

## **THE STILWELL CONSCIENCE INTERVIEW**

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**NOTE:** This is a semi-structured interview. All initial queries should be asked verbatim. Afterwards the interviewer can develop the dialogue in any way that helps the subject share the meaning of his/her moral life.

### **QUESTION 1: GENERAL DEFINITION**

Have you heard of the word, conscience? What is it? How does it work? It's alright to guess.

(1st Alternate) Is there a part of a person that knows about right and wrong? good and bad? What is it? How does it work?

(2nd Alternate) How does a person (boy/girl) know when s/he is being good? How does a person (boy/girl) know when s/he is being bad? Would you give me an example of what you mean?

### **QUESTION 2: PERSONAL DEFINITION**

Describe your own conscience and how it works. Can you give another personal example?

A word about **examples**:

Examples that are **stories** involve a situation, characters, conflict, feelings, exchange of words, actions, resolutions and lessons learned. **Stories** are the best kind of examples because they tell so much. However, an **example** can be any of these components...in that case there may not be a resolution or a lesson.

Additional Probes for "**how does it work?**":

What does your brain **think** about right/wrong, good/bad? What kind of things does it tell you?

What does your mind **know** about right/wrong, good/bad? How did it get to know those things?

What kinds of **ideas are stored** in your mind (conscience) about right and wrong? How is a conscience **formed**? How does it get in your mind in the first place?

Additional Probes to get **examples**:

Can you give me a "**for instance**"?

Can you tell me a **story** about how your brain (mind) got to know about right and wrong?

Can you tell me about a **situation (or a time)** that your conscience really worked well...

or

forgot to work? Who did what? Who said what? What needed to be done? How did it turn out? Who learned what?

If **examples** are hard to get:

What would be an example of right/wrong, good/bad for **any boy (girl) about your age**?

If **examples** are all hypothetical:

Can you give me an example **from your own life**? that **really happened** to you?

### **QUESTION 3A: PLEASING THE CONSCIENCE**

When you have pleased your conscience and done something morally right/good, what happens on the inside of you?

Do you feel it in any particular place(s) in your body?  
What happens on the outside of you? How does it show?  
If I were to look at you, how would I know what is happening inside of you?  
What is the reaction of other people around you? What do other people do when they find out?  
**[GET EXAMPLES]**

Additional Probes for eliciting feelings and psychophysiological responses:

**What is it like when you feel happy** (sad, scared, mad, embarrassed, ashamed, etc).

For every person it's a little different.

**How do you experience that feeling physically or physiologically?**

Do your feelings **show** in your face, or any other part of your body?

Do you **put on a face** when you feel that way?

**How long does that feeling last?** What do you do about it (if its negative)?

How do other people know your feelings about right/wrong, good/bad?

What feelings do you have that **don't show**?

Is it easy for other people to "**read**" your feelings?

Additional Probes for "**other people's reactions**":

How do other people feel when you have.....?

Do other people **put on a face**? What does it look like?

Do they treat you differently?

### **QUESTION 3B: PLEASING...IF NO ONE KNOWS**

Would you tell me of a time when you did something good/right and nobody knew about it....a time when you did a secret good deed.

What happened on the inside of you in that situation?

Did you feel it any special place in your body?

What happened on the outside of you?

If I just came into the room and looked at you....would I be able to tell that you had just done something good?

Do other people figure it out? How do they do it?

Additional probes for **secret goodness**:

For a small child a secret may be associated with lying or badness. Try the word, **surprise**. Let's say, you've done a secret good deed....what happens ...?  
Let's pretend that there is no possible way for your parents (teacher, friend, etc) to find out. Would that change how you felt about it?

#### **QUESTION 4A: DISPLEASING THE CONSCIENCE**

When you have gone against your conscience and done something morally bad/wrong, what happens on the inside of you?  
Do you feel it any special place in your body?  
What happens on the outside of you?  
If I were looking at you, how would I know something was wrong?  
What is the reaction of other people around you?

When moral feelings are elicited, the objective is to learn how they are used in behalf of moral growth.

How long does the **feeling bad (angry, guilty)** last?

What do you do to get a good feeling? (This will repeat in Q5).

