

ARTICLE VIII.

A STUDY OF CONSCIENCE.

BY THE REV. CHARLES CAVERNO.

I USE the term "conscience" as equivalent to moral nature. I mean by conscience, man's total capacity for moral action or passion—moral function or affection. I want it understood, at the outset, that I do not limit the term "conscience" to moral sentiment or sensibility. It will cover a much wider range than that in this discussion. Conscience is sometimes treated as a sentiment merely, and then it is said that there is no light in it. Now to say that, as a sentiment, conscience has little or no light for man, is to say something with which I should not violently disagree. No receptivity or sensibility fills itself. If it be said that it is best to confine the term "conscience" to the province of sentiment in morals I would not be a pugnacious objector. Only let us understand ourselves. I think, however, such limitation of the term would be unfortunate, for in customary use, I am persuaded, the word "conscience" is understood as covering the whole moral capacity of man. To use the term as simply equivalent to moral sentiment or emotion, without conveying the idea that such treatment does not exhaust the moral nature of man, does not even treat the most significant parts of that nature, is, in my judgment, a grave and sad mistake.

The psychologists say that man has certain leading faculties which they denominate intellect, sensibility, and will,—or the power to perceive, to feel, to choose. There are certain departments open to man in which he may give these faculties exercise. There are departments in

which he may give them all exercise—departments broad enough to call for the employment of perception, sensibility or affection, and choice. Take, for instance, the department of knowledge. Man has capacity to perceive things that may be known, i. e., power to grasp, to comprehend them. He has a certain passion intellectually, or appetite or affection or sensibility, for things in this department. We speak of this sensibility sometimes as a thirst for knowledge. Then man has the capacity of will to determine his attitude toward the department, i. e., to say, to determine, whether he will employ his perceptive powers in it—whether he will gratify the appetite or misus or longing of his nature for the things of this department, and power to make selective choices in the department. Now it would be a poor elaboration of this department, and of man's capacities in it, to seize on the intellectual appetite or sensibility toward knowledge and to say that there is no light in it. The affection standing by itself, of course, would be barren. But put perception and put will along with affection, and you get light in the department of knowledge. Daniel Webster put intellect, sensibility, and will into the subdepartment of knowledge which we call law, and the general judgment is that he had some light in it. Louis Agassiz and Darwin put intellect, sensibility, and will into the subdepartment of knowledge which we call biology, and the general judgment is that they had some light in it. Now what would you think of the discussion of the powers of these men which should treat the emotion which they had toward knowledge as exhaustive of their powers? which should say there was no light in emotion on knowledge, and leave you hanging there without any hint that, if you put perception and will with the emotion, you would get light?

Here is the department of æsthetics or of beauty. Man has a certain capacity for that department. He has

the capacity to see the beautiful, his sensibilities can be affected by and towards the beautiful, and his will make choice of and out of the beautiful. It is said the sentiment of the beautiful conveys no information. Precisely so. But will you leave us there without intimation, that the sentiment of the beautiful does not cover the ground of man's capacity for the beautiful? That is a miserably inadequate treatment of æsthetics which would lead us to dwell on the sentiment as exhaustive of man's powers in the department. It would not account for Michaelangelo and Da Vinci. Put intellect and will with sensibility, and we gain information and light in æsthetics. Instead of saying that the sentiment of the beautiful conveys no information (which indeed is strictly true, and yet it is the truth that men do not need), it is better to say that men will find no information in respect to the beautiful if they do not *follow* the sentiment or affection or nisus of their being toward the beautiful, and that if they do so follow the leadings of this sentiment they will find the beautiful.

"Not from a vain or shallow thought
His awful Jove young Phidias brought.
The hand that rounded Peter's dome,
And groined the aisles of Christian Rome,
Wrought in a sad sincerity."

And the Jove of Phidias, and Peter's dome, and the groined aisles of Christian Rome, are witnesses what light men can get in æsthetics who bring to the department the devotion of the sum of human powers,—intellect, sensibility, and will.

