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THE LIFE OF DOCTOR JOHN WITHERSPOON.

DOCTOR WITHERSPOON was born at Yester, a few miles from Edinburgh, on the 5th of February, 1722. His ancestry was respectable, he being lineally descended from the Rev. John Knox, "the prime instrument in spreading and establishing the reformed religion in Scotland." His father was minister of the parish of Yester, a man of exemplary piety, and eminent as a critical scholar. The education of the son was such as might be expected under the direction of such a father. He early acquired a fondness for literary pursuits, with a love for accurate investigation, and a noble simplicity, which have since characterised him in the various scenes of his life.

When very young he was sent to the public school at Haddington. Here he was distinguished for assiduity in his studies, and for possessing a quickness of perception, and correctness of judgment.

At the age of fourteen, he was removed to the university of Edinburgh, where he continued till the age of twenty-one. During this time, while attending the different professors with his companions, some of whom have since appeared in the highest stations in the literary world, his talents and judgment were always noticed, and in the Theological-Hall they were much admired. His correct taste for sacred criticism, added to an uncommon quickness and perspicuity in forming

AN ENQUIRY INTO THE NATURE OF CONSCIENCE.

I SHALL offer my thoughts on this important subject, in answer to the following queries : viz.

1. What is conscience ?
2. Does it exist in all men ?
3. What is its use ?
4. What is a defiled conscience ? and,
5. What is a good conscience ?

1, Query : What is Conscience ?—Some have called this principle of our nature, *The Moral Sense* ; Moral, because it has respect to a law ; and Sense, because a sensation or feeling is excited in the mind. It has been distinguished by various names ; but none of them so expressive of its nature, as the term *conscience*, which is in common use. Were I to define conscience, I would say, *It is the mind approving or condemning our intentions or actions, upon its own judgment of them.*

This term, as its derivation shews, signifies a concomitant of knowledge. And this is that knowledge necessary to form the judgment, which precedes conscience. Before the mind can either approve or condemn, it must first form a judgment of the thing approved or condemned. To suppose that the mind approves or condemns, without having previously determined the thing to be right or wrong, is to suppose it acts without a cause or reason. The mind first determines an intention or action to be good or bad, and then feels pleasure or pain, upon the performance, or intended performance of that action. Sometimes the judgment, which precedes conscience, is formed at the time, when first the thought of that particular action arises in the mind. If an heathen accustomed to worship the Sun, should be convinced, that he ought to worship Jesus Christ ; his conscience would immediately approve the latter, and condemn the former. At other times conscience is exercised upon a judgment long ago formed, and the grounds of which may be now forgotten. A man may consider it crimi-

nal to refuse to praise God in a congregation, singing a gospel hymn, and his conscience would condemn him for it; altho' this judgment, approving gospel hymns may have been formed twenty years ago; and the grounds of it now forgotten. So that whether the judgment be recently formed, or be of long standing in the mind, it differs not; for conscience still has a reference to it. And, I am persuaded, that no case can be supposed, where conscience is exercised, which will not be found to include a pre-existing judgment also. However sudden or novel the case may be, the mind quickly forms its judgment, either by comparing it with some rule, or preceding case; and then conscience is exercised.

It may be proper here to enquire, how the judgment, which precedes conscience, is formed. This judgment arises from a comparison of our intentions and actions with some standard of duty. Whatever usage, authority, precedent, or law, we consider as a rule for us; by this we determine our intentions or actions to be right or wrong, accordingly as they agree or disagree with this standard. The will of God, however expressed to us, is the only certain rule of the morality of actions. Those who are blessed with the scriptures, the written revelation of God's will, have an infallible and sufficient rule of judgment. Those who have not the written law, are a law unto themselves. Their judgments of actions are formed by other standards.

When it is said that *conscience is a principle implanted in us by the Deity*, I am at a loss to know what is intended. If the idea be, that God made the mind of man capable of feeling pleasure or pain, according as his actions corresponded with his will or were contrary to it, then it is correct. But if those, who use the phrase, man, that God has given man a principle which approves some of his actions and condemns others, without respect to a judgment formed by some standard; the doctrine is incorrect. For suppose there were in man an immediate, or intuitive knowledge of all the actions of which he is capable; yet still he must exercise a judgment in determining which are the good and which the bad. So that even in