How does that feeling show itself in your body? Does it **take a toll on you physically, physiologically**? Does it affect your health?

Additional probes for **other people's reactions**:

How **upset** do other people get with you? What do they do? Do they treat you differently?

#### **QUESTION 4B: DISPLEASING...IF NO ONE KNOWS**

Tell me about a time when you did something wrong and no one found out.  
What happened on the inside of you?  
Did you feel it in any special place in your body?  
What happens on the outside of you?  
If I were looking at you, how would I know you had done something wrong?  
What is the reaction of other people around you?

Additional probes:

Let's **pretend** there is **absolutely no way** your parents (teachers, the police, your friends, etc. can find out)....

Let's pretend I'm a little (bug, mouse, etc.) hidden in the corner of your bedroom? Would I be able to tell you had done something wrong? Would there be any clues?

Have you ever done anything so bad/wrong that you **couldn't tell anybody** for a long, long time?

#### **QUESTION 5: REPARATION AND HEALING**

A. When you have gone against your conscience and you do something wrong or bad, what do you do to make things right?

B. What do you do to feel better?

Additional probes for **making things right**?

And what else? And what else? And what else?

What do you do to **make it fair**, to **make up for.....**, to make things **turn out right**?

Are there times when **nothing makes things right**? What do you do then?

Additional probes for feeling responses:

Okay, you've done [quote the subject] such and such to make up for [quote subject], now how

do you feel?

What else do you do to make yourself feel better?

What else do you do to get back to feeling like your normal self? How long does it take?

### **QUESTION 6: FIRST MEMORIES OF GOODNESS**

What is the very first thing you can remember doing that was called "good"? Go back as far as you can. Tell me the whole story of the event.

**Note:** The goal is not necessarily the "first" memory, but early and significant memories in which the child's environment had a strong impact in defining goodness to him/her.

The objective of Questions 6 and 7 are to retrieve stories of how parents or other primary attachment figures taught the subject a sense of right and wrong at as early an age as the child can remember. It is hypothesized that these stories will reveal qualities about the strength and security of attachment relationship, theoretically necessary components of the moralization of attachment process.

Help the subject retrieve the narrative of the event with the following aids:

Where did this happen? Describe the place.

Who all was there?

What was the occasion?

How old were you? What do you remember about yourself that day? What kind of a mood were you in?

What all happened? and what happened after that", "and then what" "how did it end"

What did you do that was called good?

Who said it was "good"?

What did you learn from that? What was the lesson (moral)?

Why do you think that story is one you especially remember?

Have you had similar experiences since then?

Does that story have anything to do with how you think about goodness today?  
at story typical of things that were always happening to you?

(If the story arouses a particular feeling now...humor, sadness, anger), what about the story makes you feel silly, happy, sad, scared, angry?

What does that tell you about yourself when you were small? What does it tell you about your Mom/Dad (or other people in the story?)

Can you go back any further...to 6 or 5 or before school to 4 or 3 or further?

Is there something in a family picture album that makes you think of something?

Does your family ever tell stories about things that happened in the past?

### **QUESTION 7: FIRST MEMORIES OF BADNESS**

What is the very first thing you can remember doing that was called "bad"? Go back as far as you can. Tell me everything about it.

**Note:** See question six for how to proceed with helping the subject build the narrative and draw conclusions from it.

### **QUESTION 8: SELF-ESTEEM IN THE EYES OF CONSCIENCE**

- A. Do you feel like a good person most of the time?  
Do you think you were born "good" or "bad"?
- B. What are all the good things about you?
- C. What are all the bad things about you?

Additional probes:

Help the subject elaborate views on the **nature/nurture issue** if s/he gives you a lead.  
Help the subject elaborate views on the concept of "**original sin**" if s/he gives you a lead.

B. This is your time to **brag**. And what else? and what else? Which are the morally good things about you?

C. What things **get you in trouble** (with your conscience)?  
**How "bad"** are those things?

### **QUESTION 9: WHO CARES ABOUT YOUR GOODNESS?**

Other than yourself, who is most **PROUD** when you have done something good? Has this been true all your life? How do these person(s) show they care about your goodness?