Now just as there is a department of knowledge or science, and man has capacity for it, and as there is a department of æsthetics, and man has a capacity for it; so there is a department of ethics, and man has a capacity for it. The question comes, What capacity? I reply, The same capacity he has for the other two departments I have dis-

cussed. He has the capacity to turn all his powers into this department—intellect, sensibility, and will. And when he brings his powers to bear, he gets and gives light just as he does in the other departments. Now if the term "conscience" is used to designate the sum total of the moral capacity of man, then to say that conscience is no source of light is to state the matter exactly wrong; the correct statement being, man has no other means of acquiring light than by conscience. Think a moment: if here is a department, ethics—or the department of moral possibility, and man has a capacity for the department, how do you expect he is going to find light in the department except by employing his powers therein? If, when he employs his powers, things are found so inherently and essentially jumbled in the department that he can make nothing out of them, then, if there is a good God, we may have a reasonably certain conviction that he will not hold him responsible for what he could not find out. But things do not appear to be so confused; for we see results wrought out in this department that compare favorably in success with those wrought in other departments. The phenomenon of good men is as well known as that of great men. In fact, if there is one department more than others in which men have carried up success to high-water mark, it is this. I do not know but we can conceive of men greater than Daniel Webster or Louis Agassiz or Charles Darwin, but it is hard to conceive of a man better than St. Paul. At any rate there has been no such success exhibited in science or æsthetics as Jesus exhibited in ethics. It is the one department of all departments where success may be found. The same man may find success in various departments. John G. Whittier has our respect for his mental acquisitions, he was a learned man; also for the conquests he made in poetic conception and expression out of the realm of beauty; but is not all this subordinate to the tribute we

pay him for his conquests in the realm of morals, in the conviction we unhesitatingly award him of being a good man? Now these results are possible just because there is light to men when they employ their powers on and in the ethical department or the department of distinction between right and wrong, and of the pursuit of right and not of wrong. To say that a man will not get light if he uses only a third of his capacity, and that particular third that is least lumeniferous, is not to say much. To treat conscience as a mere sentiment, and leave it there, is not to do much toward illuminating the scope of man's moral capacity. If you limit the term "conscience" to the ethical sensibility merely, then you should go on, and show how men can get light on the moral situation by joining to the activity of the sentiment conscience, the activity of intellect and will—show how, when the whole man is turned to moral considerations, he finds moral light.

The one department of our nature out of which we may most unhesitatingly trust to bring correct results is the conscience or ethical department. The one capacity that may give light and no darkness at all, is the moral capacity. Immanuel Kant, searching for some "fixed state" in "the maddening maze of things," settled on the moral faculty as the one reliable, the one trustworthy, thing in the nature of man. What Kant arrived at metaphysically we shall also arrive at by tracing the matter historically, on the principle of evolution. The moral faculty in the history of life on the globe appears last among the ruling principles of life, appears in the highest example of life—man—and in him it is the crowning faculty. Kant called this faculty the "Categorical Imperative," i. e., the one, sole, absolute, commander of the being. After all other considerations have been taken into account, man, if he is true to himself, must turn to this department, and accept such conclusions as come upon him here. What-

ever he meets here overrules and overrides every other consideration. Ethics says to intelligence, You shall execute my behests. Ethics says to æsthetics, You must chisel and paint as I direct. The necessity of putting æsthetics under the tuition of ethics is set forth by Tennyson in the following vigorous, and, as Matthew Arnold would say, rigorous, way—

“ Art for Art’s sake ”

(instead of Art for Art—and—Man’s sake)

“ Art for Art’s sake! Hail, truest Lord of hell!
 Hail, Genius, Master of the moral will!
 ‘ The filthiest of all paintings, painted well,
 Is mightier than the purest painted ill.’
 Yes, mightier than the purest painted well;
 So prone are we toward the broad way to hell.”

Life, Vol. ii. p. 92.

There is nothing that can annul the force of ought—o-u-g-h-t—of a moral *must*. Ought is light—absolute light, the last revelation of moral light possible to man.

