

Conscience Lecture Notes



Conscience



In this lecture, we've examined the nature and origins of **conscience**. Broadly, that way in which we feel guilt for bad actions and pride for good ones. We've looked at the **historical** development of ideas around conscience from Aquinas to Freud. Then we've examined **scientific** ideas about the nature and evolution of conscience.



Conscience: The Big Questions

- A conscience is sometimes represented by a little voice in your head, saying “don’t do that!” or “do this!”
 - o It is the thing that helps us to judge our past actions, and plan our future actions in accordance with moral values
- If you’ve ever felt guilt for doing the wrong thing, then we might say that you have experienced your conscience

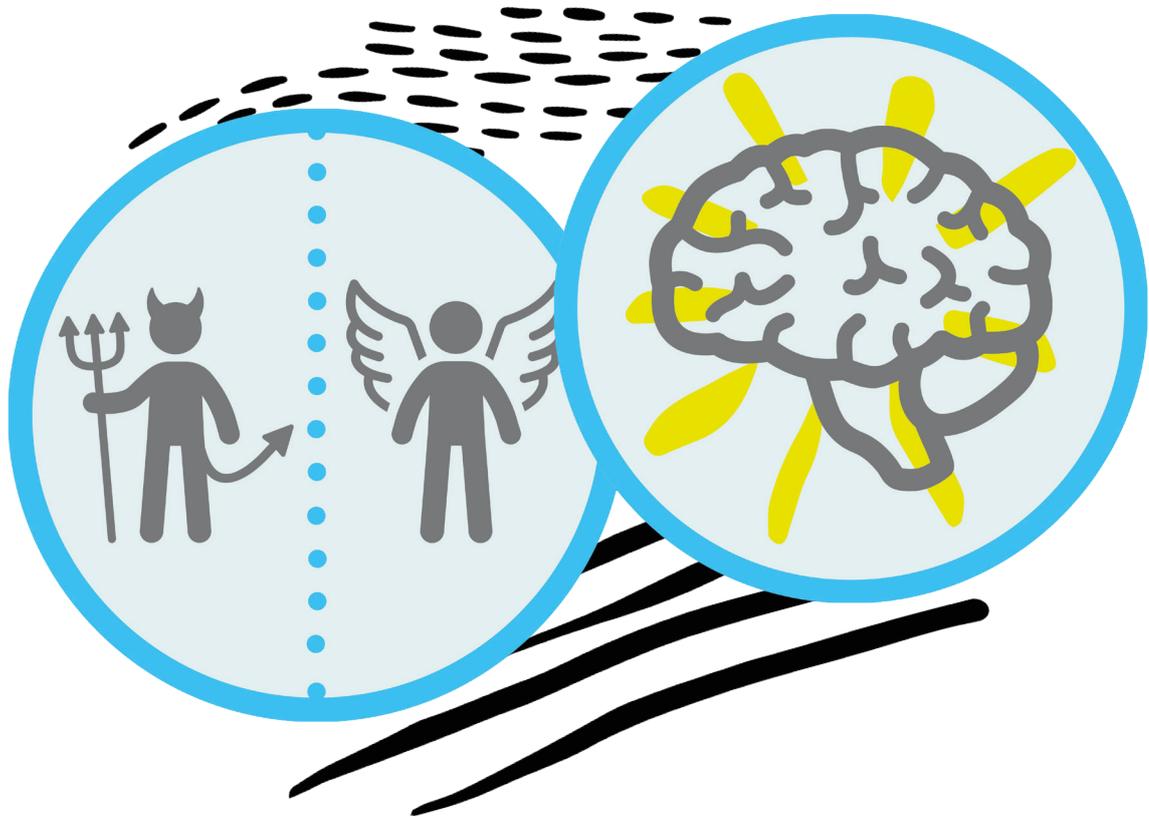
St Thomas Aquinas

Some Philosophers, such as **Aquinas** argue that your conscience is the act of applying the moral law to specific situations

Sigmund Freud

Others, like the Psychologist **Freud** argue that your conscience is the part of yourself that makes you feel bad for breaking socially established moral rules

- When you think about it, the existence of a conscience is a very strange phenomenon, worthy of explanation
 - o Why is it that we don't just act however we wish?
 - o Why is there another part of us that appears to judge and guide the part of us that acts?



- We've got two big questions to answer in this lecture:

What is the conscience?

We'll examine **Aquinas'** answer that conscience is the act of applying moral laws to situations

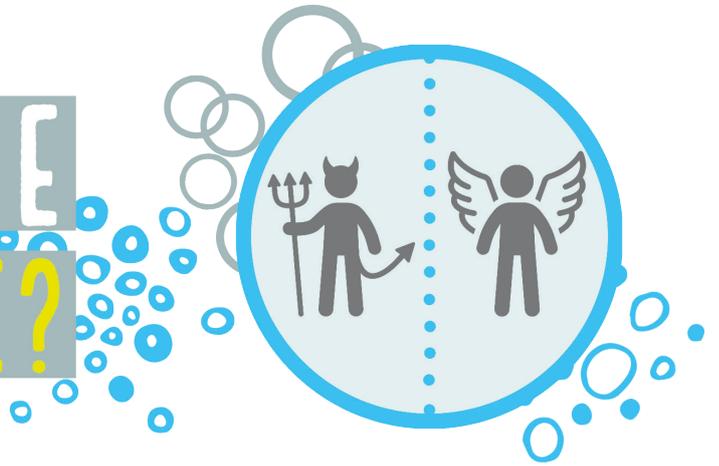
We'll also examine **Freud's** answer that conscience is the societally imposed guide and source of guilt



Where does the conscience come from?

