

Exploring the Base of Conscience and Strategies for Balancing Freedom of Conscience Among University Students

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Abstract: *Conscience, often defined as an individual's inner guide and moral compass, is a well-researched concept across psychology, philosophy, and theology. It helps individuals to distinguish between right and wrong. Despite its importance, little is known about the factors shaping conscience among university students. This study explores the foundations of conscience and how it is balanced when students from diverse religious and non-religious backgrounds encounter different perspectives. A qualitative phenomenological approach was conducted with five undergraduate students in Malaysia. Findings revealed multiple bases of conscience, including religion, personal beliefs, upbringing influenced by personal experiences, and logical evaluation. Participants used various strategies to navigate differing views, such as changing perspectives, maintaining a stable conscience foundation, openness and developing conflict resolution techniques. Their views on balancing freedom of conscience generally aligned with a no-harm principle, with compromises affecting their meaning of life. While providing valuable insights, the study is limited by its small, homogenous sample. Future research should include a broader, more diverse group to strengthen findings. This research opens the door for deeper studies to develop a comprehensive theory of conscience and calls for urgent educational and governmental reforms to nurture conscience in youth and foster a more empathetic, harmonious society.*

Keywords: base, conscience, strategies, freedom of conscience, university students

1. Introduction

Conscience is a concept that has been discussed by numerous philosophers and psychologists throughout history, both ancient and modern. Its significance in moral and ethical discourse, especially in liberal democratic societies, has been well-acknowledged by scholars who view it as a central aspect of moral life (Symons, 2022). While discussing the development of conscience, researchers often focus on cognitive moral development, which involves reasoning and decision-making, or emotional moral development, which is associated with self-control in the face of temptation (Dienstbier et al., 1975). Some also refer to it as the empathic capacity (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2003) or even the superego (Schalkwijk, 2018). These diverse perspectives highlight the complexity of conscience, reflecting its role not only in guiding personal actions but also in enabling individuals to distinguish between good and bad, grasp the essence of morality, and make informed decisions based on moral reasoning (Kamaruddin, 2012).

Conscience plays a vital role in various aspects of life, and the continual suppression of conscience can lead to a profound loss of wholeness, harmony, and integrity. Studies have shown a statistically positive correlation between students' academic achievement and their involvement in ethical and moral activities (Kitjaroonchai, 2016). Furthermore, conscience lets individuals to be ethical within professional fields, preparing the students for their roles as future leaders and citizens. Although influenced by various factors, the voice of conscience may suggest different principles and behaviours to different people (Giubilini, 2016). Therefore, understanding the foundations of conscience in university students is particularly important, as they are at a formative stage of developing ethical frameworks that will guide their future actions and decisions.

The role of conscience extends beyond the personal sphere, impacting societal norms and values. A significant issue in contemporary society is the growing dispute, commonly known as “conscience wars,” which arises from contrasting external ideologies (Rosenfeld, 2017). Furthermore, as cited by Aksan and Kochanska (2005), research on the origins of conduct problems has demonstrated that a lack of conscience during childhood sets a clear path toward developing antisocial personality traits in adolescence and adulthood. At the same time, a lack of conscience is linked to increased unethical and aggressive behaviour, contributing to higher crime rates and social fragmentation. This relationship is evident in the behaviour of individuals diagnosed as psychopaths who often act as if they have no conscience, exhibit no self-restraint, and experience little to no anxiety (Greenacre, 1945). Conscience involves introspection, awareness of one’s behaviour, and self-assessment, inspiring individuals to act on deeply held moral values and evaluate their behaviour against those principles. In universities, students are introduced to new cultures, perspectives, and moral quandaries, which provide a unique opportunity to examine how their conscience is shaped and refined. Understanding the base of conscience is crucial, not only for individual psychological flourishing but also for the well-being of the community at large.

In everyday life, individuals frequently encounter ethical dilemmas that require them to make decisions based on their conscience. These decisions often involve personal views and attitudes towards various issues, which may differ significantly from others' perspectives. This diversity in viewpoints highlights the importance of balancing one's freedom of conscience with the need for mutual respect and understanding. For example, the interpretation of the hijab varies greatly across cultures; some view it as both a symbol of oppression and a link to terrorism, while many Muslim women see it as a personal right, choice, act of modesty and a divine commandment. In an era where personal freedoms are highly valued, it becomes essential to understand how individuals strike a balance between following their conscience and adhering to religion, societal norms, laws, and expectations. By exploring these dynamics, the study aims to foster an environment where differing worldviews can be acknowledged and respected, thereby mitigating ideological clashes.

