CONSCIENCE IN GREEK STOICISM

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It has often been assumed, uncritically, that the concept of conscience was developed by the Stoics or that it played an important role in their thinking¹). This paper will examine the development of the concept of conscience in Greek culture with particular attention to the role of conscience in Stoic thought. Primarily, this will be a study of use of the term syneidesis and cognate forms. Whether there are literary expressions of the notion of conscience before the use of syneidesis for this purpose depends on the definition of conscience which one is using. In assessing the significance of ancient myths, especially the myth of the Erinyes or Furies, Friedrich Zucker interprets conscience as an internal conflict. Consequently, he does not find the fact of conscience expressed before the Hellenistic period²). Zucker sees the beginnings of the concept of conscience in the early fifth century when recognition of intention became important in judging an act, but only in the popular ethics of the fourth century with its stress on shame and deliberate willing does he recognize the developed notion of conscience³). Bruno Snell thinks of conscience mainly as reflexive thinking about one's moral life, so he finds signs of conscience in the fifth century⁴). Others find expressions of conscience in the earliest expressions of moral awareness and shame for evil deeds⁵). It is with

³) Zucker, p. 12f.
the development of the terms *syneidesis* and *syneidos* that a concept of conscience is given clear literary expression; therefore it is to the examination of these items that we must turn our attention.

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*Syneidēsis* is derived from the verb *synoida*, a compound of *oida* (*eidenai*), which means to know immediately or intuitively, as opposed to acquiring knowledge through reasoning (*noein*) 6). This sense of the verb continues to be basic to the meaning of the nouns *syneidēsis*, *synesis*, and *syneidos*. Conscience is a form of knowing.

The prefix *syn-* meant at first community of knowledge, such as a witness, confidant, or accomplice would have 7). There are examples of this meaning of *synoida* in Sophocles, Xenophon, and Plutarch. From this use developed the meaning "to know with oneself," which is expressed with or without use of a reflexive pronoun. The basic meaning of the noun and of the verbal phrase is "consciousness" (of any fact, including one with moral import.). *Synoida* meaning simply to be aware, is found in Euripides, Aristophanes, Xenophon and Plato. The peculiarly moral significance of *syneidēsis* and cognate terms developed gradually, and was never the only use. Even when *syneidēsis* meant the moral consciousness, the original meaning of consciousness or awareness was basic to the meaning of the term.

The verb *synoida* is used to express awareness of evil deeds in Euripides (*Orestes 39f*) and of innocence in Antiphanes ap. Stobaeus (*Florilegium iii.24*) and in Isocrates (*Nicocles 59* and *To Philip 79*).

In *Apology 24*, Xenophon pictures Socrates as using the reflexive construction of *synoida* for awareness of evil, and Stobaeus (*Florilegium iii.24*) quotes him as using *syneidos* for consciousness of innocence. In *Apology 21B*, Xenophon has Socrates using the reflexive construction of the verb for knowledge of a non-moral matter, viz. that he is not wise. In Plato the verb is used with the reflexive pronoun for knowledge of both moral and non-moral matters. It is clear that

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