We'll examine the **scientific evidence** for it having evolved to enable society to flourish

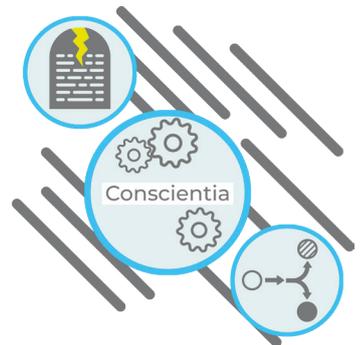
WHAT IS THE CONSCIENCE?



- Here, we're going to begin with a historical survey of the different beliefs concerning conscience in Western thought
 - o We will begin with a study of **Aquinas**
 - o Then move forward in time to an understanding of **Freud**

- **St Thomas Aquinas:**

- o He believed that the **conscience** was a **rational process** by which we took the **rules of morality** given by God and applied them to situations in which we need to **act**
- o He believed that the conscience could be applied in three ways:
 - » To the past (evaluating past actions for their moral goodness or badness)
 - » To the present (evaluating current actions and working out the best thing to do)
 - » To others (examining the actions of others, or other states of affairs and judging them)



- **Sigmund Freud**

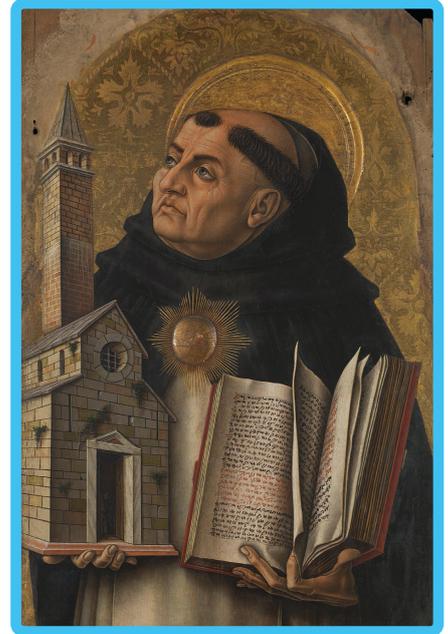
- o He argued that the self was composed of three elements:
 - » The **id**, which is your set of selfish, animal desires
 - » The **super-ego**, which is your sense of moral goodness given by society
 - » The **ego**, which is your consciousness
- o For Freud, the **conscience** is the way that the **super-ego** interacts with the **ego**, making you **feel guilty** when you don't properly live up to its (and therefore, society's) expectations



Aquinas on Conscience

- St Thomas Aquinas was a 13th Century Monk who was interested in the philosophical and theological systems that underpinned Christian belief

- Born to a rich Italian family, he gave up his riches to become a Dominican “roaming friar” - a kind of impoverished academic
- Today, he is widely regarded as the foremost Medieval Theologian, and his thinking is still hugely influential, especially in the Catholic Church
- His most important book was the Summa Theologica



- Aquinas’ moral theory was called **Natural Moral Law**

- It held that **good** and bad were **established** by **God**, and **interpreted** through the use of **reason** by humans
- In Natural Law, there are **four levels** of Law:
 - » **Eternal Law** is the true list of moral laws, in the Eternal mind of God, only accessible indirectly by humans
 - » **Divine Law** is God’s interpretation of the Eternal Law for humans through revelation (for example, the 10 Commandments and Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount)
 - » **Natural Law** is the human detection of Eternal Law in nature. God, says Aquinas, supports the world and gives it purpose according to the Eternal Law. Humans can work out what the purpose of a thing is, and by doing so, work out what the Eternal Law says about that thing
 - » **Human Law** is the political establishments set up by humans to create peaceful societies

Quick definition

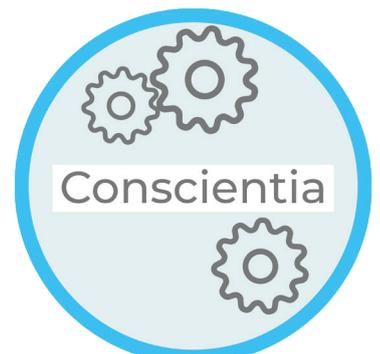


Synderesis

This is the desire to do good and to avoid evil

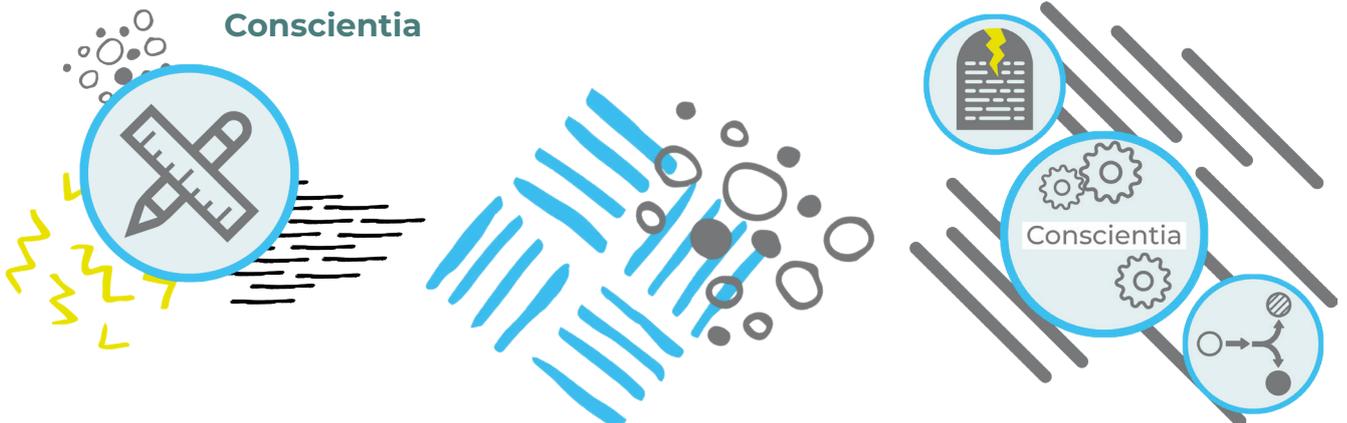
Conscientia

This is the conscience - our way of applying the moral laws to specific situations through the use of reason



