

Capital punishment and conscience

October 12, 2014 by Daniel J. Bauer

Responding in part to space I recently offered to two common English words (“We must distinguish between studying and learning English” 9-28-14) a friend wants me to say more here on language related issues. Her wish reached me after last week’s attention to the term “decency” appeared, albeit in a social, not to say political context (“On decency and the HK protests” 10-5-14).

My answer to this kind reader: I am leery of becoming too predictable. Although I may write on certain favorite topics, I also value variety and surprise for readers. And yet I find myself today, beating my head against a brick wall. I’d prefer not to play the language card so soon again, but can’t seem not to.

Last Sunday I attended the “2014 World Teachers’ Day Forum On the Awakening of Conscience” here in Taipei. (Do we really want to capitalize “on” in that official title?) A former student involved in that conference had invited me to stop by. The speakers were to direct a laser beam on the word “conscience,” she said, and surely I would want to be there. She was right.

This is not the moment to seriously critique the forum. I might have organized things differently if I’d had my say, but that is not important. I fully agree that we can all do with more thought about the role of conscience in our lives.

The Chinese term the forum used for “awakening of conscience” was (please pardon my personal system of Romanization) “liang xin jue xing.” The 2nd toned liang means “good,” and xin of course is “heart.” The two together are commonly used for “conscience.” Jue xing more or less weighs in as “become conscious of, be aware of.”

Now, “liang xin jue xing” seems to assume that people are all walking around with a conscience deep inside of them. Conscience, goes the idea, is innate in each of us, apart from any spiritual tradition to which we subscribe, or any culture into which we were born.

But what exactly is a conscience? Let’s save trouble and agree in a general way that conscience is an inner voice that prompts us to grasp or know a certain attitude or course of action is right or wrong in an ethical sense.

If several hundred of us sat in a room last week to wrestle over the mystery of conscience in life, does that mean that each of us was alert, awakened, you know, marvelously bright-eyed about right and wrong? I wouldn’t say that, but we were trying our best.

Back in 2010, Wang Ching-feng, Taiwan’s Minister of Justice, shocked the nation (and probably many an observer in China) by announcing she could not in good conscience sign papers leading to the execution of criminals found guilty of even the most heinous crimes. The voice of her conscience, in other words, prompted her to choose life over death, even in the face of tremendous social pressure.

Our current Minister of Justice, Luo ying-shay, told a Judiciary and Organic Laws and Statutes Committee last week that her conscience as a devout Buddhist tells her that capital punishment is morally abhorrent. Oh, oh, hold on. My conscience is telling me this is my view. I cannot claim it for her.

Minister Luo acknowledged that she personally regards capital punishment as wrong. Yes. She feels however that she is bound by her responsibilities as a public official to carry out executions. She is conscious, in other words, of a certain type of, shall we say, social conscience.

When faced with the same dilemma, former Justice Minister Wang resigned from public office. Her personal conscience spoke more loudly to her, it appears, than anything else in her life.

The examples of the two ministers of justice clearly give us fine material for contemplation. When in life do we act for the sake of a peaceful personal conscience? When, on the other hand, are we acutely conscious of other people, and of what our conscience tells us we owe to them?

For me, the paramount question remains: Whenever I step up to a mirror and look at myself eyeball to eyeball, am I aware or awakened or however you may describe it? Am I conscious of rights and wrongs present in my attitudes and behavior? Surely, if I am wise enough to stop and listen, an inner voice is trying to tell me something.

Do I hear that voice? (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points :

1. Although the subject of capital punishment may seem a far away and abstract issue, many people in Taiwan have strong feelings about it. Do you agree that Taiwan should continue to put people to death if they have committed extremely serious crimes?
2. This column discusses the word "conscience" in English, which is of course quite different than "conscious" or "consciousness." What does "conscience" mean to you?
3. Philosophers say that a 'personal' conscience is different than a 'social' conscience. What is the difference between these terms, and does it matter to you? Do you have a social conscience? How do you know?

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