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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

The Evangelical Quarterly

JULY 15TH, 1932

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF CONSCIENCE

This essay is a lecture given to the Philosophical Society of the University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg), under the chairmanship of Dr. R. F. A. Hoernlé, in August, 1931.

I have not given all the necessary references alluding to the works of the authors mentioned. Such references would have made this essay rather clumsy and would have occupied too much space of this periodical. The readers who may be interested in the references I should like to refer to my work : *Das Gewissen : Erscheinungsformen und Theorien*, Friedrich Cohen, Bonn, 1925, where all the necessary references will be found.

(Continued from Vol. 4, p. 12.)

VII. SUMMARY

SUMMARISING the first part of our phenomenological analysis, we get the following results. There is no real, definite or objective phenomenon of conscience corresponding to the metaphorical concepts of conscience. Conscience is not equivalent to moral personality or moral character, nor is it identical with moral consciousness. Conscience, essentially presupposing intellectual and intuitive moral knowledge, is not identical with such knowledge or with any such function of knowledge. Conscience, essentially presupposing moral determining tendencies and moral driving forces, is not identical with any or all of them. Conscience, finding its ultimate expression in the moral emotional experiences, is not identical with all moral emotions, but only with those in which a definite personal relation to one's own real or possible moral guilt is experienced. This now leads us to the second part of the phenomenological procedure, viz. the positive analysis, which intends to reveal the essence of the phenomenon as clearly and as profoundly as possible.

VIII. IS CONSCIENCE NORMAL OR ABNORMAL ?

What now is this emotional experience of your personal relation to real or possible guilt ? Naturally, of course, it is generally a very unpleasant experience and nobody wishes to revel in it, but on the contrary would prefer to repress it. Conscience, however, generally does not suffer suppression, and incessantly compels one to attend to its call. But why should we yield to its insistent summons ? Is this incessant coercion of a

normal nature, or is it some kind of abnormal experience, as is, for instance, the case when we suffer from *idées fixes*? Even there where one's guilt is unknown to everyone and no social danger of persecution or punishment is imminent, as is so clearly pictured in the case of Dostojewski's Raskolnikow, one is incessantly reminded of one's moral guilt and is even driven to some public confession or other. Why did Judas Iscariot even hang himself, knowing that his deed enjoyed public approval? Are such manifestations of conscience, and those for instance of a Saul, a Macbeth, a Hamlet, and of so many others, mentally normal phenomena? Or do the manifestations of conscience, and especially the acute compunctions, belong to the realm of psychopathology? Nietzsche, for instance, takes conscience to be an acute mental disease. Freud's analysis of conscience does not amount to anything much different. Conscience itself, on the other hand, avows and testifies that it is of a highly normal nature and places us before truths and realities of deeper and more serious significance than our daily experiences do. If we endeavour to understand conscience from a merely biological point of view, as is done by Darwin, Bain, Freud and others, I think that conscience must be conceived to be an abnormal phenomenon, ultimately some kind of mental disorder. If we endeavour to understand conscience from a mere sociological (and anthropological) point of view, as is done by Paul Ree, Nietzsche and others, conscience must ultimately also be taken to be some form of mental disease. No thoroughgoing biological or sociological (and anthropological) explanation of conscience will ultimately rescue the highly normal character, of which conscience itself so clearly testifies phenomenologically. One may, however, on the other hand try to understand conscience from a superbiological and supersociological (or superanthropological) point of view, as is given in the religious point of view. Conscience may then be the expression of the will of God in man, or an emotion, which places man before the judgment of God, or a revelation of God in man, and so forth. Conscience is viewed from the religious point of view by Calvin, Cardinal Newman, Scheler, and many others. This rescues, of course, the normal nature of conscience, because what may seem biologically and sociologically as an abnormal conduct or an abnormal state of mind, may be seen from the religious point of view to be highly normal—for now man is seen not in his relation to animal

organisms and the laws of biology, nor in his relation to his co-human beings, and the laws that govern their social interactions ; but he is seen in a very definite relation to the super-cosmic Being, to God, and this last relation is irreducible to any of the mere cosmic relations. Against this religious interpretation of conscience, however, counts the fact that although many experiences of conscience are based on definite religious experiences, many other experiences of conscience do not seem to presuppose these. Many persons who consciously do not believe in the personal revelations of God, and even those who may not consciously believe in any God, to whom they are responsible for their doings, still may have and have very definite experiences of conscience. Conscience as such is not necessarily a religious phenomenon. Notwithstanding this, conscience avows itself, phenomenologically seen and subjectively experienced, to be of a highly normal nature. It is especially of this problem that a phenomenological analysis must give a feasible and evident solution, disclosing intelligibly the uniqueness and identity of the phenomenon.