Aquinas' Application of Reason as Conscience

- Aquinas believed that the fundamental rule (what he calls a **Key Precept**) in **Natural Law** is to “**Do Good and Avoid Evil**”
 - We know this to be the case because we naturally want to do good things and not do evil things
 - We want, in short, to become the best kind of humans that we can be
 - » And the best kind of human is established by God
 - » It is natural for us to want to be the best we can be. Being a better human is better conforming to the ideal human established by God.
 - » The Philosopher **Edward Feser** compares this to triangles. Imagine one is well drawn and another is poorly drawn. Both are triangles, but one is more like a triangle than the other.
 - » Humans are a little like this, some of us may be more like the ideal human than others, but it is natural to want to be **better**
 - This desire to do the good thing, to be better, is what Aquinas calls **Synderesis**
- But once we have established that we desire to do good things, we need to work out what those good things are in any particular situation
 - The way that we do this is that we employ **Conscientia**
 - » This is our use of reason to apply general moral rules to particular situations
 - » We can work out what a rule is through **Natural Law** or can be told what a rule is through **Divine Law**, but we still need to know how to apply it in each situation
 - » The application of those rules to particular situations is called **Conscientia**



- Aquinas argues that we can use a **sylllogism** (an argument with two premises – truth claims – tied together to make the conclusion) to work out right and wrong in any particular situation
 - o He gives the example of patricide (killing your father)
 - o **Premise 1:** It's wrong to kill your father
 - » This is the moral rule
 - o **Premise 2:** This man is your father
 - » This is the particular situation you find yourself in
 - o **Conclusion:** It's wrong to kill this man
 - » This is the action derived from the premises by the use of logic – it is what your conscience is telling you to do
- Aquinas also argues that we become good at using **Conscientia** through experience. The more we do it, the better we become at applying moral rules to situations
 - o This is why Aquinas believed that **Conscientia** was a **habit**, something done again and again and perfected over time
- Here is what Aquinas says about the nature of **Conscientia**:

“Properly speaking, conscience is not a power, but an act. This is evident both from the very name and from those things which in the common way of speaking are attributed to conscience . For conscience , according to the very nature of the word, implies the relation of knowledge to something: for conscience may be resolved into “cum alio scientia,” i.e. knowledge applied to an individual case. But the application of knowledge to something is done by some act. Wherefore from this explanation of the name it is clear that conscience is an act.



Summa Theologica 1, Question 79, Article 13

Three Perspectives of the Conscience

- Aquinas believes that the role of the **conscience** is to “witness, to bind, or incite, and also to accuse, torment, or rebuke.”
- It can do this, he thinks, in **three perspectives**:

- **In the past**, when we judge our previous actions.
 - » In this context, Aquinas thinks that the conscience is a **witness**
- **In the present**, when the conscience advises us on what should be done
 - » At this point, Aquinas believes the role of the conscience is to **bind us** or **incite** action
- **In the behaviour of others**, when the conscience judges their good or bad actions
 - » Here, the role the conscience plays is to **excuse** the action, **accuse** the actor or **torment** the actor

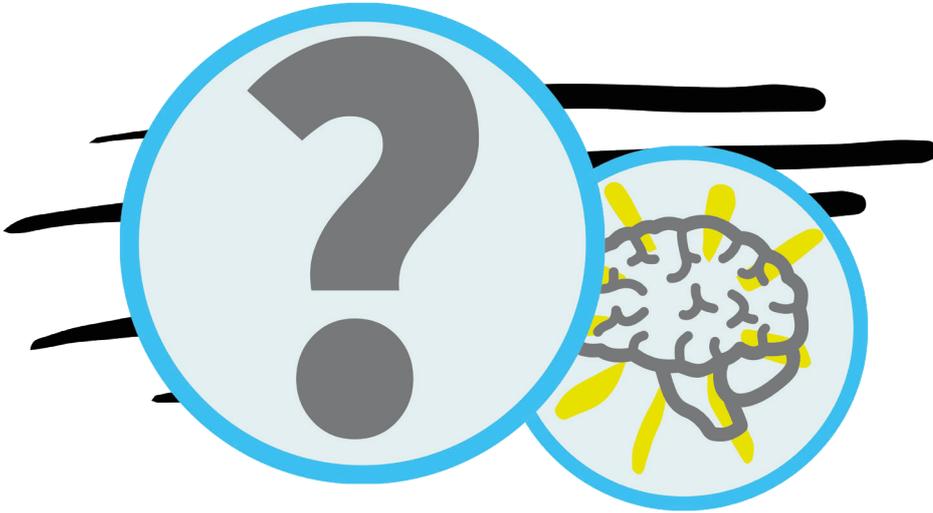
Conscience and Bad Actions

- There remains a question, however, to do with **conscience**:
 - **Why do we sometimes do bad things?**
 - If we always aim at the good, and can use reason to work out what the rule and the application are, why is it the case that sometimes we still do bad things?
- Aquinas has two answers to this:
 - We are **ignorant** of the fact that it's bad (**Invincible Ignorance**)
 - Our **will** is not strong enough, and gives in to other desires (**Vincible Ignorance**)
- Aquinas takes his inspiration here from **Aristotle** (Nichomachean Ethics, Book 3, Part 1) who argues that:
 - We are sometimes unaware of the full circumstances when we act, and if this is true, and we regret the action, then we are **not responsible** for the action
 - But sometimes we know the circumstances, but our will is overcome by emotions (such as hunger or rage) and we act poorly despite our knowledge. In that circumstance, we are **responsible** for our actions



