

THE MEANING OF CONSCIENCE

CONSCIENCE is a fact of common experience. It will be universally recognised that there is within the human consciousness some principle, some norm or measure, apparently unbiassed and involuntary, which seems to claim authority in regulating or attempting to regulate what is known as moral conduct. In other words, there is something of the Jekyll and Hyde in every man, and broadly speaking Jekyll is the personification of the voice of Conscience. But while there is universal recognition of the fact, there is less unanimity as to the precise significance of the fact of conscience. In a broad division there are two opposite views, in one of which conscience appears as rational, in the other as emotional. The latter is the view adopted by modern experimental psychologists in their attempt to analyse 'moral consciousness.'

'Moral consciousness' is the somewhat undefined name given nowadays to the complexity of emotions and instincts which precede, accompany and follow a moral act, producing feelings of 'moral' satisfaction or disquietude as the case may be. Upon examination, however, it is found that all these emotions and instincts are placed in the order of bodily reactions to stimuli. They are confined, in other words, almost entirely to the material order, and in effect the highest and especially human faculties, namely reason and rational will, are disregarded or eliminated. This position, it should be noted, is justified by the circumstances in the sense that it represents the findings of purely experimental psychology. No one should be so foolish as to deny the authority of any science within its own sphere. It is only when any science presumes to argue to conclusions outside its own sphere that it lays itself open to criticism from without. Thus, in the

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present instance, there is no ground for disagreement with the findings of experimental psychology in so far as they are confined to conclusions relative to physical emotions and reactions. But if the psychologist presumes to assert that these cover and explain the whole field of human action, his failure to recognise the limitations of his own science is signalled by culpable error. Experimental psychology touches only one element of the complete being called man. 'Moral consciousness,' with its emotional connotations does not explain conscience or moral action, for these call for the exercise of the highest human faculties which are themselves in the order of the immaterial and therefore not subject to material analysis and experiment.

Conscience is to be sought in the realm of reason and knowledge. As the name itself implies, it is the application of existing knowledge to particular circumstances. It is not to be confounded with the very common emotion known to our forefathers as 'the Agenbite of Inwit,' or remorse. This feeling of regret after the event is no doubt a useful and desirable condition, but it can hardly be set up as the principle or guide of moral action. Conscience must precede all moral action and it is to be defined as *a judgment or dictate of the practical reason based upon the common instinctive axiomatic principles of morality indicating the good or evil of an act about to be performed.*

In this definition there are four salient points which call for attention. First of all, Conscience is an act of intelligence; it is that particular kind of intelligent act called making a judgment. Any process of reasoning includes, implicitly or explicitly, a syllogism and the conclusion of that syllogism is a judgment. But secondly reason is concerned with two main classes of object; it is concerned with things to be thought, with ideas, with theories, with speculation, and under this aspect it is called 'speculative reason'; it is concerned

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also with things to be done, with human actions, and under this aspect it is called 'practical reason.' Conscience, then, is an act of the practical reason formulating a decision in respect of some human action; it is the application of existing knowledge to a particular case in point. Thirdly, this judgment of practical reason is based upon what have been called the common instinctive axiomatic principles of morality. These are fundamentally two: *good is to be sought: evil is to be avoided.* They are innate in the human mind, just as the first principles of speculative reason are innate, and they are the starting point of all moral action. Finally, it is to be noted that conscience is strictly speaking to be confined to judgments of actions about to be performed here and now.

In examining the place of conscience in the scheme of things, the first point to be observed is the absolute need of an objective rule or standard of morality. The notion of a rule or standard is one of wide application and familiar in every branch of human activity. In art, for example, there are accepted standards of the beautiful, and a picture or piece of statuary is judged according as it obeys, or fails to conform to, certain accepted canons of artistic excellence. In music, again, compositions are judged eventually in the light of accepted musical theory and rules. In social habits convention is the measure of good breeding. None of these activities are their own measure of excellence. They are judged by reference to some objective standard. This norm or standard is not always absolute, of course. But there do exist absolute standards. A foot-rule is a standard of measurement and in its own order it is absolute. Each material foot-rule is of value only precisely in so far as it is conformable with an absolute objective standard of linear measurement called a foot. Similarly with moral good, there must be some objective immutable standard of morality with

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which the practical reason can compare particular moral acts in order to pass judgment on their merits or demerits in the role of conscience. Otherwise conscience would be of no more value than an arbitrary foot-rule liable to variation in every particular instance. The position is, then, that conscience would be futile and unwarranted unless there be some objective unchangeable standard of morality.

Now is there any reason to suppose that conscience is not futile and unwarranted? The modern tendency to deny the reality of any objective moral law takes it for granted that there is no such reason, but in so doing it fails to appreciate the overwhelming significance of the undeniable law of universal final causality. The question: Why? is patient of at least four answers, all of them in the order of causality. Why is this man existing? (1) Because he has a suitably organised body; that is the *material* cause. (2) Because he has the nature or essence of a man which differentiates him from all other species; that is the *formal* cause. (3) Because he was brought into being by the Creator operating through secondary causes, namely the parents; that is the *productive* cause. (4) Because there is a purpose or end for which every man is constituted, namely the attainment of beatitude; that is the *final* cause. It needs but little reflection to realise that of these four the last is the most important as being the very *raison d'être* of the others.

