

MORAL CONCEPTS

Edited by

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CONSCIENCE AND CONSCIENTIOUSNESS

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PROFESSOR NOWELL-SMITH tells a story of an Oxford don who thought it his duty to attend Common Room, and did so conscientiously, though his presence was a source of acute distress both to himself and others. This story is told in illustration of a discussion of the question whether conscientiousness is good without qualification. The philosopher's comment is 'He would have done better to stay at home', and he reinforces this view with the historical judgement that 'Robespierre would have been a better man (quite apart from the question of the harm he did) if he had given his conscience a thorough rest and indulged his taste for roses and sentimental verse'.¹ The harm, in these cases, he points out, seems to spring, in part at least, from the very conscientiousness of these people, and he concludes that we have no reason for accepting the principle of the supreme value of conscientiousness and that there is nothing either self-contradictory or even logically odd in the assertion 'You think that you ought to do A, but you would be a better man if you did B'.²

This judgement, it should be noted, is a *moral* evaluation. 'Better man' here means 'ethically better'. It explicitly excludes 'better' in the sense of 'more useful or less harmful to society' in the reference to Robespierre. Further, it is not restricted to the mere right or wrong of overt acts, saying, for example, that Robespierre would have done less that is objectively wrong if he had attended to his roses more and his conscience less, for it is a judgement on the moral character of the *man*, not merely on that of his overt acts, and moral judgements upon a man must take account of every feature of his personality concerned in the performance of his acts, i.e., his motives, intentions, character, beliefs, abilities and so forth. What we have here, therefore, is the

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¹ P. H. Nowell-Smith, *Ethics* (London 1954), p. 247.

² *Ibid.*, p. 253.

contention that in some cases where conscientiousness would lead to more harm than good (as it may do in cases of mistaken moral judgements or other ignorance) a man may be a morally better man by stifling his conscience and doing what he believes he ought not to do. It is not claimed that this will always be true in such cases, and it is not denied that conscientiousness is to some degree a value. But it is denied that it is the only moral value, or a value with supreme authority above all others, or that it is an essential feature of all moral value.

These denials are not uncommon among contemporary moralists, but it should be noted that they constitute a rejection of the major tradition in moral philosophy, from Plato to the present day. They also conflict with the convictions of the common man expressed in such injunctions as 'Let your conscience be your guide', 'Do what you yourself believe to be right, not what others tell you', 'Act on your own convictions', 'Always act in accord with your own conscience', 'To thine own self be true'. Conscientiousness is firmness of purpose in seeking to do what is right, and to most people it seems to be the very essence of the moral life and a value or virtue in some sense 'higher' or more important than any other. Among philosophers this view is notably expressed in Joseph Butler's doctrine of the 'natural supremacy' of conscience and in Immanuel Kant's insistence that there is nothing good in itself, intrinsically good, save the good will, and that this consists in the will to do one's duty for duty's sake. There are, evidently, some complex issues and confusions involved in these sharply varying positions and to clarify them we shall need to begin with an examination of what is involved in conscience itself.

Analysis of Conscience

Conscience involves both a cognitive and an emotive or motivational element. The cognitive element consists in a set of moral judgements concerning the right or wrong of certain kinds of action or rules of conduct, however these have been formed. The emotive or motivational element consists of a tendency to experience emotions of a unique sort of approval of the doing of what is believed to be right and a similarly unique sort of disapproval of the doing of what is believed to be wrong. These feeling states, it is generally recognized, are noticeably different from those of mere liking or disliking and also from feelings of aesthetic approval and disapproval (or aesthetic appreciation) and from feelings of admiration and the reverse aroused by non-moral activities and skills. They can become particularly acute, moving and even distressing,

in the negative and reflexive form of moral disapproval of one's own actions and motives, the sense of guilt and shame. In this form (indeed in both forms) they may have some notably irrational manifestations, but the sense of shame also has a very valuable function as an inhibitory motive upon the person who contemplates the possibility of doing what he believes to be wrong.

These are the commonly recognized aspects of conscience, and they frequently function quite uncritically. Because of this uncritical emotive reaction conscience all too frequently moves people to approve or disapprove actions and rules concerning which adequate reflection would lead to a very different verdict, and sometimes it afflicts people with a quite irrational sense of guilt. These deplorable effects of some manifestations of conscience are a large part of the reason for its devaluation in the judgement of many modern moralists. What these thinkers rightly deplore is the uncritical emotive reaction which the person who experiences it calls his conscience, particularly when the emotive element in it inhibits any critical activity of the cognitive element. But it is not necessary, and it is not usually the case, that the emotive element in conscience stifles the critical, and there is no justification for jumping to the conclusion that conscience should be ignored. For critical ethical thinking is itself usually conscientiousness, and conscience can be trained to be habitually critical.

