

Conscience: Friend Or Enemy?

What is unquestionably one of the most significant factors in our lives, frequently talked about, given as the reason for not doing things, appealed to and depended upon in others, but not very well understood, is conscience. We take it for granted that most people possess a conscience and that it will cause them to do certain things, on the one hand and prevent them doing others on the other hand. Sometimes, of course, we can be too trusting that this is so. Whereas, from conscience, we couldn't do something and wouldn't, others can and will. Our conscience, for example, might well prevent us entering another person's home uninvited; taking something that belongs to another and not returning it; or attending to our own private affairs when we should be working. Others, are able to do these things and are not troubled by their conscience when they do.

Clearly, therefore, conscience operates differently with different people. And the fact that this is so raises questions and causes problems. In fact, there are a great many puzzling things about conscience. It's an altogether elusive thing. As we have just seen, one person will be prevented by conscience from doing something whereas another won't be. At the same time people have suffered and died rather than disobey the dictates of their conscience. And if a person appeals to his or her conscience as preventing them doing something or participating in something we stand back out of respect, if not in awe.

Since it is so little understood, and because of the confusion surrounding it, we would do well at the outset here to look at definitions of conscience. What is it?

The Oxford Dictionary defines it, and I quote, as "a moral sense of right and wrong". But where, we rightly ask, does this come from. This moral sense of right and wrong? Who gives it to us? How is it developed? One of the most widely held impressions we have of conscience is as a voice within, cautioning, counselling, resisting and protesting certain things we have thought or done or are thinking and might do. But whose voice is it? Is it, as is sometimes thought, the voice of God? Infallible, unchangeable, totally sacrosanct, beyond correction or revision? Or what?

Let us be clear about this that conscience is not the voice of God. To the contrary (and I ask you to note carefully the distinction) it is what a person understands and

believes to be the voice of God. The two things are quite different. It is not infallible, and it is not beyond correction and revision. Indeed, since our understanding cannot but carry with it limitations, and is clearly something which grows and develops, so our conscience will have its limitations and, in the same way, be open to growth and development. What a person is able to do at one stage, perhaps as a teenager, because his conscience is unformed on that particular matter, he may well find he is unable, from conscience, to do later on as an adult when his conscience prevents him. In the same way, what a person is unable to do, from conscience, because of misinformation or misunderstanding, he may, well find he is able to do later because he has received instruction and is now enlightened on that point. Just to illustrate this point you might recall the way in which it was so unswervingly insisted upon in times gone past that women always wear a hat to Church. They wouldn't have, in all conscience, done otherwise. But there is far less emphasis on that now. The Church and people have come to see that it is not the most important thing anyway. What, therefore, someone couldn't have done 20 years ago, being against their conscience, they are able from greater understanding and enlightenment to do now.

The very definition of conscience which is before us that it is what a person understands and believes to be the voice of God indicates to us how it is formed and how we come to possess it.

We've already rejected the idea that conscience is infallible. We can rule out also any idea that it is instinctive with us; that in some inexplicable, unaccountable way it just happens to be there.

"Conscience" wrote Swedenborg, "is formed with a man from the particular religion in which he is". (*Heavenly Doctrine* 130).

In other words, whatever a person has learnt or has been taught from religion; whatever concepts of right and wrong, of what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, have been instilled in him and accepted by him as true; these form his conscience. This is why conscience is not a peculiarly Christian thing. It is formed with everyone according to the concepts instilled; however different, from people to people and from religion to religion, those concepts may be.

Conscience formed from what has merely been learnt, however, is one thing. Conscience formed from what a person has himself or herself, as an adult, come to accept and love, is another. And there is a distinction to be noted here. We may, from

memory of teaching received in childhood feel unable or reluctant to do something which appeals to us. Conscience troubles us. And this is one thing. But where, as an adult, we come to accept and love some truth or teaching, that is another. And the conscience formed is of a deeper, much more interior, and far more significant kind. (see *Arcana Caelestia* 6207). And whereas in the one case we may resist the dictates of conscience with what are relatively superficial consequences to ourselves, this is not so in the other. Conscience, we are taught, is twofold. There is the conscience formed from the memory of things taught us while we were young and there is the conscience formed of the truths and teachings we have ourselves come to see and love and believe in.

So much then for the way in which our conscience is formed. Our next question is, How does it function? How is it that 'out of the blue' conscience starts troubling us, as we all know it does do and as we've all experienced from time to time? What is happening? How it is that certain things learnt and, as we thought, apparently forgotten, suddenly start jangling around and troubling us?

The answer is quite unexpected, but so very logical when we stop and think about it.

Isolated from, and independent of any spiritual influences reaching us from the spiritual world, as we seem to be while we live in this world, in fact, and as the Bible in many places touches upon, the situation is very much otherwise. As to our spirit we live in continuous, for all that it is unconscious, association with the spiritual world and with those who are living there. And we could not exist if that association were not there. Every thought, every idea, every impulse that comes to our consciousness, is stimulated by our spiritual associates, whether those associates be basically good or evil, from heaven or from hell. And here is what happens. Our associates who are in evil and from hell stimulate by their presence with us all that is self seeking and self regarding in our natures. They nurture and feed our hurts and our disappointments in others. They encourage our ideas of superiority and revenge. As against this, those associates with us who are good and from heaven are constantly at work trying to counter balance and offset such influences. They remind us, for example, of what Jesus said about forgiveness when we are feeling very unforgiving. They remind us of our dependance on the Lord when we are feeling flushed with some achievement or are enjoying the glow of some gem of wisdom we think we have uttered. This is conscience at work. Indeed, this is how conscience works. It is our associates from

heaven or angels at work on our behalf, applying the brakes, causing us to see both sides of the question before we rush headlong into a course of action we might well later deeply regret and wish had never happened.

Swedenborg wrote of this activity as follows:

"It is the job of angelic associates to inspire charity and faith, and to note carefully in what direction a person's delights turn, and in so far as they can, without interfering with the person's freedom, moderate them and bend them to good. ...When the evil associates pour in evils and falsities, the angels insinuate truths and goods, which, if not received, are nevertheless the means of tempering." (*Arcana Caelestia* 5992).

What is it that is said in the Psalms? "The angel of the Lord encampeth round them that fear him, and delivereth them". (*Psalms* 34, 7). And, as I repeat, it is the activity of the angels with us which we feel most of all when our conscience is pricked or when it troubles us in some way.

Once again, from the Writings of Swedenborg:

"The flowing in of the angels is especially into the conscience of people; there is the plane into which they operate." (*Arcana Caelestia* 6207).

We at times resent our conscience. We try at times to silence it. There are also times when it seems nothing other than an enemy. But that's because it opposes us, holds us back, gets in the way, and prevents us doing, or saying, things we at the time would very much like to do or say. But our conscience is our friend. And if we are troubled by it we should be relieved and thankful. Thankful because an active conscience is a sign of the angels still able to get through to us; still able to work with us. What is ominous is when conscience is silent; when we can do things without care; hurt without shame; say spiteful things and never regret them; do evil and feel no remorse because of it. What we need ever to keep before us is that it is by means of our conscience that the Lord and the angels of heaven are endeavouring with all means available to lead us away from our inclinations to evil, self-gratification and self-aggrandizement to the life of unselfishness which is the life of heaven.

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