- **Aquinas** uses exactly the same reasoning to say that:

- **Invincible Ignorance** is a defence when we do not understand the whole set of information, and it is **not your fault**.
 - » Consider the patricide example from above. If you were not aware that killing your father is wrong, or not aware that the person was your father, then you would not be responsible for your actions

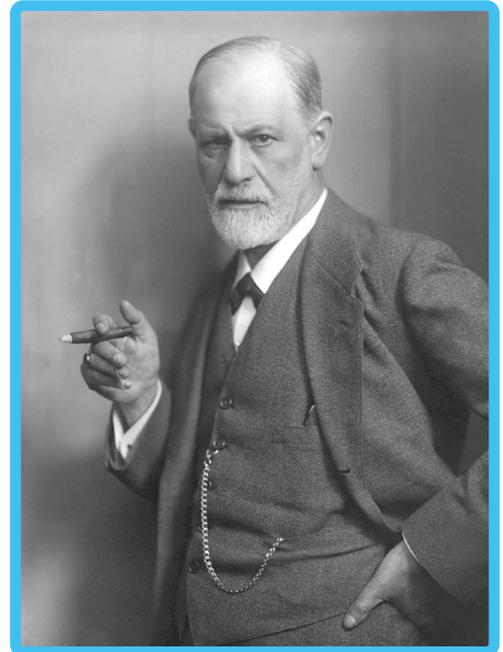


- **Vincible Ignorance** is when you are overcome by other emotions, and so the action is **your fault**
 - » For example, in the patricide case, you may know that it is wrong to kill your father and that the person is your father, but your reason may be completely overwhelmed by hatred. You are, in this situation, responsible for your bad actions

