

# *The Witness of Conscience to God*

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**I**N the following pages certain facts about conscience will be stated. While the subject is chiefly approached from the practical side, the Divine origin of conscience and its rational basis are consistently maintained. This is, however, not a thesis on the origin of conscience and the moral ideas, but an attempt to set forth the power it has in controlling and shaping human character and conduct, and in the acquisition of these virtues that are developed in man and are necessary to his further development. Whatever its origin and however evolved, there it is now, and all thinkers must accept it as it is now, a well-developed and universally recognized faculty in human life. Its power and authority are always present with us. We cannot escape or evade them. And least of all Christians, whose postulate is that conscience is the voice of God, the force of the Divine Spirit indwelling in us, illumining our reason, controlling our will, restraining our feelings. But like the "good" it seems to defy analysis. Something apart from and distinct from other faculties, it manifestly was intended and it manifestly intends to govern them all. It is in itself a witness to the unity of the human personality. It and memory prove that we are not a mere bundle of thoughts and feelings, but that behind all such, is a thinking, willing, feeling centre; self-conscious, and therefore conscious of its faults and its past, its hopes and its future. And such a soul, we know from experience or direction from a higher source which must be obeyed, is as capable of receiving a rational law as of entertaining an emotional appeal from a rival source which speaks without such authority. For if God speaks to man through his reason, man speaks to man often through his feelings. Such a soul is capable too of judging its own motives and of weighing its own actions, capable also of a future, to the development of which soul natural life and powers may

afford help but may set no limit. As the expression of such a soul, or as its attitude towards motive and action we have—conscience. From the Christian viewpoint conscience is a witness to God and immortality. It helps us to realize that the basis of the authority of the moral law is outside us, and above us, in other words, objective not subjective, and, therefore, in the highest sense rational and real. For the “real” is the “rational” as Hegel said. We must believe that the universe is worked on rational lines, otherwise we could have no science. And ethics may be roughly described as the science of human conduct. In a non-rational universe there would be no physical order, no spiritual law, no authority, and no conscience. Conscience is, therefore, a witness to the rationality of the universe, and the presence of a supreme reason which has directed and is directing its movements, physical, moral and spiritual. It was in the sphere of the practical reason which we may regard, broadly speaking, as the conscience, rather than in the pure reason or understanding, that Kant found the grounds of belief in the immortality of the soul and the existence of a supreme law-giver.

There are many technical questions and philosophical problems connected with conscience which are beyond the limits of this essay. There have been many definitions of conscience given from time to time, which may or may not be adequate. We present a few. Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153) said, “Conscience is the book in which our daily sins are written.” Our own Bishop Butler in 1736 said: “There is a superior principle of reflection or conscience in every man which distinguishes between the internal principles of his heart as well as his external actions, which passes judgment on himself and them, pronounces determinately some actions to be in themselves just, right, good; others to be in themselves evil, wrong, unjust; which without being consulted, without being advised with, magisterially exercises itself, and approves or condemns him, the doer of them accordingly; and which if not forcibly stopped, naturally and always, of course, goes on to anticipate a higher and more effectual sentence, which shall hereafter second and affirm its own.” He continues, “Your obligation to obey this law is in its being the law of your nature,” and that it is “a moral faculty: whether called conscience, moral reason,

moral sense or Divine reason: whether considered as a sentiment of the understanding or as a perception of the heart; or, which seems the truth, as including both."

Bishop Martensen said: "Conscience is not mere impulse, the impulse of obedience of subordination, the aim of which is God and God's Kingdom: it is not mere instinct, which makes known to man what in an ethical respect is serviceable to him, and what he must avoid for the preservation of his soul. . . . It is also consciousness, knowledge, information, man's joint acquaintance with himself and with God. It is man's ideal, or the ideal man in us. Which here expresses itself, commanding or censoring in relation to the empirical man." This last was Kant's idea of man as *noumenon* giving the law to man as *phenomenon*, which was but another way of saying that the spiritual man governs the carnal. The late T. H. Green, the well-known Oxford philosopher, defined the individual's conscience thus, "Reason in him as informed by the work of reason without him in the structure and controlling sentiments of society." Martineau described conscience as "the critical perception we have of the relative authority of our several principles of action." Sidgwick said, "The authority of conscience is the authority of reason in its application to practice." He held that "conscience is essentially intellect or reason applied to practice!" Dr. Hastings Rashdall held that "Conscience is usually used to indicate, not merely the faculty of knowing what we ought to do, but also the whole complex of emotions and impulses which impel us to the doing of what we know to be right or deter us from the doing of what we know to be wrong. When we talk about conscience 'remonstrating' or 'rebuking' or 'enjoining' or 'impelling,' we clearly mean to imply some kind of emotional impulse or desire as well as mere knowledge."

