

V6 - # 12

# SOUTHERN PRESBYTERIAN REVIEW.

NUMBER IV.

---

APRIL, 1853.

---

## ARTICLE I.

CONSCIENCE—ITS NATURE, OFFICE AND AUTHORITY.

- I. *Moral Science.* By A. ALEXANDER, D. D.
- II. *Dick's Theology.* Lecture LXXVII.
- III. *McCosh on Divine Government.* Book III: Chapters 1 & 2.
- IV. *Paley's Moral Philosophy.*
- V. *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind.* By THOMAS BROWN, M. D. Lectures LXXIII. and LXXXII.

Has man a conscience? This is one of the most important enquiries in mental and moral science. It is not only a question respecting all moral duty, but concerning the nature of man himself. Man possessed of a conscience is certainly a very different being from man considered as destitute of such a faculty. Subtract from human nature the reason, and substitute in its stead mere brute intelligence or instinct, and how completely has man lost his character! So, if the conscience be obliterated from the list of mental faculties, an intellectual and social being may be left, but one utterly incapable of every moral act. This question then, affects the very nature of man, and

affects that nature too, where it rises highest in the scale of being, and by its capacity for virtue approximates nearest to Divinity.

Those who have objected to the existence of such a mental faculty as conscience, have done so on what may be termed subjective and objective grounds. They have considered it difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish the exercises of what is termed conscience, from other mental operations. This objection, however, proceeds upon the supposition that, to exist at all, conscience must have a simple existence,—that is, that it must be one definite mental faculty, exercising one specific office. But this is applying a rule to the conscience which is demanded for no other mental faculty. What we call reason, or the understanding, perceives, compares, judges, generalizes, argues, etc; and yet we designate this faculty, with all its diversified operations, simply as the reason. The same is true of the will, of memory, and of the imagination. The truth is, that if we should ascribe every species of mental operation to some definite faculty, our metaphysical nomenclature would become cumbersome and unwieldy, and the science of mind would be rendered even more unintelligible than it now is.

But it has also been alleged, that the decisions of conscience concerning moral actions have not only been various, but contradictory. Admitting, for the present, the whole force of this objection, still it does by no means prove the non-existence of such a faculty as conscience. The same objection may be raised against the reason, the will, the emotions; and, indeed, against the very appetites and tastes of mankind. All these, in many respects, operate variously in different ages and nations, and among different individuals; yet who, on a ground like this, would divest men of these essential characteristics of their being?

By conscience is meant that faculty or power of the human soul by which it perceives the difference between right and wrong, approving the one and condemning the other. In this definition, two things are to be observed: first, that conscience is a mental power or faculty, the same as the reason, the will, or the memory. Paley speaks of it as an "instinct." Butler calls it "a princi-

ple"—“a law”—“a determinate rule”—“a sentiment of the understanding, and a perception of the heart.”—McCosh designates it as “a law,—a faculty, and a sentiment.” Dr. Brown terms it “the moral principle.” Language of this sort, whatever may be the soundness of an author’s creed, is well calculated to mystify the very existence of conscience, and thus unnecessarily to lead men into error. It must also be observed, that conscience, like the will, is not a simple, but a complex, faculty. The will is the faculty of choice: but in order to its exercise, there must be an antecedent exercise of the reason. The objects from which a choice is to be made must be perceived and compared, before the will can choose. So it is with the conscience. The moral actions concerning which it is to be employed must be first perceived; then compared with the rule of duty; a judgment is next formed concerning them; and the feeling of approbation, or of disapprobation, results last of all. It is true, that this is accomplished by the mind so rapidly as to seem but one act. Such, however, it is not, but a rapid succession of different mental acts. Some philosophers, wishing to indicate what is *peculiar* to the will and the conscience in such exercises, consider simply *preference* or *choice* to be the province of the will, and the exercise of moral approbation or disapprobation as that of the conscience. Dr. Brown maintains this ground strongly as to the conscience; nor does Dr. Alexander differ but little from his opinion. “The moral part of this compound, says the former, is the *emotion*, and the *emotion only*.” “So far,” says the latter, “therefore, as conscience is a judgment respecting any moral subject, so far it is an exercise of the understanding. We have not one faculty by which we discern physical truths, another by which we judge of mathematical theorems, and another for matters of taste; but all these are the one and the same understanding, exercised on different objects.” The truth is, the faculties of the mind, like the colours of the rainbow, may be said to run into each other. For the most part, whenever one acts, there is a concurrence of all; some being more prominent, others more obscure, but all efficient. The duty of the philosopher is simply to designate that *peculiar action* which belongs to any one faculty, and marks its specific character.