Despite its recognized importance, a gap exists in the literature regarding the bases of conscience among university students. Addressing this gap is crucial for shaping individuals who will significantly influence the moral and ethical landscape of society. Moreover, it will foster a deeper sense of purpose, guiding them to align their behaviour with their moral values. To ensure a more ethical, empathetic, and socially responsible future generation, this current research explores what are an individual’s thoughts regarding the base of conscience. It also investigates what impact different perspectives have on university students. Furthermore, the study examines what are the visions of individuals towards balancing freedom of conscience.

This research, therefore, not only contributes to academic knowledge but also has practical implications for cultivating ethical decision-making and promoting a more harmonious society.

2. Methods

2.1 Design

To gain a deep understanding of the concept of conscience among university students, this study employs a qualitative method with phenomenological research design. This approach effectively focuses on interpreting the context and occurrences of events to understand participants' perspectives by engaging with their lived experiences and personal language (Dodgson, 2023). Besides, in-depth, semi-structured interviews, both face-to-face and online, were conducted to obtain data from the participants.

2.2 Sample and Location

Qualitative research should have minimum five participants to maximum 25 participants (Alase, 2017). In this study, the participants consisted of five undergraduate students, chosen to represent varied religious backgrounds, including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, or a non-religious stance. In terms of location, the study was conducted in Malaysia, with participants being international students from various countries. Participants were from a variety of countries, including the United States, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, India, and Bangladesh.

2.3 Research Procedure

This study adhered strictly to ethical guidelines throughout the research process. Participants who agreed to participate were provided with an information letter detailing the research objectives and procedures. Alongside the information letter, participants received an informed consent form to formalize their agreement to participate. Emphasis was placed on the voluntary nature of participation, ensuring that participants were aware of their right to withdraw at any point should they feel uneasy or uncomfortable.

One-to-one interviews were conducted using both face-to-face and online methods to gain insights into participants' perceptions of conscience and strategies for balancing freedom of conscience. The researcher prioritized privacy and confidentiality for each participant. To maintain anonymity during data analysis, participants were assigned codes such as "Participant 1" and "Participant 2," avoiding the use of personal identifiers.

All consent forms and original audio recordings were securely stored in a safe locker accessible only to the research team. Data, including interview responses, consent forms, and audio recordings, will be securely retained for a specified period to allow for potential review or verification. Following this period, all data will be permanently deleted to prevent any possibility of research misconduct.

2.4 Data Analysis

After data collection, the information was transcribed, analysed, and interpreted using thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006), a widely recognized method in qualitative research due to its highly adaptability and cost-effectiveness. The analysis highlighted key aspects such as individuals' perceptions regarding the basis of conscience, the impact of differing perspectives and participants' visions for achieving a balance in the freedom of conscience.

3. Results

The results in this section emphasize several factors revealed through the analysis, which are summarized in Table 1. Further details are provided below:

3.1 Individuals' Thoughts Regarding Base of Conscience

It is notable that, four participants choose religion as their base of conscience where three of them consider it as their fundamental guide to morality.

“Well, I think I have developed my moral sense from my religion, Islam. So, the religious scripture, Quran and the hadith from our leader, Prophet Muhammad Sallallahu Alayhi wa Sallam, I get my morality, I understand what is ethically right and wrong..it's actually..umm..build upon that. So, whenever a situation arises, I actually, I try to use the framework of Islam to, decide that. (Participant 03)

Among five participants, three of them choose personal views as their base of conscience, where two of them consider it as the fundamental one.

“Whenever I am faced with an ethical dilemma, I always try to analyze the situation myself. Aah, you can say, I always try to consider what I think is right, what is wrong..and..whether my decision would harm someone, whether it's benefiting me. I would say definitely my personal belief makes a huge difference on my conscience.” (Participant 05)

Two participants cited upbringing as a critical factor in shaping their conscience.

“The way I was raised, a lot of it makes a big difference. So, uh, my parents taught me to be respectful to others and...and not cause any harm to others. So, I would say it's because it's like instilled in me. So, that's why it's, my upbringing, part of my conscience.” (Participant 02)

All participants recognized personal experience as a significant factor in developing their conscience.