Now whoever has taken any question and put it for analysis into the moral department, and has brought to the consideration of its moral qualities all the faculties of his being,—intellect, sensibility, and choice,—has done all that the Maker of his being requires of him, and he has in that exercise *executed the right*. The exercise *is* his light, and the judgment-day will not be able to find a moral flaw in his action. Even if men in another day, and because of another horizon in the moral department, should come to another conclusion, that would not convict him of sin. But there is not much probability of the reversal of any man’s decisions that are arrived at in this way. There is no such unanimity in the judgments of men on any other subject as on just this—the good—the right. As a matter of fact, the “Categorical Imperative” asserts its power among men, when unhindered in its action, in the production of identity of decision.

"For see the universal race endowed
 With the same upright form—the sun is fixed,
 And the infinite magnificence of heaven,
 Within the reach of every human eye;
 The sleepless ocean murmurs for all ears;
 The vernal field infuses fresh delight
 Into all hearts Throughout the world of sense,
 Even as an object is sublime or fair,
 That object is laid open to the view
 Without reserve or veil; and as a power
 Is salutary, or an influence sweet,
 Are each and all enabled to perceive
 That power, that influence, by impartial law.
 Gifts nobler are vouchsafed alike to all;
 Reason, and, with that reason, smiles and tears;
 Imagination, freedom in the will;
 Conscience to guide and check; and death to be
 Foretasted, immortality to be presumed.
 Strange, then, nor less than monstrous might be deemed
 The failure, if the Almighty, to this point
 Liberal and undistinguishing, should hide
 The excellence of moral qualities
 From common understanding; leaving truth
 And virtue, difficult, abstruse, and dark,
 Hard to be won, and only by a few!
 Strange, should He deal herein with nice respects,
 And frustrate all the rest! Believe it not;
 The primal duties shine aloft—like stars;
 The charities that soothe, and heal, and bless,
 Are scattered at the feet of man—like flowers.
 The generous inclination, the just rule,
 Kind wishes, and good actions, and pure thoughts—
 No mystery is here; no special boon
 For high, and not for low; for proudly graced—
 And not for meek of heart."

Wordsworth, *Discourse of the Wanderer.*

But why have we had such contrary decisions and actions by men where moral matters were concerned? Men once persecuted in religion. Persecution is now discarded. The Hindu mother throws her child into the Ganges—the Christian mother thinks this the sum of sin. Do not such contradictions show that there is no light in the moral fac-

ulty? That its decisions are not reliable? Now let us be a little patient and careful. Will you look at the force of that argument? It is just this: Men have done so and so, as matter of fact in history; therefore, they did so and so in obedience to the dictates of the moral faculty. That is one of the most tremendous *non sequiturs* of which the human mind can be guilty, and yet almost everybody stumbles into it. Why, it is said, men have done so and so in *religion*; therefore they were acting according to conscience. That is *non sequitur*—that will not hold water. If one tries to bail the ocean of moral phenomena with that sieve, he ought not to be surprised if he does not make much headway. Religion ought to coincide with the moral faculty. But who does not know that historically it has meddled with everything else, sometimes to the complete dismissal of moral considerations from view. Father Sherman has lately said that Porto Rico is a Catholic country without a religion; i.e., it is all church and no morals. You can come to the same end with the Bible as with the church. It is only necessary to press on the word "rule," in "the only *rule* of faith and practice," to secure the same result. There is a difference between law and life. Conscience is individual moral vitality in motion—*Zōē*. Under law or rule you can have a result correct in form, but of unethical or non-ethical spirit,—a pseudo-morph. Because a thing was done in the church, therefore it is said, it was conscientiously done, therefore there is no light in the moral faculty. One ought to see the holes in that skimmer. What is the significance of the claim of the head of the Roman Church to temporal power? Is that a survival of ethical considerations reigning in the bosoms of the popes of the middle ages? Who does not know that it is a remnant of as gigantic and petty a selfishness as ever dominated the mind of man? Revenues, state alliances, pomps, parades, pas-

sions, envies, greeds, spites, malice,—therefore the moral faculty is not to be trusted.