That man possesses, a conscience, that is, a mental faculty that judges of right and wrong, approving of the one and condemning the other, may be fully proved from the four following considerations :

1. The existence of moral distinctions, which none can deny, supposes a faculty or power in the mind by which they are perceived and estimated. That there is an adaptation of physical nature to the physical constitution of man, all must admit. Light is suited to the eye, sound to the ear, and the whole arrangement of nature to the laws of the human understanding. Now, whether man were created subservient to the external world, or the latter created in subserviency to man, it matters not; the harmony between them is apparent to all. Whether, then, we argue from external nature to the human constitution, or from the latter to the former, our conclusions are equally legitimate. Now, as there is a harmony between external physical nature and man's physical constitution, so is there a like harmony between God's external moral government and that moral constitution with which he has endowed our species. If, then, the existence of an external moral government be assumed as a fact, the existence of an internal moral capacity to discern and appreciate that government, must follow as a consequence. Those philosophers, therefore, who have denied the existence of conscience, upon the ground that its judgments are irregular, have yet given to us the fullest desirable data to prove its existence, by admitting the reality of moral distinctions. The one truth involves the other, since the only method by which we can perceive and estimate moral distinctions is some power or faculty in the mind to which they make their appeal.

2. Without a conscience or moral faculty, man is utterly unfit to be the subject of a moral government. A moral government is one based upon the distinctions of right and wrong. It supposes certain actions to be wrong, and therefore forbids them; and it supposes others to be right, and therefore enjoins them. To the one class of actions it attaches rewards; to the other punishments. But in all this, it supposes the creatures over whom such government is established, to possess a nature to perceive these facts,

and to appreciate these motives. Now, that part of the human constitution which enables man to appreciate such a government as this, is conscience, or the moral faculty. Even brutes have a species of intelligence; they also possess memory and will. But that which places them below the grade of responsibility is the lack of conscience, or the moral faculty. Nor will it do to say that simple reason would fit man for such a government. Reason is not a moral, but an intellectual faculty. Nor is it certain, that mere reason would employ itself on moral subjects at all, unless man possessed a moral nature or conscience, leading him to the contemplation of such subjects. Men seldom or never employ their understandings about things for which they have no taste or relish. The existence of the moral faculty would seem necessary, therefore, to induce the human reason to employ itself on moral subjects. But suppose the reason, independent of any moral propensity that way, should turn its attention to the objects of morality.—What could it accomplish? Just as much, and no more than it has accomplished in the kingdom of nature: It might originate a system of philosophy—a system of *practical morality*, or *religion*, it could never introduce. Its discoveries would be facts; but facts not at all calculated to move the heart, determine the will, or control the life. For the latter effects, there must be a constitutional *moral basis* in the mind itself, in the absence of which the conclusions of reason would be mere dry and heartless speculations.

But man's unfitness for a moral government in the absence of the moral faculty becomes still more clear, when we consider how completely the sanctions of such a government would be overthrown under these circumstances. The very essence of punishment and reward consists in the operations of a conscience or moral faculty. God has so created us, that when we obey him, there arises up in the mind a delightful sense of peace and joy; and when we disobey him, shame and remorse are the consequences. This is our nature, and it harmonizes exactly with our relations to our Creator. It is by a nature such as this, that we are taught to place our highest happiness in virtue; that is, in obedience to the will of God. Now, if man had no conscience, that is, no moral faculty to perceive

and appreciate the merit or demerit of his actions, it would be impossible for him to exercise self-complacency when dutiful, or self-torture when disobedient. And as these are the primary and the most efficient methods by which souls can be either rewarded or punished, the favor or anger of God would become nugatory did they not exist.

3. Human consciousness, in all ages and countries, has testified to the existence of a moral faculty in man. Certainly, if there be such a power as conscience in the human soul, its operations must be a matter of positive knowledge to the soul itself. A mental power that never acts, or that acts so feebly as to awaken no sense of its exercises, can exist only in name, and deserves, of course, no attention. But we maintain that the human conscience is one of the most active of our mental faculties, and that no other faculty announces its existence and office with even half the force that this does. See the frantic madness of multitudes in the early commission of crime, who even prefer death to life, and are ready to sever every human tie for even the possible re-possession of that peace which they have lost:—yea, who would think annihilation itself a boon, compared with an existence thus tormented by remorse! What other mental faculty can produce such pangs, such despair, such absolute self-negation?