“I have my personal beliefs, religion where I took my morality, I mean conscience, but it is my personal experience which shaped it.” (Participant 04)

Simultaneously, all participants reported evaluating their conscience through logical introspection either willingly or through the lens of experiences. Meanwhile, two participants who rely primarily on religion in terms of conscience believe that their faith offers a comprehensive moral framework applicable in all situations. On the other hand, those who believe in personal views admitted that their personal views are fluid and can evolve through new experiences, learning, and reflection.

“Well, my family is Islamic, like they're born Muslim. I was also born Muslim, but I did have some doubts about the religion..... So, uh, as I grew up, maybe when I was 14, 15, then I tried to actually critically evaluate my religion. I actually read the perspectives of other religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and also, I read other philosophies, especially the philosophies that atheists follow. Then I also did some extensive studies on Islam, then I actually realized that it's irrefutable, the logics and

the rulings, they are a perfect fit and it's timeless. Now whenever I feel any confusion or..or..conflict, I always refer back to my religion.” (Participant 03)

3.2 Impact of Different Perspectives on Students

Remarkably, all participants reported changes in their personal views, particularly concerning the faith or beliefs of others, when they are exposed to various perspectives. While personal views on specific topics might have evolved, all five participants stated that the fundamental base of conscience remained unchanged. Even two participants reported being more confident in their beliefs after they have considered alternative viewpoints.

“My base of conscience didn’t change, but I think I actually learned a lot, like how actually people view things. Some believe in karma, some believe in the afterlife, and some also think that this life is the absolute. So, I actually go to know different perspectives, but I don't think it actually changed me in any fundamental or core.” (Participant 03)

In terms of differing opinions and viewpoints, all participants show their willingness to engage in conversation.

“I'm open to things that people say. I listen to it. I'll take it into consideration, deep down I know that, okay, we can just put this together.” (Participant 01)

If any ideological conflict arises, participants mostly use logic and rationality. By using logic, knowledge, and wisdom, they make others understand their viewpoint rather than leaning on emotional appeals. Use of humour as a conflict resolution strategy is also worth noting conversation.

“And my religion says that we should actually call people into the path of our Lord with wisdom and knowledge. So now the approach I have taken is that I don't really engage in an argument or a discussion that I don't have an in-depth knowledge of.” (Participant 03).

3.3 Balancing Freedom of Conscience

Every participant indicated a commitment to a "no harm" policy, emphasizing that when faced with ethical dilemma, their primary consideration is to ensure they do no harm to others.

“It actually reminds me of a statement that your right to swing your arm ends where my nose begins. So, a person has to realize that they can't harm someone, they are not at liberty to do so” (Participant 04)

To ensure they don't harm to others, all participants acknowledged the necessity of compromising. However, their views regarding this compromise and its impact on their meaning of life were different. Among the participants who viewed religion as their fundamental base, a common understanding emerged. On the other hand, the participants who have personal beliefs as their foundation of conscience have expressed dissatisfaction when faced with the need to compromise her freedom of conscience.

“I wouldn't say that compromise actually restricts our freedom. It actually helps us flourish. Because imagine if we were actually doing, we were thinking of doing, uh, none of us would be here. Then, then you know, humanity wouldn't stand here. So, what

makes our existence meaningful and beautiful is that despite having irrational thoughts, we are actually logical enough to not act upon our, what is the word, ah, yes, irrationality. And that's the point, I think that's what makes human creature worthy of ruling the world, not the other way around.” (Participant 03)

Table 1: Summary of themes.

Research Questions	Themes
What are an individual's thoughts regarding the base of conscience?	i. Religion as a base ii. Personal beliefs as a base iii. Upbringing as a base iv. Shaping their base via personal experience v. Evaluating through logic
What impact different perspectives have on university students?	i. Changes in personal view ii. Stability in base of conscience iii. Openness to various perspectives iv. Having their own conflict resolution techniques
What are the visions of individuals towards balancing freedom of conscience?	i. No harm policy ii. Necessity of compromising

4 Discussions

The aim of this research is to explore the basis of conscience and the strategies that help to balance the freedom of conscience among university students. It seeks to deepen the understanding of conscience itself and determine how to foster improved ethical decision-making in everyday life. This study identified several key themes regarding the foundation of conscience. The findings reaffirm the significant role of religion as a foundational base for conscience. In traditional societies, moral values are often seen as products of religion rather than as mere human inventions (Akpan, 2016).