Philip of Spain, the Duke of Alva, the Inquisition, dungeons, tortures, autos-da-fé, in the interest of the Catholic faith, in the interest of religion; therefore, what? Who does not know that religion was simply the politics of the Spanish state, and that Spanish politics dismissed ethics from its purview? It was as base as the Tweed régime in New York or the career of bulldozers in Mississippi. Is it to be supposed that Philip of Spain ever called a council of state to get from his counselors their unbiased judgment on matters of state, or of religion either, in the forum of the Categorical Imperative? Then why charge up such results to conscience, and plead them as destructive of trust in the ethical faculty? Oh, but Philip of Spain was pious and wore a hair shirt! Why did he wear a hair shirt? Because he thought if he wore a hair shirt in this world he would not be damned in the world to come. Was that an ethical consideration? The ethical form of thought would have been this:—I will seek what is good and right, I will do what is good and right when I have found it, though I am damned in the world to come. For the same reason that he wore a hair shirt, Philip the Second burned the bodies of recusants—to save his own soul. They were the purchase price of his salvation. If you can strike any lower exhibition of human selfishness, anything further divorced from the domination of the moral faculty, it is difficult to imagine what it is. I can find no evidence that Philip the Second sought out what was right in the premises; he simply sought to make sure his own personal weal!

But Calvin burned Servetus, and surely Calvin was a conscientious man! On the face of history, Calvin was mixed up in politics, and it is difficult to disentangle his problem. Calvin was probably not beyond the influence

of non-ethical considerations. Then the claim is made that the execution of Servetus was just on governmental grounds. You may ask if that would not lay foundation to acquit Philip the Second. Certainly, if you can show that his problem of state called for his action, i.e., that there was no other moral way out of it. But when you have shown that, you have taken away all force from the indictment you bring against the unreliability of the moral faculty derived from Philip's case. But take Calvin's case. You have to prove, (1) that the execution of Servetus was not justifiable, and (2) that Calvin had exhausted the powers of intellect, sensibility, and will in the forum of ethics, before you can prove the unreliability of the moral powers. If any one wants to load himself with that burden, I suppose there is liberty for him to do so. It is not impossible for Calvin to have been a sinner, i.e., to have violated the light which he did have. That does not indict the moral faculty, it indicts Calvin.

And now here is the Hindu mother, that has been traveling to throw her baby into the Ganges for conscience' sake ever since I have had recollection. I wish I could stop that Hindu mother, for she has been the cause of unutterable confusion, not only in heathen, but in Christian lands. But I am powerless:—

"So 't will be when I am gone";
The Hindu mother will still plod on,

in argument, if not in fact. The astonishing thing at the outset is, the unhesitating assumption, which everybody seems to make, that the woman is going to the Ganges in the interest of conscience, in the interest of the "Categorical Imperative," in the interest of the ethical department of her being, when intellect, sensibility, and will have been determined to that department without complication from other considerations. I would like a little more proof and a little less assumption on that point, before I allow the

case of the Hindu mother to show that the moral faculty of man is not a light that may be trusted. That the Hindu mother's action was pursuant to religion—such religion as prevails about her, we have seen does not prove the action to be dictated by conscience. A great many motives and practices in the historic religions of the world, Christianity included, have not been founded in ethics.

You take out of religion what you put in.

From pot-pourri, pot-pourri comes.