In short, we may define conscience as a sense of obligation or consciousness of duty. An internal lawgiver, judge and guide. It is the man as he feels moral obligations, pronounces moral verdict, as he moves ethically *towards God*. "Towards God," one must add. For a sense of duty or obligation imposed upon us implies one to whom we are responsible for such. Duty is without its compelling power, lacks its authoritative voice when considered apart from the Divine imponent. That Divine Power for righteousness is

felt, registered and interpreted by conscience. Herein lies the greatness of the human personality that it can receive, feel, and respond to a Divine obligation. In spite of all opposition from his fellow, the man who listens and responds to that higher voice can hold out as an *Athanasius contra mundum*. He can defy the world, if backed by his conscience. For he is ultimately, in the last resort, and in the highest degree answerable to God. And it is within, in his own personality, where it is deepest and most private, that God has the seat of his authority.

Accordingly, we may regard our conscience as "our guide, philosopher and friend." A life directed and ruled by a fully developed Christian conscience—that is a conscience illumined by the Divine Spirit—offers therefore the best subject for a study of the philosophy of life.

Conscience often works subconsciously. It is not necessary that a man should have developed his self-consciousness sufficiently clearly to be able to reflect upon the workings of the Conscience, and to understand those workings, in order to obey its dictates. The Greek philosophers, who came after Socrates, made a special study of self-knowledge. They used various expressions for conscience that suggest thought and knowledge, e.g. *to suneidos*<sup>1</sup> and *sunnoia*,<sup>1</sup> thought or reflection: *sunesis*,<sup>1</sup> understanding: the phrase *sunoida emautō*,<sup>1</sup> "I am conscious to myself," or "with myself"; the word *suneidēsis*<sup>1</sup> which came to be used for conscience about one century before Christ, and is found in the Apocrypha, Philo, and the New Testament. Other words were in vogue to express "shame" (such as *aidōs*) which is a considerable element in "conscience," the saying being attributed by Stobaeus to Pythagoras—"one should feel shame most of all before oneself." But we are concentrating here upon the principal factor in the making and developing of "conscience," namely reflection.

The Romans adopted the Greek terms. Horace,<sup>1</sup> writing one generation before Christ, says: "To be conscious of no guilt, to grow pale through no fault" (*Nil conscire sibi, nulla pallescere culpa!*) using the verb. The noun

<sup>1</sup> Demosthenes, p. 231.

<sup>1</sup> Euripides: *Orestes*, p. 396.

<sup>1</sup> John viii. 9, and frequently in Pauline Epistles and Hebrews and Philo, etc.

<sup>1</sup> Epistle i. 1-61.

<sup>1</sup> Euripides: *Andromache*, p. 805.

<sup>1</sup> Plato: *Republic*, p. 331a.

"*conscientia*" was first used by Cicero. Various other expressions such as a "conscious mind" (*mens conscia*) were used by Latin poets and writers. They had of course other terms such as "*pudor*" and "*pietas*," but these were not directly connected with conscience itself.

The Jews had no expression for "conscience." They used "heart" ("clean heart") for it. They were perhaps more aware of its working than other nations. The very idea of conscience lies behind the moral development of man in the Old Testament. God's questioning of Adam and Cain and His message to David imply the possession of a conscience—something to be appealed to and to touch in man, and something that made him know his guilt, even if he did not *feel* it. The Story of the Garden is intended, among other things, to explain the Genesis of the moral sense of duty which cannot be developed in a solitude, but only in a society, and requires at least the presence of another person, an *alter ego*. (The Greek Book of Wisdom, xvii. 11, has a striking passage on conscience, "Wickedness condemned by her own witness, and being pressed with conscience [*syn-eidsis*], always forecasteth grievous things.") In the New Testament our Lord appealed to men's sense of right and wrong although He did not use the term "conscience." "Why even *of yourselves* judge ye not what is right" (Luke xii. 57). An appeal to their innate sense of right and wrong.

The Holy Spirit He declared would *convince* (or convict) the world of sin, of righteousness and judgment (John xvi. 8), using the very word *convince* or *convict* ("*elencho*") that is used to describe the action of conscience in John viii. 9, "convicted by the conscience." Jesus Himself might be described as the embodiment of the human conscience, for He came not only to awaken it in others, but to reveal *it* in its highest form in Himself. The word "conscience" is used five times in the Hebrews and twenty times in the Pauline Epistles, where we have it defined as "a law written on the heart," a something that bears witness to the validity and authority of the moral law of God, amid the clashings of internal arguments *pro* and arguments *contra* (Rom. xi. 14 f.), thoughts that accuse and excuse one another. Conscience, to define it briefly, is like the needle of the compass that points towards the North. Conscience is our guide to what is *right*. For the former implies the latter. If a thing is good

it must be an end, not a means, something to be promoted or sought for its own sake, and for nothing else above or beyond it. It is therefore right to seek it and our duty to promote it. Thus the terms "duty," "good," and "right," are correlative terms or ideas which imply each other like the inside and outside of a curve or circle. It is with all three that conscience is associated. It is held by some philosophers, e.g. the late Dr. Hastings Rashdall, Mr. G. E. Moore, etc., that these ideas cannot be analysed, that they are ultimate, and that that is why we reason in a circle when attempting to define them, as we must, in terms of themselves. Suppose for example we were to define the good as "that which helps forward the human race in its onward and upward movement," we at once comprehend in our definition a number of things, such as surgical operations which are necessary and, indeed, are good as means, but which cannot be regarded as ends in themselves; that is things to be chosen for themselves and for nothing beyond or above them. And "an upward and onward movement," must mean a movement towards the good, so that we have not yet arrived at what the good is. The "evolution of humanity" by itself cannot be regarded as an end in itself. It implies a goal to be reached, as well as a course to be run. And the goal, as Christ suggests, that to which things are tending, might possibly not be good at all. It might, to take an extreme view, be a state of greater vice and misery.