One of the reasons that explain why university students choose religion as their base of conscience is their search for meaning and identity. Religion helps individuals to cope with fundamental existential issues, such as meaning, death, suffering, isolation, and injustice, by interpreting life within a broader, eternal context (Paloutzian & Park, 2006). Despite the clear advantages, it is important to find out potential limitations of relying solely on religious norms as the basis of conscience. While these norms often provide a solid foundation for moral guidance, they may at times limit moral flexibility, especially in situations that require personal judgment outside of established rules.

Besides religion, personal beliefs are also considered as a base of conscience among university students. Instead of strictly adhering to roles, duties, and societal norms, many youths respond to their own inner states, subjective experiences, their unique needs, desires, and capabilities. This idea is also aligned with Self Determination Theory where fulfilling the basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness fosters the internalization of moral norms (Arvanitis, 2017). Additionally, personal experiences play a significant role in shaping students' conscience. For example, individuals who are more prone to feelings of shame are likely to experience these emotions more intensely across various situations. These situations further shape their understanding of right and wrong through both anticipatory and consequential experiences (Tangney et al., 2006). One significant challenge of using personal beliefs as the

sole foundation for conscience is the potential for ethical relativism. This view holds that moral judgments are not universal but vary based on individual or cultural context. In diverse environments like universities, this variability can cause conflicts in social interactions. As students develop their own ethical frameworks, they may find it difficult to reconcile their beliefs with those of others. This can create a fragmented understanding of ethics.

The role of upbringing in shaping conscience is also significant. The parent-child relationship, parental discipline, and socialization practices contribute to a child's internal sense of right and wrong. These early influences set the foundation for conscience, providing children with a framework to understand moral standards and regulate their behaviour as they grow (Kochanska & Aksan, 2006). Additionally, students rely on logical evaluation to justify their conscience. Research has shown a strong connection between logical thinking and moral development, with logical reasoning emerging first, followed by role-taking, and then moral reasoning (Smith, 1978). This process allows students to engage with diverse perspectives. Experiences like studying abroad, participating in extracurricular activities, and using social media expose students to a wide range of cultures, beliefs, and opinions, which can shift or reinforce their values.

Despite exposure to diverse viewpoints, many university students maintain a stable base of conscience, shaped by intellectual maturity and early moral frameworks. They are also seen to revise or adjust their values as they are challenged by alternative ways of thinking. Research findings suggest that disorienting dilemmas trigger transformative learning by compelling individuals to face life challenges that question their existing beliefs (Laros, 2017). At the same time, they show openness towards various perspectives. Individuals with higher levels of intellectual humility tend to be more accepting of differing viewpoints and are less inclined to belittle those who hold opposing opinions (Porter & Schumann, 2017). Additionally, students develop their own conflict resolution techniques as a response to navigate multiple perspectives. These include logic, rationality, knowledge, wisdom, humour etc. The ability to manage ethical conflicts through personalized strategies is an essential skill in today's globalized world. It reflects a maturation of conscience where students move beyond binary thinking to embrace moral complexity.

While freedom of conscience is important, it is generally accepted that no freedom is absolute. A no harm policy attempts to find a middle ground between unrestricted freedom and the need to maintain a safe and respectful community. The principle of 'Do No Harm' has been integrated into the design and execution of development and humanitarian initiatives in areas affected by conflict (Ware & Laoutides, 2021). Practically speaking, not every battle is worth fighting. Compromise can sometimes be the most efficient way to achieve goals, maintain relationships, and ensure a smoother university experience. However, the act of compromise impacts students' perception of life's meaning.

Students with religion as a base of conscience view compromise as a rational act and it has a positive impact on their meaning of life. Several studies have found that religiosity contributes to purpose, meaning and quality in life (Aghababaei & Błachnio, 2014). So, what might appear as restrictions on freedom transforms into meaningful choices. Moreover, the belief that they might be rewarded by a higher power, either in this life or the afterlife, adds an additional layer of significance to their actions. Therefore, while from an external viewpoint their freedom may seem limited, their internalized sense of purpose provides them with a profound sense of meaning and fulfilment in life.