Final causality or purpose is the only explanation of any activity and is to be found in every activity, not of man alone, but throughout the universe of being. It is indeed an accepted principle of all scientific investigation which is in effect directed precisely to the discovery of this purpose in things. But there is a still more imperative justification for the postulate of universal final causality, and it is to be found in the interrelation of the productive and the final causes. Every

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intelligent productive cause has some purpose or aim in what he does; it is precisely to accomplish some purpose already formulated in his mind that he acts at all. Thus a man who acts aimlessly or without purpose is rightly called unintelligent or even mad. Now it can be demonstrated by reason that the Author of the created universe is supremely intelligent. It follows absolutely therefore that there is some definite purpose in whatever He produces. Further, it follows just as absolutely that whatever can rightly be called natural, *i.e.*, pertaining to the nature of things, has been put there by the Author of Nature for a definite purpose; in other words nothing natural is futile or unwarranted. Now we are bound to admit that Conscience, the dictate or judgment of practical reason, is something completely natural. It is found, in greater or less degree of vitality, in all men. The degree depends on the clarity and purity of judgment. **Therefore we are entirely justified in concluding that because conscience cannot be futile, there must be some objective rule of moral conduct with which particular acts are to be compared for judgment.**

When we look for that objective rule, we find it primarily in what is called the *Natural Law*, which is the expression of the mind and will of the Creator in Nature. The main precepts of the Natural Law, as far as they concern human conduct, are embodied in the Ten Commandments. It is becoming the fashion nowadays to sneer at the Commandments. Professor Barnes, of Columbia University, for example, is reported to have said that 'if the Ten Commandments are to be obeyed to-day it should be only when their precepts and advice can be proved to square with the best natural and social science of the present time.' We have yet to be shown one of the commandments which does not square with the best natural and social science, which indeed is not an immutable basis of any

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natural or social science worthy of the name. The Decalogue can be denied only at the expense of right reason.

So far, then, conscience appears as an authoritative guide passing judgment on individual actions in the light of a known objective and immutable standard of morality, which is *de facto* formulated in the Ten Commandments. (It is not suggested that there are no other expressions of the Divine Law; if these alone are put forward, it is in order to keep the analysis upon the plane of pure reason.) The next step is to examine the ratio of conformity in operation to the natural expression of Divine Law.

In the non-intelligent creation the conformity is absolute and inevitable. Stones, plants or animals all act in accordance with the nature with which God has endowed them and with the laws of nature determined by Him. There is no need to labour the point; it is the primary empiric principle of all science. In any case, so far as these beings are concerned, there is no question of standards of morality or conscience because these latter pertain only to the realm of intelligence. But in rational beings, too, there is the need, if not the fact, of conformity to Divine Law. Because he has, as part and parcel of his rational nature, the fundamental notions of right and wrong, because he has by his nature the power of practical judgment, because that which pertains to his nature is implanted there by God for a definite purpose, because finally the objective rule of morality is a reality known to him, man should conform to that law. If he does not, he is acting against his nature and against the intention and purpose of his Creator. In other words sin, besides being an offence against God, is an offence against a man's own nature. '*Qui facit iniquitatem odit animam suam.*'

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The possibility of such an offence arises out of that quality in an intelligent being which is called freedom or liberty of choice. Now choice, it is to be observed, is exercised always and only in respect of things that are good or have some aspect of goodness. Goodness does not, of course, necessarily mean moral goodness. For example, to drink a glass of beer appeals to some of us as good. To some the drinking of ten successive glasses appeals as even better. But while the first may well be morally good, the second is almost certainly morally evil. Thus the rational will always chooses something good, but this good may include moral evil. When I am presented with two courses of action, I am free to choose, provided that both have attractions for me or, in other words, fulfil some need or purpose of mine, and I remain free, even though I may be conscious that one course of action is in accordance with Divine Law while the other is not. If eventually I choose the latter, I have chosen something from some point of view good but from the moral point of view bad.

It does not follow, however, that such an exercise of individual liberty is in any sense justifiable. In acting against the moral law, a man acts against his nature and against the purpose of the Author of that nature, against his natural interests and against right reason. This is not the use of liberty; it is the abuse of liberty. When a member of the social community breaks the established law, society does not praise him for exercising his liberty. On the contrary it registers a protest by depriving him of the liberty which he has shown himself unfit to enjoy.

