

The Moral Person

by Olin Alfred Curtis

The sermon delves into the complexities of conscience and moral obligation, emphasizing the distinction between right and wrong in the life of a moral person.

Scripture: Proverbs 20:27, Romans 2:15, 1 Timothy 1:5, Hebrews 13:18, 1 Peter 3:16

Topics: "Moral Character", "Conscience Formation"

Description

Olin Alfred Curtis delves into the complexities of conscience, exploring how it guides individuals in distinguishing between right and wrong, feeling a sense of personal obligation to do what is right, and experiencing self-blame or moral content based on their actions. He emphasizes the importance of moral distinction, obligation, and settlement in shaping one's moral character and decision-making process, highlighting the inner spiritual tribunal that drives moral distress and self-blame. Curtis also discusses the impact of education on conscience, pointing out how moral judgment is influenced by one's educational environment and the need for a clear understanding of the intuitive notion of right and wrong.

Transcript

On n'empêche pas plus la pensée de revenir à

une idée que la mer de revenir à un rivage.

Pour le matelot, cela s'appelle la marine; pour le coupable,

cela s'appelle le remords. Dieu soulève l'âme comme l'océan.

-- Victor Hugo, Une Tempête sous Un Crane -

Men get embarrassed by the common cases of a misguided conscience; but a compass may be out of order as well as a conscience, and the needle may point due south if you hold a powerful magnet in that direction. Still, the compass, generally speaking, is the true and sure guide, and so is the conscience; and you can trace the deranging influence on the latter quite as surely as on the former.

-- Thomas Arnold, Life and Correspondence, from a letter dated October 21, 1836.

This secret consciousness it is, of variance from the only True, of distance from the only Real, of alienation from the only Holy, which wakes up at the touch of human suffering and fear, and turns them from a bare

quivering of the flesh into a fruitful anguish of the spirit It is by appealing to this that the true prophet breaks the contented sleep of instinct -- rings the alarm in the chambers of the soul -- flings the animal nature convulsed with shame upon the ground, and by a purifying sorrow lifts it up into responsible manhood. In vain would the preacher light his torch from the fires of hell did he address only physical susceptibility and abject consternation; it is the moral history written within, the felt interval between what is and what might have been, which these things passionately express and which make them credible at all.

-- James Martineau, *The Seat of Authority in Religion*, pp. 452, 453.

With regard to nature, it is experience, no doubt, which supplies us with rules, and is the foundation of all truth; with regard to moral laws, on the contrary, experience is, alas! but the source of illusion; and it is altogether reprehensible to derive or to limit the laws of what we ought to do according to our experience of what has been done. -- Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, the MÃ¼ller translation, p. 259.

While fundamentally a man is a person, actually he is more -- he is a moral person. At times he is not only self-conscious, but also conscious of a peculiar background of moral demand. This moral background we call conscience.

In an address, delivered in Tremont Temple, Boston, March 25, 1879, James Freeman Clarke tried to prove that dogs have conscience. In point, he told the audience of a dog that was punished for stealing a piece of meat. A day or two after the punishment the dog stole another piece. Mr. Clarke, unaware of the second theft, came quite suddenly upon the dog and began to pet him; but, strangely enough, he slunk away like a culprit. "This," said Mr. Clarke, "convinced me that the dog was conscience-stricken." But it convinces me of no such thing. It is nothing but an instance of associational fear. The dog punished for taking the meat; and after that experience he associated the taking of meat with the pain of the punishment; and Mr. Clarke's sudden appearance brought to mind the association as fixed; and the fondling was not sufficient to break the fixture. When the dog slunk away he was in no moral distress at all.

To understand the work of conscience it is first of all necessary to see that moral distress never comes from associational mechanism. In moral distress a man is not afraid of any external tribunal. He is afraid of an inner, spiritual tribunal. At times, indeed, a conscience-stricken person seeks, actually seeks, exposure and public castigation in his endeavor to escape the awful forensic condemnation within. Rather would he suffer any possible external penalty than endlessly to endure this mysterious, searching, unpliant presence that says in his soul, "You did wrong!" Moral distress is a feeling of self-blame under the notion of right and wrong.

The Notion of Right and Wrong

The notion of right and wrong is a personal intuition that there is the right and the wrong; that the two are absolutely antagonistic; and that a person ought to do the right. There is, therefore, in the intuition an insistence upon three notes -- existence, antagonism, and obligation. But this insistence upon the existence of right and wrong is entirely empty of concrete indication. Conscience never tells us what is right, or what is wrong. We have simply the unfilled notion that some thing is right and we ought to find it and take sides with it; and then we ourselves fill up that empty moral form and get a concrete moral obligation. This content -- this "what of moral concern -- is naturally a varying thing; sometimes determined by powerful influences belonging to our environment; at other times determined by long, careful personal search and practical tests; and not infrequently determined, as I believe, by desperate, willful dashes at

duty. Once clearly grasp this distinction between the intuitive, unfilled notion of right and wrong and the same notion applied, filled up, rendered concrete, and you can begin, anyway, to appreciate man's pathetic moral history. Men have always agreed that there is a right; but never as to what is right.