On the other hand, students whose views of conscience are grounded in personal beliefs rather than religious principles find balancing freedom of conscience often comes at the cost of their sense of meaning in life. Reconciling personal beliefs with external pressures can lead to doubt and mental health challenges, as observed in individuals struggling with secular worldviews after profound experiences (Van Der Tempel & Moodley, 2020). The act of compromise is perceived as a limitation, constraining their choices and, consequently, their happiness and sense of self. Unlike students who practice religions, these individuals might not have an external system that validates their compromises. Therefore, the compromises feel like sacrifices without any compensating benefit. Students who form their conscience based on personal beliefs often place high value on authenticity and self-expression. Any form of compromise is viewed as a betrayal of their true selves, making their life feel less meaningful.

To prepare the students after graduation adequately, educational sectors can introduce modules on conscience, and even outreach programs to develop themselves as more conscientious, responsible individual and make sure they are ready to face the professional world with a morally grounded perspective. The module can combine theoretical knowledge with practical application by focusing on moral reasoning, self-reflection, and ethical conflict resolution. It should include experiential learning through case-based discussions, ethical dilemmas, and real-world scenarios that challenge students to face moral complexity and make decisions based on their conscience. The outreach programmes can be community service projects, working with local charities, mentorship programmes etc. These programs help to develop conscience by encouraging students to reflect on their actions, understand different perspectives, and apply moral reasoning in practical, socially responsible contexts.

Conscience is a very broad topic, and it might have its own unique way of forming and growing in people, which can stay stable despite many different influences. The current study showed that even when people are being exposed to different ideas and experiences, there have a core understanding of conscience that didn't change. So, this area needs study to find out what makes this core so strong and unchanging. Therefore, the development of a new theoretical framework is essential to systematically examine the underlying stability of conscience, assess the influence of external factors, and explore its practical implications in real-world contexts. A potential name for this theory could be Core Conscience Theory. This framework can provide a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of how conscience is formed, maintained, nurtured and ultimately contribute to personal growth and ethical decision-making. Additionally, this theory can give a fresh perspective and detailed information on understanding the human conscience in a simpler yet detailed manner.

For a more comprehensive understanding, future studies must aim for a larger and more diverse sample size. A more expansive sample can enhance the reliability and generalizability of the findings. Future studies can be done in various aspect; not only based on religious and non-religious background. The research can consider different age groups, generations, gender, professions and so on. Even it is conducted in between religious and non-religious background, the researchers can include more participants from other religions rather than only the major ones. The non-religious background should have the same variety, like agnostic, atheist, non-practising etc. Studying this topic across various ethnic, religious, and regional groups will reveal how different moral frameworks shape the development of conscience. This approach will provide a more profound understanding of the cultural factors that influence ethical decision-making.

The current research involved participants from four major religions and one non-religious group, with data collected through one-on-one interviews. Future research could benefit from using focus group discussions, which would capture the richness and diversity of perspectives on conscience. The interactive nature of focus groups encourages dialogue, provides insights that may not emerge in individual interviews, and allows for real-time comparison between participants from different religious and non-religious backgrounds. Additionally, adopting a mixed-methods approach will offer a more comprehensive understanding of conscience development. Surveys can provide broad, statistically significant data on the foundations of conscience, moral attitudes, and behaviours, while qualitative methods like interviews and focus groups can explore the motivations behind these behaviours. By combining both approaches, future studies will not only capture a wide range of perspectives but also gain deeper insights into the psychological, emotional, and cultural factors that influence the formation of conscience.

In short, the research gives a significant insight regarding the base of conscience and ways to balance the freedom of conscience among university students. The research reveals what students think regarding their base of conscience and how different factors help them to align their beliefs with their actions. It delves into the impact of various perspectives on students and explores their views on balancing freedom of conscience. Furthermore, it shows how their approach, advocating for responsibility and consideration for others' well-being, serves as a critical moderating force in navigating the complexities of diverse ideologies and perspectives.

Beyond academic relevance, the findings highlight the practical importance of conscience in both professional and social contexts. Educational sectors could benefit from integrating modules on conscience, preparing students for ethical practice and responsible behaviour in their professional lives. Additionally, the findings suggest a need for reorienting judicial systems, potentially leading to more harmonious society. By fostering an environment where diverse perspectives are respected and ethical decision-making is prioritized, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how to cultivate a more conscientious and ethically grounded society. As university students stand on the cusp of entering the broader world, equipping them with the tools to navigate and balance their conscience with external influences is essential for ensuring ethical decision-making in their day-to-day lives.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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