

THE
NINETEENTH
CENTURY.

No. XVII.—JULY 1878.

*THE PLACE OF CONSCIENCE IN
EVOLUTION.*

OF all the objections and difficulties that sprang into life the moment that the doctrine of evolution was propounded for our acceptance, very few indeed (exclusive of the purely scientific ones) now give evidence of persistent vitality. Time, which, if age and experience can give wisdom, ought to be so much wiser than any of us, has consigned the greater part of them to oblivion, and evolution is taking its place, one might say, as part of the furniture of the human mind. Chief among these objections was the assertion that evolution could give no satisfactory account of the origin of morality and the genesis of conscience.

Many persons, religious thinkers especially, among whom Mr. Charles Kingsley may be cited as an instance, while willing to accept any reasonable conclusion of science as to the origin and constitution of man, appeared determined to reserve conscience as something inexplicable by any effort of human thinking, and therefore as a direct gift of God to His creatures: others, again, have gone so far as to assert that the idea of duty as of divine obligation must perish, if the nature and growth of conscience could be explained, as part of the evolution of the race, by natural causation. This feeling, natural and indeed honourable, was strengthened by the fact that the explanation given of the place of conscience in evolution seemed to unprejudiced minds—seemed also to that *communis sensus* which is

after all the ultimate court of arbitration in these matters—on the whole inadequate to account for the phenomenon for which explanation was desired. These persistently averred that they were conscious of something within them which no considerations derived from utility or from social life, or from the transference of external sanctions to the inward individual consciousness, at all explained or enforced. To a certain extent this feeling was itself a justification of resistance to the claims of evolution to be regarded as a sufficient history of the creation of man. The evolutionists had claimed to be able to make clear to its possessors the mystery of conscience, and if reasonable men asserted that, so far as they were concerned, the sense of mystery remained, it was clear that the last word on the subject was not yet spoken.

I am certainly very far from thinking that the last word will be spoken for some time to come, but I make bold to believe that it is possible to throw further light upon the subject without at all departing from the general principle of evolution to which I have for long given such intellectual adherence as was in my power. Let us then begin by endeavouring to understand what were the precise features in the power called conscience, which seemed to intuitional thinkers to baffle and defy the explanations of the evolutionists.

Their general point of view may be fairly expressed by the statement that the conscience must have had an existence prior to the conditions out of which it was supposed to have been evolved. Drawn out in detail, this statement contains the three following propositions:—

(1.) Conscience is instantaneous—that is, innate—in its origin, and therefore not to be accounted for by the supposition that by degrees it was impressed upon the mind from without. It bears so strong a resemblance to the other faculties, the senses and emotions, that, like them, it must have formed part of the original constitution of man. When examined it seems to testify that it is in no sense a composition, not made up of long and varied experiences, but the result of a single creative act, or at any rate the instantaneous product of certain conditions brought for the first time into relation with each other. In other words, the length of time postulated by evolutionists for the development of man is not granted them in the case of conscience. We shall see presently whether they really require it.

(2.) Conscience is instantaneous—that is, intuitional—in its operations, and therefore not to be accounted for by the action and reaction of social relationships. Had there been but one man, that one man would have been able to say, ‘I must do this;’ and, again, there must have been a sense that it was right to combine for social purposes of mutual help and comfort before men could have conceived the idea of doing so. The notion that I ought to act in a certain way towards my neighbour is, if not a primary, at least a

very easy one, whereas the notion that I ought to act in a certain way, because it is for his or our advantage, seems *primâ facie* a much later one. There is, in short, a correlation between the conscience and an external rightness, which is just as natural, as rapid, as unaffected by later relationships, as is the correlation between the eye and light. In primeval man the conscience detects, however dimly and imperfectly, morality in actions just as the eye detects shape and colour in objects. Social and civilised life may enable him to see more clearly and explain more completely, but it cannot give him either the eye or the conscience.

(3.) Conscience is also instantaneous—that is, imperative—in its commands. It never stops to argue when once the right is, or is thought to be, ascertained. But if mankind had reached the lofty heights of duty by the ladder of utility or the gradually growing influence of external sanctions, it might have been expected that some fragments of the ladder, some traces of the process, some memory of the time when ‘ought’ was a word of dubious meaning and uncertain cogency, would have been preserved. The evidence derivable from the histories of savage existence seems plainly to indicate that this imperativeness of conscience is inseparable from the most rudimentary stage of moral and social life. In short, to put the matter as briefly as possible, those who object to the theory of evolution maintain that it is impossible to conceive of any creature entitled to the name of a human being who was not as much furnished with a conscience as any of his successors. True, the primeval conscience had not begun to construct moral rules any more than the primeval eye had formed theories of light and form; but the existence of both was equally indisputable and essential to the idea of man.