Take the case of our civil war. Beneath the political question which had come down to us from the conflict between Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson was the moral question of slavery. But slavery as a positive wrong was not the bottom of the ethical situation. That bottom -- "the unspeakable sorrow of the war" -- lay in the fact that the deadly struggle was between brothers, all believing in the right, and all seeking the right, and yet entirely unable to agree as to what was right. In one of his later books Mr. W. D. Howells has written these words: "In the South there was nothing but a mistaken social ideal, with the moral principles all standing on their heads in defense of slavery." It is as much as twenty-five years too late to write such careless words. They are inadequate and even misleading. We must not for one instant fail to recognize the truth that there was just as much moral purpose in the South as there was in the North. The trouble was not in moral character, but in the moral judgment by which the empty notion of the right gets its concrete application.

The Institution of Taboo

This institution, found in the customs of certain savage tribes, is, I believe, the crudest expression of moral life. A "thing taboo" is considered dangerous, so very dangerous that one must not touch it or even look at it. A corpse, a newborn child, shed blood, a sick person, and hundreds of other things and persons are taboo. Mr. Frazer tells of an Australian who discovered that his wife had been lying on his blanket and "died of terror in a fortnight." In his *Magic and Religion*, Andrew Lang gives a utilitarian explanation of this institution. He says that these taboos were sanctioned by the tribal counselors as the result of experience; not their own, perhaps, but that of the clairvoyants, and other ministers of mystery. "Other taboos, as to women, are imposed for very good reasons, though not for the reasons alleged; and broken taboos are not (in actual ordinary experience) attended by penalties, which, however, suggestion may produce."

Over against this utilitarian explanation, I wish to quote a passage from Principal Jevons's *Introduction to the History of Religion*: "How primitive man settled what things were not to be done there is no evidence to show. We will therefore content ourselves with the fact that as far back as we can see in the history -- rather the prehistory -- of man taboo was never grossly material. It marked the awe of man in the presence of what he conceived -- often mistakenly -- to be the supernatural; and if his dread of contact with blood, babes, and corpses appears at first sight irrational, let us remember that in these, the three classes of objects which are inherently taboo, we have man in relation to the mystery of life and death, and in his affinity to that supernatural power which he conceived to be a spirit like himself. The danger of contact with the objects is 'imaginary,' if you like, but it is spiritual; that is, it is the feeling that experience -- sense-experience -- is not the sole source or final test of truth, and that the things which are seen bring man daily into relation with things unseen. For, once more, the essence of taboo is that it is *Ã priori*, that without consulting experience it pronounces certain things to be dangerous. These things, as a matter of fact, were in a sense not dangerous, and the belief in their danger was irrational, yet had not that belief existed there would be now no morality, and consequently no civilization."

Principal Jevons has, it seems to me, said the profounder thing; but I am not satisfied with either of the two interpretations of taboo. This institution is really a complex thing. Sometimes it is nothing but superstition, and in such cases it is to be explained as any superstition is explained by man's natural fear of anything he deems supernatural. At other times taboo rises into the realm of the spiritual must and must not. And

here, in the upper region of the institution, there are manifested two very different things: 1. On the surface, the taboo item -- the blood, the corpse, the babe; and,

2. The taboo principle, namely, that some things are not to be done because they cannot be done without an inner, spiritual peril. And when I try to analyze this sense of spiritual peril I find not a mere fear of the supernatural as mystery, but a fear of the supernatural as making a masterful demand upon man's life. And such a fear of such a master in spiritual demand is, I am quite sure, the first movement in moral distinction -- "the sunrise of the term Ought." Then, the expression of this taboo principle in the taboo item is determined in all sorts of ways; now, as Mr. Lang says, by the tribal counselors and clairvoyants and ministers of mystery; and now by pure accident worked over in individual imagination. But the reason why there can be any taboo item, the reason why it can be manufactured, the reason why it can be accepted at all, is that the intuitive experience of the savage has already yielded the taboo principle. In other words, I discover in savage life precisely what we find in higher human life, an intuitive, empty moral notion made concrete in manufactured items.

Conscience Analyzed and Related

In conscience proper there are three features only, namely: 1. Moral distinction; 2. Moral obligation; and 3. Moral settlement.

Moral Distinction. As already stated, every man makes an intuitive distinction between the right and the wrong. In doubt he may be, or completely misled, as to what is right or wrong, but ever is he personally sure that something is right and its opposite is wrong. Notice that I say "personally sure," for by this I wish to limit the certainty. This distinction is possible to man not as a conscious individual, but only as a self-conscious person. I claim simply this much, that no man in a normal condition is ever fully self-conscious without feeling moral distinction; that no normal man is ever sure of himself without at the same time being sure that there is a right and a wrong. In another connection the notion of the right will be more profoundly considered; here it must suffice to say that to the ordinary man this notion is an ultimate notion, like the notion of being itself, incapable by him of further analysis and definition. To him the right is right not because it is useful, not because it is beautiful -- the right is right simply because it is right.