IX. CONSCIENCE AND MORAL GUILT

This now necessitates us to analyse phenomenologically the experience of moral guilt, which constitutes in some way or other the essence of conscience. The phenomenon of moral guilt requires essentially not only a person who is guilty, but also a somebody to whom he is responsible for his shortcomings. Guilt ought not to be ; and requires for its annihilation either punishment or forgiveness, and in consequence someone who can punish and can forgive. That this someone is not the guilty person himself is clear, when we consider how meaningless in this respect self-punishment and self-forgiveness is. Man is not his own final judge when he is morally guilty. Nor is juridical punishment or acquittal equivalent to and essentially exchangeable with moral punishment and forgiveness. When morally guilty everyone experiences these relations of moral guilt consciously or dimly. The point at issue now is the following : to whom is the conscience-smitten person, according to a phenomenological analysis of conscience, responsible for his guilt of which his conscience testifies ? He is not responsible to himself, as he experiences himself as a whole person guilty, without any pretensions to be his own lord and master in this matter ; it is

essentially not his business to punish or to forgive himself, although he may seek some relief in self-punishment and self-chastisement. Nor is he in this matter in any ultimate sense responsible to his family, to his friends, to the court of justice, to the state, or to humanity. Who of these could claim an essential and final right to forgive him absolutely and to release him entirely from his moral guilt? He does not experience himself in any ultimate sense responsible to any of them. The more the voice of conscience claims him, the more he knows all these to be unessential and irrelevant to what is now most important to him. He essentially does not suffer their interference, unless he seeks relief in some confession or other. Even those persons whom he may have wronged or injured—although they may forgive him as far as they are concerned—cannot in any ultimate way release him from his moral guilt, and it is exactly this that he is in need of. Nor does he feel himself in any sense responsible to the moral law he transgresses—for who expects a law as such to punish or to forgive, unless he somehow thinks the law personified? It is very significant that no biological or human being or group of human beings can be indicated who, according to the essentials of moral guilt as experienced in conscience, are principally in a position to release him from his guilt, or to whom he experiences himself ultimately responsible for his guilt. Conscience seems to point beyond itself to a sanction higher than that of any cosmic creature. This is corroborated by conscience itself in many other regards, as is evident, among others, in the following examples. Cardinal Newman says: "The wicked flees, where no one pursueth, then why does he flee? Whence is his terror? Who is it, that he sees in solitude, in darkness, in the hidden chambers of his heart?" In conscience we experience shame, even there where public opinion approves of our deeds. Before whom are we ashamed of ourselves? In conscience we experience our guilt to be universally known, even when we are quite certain that no human being knows anything about it. To whom, then, should our guilt be known? In conscience we experience ourselves to be solitary and forsaken, although we may have all our friends near by and around us. By whom are we forsaken and from whom are we separated? In conscience we feel despair, although there may be no human reason for despair whatever. Why do we despair? In conscience we feel remorse and sorrow, although

¹ McDougall, "Is Conscience an Emotion?" *Hibbert Journal*, January, 1921.

the deeds done may have brought us nothing but profit and advantages. Why, then, are we sorrowful, whom have we grieved? In conscience we dimly recognise a law above us, and the breaking of this law causes our compunction. Whose law have we broken? We do not feel compunction at breaking mere human law. In conscience we experience this lawgiver, whoever he may be, to be absolutely righteous and just; any doubt of this would annihilate conscience. That this lawgiver has every claim on us, and we are not entitled to any claims on him, that we are absolutely dependent on him, conscience discloses phenomenologically as well. These questions are either meaningless and the suggested interpretation of these indications of conscience wrong (but then conscience ultimately does belong to the realm of psychopathology), or they are significant and sensible, but then conscience essentially points of its own accord beyond man to some infinite Judge, whose existence and claims would make the functioning of conscience a meaningful and highly normal experience. This is what Cardinal Newman means, when he says: "Conscience does not repose on itself, but vaguely reaches forward beyond itself, and dimly discerns a sanction higher than self for its decisions, as is evidenced in that keen sense of obligation and responsibility, which informs them."¹ Joseph Butler² points to the same relation when he says that "conscience naturally and always of course goes on to anticipate a higher and more effectual sentence, which shall hereafter second and affirm its own." Max Scheler refers to the same relation when he maintains that in the workings of conscience, in its warnings, admonishings and judgments, conscience points forward to an unseen infinite Judge. Conscience would, according to Scheler, fall apart into a multiplicity of processes and its unity and uniqueness would be lost, if a relation of conscience to an holy and infinite Judge were lost out of sight; in other words, the functions of conscience itself point directly towards God. Just as different clues and circumstantial evidences may point to one and the same person, the recognition of whom renders all that happened in some case concerned intelligible, so the different manifestations of conscience and its features necessitate the acceptance of an infinite Judge to make conscience essentially an intelligible phenomenon. Without this common point of reference all the processes and manifestations of conscience fall apart and become essentially