Now, if it can be shown that there is a place in evolution for the formation of a conscience fulfilling all these conditions—if, that is, the theory of evolution can be proved to account precisely for those phenomena that seem *primâ facie* to militate most strongly against it—if this feature, which I have called instantaneousness, and have exhibited in three of its leading characteristics, is exactly what one might expect to find in the evolution of the human race—then I submit we have obtained a confirmation of the truth of the said theory of that nature which appeals most forcibly to the common sense and practical judgment of mankind. Let this, then, be the judge as to whether all that is instantaneous in conscience is not fully accounted for by the considerations I am about to urge.

In seeking to account for the origin of man by evolution we are obliged frequently to confess that the entire absence of contemporary evidence compels us, at any rate for the present, to say of many phenomena, that if we knew more we should be able to answer difficulties and clear up perplexities which seem at this present

moment well nigh insuperable. The gaps are such that they cannot be filled up even by the imagination. Science has done but little yet to enable the intellect to form an idea to itself of the way in which organic life and reasoning man began to exist upon the earth. Impenetrable darkness hangs over vast epochs, nor is it possible in the present absence of materials to fill in the picture of that critical time when man (slowly or suddenly, who can tell?) rose up from among the beasts and said, or rather felt without being able to say, 'I am.' But then by our hypothesis this is also the time when he also said, 'I must.' We may feel assured that at this time, by orderly development and natural process of causation, all that is most vital and precious to humanity, all the seeds of man's present and eternal future, came into existence; but none the less is the darkness so great that even the imagination refuses to move from its place. The surrounding objects are there if the light would but dawn so as to enable us to see them. It is very necessary to remind ourselves of this, lest we seem to be expressing ourselves with too much certainty in doubtful matters. But however necessary this may be when we are dealing with many other questions respecting the origin of man, it is, I firmly believe, by no means so necessary in our present investigation. That phenomenon, called conscience, which seemed at first sight the most likely to resist analysis by way of evolution, proves upon experiment to yield most readily to it.

As usual in questions of this description, philosophy has been made the slave, the victim, and finally the accomplice of language. The word conscience has come to suggest a kind of special faculty, not exactly thought and not exactly feeling, which presides over a specific department of man's being, namely, his moral conduct. Whereas, reduced to its simplest elements, conscience is merely the power which the mind possesses of discerning rightness. Just as we discern something called beautiful which we must admire, or something called pleasurable which we must seek, so do we perceive something right which we must do. And so our specific question comes to this, How did the idea or the fact of rightness enter into the world?

There can, I think, be no doubt that the general tendency of the teaching of evolution has been to reintroduce into philosophy the idea that such things as virtue, goodness, happiness, right, are absolute and fixed quantities, formed for man and not by him, existing independently of him, and therefore the same to all men in all circumstances. They are realised by the complete and harmonious adjustment of the self-conscious ego to the circumstances out of which it came and by which it is surrounded. Can, then, evolution help us to perceive how the idea of there being such a thing as absolute fixed rightness came into the world?

Let us transfer ourselves in thought as far back as the time when

the origin of man took place, and let us imagine a being slowly or suddenly arriving at the stage of self-conscious existence. For our present purpose it matters little whether we attribute this to a gradual progress, or (what is surely possible) to a sudden but natural leap in evolution, or to a special act of creation adapting itself to materials already at its disposal. (I mention this last alternative merely to show that this theory of the origin of conscience does not conflict with any reasonable hypothesis as to the origin of man.) Now this Being owed his origin to the law or process of natural selection. He had been cradled, so to speak, under conditions which prescribed a continual struggle for existence, and which permitted only the strongest and fittest to survive and multiply. His 'conduct' up to the moment or epoch when it became self-conscious was confined to these two spheres of action, flying (by combination and otherwise) for life and killing for life. There were creatures whom it was natural for him to kill, and others who, it was equally natural, should kill him. This was the state of things in which he found himself a living, thinking being; this was the law which he found not only confronting him on every side of his exterior life, but also deep rooted in his inmost nature as an indubitable, unanswerable fact.

Having arrived at this point, let us as our next step remind ourselves that it is impossible to imagine a rational human being in whom there is not present the assurance that he has a right to himself, to be allowed to live in the first place, afterwards (as the result may be of long years of evolution) to be allowed to live happily. That no one has a right to take my life from me is a thought inseparable from myself, it is at any rate the first piece of knowledge of which I become possessed. The infant's cry for nourishment and warmth contains this much meaning to those who can discern how moral feelings grew out of physical conditions. But then this thought remains a mere mystery, and therefore quite unsuitable for affording a basis on which to explain the origin of conscience, until we set it in the light of evolution. So regarded the mystery vanishes in an instant. For this thought is merely the necessary result of the correlation of the first self-conscious being with his environment, and conscience is the *struggle for existence become aware of itself in the mind of a thinking person*. The first man, in however dumb inarticulate a fashion, did nevertheless practically contrive to claim of the universe, of nature, of creatures like himself, nay, ultimately of the unknown Author of all things, that they should not destroy the life which they had originated. He made his appeal (makes it in truth now) to all the tremendous forces amid which he moved, and in the balance and play of which he endeavoured to maintain an independent personal existence, that they should minister to *him*, the one thinking creature among them, and therefore (for the first man was also the first Philosopher)

their centre and final cause. It seemed to him, in short, right, could not indeed seem otherwise, the past being what it had been, that his environment should be such as would make life possible to him at once, and in due time useful and enjoyable.