Men have borne this testimony to the existence of conscience, by the universal admission that certain actions, intentionally performed, are right; and others, of an opposite character, are wrong. Among actions of the former class, are the worship of the Deity, reverence for parents, affection towards friends, justice to others, truthfulness, and chastity. These, and other similar virtues, have received the universal esteem of mankind. Evidence of this exists in the following facts: parents have taught them to their children; philosophers and legislators have inculcated them by argument and appeal; laws have been enacted to enforce them; and men have been considered good or bad, honourable or base, as they have, or have not, practised them. Now, if we wish to get at the real opinions of a nation, we must not select individual instances, but consider the institutions, laws and habits of the people, as a whole. And in the application of this principle to all mankind, of whom we have once heard, we hesitate not

to affirm, that their uniform and consistent testimony is, that there is such a thing as moral virtue, and that it is both to be esteemed and practised. Nor is it any objection to this to affirm, that the *same specific acts* have not been universally considered as virtuous, in all ages and countries. The modes of religious worship, the manner in which respect is exhibited to parents, and justice exercised towards others, have been various in different ages and countries. These are matters of usage, of positive statutes, and of circumstances. That in which men have agreed is not in the form or manifestation of a particular virtue; but in the virtue itself. In America, patriotism prompts to the defence and maintenance of republican institutions; in Europe, to the advocacy of monarchy. Under an episcopal form of church government, the people defend bishops; under one more democratic, they maintain the parity of the clergy. In all such cases the patriotic or religious principle is the same; its form or manifestation is different. So the laws of different countries may define murder, or theft, or falsehood, or blasphemy, variously; and yet be all agreed that such crimes should, when ascertained, be punished. Even the Atheism of France, during the Revolution, is no exception to what is here affirmed. This horrible creed was adopted by the bloody leaders of that Revolution as a means to an end. Resolved to overthrow every form of monarchy and aristocracy, the politicians of that country struck a blow at the Catholic Hierarchy and Priesthood, as either being themselves a sort of ecclesiastical royalty, or as interested to sustain the prerogatives of the throne. Along with the priesthood, religion itself became to them a matter of disgust, and they attempted in their madness to abolish it altogether. But this was the conduct of but a political junta in the State, and even they hurried on by a storm of passion which it was impossible to control. But when this unnatural outburst of a nation's fury had subsided, we see that very people returning again to the creed and the practices which they had abolished. Conscience in France was overborne for a time; but it soon recovered its ascendancy and proceeded again to its legitimate work. Thus is it true, that mankind, in every age and nation, have maintained a radical distinction between virtue and vice, religion and irreligion.

4. It is to the faculty of conscience in man, that the Christian doctrine of repentance is chiefly addressed.—That “God now commandeth all men every where to repent,” is the definite statement of the Apostle Paul. But what is repentance? It is a strong and fixed conviction in the mind of past ill doing, and a determination to forsake such evil course from a sense of its inherent demerit. Now all this is the work of conscience. The charge of guilt is pressed home upon the sinner, either by the Word, or the preacher of the Word. To that charge there is a response within—a full consciousness that the state of the heart is as described, and that from it have proceeded innumerable transgressions. These facts arouse the conscience—a sense of guilt is felt—the soul tosses and heaves under its burden, and seeks earnestly for relief. It was in this way that thousands were “cut to the heart” under the preaching of Peter, and that the jailer at Philippi “fell down trembling” with the question on his lips, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” Indeed, without a natural conscience, or faculty of moral judgment, mankind would be as incapable of repentance as the very brutes around them.

It is amazing, in view of the facts stated above, that Dr. Paley, in constructing a system of Moral Philosophy, should have attempted to disprove, at the very outset, the existence of a moral faculty. But this he does, and in the most stoical language possible. “This celebrated question, therefore, becomes in our system a question of pure curiosity, and as such we dismiss it to the determination of those who are more inquisitive than we are concerned to be about the natural history and constitution of the human species.” Had this language fallen from the lips of the infidel Hume, Paley’s illustrious predecessor in utilitarianism, it were consistent enough. But that a Christian moralist and a preacher of the gospel, should thus sarcastically entomb the conscience of mankind, is wonderful indeed. And yet, there is a greater wonder—it is this: that Christian colleges and schools, both in this country and England, should, for so long a time, have continued this Philosophy as a text-book for the young. Nor is it any apology for such conduct, to announce, as most professors and teachers do, that on this point and



that, Dr. Paley is considered unsound. There are, we will admit, many excellent things in Paley, but as a system of morals, his work is rotten from beginning to end. The difference between Paley and Hume consists simply in this, that while the latter places the objects of selfishness in this life, the former transfers them to the life to come. Nor is the criticism of Dr. Brown on the Archdeacon at all too severe:—"This form of the selfish system, which has been embraced by many theological writers of undoubted piety and purity, is, notwithstanding, I cannot but think, as degrading to the human character as any other form of the doctrine of absolute selfishness; or rather, it is in itself *the most degrading of all the forms which the selfish system can assume*; because, while the selfishness it maintains is as absolute and unremitting as if the objects of personal gain were to be found in the wealth or honors or sensual pleasures of the earth; this very selfishness is rendered more offensive by the noble image of the Deity which is continually presented to our mind, and presented in all his benevolence, *not to be loved, but to be courted with a mockery of affection.*"