¹ Cardinal Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, Ch. V, §1.

² Joseph Butler, *Sermons*, etc. Sermon II, §8.

meaningless. Conscience then phenomenologically analysed in its wholeness, uniqueness and identity refers beyond itself to an infinite personality, whom we may fear, from whom we may wish to flee, who is omnipresent, before whom we may feel ashamed of ourselves, who is absolutely just and righteous, on whom we are absolutely dependent, and who has every claim on us. Conscience in its essential characteristics points beyond self and anticipates God. This anticipation renders conscience intelligible, significant and a highly normal experience. It is the relation of man not to biological organisms and laws, nor to his co-human beings and social laws, but to a super-human Being, that gives to conscience its uniqueness, identity and serious character.

X. CONSCIENCE A THEAL PHENOMENON

This, however, does not mean that conscience is of necessity a religious phenomenon. Religious experiences are constituted by the conscious experience of a personal relation to a superhuman Being, the consciousness of whom is given in the momentum of revelation. In experiencing religiously, you consciously know and feel yourself before the sight of some divine and revealed Being. This is not a necessary condition of conscience; the relation of conscience to an infinite Judge does not presuppose the momentum of revelation, nor the consciousness of, or faith in such a revelation. Conscience may, of course, be integrated with religious experiences, and in its lively exercise may be born of such experiences—but where this is not the case, conscience only refers to, anticipates, the infinite Judge, notwithstanding that the conscience-smitten person may be unconscious of this reference or anticipation. Conscience does not presuppose some positive revelation of the anticipated being; religious experiences do. On the other hand, conscience is more than a mere moral experience, as is given, for instance, in your moral judgments of others, in the hearing of the call of duty, in loving your neighbour, and so forth. The mere moral experiences do not refer to a personal relation to an infinite and unseen Judge. In order to arrive at a clear distinction of the matters at issue, I have suggested the use of the term "theal." Theal connotes a formal relation between man and God, which is not necessarily a religious relation. That man, for instance, is a creature of God, is not a religious, nor a cosmic, but a theal relation. In this sense, then,

conscience is not necessarily a religious experience, is more than a mere moral experience and is essentially a theal experience.

I am phenomenologically convinced that if you take conscience and its testimonies seriously, i.e. if you take conscience to be a highly normal experience, you must accept the consequence of its theal character. If you principally deny the thealness of conscience, you must in consequence ultimately deny its normality and leave the last word in the analysis of this phenomenon to psychopathology, as Nietzsche consistently does.

The religious theories of conscience, such as are advocated by Cardinal Newman and others, err. It is not essential to conscience that God should speak personally to us in our conscience, nor that conscience is a positive revelation of God. If we do want to speak of a revelation of God in conscience, this may only be maintained as an indirect and negative revelation. If we may call the image of the sun in a mirror or in water an indirect revelation of the sun, and our immediate perception of the sun a direct revelation, the metaphor may somehow suggest what is meant. In the religious experiences the revelation is experienced directly and as coming from the one who reveals himself. In conscience the revelation of the infinite judge is given in the experience of our moral guilt and not as coming directly from the one to whom the experience refers, or whom it anticipates.

Conscience is essentially a pre-religious experience, but finds its most lofty significance, and its most adequate fulfilment, when it is woven in and integrated with our religious believing aspirations and emotions and with our personal and conscious service to God. Then the experience of your personal relation to moral guilt becomes an experience of your personal relation to sin, and in the experience of the forgiveness of sin conscience finds its most adequate rest and what is essentially adapted for the extraction and annihilation of its sting. Only in the religious experiences do we find that necessary and ultimate satisfaction of conscience, which conscience is essentially in need of—but which it could not afford of itself.