Observe that the condition essential to all knowledge, namely, contrast or the perception of dissimilarities, is here present. As light is meaningless without darkness, or heat without cold, so is right without its contrast of force or wrong. No doubt primeval man may have for long perceived by sensation the contrast of heat and cold, day and night, before he so far separated the ideas as to give them abstract names. So, too, the same man may have for long felt the indescribable contrast between the external force that was everywhere threatening his existence and the internal force that was resolutely bent on continuing to be, before he called the two by the names right and wrong. But as the mere fact that the contrast was there and always had been there, at the very root of things, produced at once the appropriate feeling in the first mind, so did the feeling produce in due time the words in which it is expressed. Take the first and commonest action in the struggle for existence. The meanest creature that lives seeks instinctively to escape from its enemy by flight. But man alone can think, as he flies from his pursuer, with an energy quickened by his knowledge of what death is and means, 'all this is unutterably wrong. I have a right to save my life, this thing or creature has no right to take it from me.' Such, or something like this, were the first thoughts of the first conscience, the first expression of the conviction that there was a rightness in the world.

Whatever else may be urged against this account of the origin of conscience, it seems to me certain that those phenomena, upon which intuitionists have particularly relied as being beyond the reach of analysis and therefore of discovery, are fully and precisely accounted for. Take, for instance, the word creation which men have used because of their feeling that there were things in the world of instantaneous, and therefore of specially divine, origin—a feeling which gave rise to the most sublime utterance of antiquity: 'God said, Let there be light, and there was light.' Now the poetical beauty and religious truth of such phrases are surely not in the least degree prejudiced by the scientific statement that these 'creations' correspond to those critical epochs in the progress of evolution when, by the union or marriage of one set of conditions with another, a third is instantaneously, and for the first time, called into being. Such an epoch, resulting in the origin of conscience, was that in which a being conscious of himself said, or thought, or felt 'I am,' and then, confronted with a world of opposing and destructive forces, added, 'and I have a right to be.'

So, too, the truth contained in the assertion that conscience is innate, intuitional, and imperative, is seen to be in harmony with the

foregoing account of its origin. It is innate in the sense that though undoubtedly impressed from without during long periods upon man in his *animal state*, it was *not* gradually impressed upon him in his intelligent state, but was, from the first, part of the mental furniture with which as a rational being he commenced his life upon earth. It is, in short, not a composition, *i.e.* the result of various tendencies such as pleasure, utility, and the like, but, in the sense explained above, a creation, coeval with man himself, the inheritance of the first human being no less than of the last.

Again, it is intuitional in the sense that it has a direct necessary and immediate perception of an external something, named rightness, with which it is correlated. Man, by virtue of his conscience, is obliged to believe that there is right and wrong, just as by virtue of his eye he is obliged to believe there is light and darkness. And this belief exists and must exist independently of all theories as to what in the abstract constitutes right and wrong, and in spite of mistakes in particular cases.

Lastly, conscience is imperative, because the inwrought consciousness in human nature that man has a right to himself, makes every other consideration whatsoever subordinate to itself. This is the right which must be at every cost pursued by myself and conceded to me by others, which dominates every action, lies at the root of all human progress, shapes every institution of our devising, and presides over the destiny of mankind to its remotest end. For travel as far as we please, we can never escape from the conditions under which we were called into being.

So far then the task we set before us of ascertaining how the sense of rightness came into the world, has been in some degree accomplished. The process by which from this prolific germ the vast fabric of human morality, together with the exquisitely delicate machinery of the individual conscience, as we now see it, has by slow degrees grown up, can be indicated in a sentence. Morality consists in transferring to other beings like ourselves those rights which we feel that we ourselves possess, in learning that what is due to us from them is also due to them from us, in ascertaining in what those mutual rights consist, in adjusting the rights of individuals within the limits of one society, lastly, in forming to ourselves notions of abstract right and wrong by the methods of philosophical inquiry. Manifestly, therefore, this account of the origin of conscience does not conflict with any one proposition that has ever been formulated by any of the great masters of experimental philosophy; it does but claim to add to them that undefinable something which seemed to the common sense of mankind deficient in their account of conscience. The true method of inquiry is surely not to ask what such words as 'conscience,' 'ought,' 'duty,' 'happiness,' mean in the mind of a modern thinker, but to discover, if we can, what they meant, or

rather to what instinctive impressions they corresponded, in the minds of the forefathers of our race. For the question is *not* How did I come by my conscience? but How did those remote ancestors of mine, the first man and after him the first society of men, come by theirs?

