The nature and authority of conscience.

Dealing with a subject so much and so variously discussed as the nature and authority of conscience, I feel that before beginning, it is fitting that I should make some statement as to my authority. I have found that the ideas of moralists and philosophers differ on this subject to the point of absolute contradiction, and so to a large extent have been thrown back upon myself and my own opinion and experience. I shall not in this thesis be afraid of "I think."

Each man's personality is, and must be, to a large extent, his standard in measuring external things, and in matters of conscience, which is universal, the testimony of the meanest, so long as it is sincere, is worthy to be put with that of the most learned.
As is the case with nearly every other great philosophical discussion, the grounds for argument concerning conscience rest to some extent on misunderstandings as to terms and definitions. Each man has a conscience. Each man knows that he has a conscience, but knows what he means by the word conscience, so difficult is it to define that which is not perceptible to the five senses, and so prejudiced is every man in favor of his own idea, that men who really agree find cause for argument, and men who disagree on every other question find themselves on this one fighting side by side.

A few definitions showing the wide range of conceptions of conscience are given below, and it is easy to see that concerning a thing so variously defined definite conclusions must be difficult to reach.
"Conscience was defined— by the Stoics as the sovereignty of reason"—Tucker.

"The elements of conscience may be computed thus— one fifth, fear of man; one fifth, superstition; one fifth, prejudice; one fifth, vanity; one fifth, custom"—Schopenhauer.

"Conscience I define to be a faculty or habit of practical understanding, which enables the mind of man by the use of reason and argument, to apply the light which it has to particular moral actions"—Sanderson.

"Conscience is an intuition within ourselves of the government without us; and even when differing in what it prescribes from the current morality, the mode of its action is still parallel to the archetype"—Bain.

"We consider our acts, external..."
and internal, will refer to a moral standard of right and wrong. We recognize them as virtuous or vicious. The faculty or habit of doing this is conscience." — Whewell.

"Conscience is the brightness and splendor of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the divine majesty, and the image of the goodness of God." — St. Bernard.

A comparison of the workings of this secret force, conscience, may be of use. We may see its effect in ancient Greece, where Leonidas and his three hundred would not flee from Thermopylae, and the "daemon" of Socrates forbade him to evade the Athenian law. Yet the commands of conscience ever to the highest Greek thinkers came in many respects different from what we think right. Aristotle, in his catalogue of virtues, refuses to call evidence only as liberality, and holds up
his perfect man as one who is indifferent to small matters and hence is high-minded, in contradiction to the code which commands, "despise not the day of small things."
The conscience of the Jew was largely satisfied with the substance of a multitude of minor laws— that of the crusader in doing penance for crimes some of which nowadays we regard as incompatible with all manliness, and some of which we commit thoughtlessly and hardly regard as offenses at all. True or not, men governed their conduct by the law of honor— that law which commands murder and sanctions adultery, and this too when the sermon on the Mount has been spoken, and the Christian ideal formulated.

So we see that wide as the differences are between the definitions of conscience given by thinkers, its commandments
shown in the actions of men are even more different. Let us now inquire into the nature of this face, on the character which scarcely two moralists can agree, and whose commands vary to the point of contradicting from age to age, and between class and class. I shall take up these conceptions of the nature of conscience, according to the theories, the Utilitarian theory, the Instinctual theory, and the Theory of Reason.

The true men whose works best set forth these theories are Bain, Gaskin, and Whewell, and it is largely from the works of these that I shall draw in dealing with the nature of conscience.

Before discussing separately the differences of these theories it is worth while to notice the main point upon which they all agree, the existence of conscience. No thinker has ever undertaken to deny
that. The voice of conscience has sounded
in the ears of the most obstinate materialist,
and no man who admits the existence of mind,
will presume to deny that of conscience.

Bairn states the nature of
conscience according to the Whitmanites.
He has an distinct advantage at the outset
since he assumes nothing which he is not
prepared to prove and account for. He
merely assumes the existence of conscience,
and as far from using innate ideas
divine guidance, in his demonstration,
distinctly denies both of them. Consci-
science, he says, is trained and moulded
by authority. A baby has no conscience,
but as he grows older and is punished for
what his caretakers regard as misdeeds,
he gradually associates the misdeeds with
the punishments, and hence comes that
the sin for itself. A parallel examin-
He is that if a man, for money, for what it will buy, but in his craving after luxuries he comes to love the means more than the end, and at last derives more enjoyment from a stack of gold pieces than from a well-stocked table.

As the child grows older, affection and respect for the makers of the law add a fear of giving pain to those whom he loves, to his fear of pain for himself, and the conscience grows stronger. In this stage, it is where the boy becomes old enough to see the reason behind the law, and appreciate the utility in obeying it, and this appreciation is the strongest motive of all in the mature conscience.