For clarity of thinking on this question we need to distinguish between the critical and the traditional conscience. The latter is uncritical. Here the emotive element attaches to moral ideas accepted from the tradition without critical re-evaluation of them. Its strength lies in this perpetuation of tradition, but this is also the source of its errors. It is this blind by emotive perpetuation of an outgrown and mistaken tradition that contemporary critics of the supreme evaluation of conscience, for the most part, are concerned to deplore. And thus far they are right. But one would be unfair to such critics if one were not to recognize that their efforts to point out the errors of the tradition are usually also conscientious and are not merely the echoing of another tradition. Sometimes their critical ideas are boldly new and very commonly they are presented with persistent and painstaking care and in spite of personal cost. Nietzsche and Marx, Schweitzer and Gandhi, as well as Robespierre, were thoroughly conscientious men. Their ideas were new but were held with great emotive strength and tenacity. The same is true of the prophets of Israel and the great moral innovators of other religions. Indeed, the outstanding examples of conscientious men are not the mere sustainers of a tradition but the thinkers who

try to improve the tradition.

This fact of the vitality of the critical conscience shows the superficiality of Freud's identification of it with the super-ego and of the explanation of it as an after-effect of early social conditioning, as put forward by many psychologists and sociologists, and uncritically adopted by many philosophers. On this view the moral judgements which tend to arouse spontaneous emotions of approval or disapproval, shame and guilt, are those which we learned to make in our childhood and which we then heard expressed by those around us accompanied by strong manifestations of moral approval and disapproval. The child, it is pointed out, must naturally assimilate the tendency to feel similar emotions whenever he himself makes a moral judgement, and this emotive tendency remains with him in adult life together with the tendency to frame and express such judgements. Conscience is then said to be simply the inward echo of the emotionally expressed judgements of our childhood social environment. This may be accepted as part of the explanation of the emotive element in the uncritical traditional conscience, but as an explanation of how men come to feel the way they do about the results of their own original critical thinking, and of the motivational drive conscientiously to do original critical ethical thinking, it is woefully inadequate.

It is not difficult to see how the cognitive element in conscience, the judgement of right and wrong, becomes critical. To some extent it must be so from the beginning. A favourite word in every child's vocabulary is 'Why?' And especially does he ask for reasons when told that he *ought* to do something he does not want to do. If moral injunctions are accepted as such on mere authority it is because it is implicitly believed that the authority *has* good reasons for issuing them, or else that the demand or example of this authority is in itself a sufficient reason for obedience or conformity, as with kings and deities. Apart from authority, reasons for moral rules have to be found in their relevance to the needs and security and peace of the community and the well-being of the person himself. But always, it is a distinguishing mark of a *moral* rule that it is one for which it is believed that reasons can be given. Critical thinking about moral rules is therefore stimulated whenever the reasons presented seem inadequate, beginning with the child's 'Why?' and whenever there is a conflict of rules.

This critical thinking at first accepts as its basic principles the sort of reasons customarily given for moral rules and injunctions—the traditions of the tribe, its peace, security, prosperity and honour, revelations from divine sources, and so forth. But at a higher level of critical thinking

conflicts are found between these basic principles themselves, and man is directed to the philosophical task of thinking out the *most* basic of all principles—if any such can be found. The search may end in scepticism and confusion, but so long as the thinker is prepared to accept any reason at all as a reason why something 'ought' (in the ethical sense) to be done he also feels conscientiously constrained to do that which his search for reasons has led him to believe that he ought to do. Further, the experience of finding reasons for rejecting old views and accepting new ones impresses upon him the need and value of the search. Thus, so long as he recognizes any moral reasons at all he must recognize a duty of continued critical examination of moral ideas. The critical conscience thus becomes its own stimulus to further critical thinking. Conscience takes the form of the firm conviction, not merely that one ought to do what one believes one ought to do, still less that one ought to do without question what one has been taught one ought to do, but that one ought to think for oneself as to what one really ought to do and then act on one's own convictions. And the emotive drive is apt to attach itself as firmly to this last formulation of the cognitive element in conscience as ever it does to the other two.