XI. CONCLUSION

It is this theal character of conscience which constitutes its ultimate essence, and which gives to conscience its personally intimate and serious significance. It is the thealness of conscience

which gives it an evidence (or, as Butler would say, an authority) of its own, and which confers on it its peculiar power, its peculiar sting. Conscience, in a sense, stands above and opposes man, incessantly calls a halt to the flow of his daily experiences when necessary, bids him to review his life and acts, warns him in regard to his intentions, and summons him to strive for moral elevation ; it generally does not suffer repression, and forces man to take notice of its summons, although he may definitely know what conscience has to say to him and may think it expedient to ignore its summons. The uniqueness of these experiences lies in their theal relations : man has here primarily nothing to do with his surroundings and his co-human beings, but ultimately stands wittingly or unwittingly before some infinite Being above him—and this is to him in his experience of conscience more important and of a more serious nature than anything he generally comes across in his daily life. It is interesting and significant to attend to this theal uniqueness of which conscience testifies in such singular ways, and which gives to conscience its peculiar depth and intimacy.¹

Conscience, in its summons, monitions and judgments, is a peculiar kind of danger signal, warning us of super-biological and super-sociological dangers, the dangers of our moral and personal welfare, the most intimate and deepest welfare of personality, being at stake. It is peculiar, too, that the higher man's moral elevation may be, the more sensitive and marked the reactions of conscience are ; and that the more indifferent man is to the moral value of his deeds and character, the less conscience irritates him. Absence of the voice of conscience is in consequence no sure criterion of moral integrity.

Conscience places man before a deeper and more significant reality than the reality of our daily interests. The experience of this reality may permeate our whole moral life. It may strengthen our moral urges, driving forces and aspirations ; it may give to our sense of duty a peculiar moral piquancy ; it may press us to action, encourage us to perseverance, stimulate us to the fulfilment of our vocation in life, or to the realisation of our personal idea. Conscience, ultimately an emotional experience,

¹ It is worth while to consider in this connection Calvin's description of conscience : It is a feeling (an emotion) of the judgment of God, a feeling which as a testimony does not allow our sins to be concealed, but places us before our Holy Judge. It is a feeling (emotion) which places man before God's judgment, and which forces him to be conscious of his secret sins. Pure knowledge (as such) lacks this power.—Calvin, *Institution*, 3, 19, 15, and 4, 10, 3, 4. (I have used the translation of J. H. Landwehr.)

has its undoubted influence on our moral exertions and aspirations. It has its influence on our moral knowledge too, making us more sensitive and open-minded to distinctions of moral values and moral standards. Conscience directly and indirectly influences and permeates our whole moral consciousness, giving it a new colour, a new tone, a more profound depth. It even penetrates the depths of our moral character and personality, conditioning in these depths a unique attitude and quality generally called conscientiousness. In these ways the kernel determines in more than one aspect the form and the features of its shell. Conscience, intermingled and entangled with almost all the other phenomena of moral consciousness, through which alone it can realise itself, may be clearly experienced in its uniqueness—but at the same time the entanglement impedes a univocal determination of it in thought as well as a clear scientific analysis. Moreover, on account of its profound and intimate personal nature it appears in different persons with their personal distinctions in different ways. In the active and practical type conscience reveals itself predominantly prospective as the warning and admonishing conscience. In the contemplative and introverted type conscience reveals itself predominantly retrospective as the bad and the good conscience. In one type it leads to action, in another type it hampers all activity. In one type it may be very influential, in another type it hardly has any influence at all. Compare, for instance, the appearance of conscience in a Hamlet, in a Macbeth, in a Raskelnokow, in a Saul, in a Judas Iscariot. Also on account of this integration of conscience with the personal characteristics, one is hampered in one's attempt to grasp it purely in its ultimate essence and uniqueness. It is, as I see it, only possible to penetrate the coverings of conscience and to grasp its ultimate nature and unity, when one consistently uses the phenomenological method. An attempt of this nature I intended to give in this lecture, although I am keenly aware of the inadequacy and the imperfection of my analysis. On the other hand this method is in need of the supplement of many other methods and only with the co-operative use of all adequate methods will it be possible to understand the import and rôle of conscience in human life.

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