Again, define the good with T. H. Green as a "state of desirable consciousness." This is the same as saying that the good is a state of consciousness which is right, is good, and therefore to be desired. This again is reasoning in a circle. It is true that as reason gives the ideal, or the idea of the end, that end must satisfy reason; but it confuses the means with the end. The perfection of mankind, the complete realization of one's own capacities, even if that involves the seeking for a like realization of the capacities of others (as T. H. Green held), cannot be an end in itself, can only be a means. For the question at once arises, What is this realization for? What is the use and purpose of it? To what does it lead?

The truth is that we are regarding humanity as an end whereas it is only a means. We must, indeed, treat men not as means, but as ends in themselves. But when we

attempt to define the good or the goal of humanity we cannot seek that good or that goal in humanity itself. The good and the bad are to be determined, therefore, by some standard outside us, some law above us, some will and mind greater than humanity. In fact, the idea of God is implied in that of the "good." The good, therefore, is the will of God and is attained in the service of God. Directly, or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, there is in every judgment of value a reference to some such ideal standard or mind. Even if we cannot agree about our definition of it, whether we say it cannot be analysed or whether we analyse it into various supposed contributory ideas and sentiments, in every reference to the "good" we employ a standard and ideal that are in us, but not of us. This objective standard, the rule of duty, this "ought" involves of necessity a belief in a just God; a God Who has given us the laws and categories of rational thought, and the hope of a future life where the "good" will be realized, the ideal will become practical, and the rule of righteousness will be universally applied. In a word, conscience is not only the witness to man of a law that must be obeyed, and of a Divine Law-giver Who has given that law, it is also the witness of a future life, and a Divine Kingdom.

It is the practical reason, reason in its judgments upon conduct and character, not the speculative reason, or reason in its theorizings and logical processes, that helps us here. It is this practical reason which considers and promotes the "good" of mankind, that gives a standing or position to the findings or theories of reason in its speculative work. It is this practical reason that establishes the necessity and objective reality of God, free will and immortality: whereas about these speculative reason theorizes in a detached and aloof manner, as if not personally interested. Why? Because practical reason (which is another expression for conscience), man's personality in its ethical and practical aspect, has a practical and living interest in these things. While pure reason is wondering whether they are necessary to thought or merely self-contradictory propositions; practical reason declares that they are essential to life as well as to thought. The clue to the meaning of it all; the answer to the great question of speculative reason is given by the practical reason which finds in its own consciousness of

goodness and rightness a revelation of the purpose—the rational and spiritual purpose that is being worked out in the Universe.

This purpose every rational and spiritual being must promote. Our conscience, in a word, leads us to God, and reveals God to us and in us. God intends us, and wills us, to advance along His lines. The sense of dissatisfaction that follows our failures is partly the result of our own judgment that we have failed, and partly the result of an intuition that we have displeased God. And both these, the judgment and the intuition are activities of our conscience. It is at once the faculty by which we learn the will of God, and the faculty by which we judge and condemn ourselves. Are we not, therefore, justified in holding that God speaks to man through his conscience? May we not consider that conscience forms a portion of what was meant by "the image and likeness of God," in which man was originally made? Such is represented in Scripture as that which distinguishes man from the beast, and as that which was perfectly revealed by Christ, Who is described by St. Paul as "the image of the invisible God" (Col. i. 15, cf. iii. 10).

Writers like Darwin on evolutionary ethics, who hold that the conscience or moral sense is the result of a long and chequered process of development, would regard the chief difference between man and the beast as consisting in the moral sense. But even this difference they would consider as one of degree, not of kind. To exalt the animal creation thus is to disparage the human race. Animals can be taught to obey and to learn that disobedience is wrong and will be punished. Through association with man and his methods of discipline they may acquire a crude idea of rightness and wrongness. But the recognition of duty as duty cannot be found among these.

It is here that we have the highest proof of the divine origin and eternal future of man. It is his reason illumined by the Spirit of God; his conscience as it interprets the Word of God, and his prayer as he holds fellowship with God that makes man divine. As man may serve as a conscience to the animal he domesticates, Christ is the conscience not only of those He leads and saves but also of those whose lives are indirectly influenced by his teaching, who live in the atmosphere of morality and spirituality created by His example and His Divine Spirit.