this case conscience would follow judgment. But every one is conscious that he has no such intuitive perception of things; and therefore the supposition is absurd, because it contradicts universal fact. Moreover if by the phrase, under consideration, he meant, that God made this a principle of man's nature at first and preserved it from injury in the fall, that it might now be a faithful monitor and unerring guide to him in duty; the doctrine is erroneous. For if conscience had escaped the injuries of the fall, it would now uniformly approve the same things, and uniformly condemn the same things. But we find it does not: for example—The conscience of a Heathen, accustomed to worship the sun, at stated times, would condemn him if he neglected it; but a Christian's or a Jew's conscience would condemn him for such idolatry. It is therefore both erroneous and dangerous, I think, to say, that this principle is implanted in man by God or that it is God's vicegerent in us. God hath made us capable of feeling pleasure, when we do according to the rules laid down for us; and pain when we act contrary to them. And this is abundantly sufficient to make us answer the end of our creation.

We may, I think, safely conclude, from the preceding observations, that conscience follows judgment; and that the judgment of actions depends upon a knowledge of their standard. This doctrine is supported by the word of God, *If our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart and knoweth all things*, which plainly intimates, that if our hearts condemn us upon our scanty knowledge, God who knoweth all things will have much more reason to condemn us.

2, Query: Does Conscience exist in all men?—I know of no language ancient or modern, which has not a word to express that exercise of the mind, which we term conscience. All nations, so far as I can ascertain, acknowledge themselves possessed of this power of mind. Mankind, in every age, have had ideas of moral good and evil; and have approved what appeared good, and condemned what appeared wrong. I might also appeal to every man, and ask whether he is not conscious, that he does approve certain of his own actions as right

while at the same time, he condemns others as wrong. Every man is formed with a soul capable of the same exercises as another, differing only in degree. Some are conscious of the existence of conscience in them—but if others have not this power, there would be a characteristic difference in the human species; part could approve or condemn their own actions, by a standard of duty, and the other could not. This would constitute such a characteristic difference in the human race, that it would make two species essentially distinct and different, which is contrary to scripture and fact. We therefore conclude that conscience exists in all men; which will appear still more evident in answering,

3, Query: What is the use of conscience?—Conscience is useful to aid us to glorify God, as the highest end of our creation. God hath made all things for his own glory. And as this end of our creation can be effected only by an obedience to the divine will, it is manifest, that whatever prompts us to an observance of his will must aid us in answering this end of our creation. Now it is evident, that feeling an approbation in our own minds, when we obey this will, must stimulate to a constant observance of it.

Conscience is also useful to aid mankind to avoid misery, and secure their own happiness. God hath so constituted man, that, when he acts for the divine glory, his own happiness is the certain consequence. The mind of man is so formed, as to feel pain, when he intends to transgress a known law of God. He has then warning, in himself, of the consequences; which will tend to deter him from the violation. But if he shall have transgressed already, he feels pain and remorse for it, which will have a tendency to produce repentance for the past, and deter from the like violation in future. Were it not for the feeling of pleasure in the mind, upon performing actions according to the will of God, the many exhortations in Scripture, to holy obedience, would be lost upon us. Because if we felt no approbation in our own minds upon the intended performance of holy actions; and no pain upon the intended performance of the contrary, we would hang in dan-

gerous suspense; and then the tempter might much more easily give a preponderance to the wrong. And thus would man's happiness be in danger every moment. But suppose his happiness were secured, and he confirmed against transgression; yet this happiness would be much more incomplete than now; because, without conscience, he could not feel pleasure from his own virtuous actions. Conscience is, therefore useful to aid us to promote God's glory in our lives, to avoid misery, to secure happiness, and to make it more complete.

4. Query: What is a defiled conscience?—The conscience, which does not reprove faithfully for sin, may, with propriety, be denominated *defiled*, let the cause of this unfaithfulness be what it may.

The conscience is defiled, when it follows a judgment formed by an improper standard of duty; when the knowledge of the proper standard was attainable. This being an exercise of the mind consequent upon judgment in order to its acting rightly, reference must be made to the right rule of actions. The will, or law of God, however expressed to us, is our only certain standard. If then any shall neglect this rule; and vainly form to themselves other imaginary standards, contrary to this, their judgment of actions will be erroneous; and conscience, following this judgment, will be wrong.