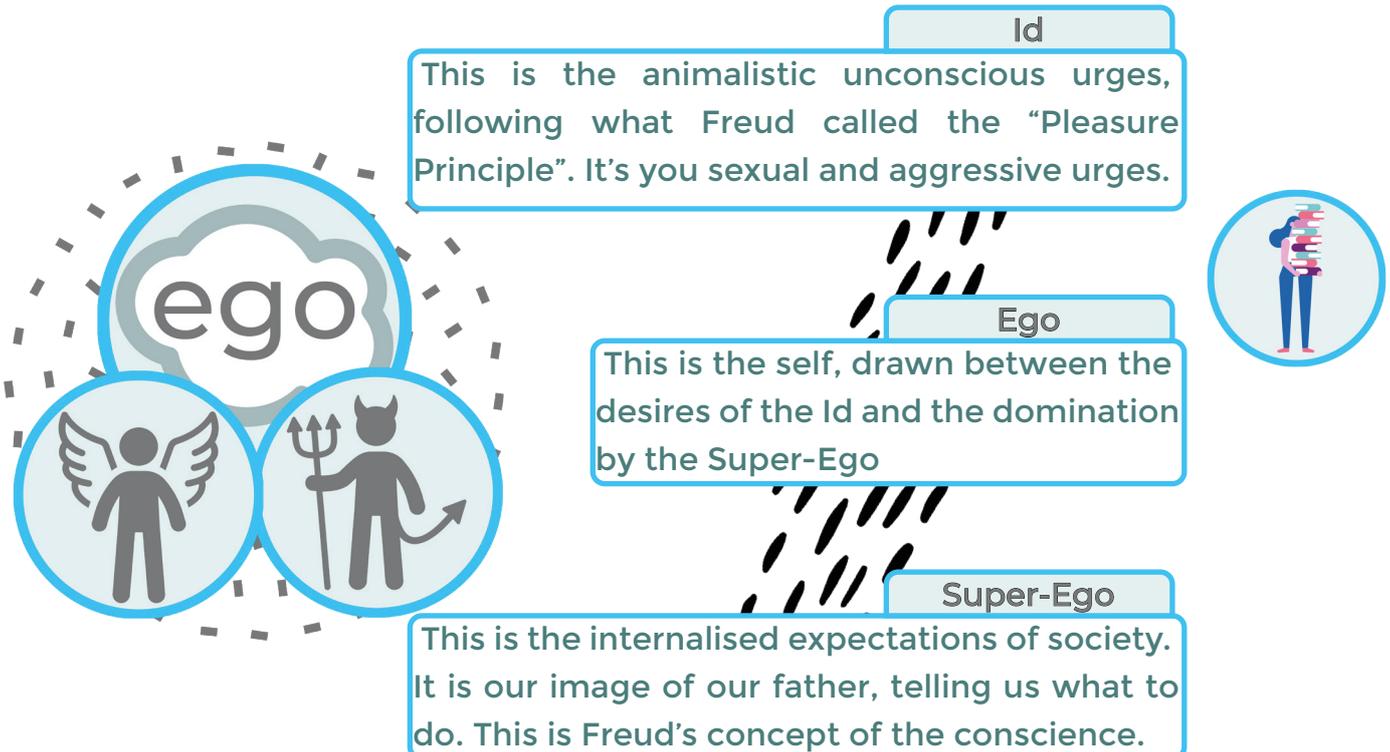


Freud on Conscience

- Sigmund Freud comes much later in the story of the development of our beliefs around the conscience
- He takes a non-Theological approach, and instead applies psychological techniques to understand what the conscience is
- Freud was a **psychoanalyst** (a brand of therapist), who was active in Vienna at the beginning of the 20th Century
 - o He was interested in understanding the **unconscious** - the motivations for actions that we are not aware of
 - o He believed that many of us have an **unconscious** that has developed **imperfectly** during our childhood and leads to us being **maladjusted**
- Freud was one of the great thinkers of the early 20th Century, but being Jewish and living in Vienna, he had to flee to London when the Nazis began their expansion throughout Europe. He died in exile, still trying to understand the nature of people who have a weakened conscience



Quick definition



- Freud believed that there are three parts that make up the human mind: the **ego** (self), the **id** (animal desires) and the **super-ego** (conscience)
 - o The **id** and the **super-ego** are part of the **unconscious**
 - o He argued that it was the job of the **ego** to listen to and obey the **super-ego** and not the **id**

Childhood Development

- Freud believed that our childhood development massively informs the kind of person we grow up to be
- Freud thought that our childhood development was largely to do with the development of our **libido** (our sexual drive).
 - o He called our childhood years our **psycho-sexual development**
- Freud believed that there were **5 stages** of **psycho-sexual development** where our libido is focused on a different area of the body:

- o **Stage 1: Oral**

- » Age 0-1 years

- » The baby is concerned with exploring the world by putting things in their mouth

- » At this stage, the **id** dominates the impulses of the baby

- » Faulty development at this stage (through neglect or over-feeding) would lead, Freud believes, to oral fixations (such as smoking, over-eating etc.) later in life

- o **Stage 2: Anal**

- » Age 1-3 years

- » Here the toddler is concerned with potty training - working out how to control their bladder and anus

- » This is the first real conflict between the **id** part (need to poo) and the **super-ego** (your parents wishing you to do so in the toilet)

- » Faulty development at this stage leads to being either anal retentive (need to be overly tidy) or anal expulsive (messy and disorganised)

- o **Stage 3: Phallic**

- » Age 3-6 years

- » The child becomes aware of gender and sex differences

- » Girls develop a desire for the father, but then realise they do not have



a penis of their own, and so gain penis envy

- » Boys develop sexual feelings toward their mother and fear castration by their father if these feelings were uncovered



○ Stage 4: Latency

- » Age 6-puberty
- » Psycho-Sexual development is paused



○ Stage 5: Genitals

- » Age puberty-adult
- » The development (good or ill) is put into use in the grown-up world, as people seek partners and desire to settle down

Development of the Super-Ego

- As you can see, according to Freud, our childhood development is a struggle between two things:
 - Our natural urges (the **id**)
 - » Things like sexual intercourse and pooping as we need
 - The demands of society (the **super-ego**)
 - » These are expressed and enforced by our parents
- In "The Future of an Illusion" Freud argued that **Parents** represent **God** for the young child:
 - The role of the parent (especially the Father) is to:
 - » **Set the rules** for the child
 - » And also to **protect** the child from the world
 - The parent, therefore, imposes the rules of society upon the id-driven child, until the child **internalises** the rules - this is the development of the super-ego
 - » But the parents themselves are not actually gods, and struggle internally with their own ids and super-egos. The child then, according to Freud, is not attempting to emulate the parents themselves, but the parents own super-egos
 - At some point, the child grows up, and realises that their Father is not the all-powerful protector and rule-setter that they believed him to be
 - The Father is seen as he truly is, an ultimately powerless and limited person
 - » The child is now confronted by the chaos of the world without a

protector

» So, says Freud, they invent (or adopt) a new one:

- God is the grown-up's replacement father-figure, a rule-setter and protector
- By the time that the child has become an adult, though, the **super-ego** is firmly in place in their mind

Religion as Father replacement

"... the paternal core that had always lain hidden behind every god figure; basically, this was a return to the historical beginnings of the god idea. With God now a single being, relations towards him could recover the intimacy and intensity of the child's relationship with its father."

- Sigmund
Freud



- The **super-ego**, then, is the **internalised** expectations and **rules of society**
 - In "Civilization and its Discontents", Freud argues that the development of the **super-ego** is **essential** to the proper running of **society**
 - Without clear **restraints** upon someone's sexual and aggressive urges (the **id**), society would cease to function
 - Those restraints come from the **super-ego**
 - So, in this telling, the **conscience** is the **internalised father** replaced not only by God but by the **fear of the community**
- According to Freud, if the only motivation for doing right things is the fear of the loss of community, then this will stop people behaving badly **only when observed** by others

"... the sense of guilt is clearly only a fear of loss of love, 'social' anxiety. In small children it can never be anything else, but in many adults, too, it has only changed to the extent that the place of the father or the two parents is taken by the larger human community."



Civilization and its Discontents, p. 116

- The problem for Freud is that we feel **guilt** not only for **actions** but also for **wanting to perform** “bad” actions
 - o Freud explains this by saying that the **guilt** is a result of the **internalising** of the **fear of community** - the **Super-Ego**



“... the authority is internalized through the establishment of a super-ego. The phenomena of conscience then reach a higher stage. Actually, it is not until now that we should speak of conscience or a sense of guilt. At this point, too, the fear of being found out comes to an end; the distinction, moreover, between doing something bad and wishing to do it disappears entirely, since nothing can be hidden from the super-ego, not even thoughts.”