The history of the process by which, under the influence of social life, its wants, obligations, utilities, arrangements, and sanctions, the sense of a right due to ourselves was elaborated into the voice of conscience prescribing what is due to others, would be a valuable and interesting contribution to moral science. But though quite beyond our present limits it is, I think, possible to sketch in mere outline the stages through which conscience passed till it reached its full growth. I disclaim any pedantic desire to show that these stages are chronologically successive; on the contrary, they act and react upon each other, and may be immensely varied in their operations among different races or at different times. But with this proviso the seven ages of conscience may be briefly indicated as follows:—

(1.) The Animal Stage. Mr. Darwin's book has familiarised us with the idea that the moral and mental elements in man's nature, no less than the physical and material, were derived from irrational creatures by the process of evolution. How far this is capable of being proved in other respects it is not for me to say (whatever I may believe), but I am sure that it is true of that element which seems at first sight most opposed to it—the conscience. Making all allowance for the temptation and tendency to read our own thoughts into the minds of animals, and also for the effect upon the animals themselves of man's moral control, it yet remains certain that the materials out of which conscience has been constructed are everywhere discernible, like the rough unhewn stones of a quarry, in animal life and in nature itself. The mere fact that animals can be taught and made to feel what they ought to do (how can we avoid using the word 'ought'?) settles the question. But without relying upon this, is it not evident that the contrast between the external force that *would* destroy and the internal power that *will* live, existed long before it became an object of perception and reflection in the brain of a reasoning creature? And this contrast produced such actions as the following—flight, combination for defence, appealing looks, cries of remonstrance, self-defence to the last moment of existence. For instance, the sight of an object accustomed to prey upon a weaker animal then and there stimulated that animal to immediate flight by putting into motion the appropriate muscles and limbs. But the animals with which man is in closest alliance were those whose weakness must certainly have made the necessity of escape a large part of their experience. With this would come a great number of painful and also pleasant emotions. The need of horrible exertions, the terror of anticipation, the sense of unavailing wrath, sometimes the ecstasy of

deliverance, which must have been so strong in the heart of every hunted animal that turned to bay at last, are seen to border closely upon that instinct of rightness which so evidently belongs to our individual inherited experience. It needed but the touch of self-consciousness to make the instinctive feeling pass by a bound into an instinctive thought in the mind of a being that 'could look before and after.' And whatever difficulty there may be in accounting for the evolution of man lies not in his moral but in his mental growth. How he became conscious of himself we may possibly never be able even to imagine, but that being conscious of himself he was by mere force of circumstances possessed of the germ of conscience, is a statement that presents no difficulty at all.

(2.) *The Intermediate Stage.* What was the moral condition of the 'ape-like man'? He was a creature who had a vivid and intense conception of his own right to exist, and no conception whatever as to the rights of other creatures to the same existence. He was the inheritor of conditions and tendencies which wrought in him such thoughts as these: 'You shall die before I will;' 'I will use you to please myself;' 'I am born to pursue my own happiness;' 'the whole world is mine to occupy, plunder, and rule over so far as I find a power within me to do it and to prevent others.' He was, in short, the incarnation of perfect selfishness. No one, of course, supposes that these 'thoughts' amounted to anything more than vague impressions in the minds of the first men, till they grew into positive convictions under the fostering power of progressive and multiplied experiences. All that seems certain is, that there was an era in the history of man when there was added to his nascent conscience that sense of physical or necessary obligation expressed in our word 'must.' If he was to avoid destruction, it was borne in upon his mind that he 'must' act in such and such a way; his perception of right, that is, of his claim to existence, demanded of him a certain course of action (hardly yet perhaps of conduct), and demanded it in the most brief and imperative fashion. In this stage of human life, before men entered into social relations, we can plainly discern that aspect of conscience which we have described by the word 'instantaneous,' and which has seemed to so many minds independent of, and prior to, any social experiences. We do but reproduce this ancient fashion of our race when, putting aside all opposing considerations, and refusing to listen to arguments based upon expediency or advantage, we say peremptorily and decisively, 'I owe it to myself to do this at once.'

