Latin conscientia and conscius are perhaps also discernible in Hamlet’s reflection, “thus conscience does make cowards of us all,/ And thus the native hue of resolution/ Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought.” Hamlet has been rehearsing the ills in this life that might cause one to commit suicide, but he himself has not particularly encountered those he names [quote some lines here from the soliloquy]. We wonder to what extent his conscience, in the sense of his awareness of what is right or wrong, is holding him back. The fact that the Everlasting has set His canon against self-slaughter does not seem to be much on his mind at the moment, but he professes to be worried about what lies beyond the grave. In a few moments we hear him speaking to Ophelia of his vices: “yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not born me: I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offenses at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in” (III.1.123-27). We might argue that what gives him pause is the thought of the punishment the spirit of his father suffers, “confin’d to fast in fires,/ Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature/ Are burnt and purg’d away” (I.v.11-13), but his words to Ophelia seem to be directed to Claudius in hiding rather than designed to show her his conscience. At this point in the play Hamlet is more concerned about catching the conscience of the king than keeping his own clear. When he speaks later of his conscience, it is callous. He tells Horatio of his stratagem that puts Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern to death, “not shriving time allowed” (V.ii.47). “They are not near my conscience,” he avers (V.ii.58), and he continues in this vein when talking to Horatio about killing the king: “is’t not perfect conscience/ To quit him with this arm?” (V.ii.67-8). It is therefore hard to believe that what makes Hamlet a coward to kill either the king or himself is some craven scruple posed to him by his conscience. A form of consciousness seems rather to be responsible for his habit of pausing. His observation, “thus the native hue of resolution/ Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,” is his own gloss on “thus conscience does make cowards of us all.” By dwelling constantly on the sullied flesh his mind has caught the contagion of the world and become sick itself. It has produced in him a contamination of the self with the other. When playing with Osric, who has been fulsomely praising Laertes , he claims in his mockery that he dare not confess of what excellence Laertes is “lest I should compare with him in his excellence.” To explain how he could match Laertes for virtue he cites the principle, “to know a man well were to know himself” (V.11.137-38). In other words, we can know in others only what we recognize in ourselves. For Hamlet, however, excellence in others was removed by the death of his father and his mother’s re-marriage. The corruption that was left has communicated itself to him. His self-consciousness stymies him. It consists in role-playing wherein the varied parts of him, all of which are faulty, converse with each other, and none possesses the virtue to fuse his consciousness in a resolution to act. In one respect his self-knowledge is something like Socrates’ whose quest to know himself caused him to live in the city but not to act like a citizen. So too Hamlet lives in Denmark, but he cannot play the political part that most he should, the role of prince.[2](http://udallasclassics.org/sweet_files/Conscience%20%26%20Co-knowledge%20UC.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22_edn2) Conscience prevents him.

[1](http://udallasclassics.org/sweet_files/Conscience%20%26%20Co-knowledge%20UC.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ednref1) For this interpretation, see Seth Benardete, “Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannus,” in Joseph Cropsey (ed.), Ancients and Moderns, Basic Books; New York, 1964, 1-15).

2 For a clear and compelling account of the progression in the states of Hamlet’s mind that concludes in his regaining a sense of his own virtue and therefore being able to act like a prince, see John Alvis, Shakespeare’s Understanding of Honor, Carolina Academic Press; Durham, North Carolina, 1990, chapter III, passim.