Civilization and its Discontents, p. 116-117

- The **super-ego**, then, is the internal sense of morality, drawn from society and parents, that makes us **feel guilty** for things done or things thought
- This is not all good: Freud sees it as a trade-off:
 - o We **lose happiness** (which would have been found in just following the **id**)
 - o We **gain society** (by allowing the **super-ego** to make us feel guilt)

The Superego

“... the price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt.”



- Sigmund Freud



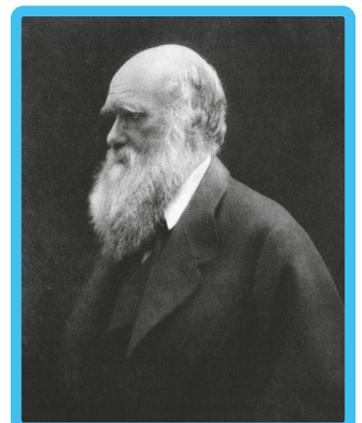
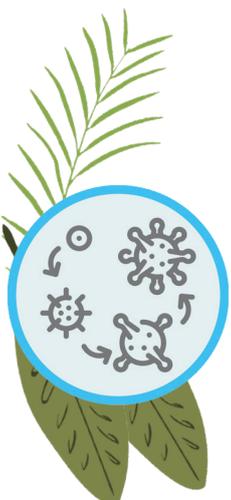
WHERE DOES THE CONSCIENCE COME FROM?



- We've already examined both **Aquinas** and **Freud** on the nature of the conscience
- We've also examined their views on the **ultimate origins** of the conscience:
 - o **Aquinas** believed it was the ideal of the human in the mind of God, applied through reason
 - o **Freud** believed that it was the internalized rules of society
- In this section, we're going to consider another approach to the question of the **ultimate origins** of the conscience:
 - o That we **evolved** to have a sense of right and wrong
 - » Essentially, this says that those creatures who had a **conscience** were more likely to **mate** and to have **successful off-spring** compared to those without a conscience

What is Evolution?

- **Evolution** is the idea that **traits** (biological characteristics) are passed on to new generations
 - o **Charles Darwin** explained in "The Origin of Species" that **Evolution** works by **Natural Selection**
 - » **Natural Selection** is the idea that new **traits** emerge by random mutation
 - » A **trait** is **beneficial** if it helps to pass itself on, and **negative** if it doesn't help to pass itself on
 - » **Beneficial traits** will, over time, become prominent
 - » **Negative traits** will die out
 - » **Species** evolve from other species as the number of positive traits changes



- **Richard Dawkins** in *“The Selfish Gene”* says it is best to consider evolution on the **genetic level**

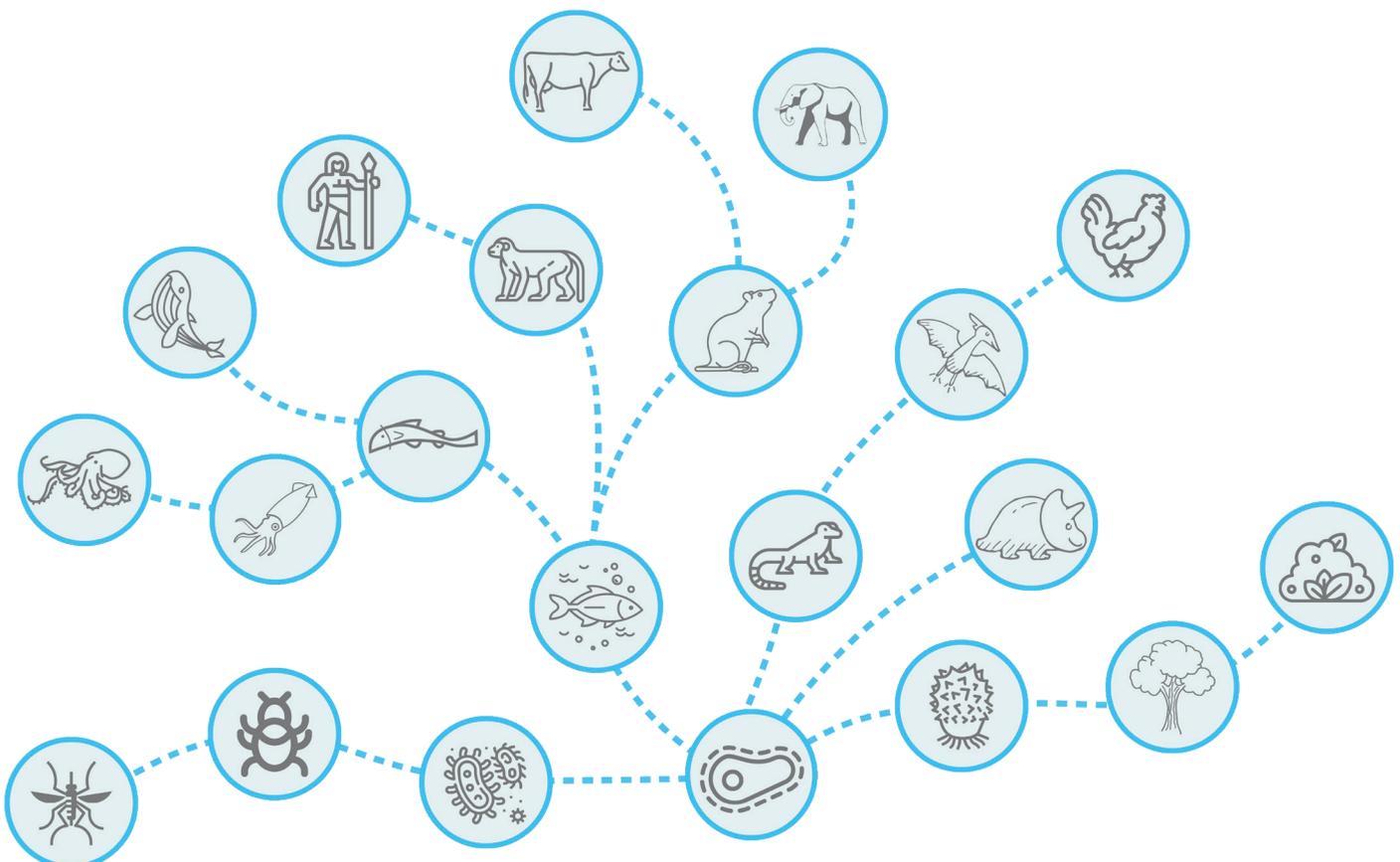
- A **gene** is a set of **instructions** for a cell
 - » It is a **replicator** – capable of reproducing itself
- **Genes** want to **survive**
- A **gene** survives if it is better at **reproducing** and **protecting** itself
 - » So, **genes** that instruct cells to form protections, gather food better and reproduce more effectively, are more likely to survive and become dominant
- **Genes** form **survival machines** in the form of more and more complex **biological constructs**