Bain frankly admits that the great objection to his theory is the existence of the independent conscience — the man who is conscientiously opposed to the laws from which he is absolutely free and which govern his age — and he
Spends some time in dealing with this phase of conscience. This in brief is his argument. As soon as the mind becomes sufficiently developed to think of the reason and necessity of the laws, the motive power of the conscience comes from an entirely different source, and men may, and some times do, depart from the laws instilled into them in childhood. In the largest number of cases, however, the minds either reconcile the contradiction, accept it as it is, and live by the law which they have always been taught.

In support of his theory of a purely external origin of conscience, Bain further says, that if it were an original function of the mind, it could not be so inconsistent in its commands and prohibitions.
Lealderwood devoted a chapter of his Hand-Book of Moral Philosophy to answering this theory. He bases his argument on a quotation from Bain, "There can be no such thing as a standard outriding the judgment of every separate intelligence." Lealderwood points out the inconsistency of this statement with Bain's theory that conscience is formed by the association of crimes with their punishments. Bain says that the independent conscience is possible because individuals see that the existing laws do not lead to the highest utility. "But," says Lealderwood, "your supposition is that all laws are based on utility, and thus how can there be an independent conscience?"

This reputation of Lealderwood while it is logical, is yet too technical.
to be satisfactory, but surely this bloodless
Wilsonian theory needs no refutation.
New theory of formation by punishment is
too foreign to our own intimate knowledge of
the workings of conscience to be regarded
as anything more than a setting forth of
one of its means of education, and while
we must acknowledge utility as one of
the forces which govern our moral choice,
few of us would be willing to admit
that it was the only one.

Caldewood sets forth the
Intuitionistic theory of conscience.
According to him, conscience is that power
of the mind by which moral law is dis-
covered to each individual for the gui-
dance of his conduct, and he proceeds to de-
scribe and explain the nature of conscience in
accordance with this definition. He says
that conscience consists of intuitions which
convey to us the moral law, but it is a little difficult to grasp what he means by intuitions.

It seems to me that intuitive ideas would be the better expression since they do not depend on the least on training, but are as essential to a man as his head. He says, "We must get behind judgments, convictions, and feelings; we must get deeper into our nature and discover a prior and simpler essence. Neither judgments nor convictions can properly be called intuitions. We must find a power fulfilling special functions. It is this power, this function of the brain, which he calls conscience. He makes conscience merely a guide, in contrast to the popular idea which gives it the three functions of guide, judge, and punisher. The main objection to Baderwood's theory lies in the diversity of moral judgments among men. This certainty must be a very grave objection since
The statement that conscience always points out the right is contradicted by the undeniable fact that men conscientiously do actions which are diametrically opposite to one another.

Concerning this diversity, Leidenwood says, that all nations recognize the difference between right and wrong, and that the differences of opinion concern mere that which is wrong than that which is right. Thus he says, men conversant, who do not condemn integrity, they approve advantage taken of another, but they do not condemn honesty; they applaud cruel vengeance, but they still admire benevolence.

We say that men differ, not as to the principles of moral action, but as to the application to particular cases. He then proceeds to give five reasons explaining the diversity, which, in brief, are these: human nature is very weak, and malice
and selfishness influence not only to wrong doing, but also to wrong thinking; nor that is often doubt about deciding what is right and what is wrong; for men are always une welding to believe what they wish; if pre vailing opinion may be wrong and thus exert a bad influence; if moral sentiments cluster as easily about a false sentiment as about a true one.

The weak part of Coleridge's theory lies in his explanation of the diversity of moral judgments. In fact, in dealing with this side of the conscience every writer is forced to be upon the defensive, and while each man uses the weak spot to the utmost in attacking the theory of his opponent, in his own he either slurs it over without mention, or goes into elaborate and useless explanations. Take for example Coleridge's five reasons for diversity in moral judgment.
everyone of them directly or indirectly contradicts his main proposition, "that conscience reveals the moral law." If each man's conscience revealed to him the moral law and he failed to follow it, he would be a criminal against his conscience, despite human nature, doubt, probability or the existing standard of morality.

Whewell sets forth a conception from conscience in which reason plays the most important part. He says, "As the object of the reason is to determine what is true, as the object of the conscience is to determine what is right." It is conscience that is a kind of moral reason. He divides conscience into two parts, synechese - the moral law as known by the individual, and synechese - the reason which applies the moral law. He gives a syllabus to illustrate his views in regard to a conscientious
conviction of sin.

"He who dissuades transgresses the Duty
of Truth." This is the Synecesis.

"I have dissuaded" 

"Therefore I have transgressed the law
of Truth." The latter two are the expressions
of the Synecesis.

The theory of Whewell explains
the diversity of conscientious judgments more
readily than any other theory of the nature
of conscience. He simply says
that, when conscientious convictions
contradict, the moral laws by which
the two individuals govern their lives are,
one or both, in a state of insufficiency
out of which they should be educated.

The weak point of his theory, I think,
lies in his conception of conscience as a
kind of reason. Conscience is not
reason, nor does it use rational methods.
such as plagues, in its workings. When
Judah went to the chief priests and said,
"I have sinned in that I have shed innocent
blood," he did not do so because he had rea-
soned out that he was not right in killing
his kin. He did it because the eye of his
soul was opened and he saw his sin in
all its contemptible meanness.