(3.) *The Family Stage.* The phenomena of primeval family life are so obscure, so varied, and so complicated by institutions like polygamy and polyandry, that in making even the most general and apparently common-sense observations we are obliged to express ourselves with caution and reserve. One indubitable fact, however, stands out impressively amidst all the chaos, and affords us a sufficient stand-point

for indicating the precise growth of conscience at this stage of its existence. I mean, of course, the maternal care of offspring. It was from this deeply-rooted instinct that men first learned to transfer to the beings whom they loved, and whose helpless weakness appealed to them for protection, the same rights which they claimed for themselves. But however important and indeed enormous is the step thus made in the evolution of conscience, we must beware of making too much of it at this stage of its growth. For the first parents, even when preserving and protecting their children, could only regard their children's rights as part of their own, which they were entitled to defend against all opposing forces; nor could they possibly have imagined that their children had any rights as against themselves. Still, when every deduction has been made, the fact remains that the sense of an obligation due to others besides ourselves, and perhaps too from ourselves, became part of the human consciousness, and men learned that if they wished to do well unto themselves they must make efforts of care and protection for the life and for the welfare of others. All the earlier annals of our race seem to show that this consideration for others, even those dearest to us, was at first but a very flickering and transitory feeling as opposed to our inherited selfishness; but for all that, it was the bridge by which men first began to cross from self-love to benevolence, and to become social beings. An interesting survival of this primeval state of things may perhaps be traced in Roman law, under which the father's control over his children seems to point back to the time when men did their duty to their children only as part of themselves, and exercised to the fullest extent the right to do what they pleased with their own. A less pleasing reminiscence of the primitive conscience is to be found in the plea of the slaveholders, that they do not ill-treat their slaves because it is for their own interests to keep them alive, healthy, and happy.

(4.) The Social Stage. At a certain period of his mental growth primeval man must have begun to form conceptions or ideas of the various objects that came within his experience, so as to be able to say, this is a flower, and this a stone, and this a man. Now his idea of man must of necessity have been framed upon his knowledge of himself. Whatever qualities or properties he recognised as belonging to himself, these he would transfer to all other beings of whose likeness to himself in all essential conditions he had become aware. Hence it would follow that as he had a distinct and vivid impression of his own right to existence, he would have the same impression, in a faint and dubious form, of other men as possessing the same right. It seems probable that to this rudimentary perception of mutual likeness may be traced all that part of our social feelings which owes its origin to an intellectual as opposed to physical sources. Anyhow this recognition of likeness selects for man the kind of beings with whom he is willing to enter into those social relations to which he finds himself

impelled in part by inherited instincts, and in part by the necessity of living together with other creatures in the same territory, and upon the same means of subsistence which they must procure in common. Thus the important fact emerges that man brought (in germ) the idea of right and wrong with him to the formation of society, and did *not* obtain it as a result of social intercourse acting through the agency of pains and pleasures. From the moment that A, B, and C, recognising a likeness of nature, and therefore a possibility of intercommunion, resolved upon trying the experiment of living together, they must have perceived that they could only do so by acknowledging each other's independent claims to be allowed to live. In respect of all that pertains to life and death they must in short have acted up to what Mr. Mill called the 'golden ethics' of doing to others as we would they should do unto us. Let us note, in passing, that this 'golden' saying, when seen in the light of evolution, becomes not merely a moral rule but also a statement of a scientific fact, for it was only by acting in accordance with it that 'neighbourhood' became possible. 'Who is my neighbour but he to whom I assign the same right to exist that I claim for myself from him?'

We are now in a position to describe how man came by that social *modus vivendi* which we call utility, and define as all that makes for the continued existence and progressive welfare of the community. Utility is scientifically '*the result of the conflict of individual rights with survival of the fittest.*' The first right that passed away was the right to kill my neighbour; the first that survived was the right that my neighbour should not kill me. And to these rights conscience paid an intuitive deference (rendered perhaps all the more striking by the contrast presented by men's habitual practice) from the moment that the mind conceived the possibility of social relations. Things being as they were, it could not do otherwise. But then this right to oneself soon passes, under the fostering nurture of social life, to mean not merely bare animal existence, but all that conduces to make life happy, free, good, and useful. During the long course of advancing ages, rights are being conceded to the individual or being abandoned by him according as experience shows what is possible and best for human life and happiness. And all the while the conscience plays its part in this upward progress by transferring to any recognised reasonable rightness (alas! also to a thousand wrongs, which, yet true to its innate origin, the universal conscience persists in regarding as doomed to pass away) the same intuitive deference that it could not help but pay to the first moral inference evolved by the needs and the instincts of social life, 'If you have no right to kill me, then have I no right to kill you.'