Additional probes:

Who most wants you to be a good person?  
How do they get that idea across to you?  
Does it get across?

### **QUESTION 10: WHO CARES ABOUT YOUR BADNESS?**

Other than yourself, who is most **ASHAMED** when you have done something bad?  
Has that been true all your life? How do these person(s) show they care when you haven't been good?

Additional probes?

Who gets most **upset** with you when you're done something wrong?

With whom do you **get in trouble**? What is "trouble"?

How do you feel about it when they (ground, punish, give you a timeout) etc.,

Is it for your **own good**?

What are they trying to teach you? Does it work?

### **QUESTION 11: CONSCIENCE DRAWING**

Now...I want you to use your imagination and draw a picture of your conscience (or the part of you that knows about right and wrong) (or a picture about being good and being bad).

**Note:** Give the subject an 8 1/2 x 11 sheet of white paper with a box of eight markers with basic colors. Slides will be made of these drawings.

Now... would you tell me about your drawing?



Additional probes:

Do the **colors** mean anything in particular?

Ask about any **details** that the subject doesn't spontaneously describe.

How does the "person" feel in the drawing? What is s/he thinking?

#### **QUESTION 12: MANDATE LISTS**

Now, I want you to make a list of the main principles (rules) (do's and don'ts) in your conscience.

**Note:** Use another identical sheet of paper (with pencil or pen). It is the intent to take slides of these, so use writing materials that show well.

Additional probes:

If the rules are concrete (i.e. don't knock down mailboxes) ask for a **generalization** (i.e. don't damage property). Younger subjects won't be able to generalize.

If a lot of rules seem to get at the same thing, ask for a **generalization**.

#### **QUESTION 13: MANDATE AUTHORS**

Beside the rules write the name of the person(s) who have helped the most in putting that rule in your conscience.

#### **QUESTION 14: VALUATION AND DEFENSES:**

Sometimes there are good reasons for OBEYING rules; sometimes there are good reasons for NOT OBEYING rules. Let's look at your rules and see what you think

about them.

What are your best reasons for \_\_\_\_\_. What are your best reasons for not

**Note:** If the subject has an extremely long or repetitive list, select just a few mandates for discussion. Include ones that cover the three categories: obligations to authority, obligations to self, and obligations to others (egalitarian issues).

Note: When the subject gives a reason, keep asking for a reason for the reason until the very root value is reached.

Additional probes:

When would it be a **good idea to "forget"** to follow that rule?

Is that rule ever just **too hard** to follow?

Are there times when that rule just does **not make sense**?

Do you have rules in your head that are **confusing**?

Are there any **exceptions** to that rule?

Can you **follow all those rules all the time**?

#### **QUESTION 15: SELF EVALUATION AND VOLITION**

Does your conscience change as you grow? How?

Do you think about your conscience (or morality) differently **NOW** than when you were younger? Are there changes going on in you now? Tell me about them.

Is your conscience your friend or your enemy? Is it in charge of you or are you in charge of it? Do you work together or are you enemies? How much **WILLPOWER** do you have? How do you use your willpower to stay out of trouble, to please your conscience, to follow through on what you believe?

When does your willpower fail for you?

Are there ways that your **FEELINGS** get in the way of following right and wrong?

Do you sometimes **THINK** one way and **BEHAVE** another?

Additional probes:

What does your conscience **know now** that it didn't know when you were younger?

How much **will power** do you have? How often do you follow your own conscience? How hard or easy is it to follow your conscience?

Are there times you **don't know** what the right or good action is? What if there are **two rights or two wrongs**? Which action do you take?

Have you been in **unusual situations** that interfered with you doing the right thing or being a good person? Are there some situations you try to avoid? Are there some situations that are too tempting?

Do you have a **different attitude** than you used to have about things having to do with conscience? Are you trying to get a different attitude? How?

What developmental events--things that happened while you were growing up--changed your conscience? directed the development of your conscience? shaped how you think about right and wrong? good and bad?

#### QUESTION 16: A FREE QUESTION

Interviewer's choice

For patients this may involve particular behavior for which the patient was hospitalized or referred for treatment.

Additional probes:

What did you think of these questions?

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