“The replicators [genes] that survived were the ones that built survival machines for themselves to live in. The first survival machines probably consisted of nothing more than a protective coat. But making a living got steadily harder as new rivals arose with better and more effective survival machines. Survival machines got bigger and more elaborate, and the process was cumulative and progressive.”



The Selfish Gene, Richard Dawkins, p.19



- Over time, these **survival machines** competed over limited resources, and more alternative machines
 - o The ones that continued to survive and pass on their replicators (**genes**) were those that were better adapted to their environment
 - o **Genes** worked together to form more complex survival machines. They **co-operated**

“Now they swarm in huge colonies, safe inside gigantic lumbering robots, sealed off from the outside world, communicating with it by tortuous indirect routes, manipulating it by remote control. They are in you and in me; they created us, body and mind; and their preservation is the ultimate rationale for our existence. They have come a long way, those replicators. Now they go by the name of genes, and we are their survival machines.”



The Selfish Gene, Richard Dawkins, p.19-20

- The challenge for **Evolution** is to explain the origin of moral ideas (**conscience**) in evolutionary terms
 - o Why did we evolve to have a conscience in the first place? Wouldn't a better strategy for our genes to be to program us to be psychopaths?
- The answer to this question lies somewhere in the concept of our status as **social animals**
 - o One of the main reasons for our success as a **species** is that we **co-operate** and **share ideas**
 - o In order to do these things, we need to believe in and work with **society**
 - o And to **maintain a society** we need to have people who **obey the rules**, and what better way than giving them a sense of the rules in their minds? In other words, a **conscience**

In short

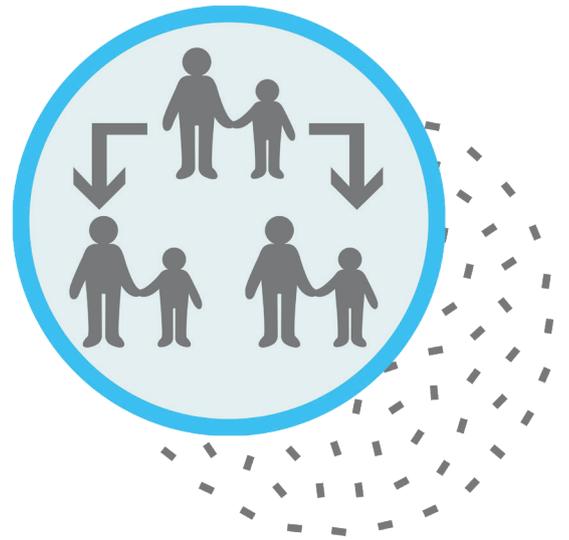
Our **genes** gain an **evolutionary advantage** from making animals with a **conscience**



- There are two main theories about how this might work in Evolution:
 - o **Kin Selection:**
 - » We behave morally to others because they likely carry some of the same genes as us
 - Richard Dawkins supports this idea
 - o **Group Selection:**
 - » We behave morally to others because a group that does so will out-compete groups that don't
 - E.O. Wilson supports this idea

Kin Selection and the Conscience

- The concept of **kin selection** is the most common idea amongst modern Evolutionary Biologists
 - o It claims that we favour those who **share genes** with us
 - o From a genetic point of view, the particular person doesn't matter, only the continuation of the genes themselves
 - o One of the key **motivating factors** for us to perform moral acts is that it will likely **help our genes** even if those genes happen not to be within our particular body
 - » You can see this clearly with parents and children - parents will willingly sacrifice themselves for their children because their children carry a lot of the same genes as them
 - » But the same logic would also hold true (though perhaps weaker) if it were a cousin, or a second-cousin
- But what of people who are not related to us at all? Why be motivated to help them?
 - o To explain this, Richard Dawkins invokes the idea of **reciprocal altruism**