The need of conformity to divine moral law appears, then, as appertaining to man's very nature with all the obligation there implied. To effect this conformity he has been endowed with the noble gift of liberty whereby he can choose for himself the better or the best. The

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actual exercise of freedom of choice depends immediately upon a particular judgment or decision of the practical reason: 'This course of action is to be followed.' We call it making up our mind or coming to a decision, and without it no man can be said to act reasonably. That judgment must necessarily be based on knowledge already acquired, for the process of making up one's mind is merely the correlation of existing ideas, and ultimately the conjunction or disjunction of two or more of these ideas according as the decision reached is positive or negative.

Now with reference to actions of a moral character, the practical reason functions in precisely the same way; but the knowledge required here includes the adherence to the axiomatic principles of morality and their general application as set forth in the known natural law. The judgment includes the comparison of the action under consideration with the objective moral standard. The process, which need not necessarily be explicit or even conscious, is somewhat as follows. I am, for example, considering the advisability of obtaining the money I need by stealing it. Now, I reflect, stealing is contrary to Divine Law or is immoral. But what is contrary to the divine law is evil or not to be done. Therefore, I conclude, I must not steal. This is an example of what is called the Moral Syllogism, and the final judgment or conclusion is the voice of conscience. Whence conscience is often referred to as the conclusion of the moral syllogism.

At this point a fact of the utmost practical importance is to be noted. We have appeared to distinguish between human acts having a moral character and human acts having a non-moral character. That proves in practice to be a merely theoretic distinction, for in practice all deliberate human acts have a moral complexion. For instance, I decide to play football. In itself, the playing of football is non-moral. But be-

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cause I am a rational being, I must have some purpose or other in playing football. In other words I must use my reason in order to come to that decision, and according as my decision is consonant or not with right reason, so does my action take on the moral complexion of good or bad. My purpose may be much needed recreation—that is morally good; or it may be to show off my good playing—that is pride, and morally bad. Whence it is clear that the scope of conscience is practically unlimited in the field of human operation.

In this context it may be well to make further reference to that aspect of psychological investigation which appears to aim at the defence and justification of all instincts of passion and emotion, and to attempt to reduce all human activity to terms of such instincts. It has been laid down that what is natural is divinely intended. It might seem to follow that since these instincts, and especially the instinct of sex, are natural to man, they must be allowed full sway. *Non sequitur*. These instincts are indeed natural and have therefore a definite place and purpose, but it also belongs to the nature of man that the lower or animal instincts should be subject to the rule and domination of reason. How else is man distinguished from the beasts? It is said that in the light of modern science we must replace the Commandments by 'mental hygiene,' but what better or even other mental hygiene can there be than the clear judgment of sound human reason based on those very Commandments? Man has an internal guide that is more trustworthy than such science.

The trustworthiness of conscience must not, however, be over-rated. It is patient of error just as any other rational judgment. What is said of reason is said of conscience, for conscience is only reason in act. Obviously I may reason falsely because of a variety of accidental interventions. My brain may be out of order,

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my facts may be wrong, my bodily desires may over-persuade me; I may refuse to enquire into the matter sufficiently carefully or I may deliberately blind myself to circumstances. We are well aware of these and many other causes whereby error creeps into our judgments. But we do not therefore deny the validity of human reason. We are merely the more careful to eliminate these defects, if we desire to reason accurately and confidently. Similarly conscience may be erroneous, especially through the intervention of passion, but we cannot therefore deny the validity of conscience in general.

Conscience, then, is precisely as trustworthy as reason. From a moral point of view, it must be obeyed, for no man can act morally well, it is clear, in opposition to the dictate of the only rule of moral conduct open to him. If it is in error and misleading him he still may not disobey its commands. But if this error is due to his own wilful blindness or to bad habits or to any other cause for which he is himself responsible, he cannot escape moral responsibility for an action dictated by his false conscience. Nevertheless conscience, like reason, pertains to man's nature and is part of the natural make-up that comes to him from God. In itself and apart from abnormal circumstances, it is a trustworthy guide in moral action, having been bestowed upon man precisely to this end.

The materialistic outlook of these days, irrational as it is from every angle, fails lamentably to appreciate the natural importance of conscience and the moral law. If life means no more than animal life, if man's powers do not transcend the animal instincts of his body, if the summit of happiness for mankind is to be looked for only in the Utopia of an earthly paradise, then moral responsibility ceases to be more than a futile superstition. That common phenomenon known as conscience must therefore be explained away, or

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reduced to terms of tradition, environment, upbringing and so forth. For his justification the materialist bases himself, theoretically at least, upon the advance of science. But science is not the ultimate norm; its conclusions must be judged by the wider issues of universal final causality. Failing to envisage these wider issues, the materialist propounds a thesis utterly contrary to natural reason; it is a denial of all that is noble in mankind; it is self-centred and narrow; it is a rejection of common sense; it is a denial of the only explanation of the meaning and purpose of human life. Conscience and moral responsibility, even when they are considered apart from their more profound functions in relation to grace and the supernatural, are essential characteristics of human nature and the necessary instruments in the fulfilment of human destiny. Neither their reality nor their imperative need can be impugned upon rational grounds, for conscience is the very keystone of right reason.

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