The Greeks put calisthenics into religion. I do not think that would make gymnastics a part of ethics; so that when a man was tightening up his muscle, I should be obliged to say that it was an ethical process—a way of giving utterance to the sense of right. What a procession of saints—Yankee Sullivan, Morrissey, Heenan, Sayers, John L. Sullivan, Corbett, Fitzsimmons, Sharkey! If the result in the Hindu mother's case—to-wit, the murder of her offspring—were not enough to startle one into the conviction that ethical considerations in her case could not have had a supreme control, that they must have been ignored entirely or smothered by a multitude of other motives, there are some other considerations that suggest themselves. Where, in the world of moral development, is this Hindu mother? What has she been made up by? To what height has moral culture in its various applications been carried in society about her? Is she a child of ethical influences? Besides being a child of ignorance and degradation, is she not a child of superstition? And what is superstition usually but the substitution of selfishness for ethics in religion? Superstition does not seek what is right, but what will protect. Everything but moral considerations—fear, favor, and the hope of reward—comes to the front in superstition. It is begging the question, when you see a certain action done by this Hindu mother, to assume that it was ethically done. Tried by the results we

observe when we are convinced that the moral capacity has been exerted, her action gives no indication of being an outcome of the moral nature at all. Over all this realm of confusion the proper inference is the non-employment and not the non-luminousness or non-reliability of the ethical faculty. The Hindu mother is sincere. Certainly. So is everybody who gets out of a carriage to pick up a horse-shoe, sincere, not that it is right, but that it will bring good luck.

Man's moral faculty not only gives him light in moral matters, but the department in which it finds action is the crowning department of his nature. He has an order from his Maker to consult this light as he has in reference to no other. Whether we have knowledge or whether we compass beauty, we *must be right*. That is the order stamped in our nature. And we can be right, too. When we follow our light with a single intent, it is an infallible guide. The man who has followed his conscience has never sinned. But then it does not do to have a decision made up part of conscience, and part of passion, prejudice, conceit, and willfulness. That is not to take the testimony of the moral nature at all. The moral capacity dominates all other powers, and is imperative. It permits no divided allegiance of the soul. "If thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness."

"The unpardonable sin
Is to deny the word of God within."

Whittier.

Inquiry will be made, What do you do with the Bible? Is it not a light separate and apart from the conscience, over and above the conscience? The Bible has no light except as its truth is perceived, seized, and appropriated by an alert moral nature. Then experience proves it a light giver supreme in its class. But the light a man gets from

it comes to him through his conscience. There are a great many people who know all about the Bible who yet do not get light from it. The difficulty is, that its truth does not have the freedom of their moral nature. Here is when will comes to the front. Paul says there are those who "hold down" the truth. How influences, as from Scripture, or word, or act of men, come into the field of moral vision, we may imperfectly understand. But I think this the simplest lore, the ultimate truth in the matter: wherever and whenever there is moral motion in the soul, there is communication from the Holy Spirit, suatory, minatory, or illuminant.

" Speak to Him thou, for He hears, and
Spirit with spirit can meet —
Closer is He than breathing, and nearer
Than hands and feet."

Tennyson, *The Higher Pantheism.*

Mr. Webster, in the argument to the jury in the White murder case, has put the rightful regality and perpetual presence in us of moral obligation in form that cannot easily be amended:—

" There is no evil that we cannot either face or fly from, but the consciousness of duty disregarded. A sense of duty pursues us ever. It is omnipresent like the Deity. If we take to ourselves the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, duty performed or duty violated, is still with us for our happiness or our misery. If we say the darkness shall cover us, in the darkness as in the light our obligations are yet with us. We cannot escape their power, nor fly from their presence. They are with us in this life, will be with us at its close; and in that scene of inconceivable solemnity, which lies yet further onward, we shall still find ourselves surrounded by the consciousness of duty, to pain us whenever it has been violated, and to console us so far as God may have given us grace to perform it."

" Stern daughter of the voice of God !
O Duty! if that name thou love
Who art a light to guide, a rod
To check the erring, and reprove;

Thou who art victory and law
When empty terrors overawe;
From vain temptations dost set free;
And calm'st the weary strife of frail humanity."

"To humbler functions, awful power!
I call thee: I myself commend
Unto thy guidance from this hour;
Oh! let my weakness have an end!
Give unto me, made lowly wise,
The spirit of self-sacrifice;
The confidence of reason give;
And, in the light of truth, thy bondman let me live!"
Wordsworth.