In my opinion conscience
is a necessary part of each sane human
being, and as such, is susceptible of
being treated in a perfectly rational way.

It is in no sense a function of the reason,
and its workings, I think, are entirely in-
dependent of the reason. They may
be easily seen by the men who have
died for what they thought right, who yet
have not been able to advance a single
dogma in support of it. From personal
experience, I can also say that frequent,
when about to do or say something. I have experienced a restraining force from within, yet as a rule only after reflection, and sometimes not at all, has my reason been able to grasp the cause of this prohibition of conscience. It is no uncommon thing to hear a man say, when considering the rightness of an action, "I don't know, but it does seem quite right."

It is this state of mind which leads me to believe more than anything else that conscience is distinct from reason.

Many maintain that conscience is the direct voice of God. Milton says,

"And I will put within them as a guide

My unpreconceived wisdom if they will hear

Light after light well used they shall attain"
I think, however, that it is incorrect to attribute all the evil actions done for conscience sake to the influence of the Perfect One. No doubt conscience does nearly always express the will of God, and perhaps may be used sometimes as the direct means of communication between the Creator and the created, but any statement of this kind must be entirely beyond certainty and hence outside the sphere of this discussion.

The definition of conscience which best expresses my views is given by Maurice in his book "The Conscience." He says, "Conscience is that within me which says 'I ought or I ought not.' It is the spiritual eye of the soul, and in every respect is analogous to the corporal eye. The complete lack of it in some personalities does not destroy the
companion since many men are born blind.

The men who are unable to appreciate certain forms of crime as such are comparable to the color-blind, and the childish eye which cannot distinguish between the fly on the window-pane and the hawk high in the air, is like the childish conscience which cannot understand the evil of a lie.

The function of punishing, which is often attributed to conscience, I am inclined to think does not belong to it. Thus can be no doubt that men who have committed crimes suffer agonies of remorse, but then we must remember that no one can tell how far fear of punishment, in this world or the next, is responsible for this remorse.

The fact that many men have given themselves up to justice sooner or later...
can best be accounted for by reasons distinct from conscience. Either they wished as far as possible to expiate this crime in this world, or they were so worn and worried by suspense that they desired to end it at any price. At all events we know that the causes I have given, and many others also, such as regret for lost self-respect and fear of yielding to another temptation must operate on the guilty mind, yet whether conscience itself actually punishes or not must forever remain a mystery.

We then see conscience a function of every sane mind, independent of the reason and not necessarily dependent on divine light, not always right and not always decided, but always at work; and while we cannot scientifically determine its nature, we must yet accept it for what it is, the greatest factor in shaping the destinies...
man.

Concerning the authority of conscience little need be said. Every moralist in discussing the conscience has endeavored to deduce its authority from its nature. Barque, quite logically, allows the conscience no authority at all. He attributes the whole authority in moral decisions to utility, and maintains that human reason is adequate to measure the consequences of its choices. Conscience, with him, then is merely a useless phenomenon which is the result of punishment for sin. Leaarden maintains, as a natural consequence of his theory of intentions, that conscience is of supreme authority. He asserts that it is always right, not only right in the individual, but right in the absolute sense, and if we grant his hypothesis that it
is the unchanging and eternal mirror which reflects the moral law, we must conclude his conclusion. He further maintains that conscience can not be educated, and in this he is also logical. He says:

"That conscience intuitively recognizes moral law; that it is supreme in its authority; and that it can not be educated are three propositions which hang on a thread together. Whether we grant then that conscience intuitively recognizes moral law, or not, and if we do not is a matter for argument, but once grant this proposition and the other two inevitably follow.

Whenells conception of the authority of conscience is precisely reversed on the subject exactly. He points out that those who act against their conscience must always be wrong, but he then goes
To say that those who act according to their consciences are not necessarily right, I was much as conscience is the only means which a man has of determining what is right, it is possible that he may be justified in wrong doing if he has acted conscientiously, but if at any time previous he has neglected to secure or instruct his conscience, he is guilty on that account. No doubt the Jews acted conscientiously when they crucified Christ, but they did not properly listen to his words or their conscience would not have commanded them to kill him; and thus they were not justified. No doubt St. Paul thought that stoning Stephen was acceptable to Jehovah, but if he had opened his heart to Stephen's sermon he would not have thought so.
the comparison of conscience to the mortal eye, we may say, that all the sensations conveyed to us by our sense of sight are so mingled and modified by sensations which have gone before, that we do not realize how extremely fallible our vision is.

A shadow of a tree on the turf makes the grass look black, and so an artist paints it, but we, knowing it to be green, think we see it so.

Imagine a man shut up in a dark room until the age of thirty. He would see nothing as we see it. He would not understand perspective and hence would think all distant objects diminutive. It is so with our consciences. Only by constant education and training after moral perfection can we hope to make them infallible guides to right conduct, and since they are the only means we have of seeing the right, any man must be justified for any deed if he has done it conscientiously and can only be blamed for his failure to educate his conscience.

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