

Niebuhr's discussion of "conscience"—or of "the social and individual dimension[s] of the moral sense"—is instructive (*Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics*: 125 f.).

On the one hand, he rightly recognizes that "[t]he 'content' of conscience is obviously very relative to time and place," and is much more so, in fact, than "the proponents of the idea of 'moral intuitions'" realize. Such relativity, he argues, points to "the social derivation of the moral law." Because "[m]an is both a historical and [a] social creature," "[h]e does not make his moral judgments in a vacuum," but rather judges himself by "the standards" set by the community in which he lives. On the other hand, Niebuhr also rightly recognizes that "the minimal terms of our obligations to our neighbors, incorporated for instance in the prohibitions of murder, theft, and adultery, are fairly universal"; and he confirms Hume's observation that the "preference for benevolence over self-regard" is universal, "certainly more nearly universal than actual benevolence." He then adumbrates, however tentatively, what is evidently his own version of "moral intuitionism," according to which "the universalities of the 'moral law' are derived from intuitions of the self about the essential nature of its selfhood," so that the self feels "obliged to conform to the 'law' written into its nature, including the law of love or the law which is derived from the mutual dependence of persons." In this connection, he further argues that the "modicum of truth in the moral relativism propounded by modern anthropologists" is exactly that—a modicum—the countervailing truth being proved by "the frequency with which 'conscience' expresses itself in defiance of the community."

As for Niebuhr's criticism of "consistently 'liberal' or 'bourgeois' notions of conscience as purely individual," it's not entirely clear that it's justified. Even granting his point that "the individual is best able to defy a community when his conscience is informed and reinforced by another community, whether religious or political," one may still doubt that there is more than a verbal difference between a purely individual notion of conscience, on the one hand, and the notion that Niebuhr himself entertains of a man's conscience being informed and

reinforced by a community that “makes no overt claim upon him and may exist only in his imagination,” on the other.

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