(5.) The Political Stage. The earliest and (in a certain sense) most authentic records of the human race represent the murder of a brother as the first crime, the murderer's fear of vengeance as the

first idea of punishment, and 'Whoso sheddeth man's blood by man shall his blood be shed' as the first effort of criminal law to curb the murderous instincts. We have in this a very impressive representation of the next stage in the history of conscience. At first the faint and shadowy idea of my neighbour's right to existence must have been a poor and frail defence indeed against the storms of innate passion, the cruel selfish lusts, the reckless and savage assaults of men just emerged from the animals and beginning a social life, which, unlike theirs, involved a conscious sacrifice of the individual's will to the community. But no society could have lasted for long without there growing up a distinct and profound conviction that the indiscriminate taking of life cut at the root of its own existence. There are many interesting (in a scientific sense) survivals (blood feuds, for instance, or the cheapness of human life, which invariably accompanies the dissolution of society at revolutionary epochs) of this primeval state of man, during which some of the strongest sentiments we possess were engraved upon our mental and moral constitution by the external action of laws and customs. It was now that the voice of the community began to proclaim in no hesitating tones to the individual conscience 'Thou shalt not kill,' and to take very decisive steps indeed to make its decrees heard and obeyed. And so the word duty began to be in the air.

Now I hold it to be quite impossible that any such external command could create in the mind the sense that it is a matter of duty to obey it; nay, all law must have presented itself to the individual merely as part of that very external force which was originally, and is still liable at any moment to become, the natural enemy of his personal rights. And if I (that is to say, my ancestor of thousands of years ago) am merely forced by laws acting upon my fear of punishment to surrender my desire to slay another man, I may of course yield to superior force, but I cannot possibly thereby acquire the sense of duty, which may be defined as *the pleasure resulting from intelligent acquiescence in self-sacrifice that makes self-sacrifice possible*. But when the law appeals to a sense of right and wrong already existing, when the command 'Thou shalt not kill' is met by a response in the conscience, 'I know that this is true, for I had the thought before, or rather at the moment when, I became a social being,' then there results the joyful sense of duty which makes obedience pleasant. 'Wherefore,' the conscience cries, 'the law is holy and the commandment holy, and just, and good.' It is welcomed as the interpreter of conscience, as that which explains a man to himself. And so through countless avenues of utility, and through as many sanctions of social opinion embodied in law, custom, or tradition, the conscience advances towards the perception of the rights of men and of a corresponding internal sense of duty towards them. And thus, as I think, we get an explanation of the pleasurable element in

duty. For while the law is becoming more and more imperative, and sacrifice of self more and more exacting, and our personal rights more and more circumscribed, there goes along with us the sense that we are but finding our true selves and expressing our own convictions and obeying our own highest wills, and are thus enabled to experience the greatest possible delight in doing our duty. For what is this after all but the satisfaction of finding our life when we were willing to lose it ?

(6.) The Ideal or Moral Stage. The next step in the history of conscience carries us a long way forward in the course of man's mental evolution, because it brings us to the time when he became capable of forming abstract notions. But it must be borne in mind that long before these notions were formed, the tendencies and impressions in which they culminated were busily, if silently, at work ; hence it is possible to trace the line of advance along which the conscience passed from the primitive sense of rightness to the complete ideal state.

It is natural for men, under the pressure of social obligations, to fall back upon their personal rights and innate egoism, and to question the authority to which they have submitted more from a gregarious instinct than from any exercise of their reasoning powers. Questions like the following lie deep down in the nature and necessity of things, and exercise powerful effect upon the mental and moral modes of thought long before they become articulate in language. 'Why am I restricted from doing what I please ? Why does law or custom pronounce it wrong to kill one man, right to kill another ? Why would my fellow-men think it right to kill me under certain circumstances ? Why is the law on this and other points so unfair, so irregular, so incomplete, that were I to fashion my conduct by it alone, I should be always doing something of which I did not approve ? Above all, am not I, the unit of which society is composed and for whose benefit it exists, in danger of losing my right to myself and becoming merged in a mere aggregate mass of my fellow-units ? Is right and wrong to be determined for me without effort or remonstrance, or even cooperation of my own ?'¹

Now the answer which man has made for himself to such questions is, by common confession, the discovery and the assertion that there is an absolute rightness belonging to society as such, with

¹ The relation between the power of law in enforcing rights and the power of conscience in detecting rightness is well illustrated by a sentence of Sir Henry Maine's, describing the action of English law upon Indian modes of thought: 'Unfortunately for us, we have created the sense of legal right before we have created a proportionate power of distinguishing good from evil in the law upon which the legal right depends.' (*Village Communities*, Lect. iii.) I may add that the history of village communities presents a curious illustration of the way in which the conflicting rights of egoism and society were preserved in early times, i.e. by what would now be considered an exaggerated expression of them side by side. See his remarks on the isolation of households and the secrecy of family life in the fourth lecture.