This is agreeable to the holy Scriptures, which condemn for the want of that information, which might be obtained, *This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light; because their deeds were evil. For every one that doth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reprov'd.* Now therefore if the conscience of any one approve actions contrary to the laws of God, he is guilty, because the judgment was formed without that light which was attainable. And this too, perhaps, thro' fear of discovering that his deeds were wrong, and would be condemned by the law of God and reprov'd by conscience. *They are of those that rebel against the light, they knew not the*

ways thereof, nor abide in the paths thereof. Such, have the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, thro' the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart. Who being past feeling, have given themselves over to lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness, with greediness. Thro' their wilful ignorance and darkness, their consciences do not reprove their evil deeds. Hence we justly conclude, that the conscience is defiled, when it approves things wrong or does not condemn them, acting upon a judgment erroneous, for want of attainable information.

The conscience is also defiled, when it acts upon a judgment unduly biased by self-interest. Mankind are so prone to selfishness, and the heart so deceitful, that we often judge too favorably of our own intentions and actions. And when great interest is added to this strong bias of the heart, it is but too easy to persuade ourselves, that whatever promotes our advancement or interest in the world, must be right. When, therefore, the judgment of an action is formed from a partial view of the case, in our own favor, conscience, acting upon it, will be wrong.

Again conscience is defiled, when it acts upon a judgment formed thro' prejudice. The appetites of the body, and passions of the mind have often undue influence in fixing the judgment. When we are already attached to a particular object, or are averse from it, it is difficult for the mind to form an impartial decision. When under the power of anger, hatred, malice and their opposite passions, the judgment is subject to an undue influence and will often be erroneous. In such case, we are unwilling to seek for proper light, in forming the judgment, lest it should be against our premature decision, which we wish to remain unshaken. Hence conscience approving or condemning according to this judgment will be wrong.

To this part of the subject, belongs the consideration of the awful influence, which unbelief of heart has, in swaying the judgment and conscience. *The carnal mind is enmity against God.* And while this is the state of men, they will not have Jesus of Nazareth to reign over them. Hence they con-

clude, that he is a hard master; commanding when he had no authority, and forbidding when he had no right. They therefore judge it not incumbent on them to obey his commands, or to abstain from what he has forbidden; and their consciences approve their deeds. Their judgment of the nature and obligations of religion, is utterly erroneous; hence conscience in them will be wrong. This is fully the case with some unbelievers, and partially so with all. Such may act under the power of prejudice, and refuse instruction so long, that they may at last be given up to their delusions, by a righteous God. Accordingly we find these alarming passages in the divine word: *Even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient, being filled with all unrighteousness\* &c. Because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved; God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie; that they all might be damned, who believed not the truth; but had pleasure in unrighteousness.* This is the last, and most dangerous stage of the defilement of conscience. This is its state, when in Scripture language, it is said to be *scared with a hot iron*. The humane may be so accustomed to scenes of blood, that they will at length view them with but little emotion. Likewise man may be so habituated to the works of iniquity, as not only to feel no pain of mind upon performing them; but even delight in them, and love those who have pleasure in such works. The conscience of these is diametrically wrong; for by habit, and frequent repetition of iniquities, it has learned to view them, not only without reproof; but with approbation.

5, Query: What is a good conscience?—After what has been said under the last query, little need be added here. If the judicious reader will retrace this ground, and reverse the characteristics of a defiled conscience, he will have an idea of a good conscience. Those, who, in a sincere and honest heart,



have sought for the true rule of moral actions, without prejudice; and without partiality, have formed their judgment accordingly, will have a good conscience. The Scriptures are the only sufficient standard. So far then as we judge of actions by this rule, admitting as right what it enjoins, and acknowledging as wrong what it forbids; the conscience approving the former and condemning the latter, will be good, or right in the sight of God.

Now, should I be asked, is conscience natural or acquired? I answer, conscience is as natural as understanding, judgment, or any other exercise of mind, of which we are capable. For the mind is so constituted by God as to approve or condemn our actions as well as understand, judge, &c.

But this approbation or condemnation depends upon judgment; and that judgment is formed by some standard, and will be correct or incorrect, as that standard is true or false. So that the exercise of conscience will be determined by education. The conscience of a Jew will be very different from the conscience of a Christian.

Man by nature is now incapable of forming a correct standard of morality. If not all the systems formed would have agreed. But they are widely different and contradictory.—What shall we render to God, for that correct and pure standard, his holy word! Pure and holy doctrines; and rejected, *because* pure and holy! O my soul, the wisdom of man is foolishness with God! Draw thy instructions from his word! Judge thy thoughts and acts by this rule! And may conscience always approve and condemn, as God, who knoweth all things, approves and condemns!

A.