Moral Obligation. Nor can a person, in a normal condition, have this intuition of moral distinction and not also have a sense of obligation toward the right. The instant the right says to a man, "I am," it also says, "You ought." When we most searchingly analyze this sense of moral obligation, we find in it three momenta, the obligation of allegiance, the obligation of search, and the obligation of action. In an ample moral life the person feels that it is not enough to join the right when seen; he should search until he finds out what is right, and then express his discovery in the finest moral conduct.

Moral Settlement. After any personal volition under the sense of moral obligation, there is always an inner ictic settlement with the person. If he has willed against his obligation, he has distress of spirit; if he has been true to his obligation, he has a flash of moral content. The transient and partial nature of this settlement needs firm insistence, for no man can come to abiding moral peace by doing one right deed, however heroic that deed may be.

The Coworkers with Conscience. With conscience there are two coworkers, namely: 1. The judgment, by which the man decides whether a given matter is right or wrong; and, 2. The will, by which the man makes a choice among the possible courses of action. In popular speech the judgment is considered a part of conscience; but, strictly speaking, there is no moral quality in the judgment; it is moral only in the loose

sense that it is now dealing with moral matters. A man does not have two faculties of judgment, but merely one faculty performing two kinds of task. To make the judgment an integral feature of conscience is no more reasonable than it would be to regard the will as an integral feature because it makes volition in moral relations.

The actual cowering in a typical situation would be essentially like this: The man would come to his case thinking, "There is a right course here somewhere, and I must find it and take it." Then in search he uses his judgment and sooner or later decides, "That is the right course." The moment he makes this decision he feels an inner moral urgency as definite as this, "You ought to take that course." Then he wills one way or the other, and the ictic settlement follows.

Conscience and Education

The question often comes up, Can conscience itself be improved by education? If by the term education the questioner means mental development, enlargement in knowledge, and the refinement of taste, the answer must be, "Not directly." We do not, simply by intellectual progress, simply by knowing more and more, simply by access of culture, get a clearer moral distinction, a larger sense of moral obligation, and a swifter and sharper moral settlement. Always is it possible, alas to have life filled with schools and libraries and science and invention and art -- yes, and even with philanthropy "touching human suffering with its merciful hand" -- and yet not have much moral concern. Civilization and morality are by no means interchangeable terms.

But conscience is strengthened or weakened under the law of use; and for use there must be motive; and motive is entangled with opinion; and opinion is often most vitally related to the peculiarities of our educational environment. For example, there can hardly be any serious question but that the modern man is losing the most delicate sense of moral obligation; and I am very sure that this loss is closely connected with the fatalistic teaching of our time. Such books as *Der alte und der neue Glaube* and *Die WeltrÃ¶thsel* have been published in popular form and sold by the thousand; our colleges and universities have made attractive those theories in natural science, and those theories in ethics, which do not leave even a clinging-spot for any personal responsibility; and the theologians and preachers have; some of them, added an atmosphere of unethical impotence by their ceaseless doctrinal mitigations. As to that masterly work in superficiality, "the new psychology," it is difficult fairly to estimate the sum total of its influence. There are students who are not harmed by it in the least; there are other students, however, who cannot live so continuously in the physical scene and not lose regard for the spiritual springs of moral life. As one teacher has wittily said: "Many a man feels himself discharged from responsibility once he can describe himself."

But in relation to education, the more important feature is the judgment. So thoroughly is a man's judgment in moral matters a result of the educational influences about him that we could almost say, "Show us fully a man's history and his immediate environment, and we can point out the peculiarities of his moral judgment." We cannot quite say that, for even in moral judgment there is sometimes "a personal equation" of large account.

Now we are ready, I think, to appreciate the full consequence of this analysis by which the moral judgment is separated from the elements of conscience proper. With such a separated judgment, not only does a more precise and fitting psychology become possible, but also we relieve the moral side of man's nature from the charge of being a shifting, worthless indicant, and place the inherent weakness in his mental life

where it belongs.

Definitions of Conscience

Analytical Definition -- Conscience is the entire moral sense of the moral person, consisting of three features, namely:

The power to distinguish between the right and the wrong as two eternally antagonistic principles. This feature is moral distinction.

The power to feel a personal obligation to join the right, to find the right, and to do the right. This feature is moral obligation.

The power to feel self-blame, or moral content, in consequence of personal conduct. This feature is moral settlement.

Concise Definition -- Conscience is the power to feel the right and the wrong, with a sense of personal responsibility, both before and after conduct.

Popular Definition -- Conscience is the moral voice in a man which says, "You ought."

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