which individual rights may be harmonised, but which they can never supersede. How did he come to make this discovery and assert it with so unhesitating a conviction? Of justice in the abstract (for this is what we call the social rightness) it is true that primitive man could have no conception; that idea has been generalised from experience. Now we have seen that the first man was dominated by the consciousness of a primitive rightness due to himself. We have seen also that, compelled by the instincts of forming a social life, he extended the same rightness to individual men like himself. We are now to see that, under the stress of questions such as the above, and strengthened by the growing power of forming general ideas, the mind transferred to society, to nature, nay, to inanimate matter, the same idea of absolute rightness which it claimed for itself. Man perceived right everywhere and in all things just as he had done at first—*then* in the simple concrete form of the right to his own existence, *now* in the highly abstract form of everything having its own right and wrong. At first all nature is indebted to him, now he is indebted to all nature. Utility prescribed in what right and wrong consisted, but did not give the idea of it; or, to speak more accurately, if we are willing to define utility as that which makes for the existence of anything, then just as utility or the needs of his own existence had suggested to man the idea of primitive rightness, so did it impress upon him the idea of rightness as inherent in the constitution of things, and especially of society, if it were to continue to exist. Men come to think that they have no business wantonly to destroy anything, not even an insect or an inanimate object. Yet if they do it at all, they answer that it was because it was 'useless.' It is thus by tracing ideas apparently dissimilar to the same root that we obtain the strongest possible confirmation of the truth of our contention.

It was thus, then, that men began to form to themselves moral ideals, having an absolute and universal existence as opposed to the mere passing dicta of laws and opinions. In the special case before us the inference ran thus: if it is not right for me to kill, then all killing is naturally wrong, necessary exceptions notwithstanding. And thus the ideal was formed of the sanctity of human life, and society was regarded only as a means for this end, all its arrangements and institutions being of necessity submitted to the moral judgment of the individual mind, and approved only so far as they came up to the ideal. It must, indeed, be confessed that there are survivals from earlier stages of moral growth which cast a strange and ironical reflection upon man's claim to wisdom and advancement, and cause his practice to fall lamentably short of even so early and obvious an ideal as the sanctity of life. How else are we to account for the fact that whilst all England will thrill at the news of some specially savage murder, or whilst we ourselves would be saddened to

the end of our days by the result of some homicidal carelessness, we yet contrive to read morning after morning without a sigh or even a passing remark of battles in which thousands of human beings have perished for a cause in which they had no more real concern than they had for the politics of the planet Jupiter?

It was thus, then, that men embarked upon that process of forming ideals which led them from the primitive thought, 'self-preservation is the first (and only) law in nature,' up to the highest abstract expression of moral duty, 'fiat justitia, ruat cœlum.' But now observe the immensely important influence which the formation of ideals exercised upon the moral constitution. It was this which enabled men amid the pressure and conflicts of life to vindicate their primeval claims to themselves, and to establish an independent moral existence in the midst of society, as they had at first established an independent physical existence in the midst of the universe. The immediate effect was that they became a law unto themselves. For instance, under the influence of such an ideal as the sanctity of human life they refuse to kill even when authority commands them; nay, they prefer themselves to die. That is to say, the original claim to bodily life reappears in the form of a claim to moral life, to which we insist that the same deference shall be paid as our forefathers claimed for their natural existence, and which, thanks to the innate law of our being, we refuse to surrender upon any conditions whatever. And thus we have come to understand what is meant by the significant phrase, 'rights of conscience.' Can it be said that this has been satisfactorily explained up to the present time? Mr. Herbert Spencer finds the origin of the sense of justice to self in the egoistic sentiment known as the love or instinct of personal freedom. Carry the analysis one step further back, to the innate demand for personal existence, and, like finding a diamond in a coal mine, we come upon just that element of absolute, all-pervading, essential rightness for which we might otherwise search in vain.

No wonder, then, that men have almost deified the power they possess of discerning right and wrong to which they owe in the last resort the possession of themselves.

Justum et tenacem propositi virum. . . .
Si fractus illabatur orbis,
Impavidum ferient ruinæ.

But unhappily egoism is easily overdone, and egoism identifying itself with liberty and duty is liable to all kinds of mischievous exaggerations and delusions. Conscience comes to be regarded as a special faculty instead of being an ordinary operation of thought directed to special objects. It is ascribed to a divine origin and erected into a test of religion and truth. The chief stress of practical exhortation is laid not upon finding out the right, but upon doing

what we believe to be right, very often irrespective of advice, common sense, and obvious consequences. Nay, men go so far as to assign to conscience a sort of lordship or supremacy over themselves, and so by a roundabout way only end at last in doing what they please. Like Arthur, they 'reverence their conscience as their king,' and, like that excellent but unprosperous monarch, they contrive with the best intentions in the world to make a bad business of life. In short, they glorify not the sun which gives the light, but the eye which perceives it, and thus give rise to a reaction against the pretensions, nay, the very existence of conscience, which causes whole volumes of philosophy to be written with barely so much as the mention of its name. To redress the balance recourse must be had to the good genius of philosophy—evolution.