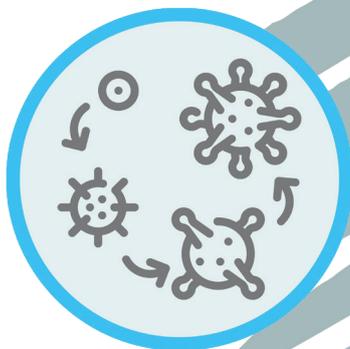
Quick definition

Altruism

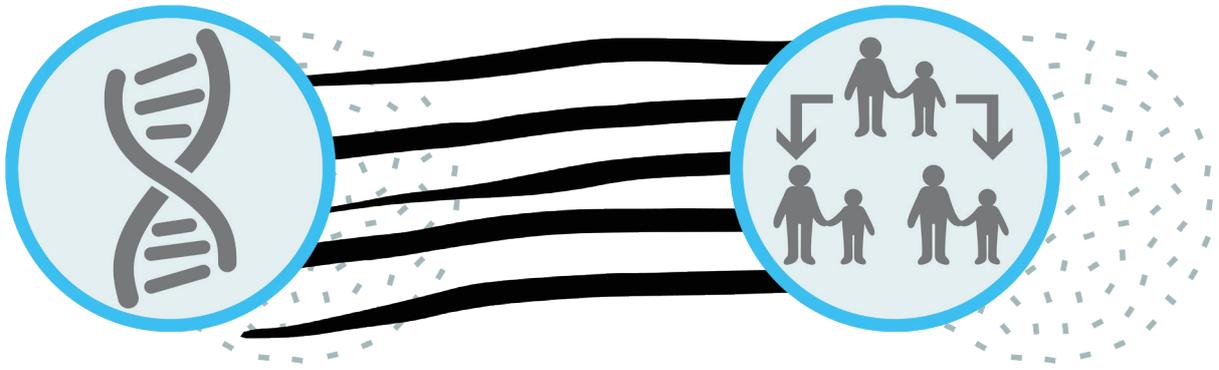
An **altruistic** act is doing something for someone that will benefit them but not benefit, or indeed will harm, us.

Reciprocal Altruism

This is the thinking that if you help me, then I will help you. But if you don't help me, I won't help you. Reciprocating altruistic or negative acts promotes altruistic acts and in the long run means you won't be taken advantage of.



- Dawkins argues that if we perform an **altruistic** act for someone else, then our genes are more likely to survive than someone who's genes don't help others



- Dawkins argues that if we perform an **altruistic** act for someone else, then our genes are more likely to survive than someone who's genes don't help others
- Dawkins asks us to imagine 3 kinds of **genetic codes**:
 - "Cheats"
 - ← These will always act negatively
 - "Suckers"
 - ← These will always perform altruistic acts
 - "Grudgers"
 - ← These will perform altruistic acts if the other being performs altruistic acts
 - ← They will perform negative acts if the other being performs negative acts
 - In other words, they hold a grudge, or, they **judge** actions and respond accordingly
- In computer simulations of these three genetic codes pitched against each other;
 - The **cheats** take down the **suckers**, gaining what they can and giving nothing back.
 - But the **grudgers** remember the **cheats** and stop co-operating with them.
 - Over time, the **cheats** run out of people to take advantage of and die out.
 - The successful code is the **grudgers**.
- Another word for the reciprocal altruism of the **grudgers** is a "Conscience", understanding the other's behaviour, and responding accordingly. **Judging** others on their behaviour.

As Dawkins puts it;

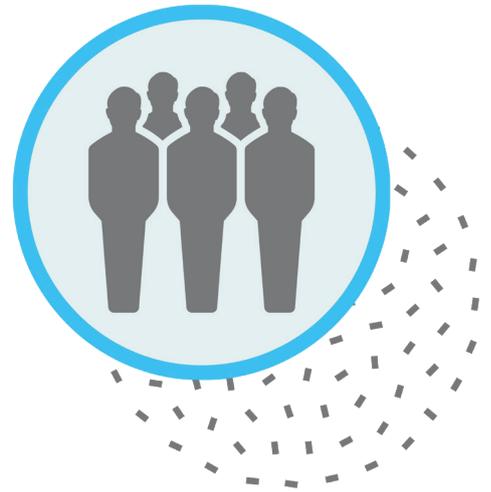
"We might therefore expect reciprocal altruism to have played an important part in human evolution."

The Selfish Gene, Richard Dawkins, p.187



Group Selection and the Conscience

- The Biologist E.O. Wilson argues that a more likely explanation for the origin of the **conscience** is on the **group level** rather than on the **individual level**
- Wilson says that humans naturally cohere into groups, and divide ourselves into **in-groups** and **out-groups** as he writes:



"In its power and universality, the tendency to form groups and then favour in-group members has the earmarks of instinct."

The Social Conquest of the Earth,
E.O. Wilson, p. 59

- Unlike the majority of other animals in the history of the planet, we are a **eusocial** species

Quick definition



Eusocial

A group behaviour where individuals share resources, act altruistically, and not all reproduce. This is a behaviour seen in ants and bees (ants were Wilson's speciality), but also, arguably, in humans.



- Whilst animals originally evolved to pass on their genes on the individual level, some species (including our own) became social
 - o We form groups, and consider ourselves to be identified with that group
- The fundamental thinking in the **eusocial** group is that if the group survives and thrives, then so do the **genes** that allow it to do so
 - o By co-operating in the group through the adoption of **morality** and **conscience**, the group as a whole will out-compete groups that do not have as many members with a strong sense of co-operation
 - o The conscience evolves to help group cohesion, allowing those groups with a strong moral sense to thrive