(7.) The Religious Stage. I have placed this stage last because the association, much more the identification, of religion with morality comes so late in the history of man that religion has but little to do with the conscience in its elementary state. Among savages religion can hardly be called moral at all, although the gods might on the whole be believed to be on the side of what the tribe thought to be right, subject, however, to the very important qualification that the gods of another tribe held different views. Still, so far as primitive man believed that the gods would visit him with rewards and punishments by an exercise of superhuman power, to that extent there was added to the conscience a feeling of responsibility and solemnity together with an awful imperativeness which must have considerably modified his moral constitution. Moreover, by calling attention to a will external to our own, something was done to counteract the egoistic tendency which I have just described. And so it was that morality did not take final refuge in stoicism until religious belief had died away.

The truth, of course, is that religion can and does become definitely moral when the human mind rises to a belief in one Almighty God with whose will righteousness is of necessity identified. How the Hebrew branch of the Semitic family came by this belief (along with other peoples who, however, did not retain it) cannot at present be positively affirmed, but it is of exceeding interest to observe that the earliest idea of the moral will of God is connected with the instinct of self-preservation, to which we have traced the genesis of conscience. What in other races is the voice of tribal opinion condemning murder, is, among the Hebrews, regarded as the voice of God, 'who at the hand of every man's brother will require the life of man.' In this we see how records, old in themselves, and pointing back to tendencies and traditions lost in the mists of antiquity, identify the primitive rightness with the will of God, by whom first nature, then man, then the family, then the society, had been established. And thus the will of the Creator has been by degrees

definitely set up as the standard of right and wrong to which men must conform, so that the supreme effort of human morality is breathed in the prayer, 'Thy will be done.' And this accounts for the remarkable fact that the idea of conscience had little or no hold upon the Jewish mind. Modern theology bases religious belief mainly upon a supernatural origin of the conscience and a supernatural revelation as to the conditions of the future life. The Bible, for all practical purposes, has nothing to say about either of them.

To sum up, then, the result of our investigation, the conscience which we now possess is the primitive sense of a rightness due to oneself, resulting from the struggle for existence; extended to others as men entering into the social state perceived a likeness to themselves in their fellows; intensified and sanctioned by the urgent pressure of external law in the political state; becoming a law to itself as men became capable of forming abstract notions; and saved from egoism by the Christian development of the Hebrew monotheism.

Now the truth and adequacy of this statement may be tested in two ways. Is it conformable to what we know to be true of evolution generally? and is it in harmony with the phenomena presented by the conscience now? It has been impossible to do more than here and there indicate an answer to the second question, but if opportunity offered it would be, I believe, easy to answer it at length by an examination of the operations of conscience in actual practice, and by surveying the conflicting forces, the curious survivals, the metaphysical theories, with which the word conscience is associated. Anyhow the history of the conscience from an evolutionist point of view remains yet to be written.

But is this theory of its origin in harmony with evolution itself? How far, for instance, are we justified in using such words as 'think,' 'say,' 'feel,' or 'law,' 'idea,' and 'consciousness,' in describing the moral condition of primitive man? To this we must reply that the inchoate tendencies and slowly deepening impressions which finally culminated in the phenomena described by words like the above, present an inward and personal aspect of the nature and progress of evolution which ought not to be overlooked. For the very method and circumstances of man's creation by evolution planted within him a consciousness from which, when acted upon by myriads of slowly widening experiences, were evolved all the fundamental powers of his moral nature. Let us illustrate this position by the cognate example of the genesis of religious beliefs. These were developed, let us say, either from the worship of ancestors, or (according to the mythological theory) by personifying the operations of nature. But it seems to me totally impossible that any merely external cause could have produced a belief so primitive, so powerful, so universal, so permanent, and above all so strongly marked by certain original and undeviating

characteristics, unless they had been correlated with the consciousness of a creature in whom by the very law of his origin the Spirit of Evolution was always suggesting an unanswerable question: 'Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare if thou hast understanding.' Primitive man had enough of philosophy to ask this question, and enough of science to attempt to answer it out of such materials as lay ready to hand; hence it is that speculations as to their own origin are common, if not universal, among savage races. As in religion so in morality. All the external impressions arising out of society, law, utility, and the like were related to and conditioned by an innate sense of rightness in the individual, wrought in him by the power of evolution itself by which he was created. And thus we arrive at that inward and SPIRITUAL side of evolution to which I have endeavoured to call attention, in the belief not only that justice remains yet to be done to it, but also that it contains a reconciling and adjusting element much needed amidst the conflicts and misunderstandings of modern thought. But from the further pursuit of this thought I am obliged, however reluctantly, to turn away.

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