The chief objection to Paley's system is not that it is utilitarian, but that it is *immoral*. We do not mean by this, that Paley discountenances virtue and inculcates vice: this is what no man may do and have a hearing. But we mean, that he advocates the moral virtues upon the ground of expediency and profit. Virtue and vice, in his system, are as much articles of traffic as cotton and grain in our ordinary markets. The great question for every man to propose to himself when he contemplates a certain course of conduct is, "What shall I gain or lose by it?" Now, we deny positively, that virtue can exist in a mind that makes such a calculation. There is something noble, certainly, in repentance; but if you abstract from that virtue all that is disinterested, and make it simply a *price* for procuring pardon, it becomes at once a base and contemptible feeling.

That Paley's system should be *immoral*, was inevitable from his rejection of the moral faculty. If man have no conscience, he has no power of perceiving the intrinsic excellence of virtue. Right becomes to him, of course, just what Paley has defined it to be, "that which is expedi-

ent." Now, a system of pretended morals, based upon such a view of human nature as this, to have any success at all, must address itself, not to a sense of moral obligation,—not to man's constitutional capacity to appreciate virtue, as virtue,—but wholly to his *interest* in his own welfare. And this is Paley's system. His definition of virtue is, "the doing good to mankind, in obedience to the will of God, and for *the sake of everlasting happiness.*" And, as if this were not plain enough, he announces it distinctly, that "*everlasting happiness is the motive of human virtue.*" A beggar stands at the door of some citizen, and asks a charity. The landlord gives him five dollars, but induced thereto solely upon the consideration that the government is to remunerate him the next day with five hundred! Is such a gift an act of benevolence? Nor does it matter a whit, whether it be a human or divine government, that is to compensate the giver: the principle is the same in both cases; and we deny positively, that there can be any virtue at all, where such a motive predominates. The whole tendency of such a doctrine is, to make hypocrites and deceivers. It was precisely the religion of the Pharisees in the time of Christ, and is now that of multitudes among the ascetics and devotees of the Papacy and Heathenism. Once make virtue or morality a matter of barter, and it ceases to exist. Our own impression distinctly is, that a virtuous mind would do a virtuous act, however greatly it should suffer for the deed. At any rate, such a mind abhors all idea of reward as the chief *motive* to the performance of virtuous actions.

Dr. Paley's system is equally subversive of morality in his views of moral obligation. "Why am I obliged to keep my word?" he asks. The reply is, "Because I am urged to do so by a violent motive resulting from the command of another." The violent motive here alluded to, he defines as "the expectation of being after this life rewarded if I do, or punished for it if I do not." "This solution," he continues, "goes to the bottom of the subject, and no further question can reasonably be asked. Therefore *private happiness* is our motive, and the will of God our rule." Now, all this is legitimate enough, if the Doctor's first principle be admitted, that man has no conscience. Surely, if there be in man no nobler principle

than self-love to control him, this, and this alone, must be addressed. But if man have a moral faculty, the very office of which is to perceive and appreciate the excellence of moral virtue, and to practise it as something attractive in its own nature, then we affirm, that this definition does not "go to the bottom of the subject," but leaves the main question, not only unsolved, but *untouched*. A virtuous man feels bound to keep his word, not through a law of compensation, but through a law of morality. He has no eye whatever to what will be his gain, either in this world or the next, by observing truth. He does so because it is *right*, and he would do so, though he should be persuaded that suffering, and not happiness, would be the result.

But we have another argument against Paley. It is this: that if mere self-love, under the command of God, becomes such an efficient motive to the exercise of obedience, how much stronger must be the motive, when that command is addressed to an *internal* and *constitutional sense of moral obligation*? Notwithstanding the "violent motives" of which this author speaks, we are firmly persuaded that no inducements whatever, as addressed to human selfishness, are strong enough to keep men in a state of obedience, apart from the office and exercises of a sound conscience. Once admit that man has in his *nature* a foundation for morality, and once implant upon that foundation its inflexible principles, and you have a character as stern as adamant in the performance of duty. But send forth the seller of rewards to buy up the allegiance of a revolted race—let him offer considerations of even the highest conceivable value to the multitudes around him,—what will be the results of such a mission? Why, that amid the full flow of present earthly gratification, the sinner will scarcely give the offer a moment's attention; or should he do so, he will approach it with substantially the same feelings that he does a market or a counting-house. But suppose the bargain to be made. What then? Have you secured your man? Not at all. He will sell himself to the next comer who offers what he conceives to be a higher consideration, as cheerfully as he did to you! No; mere selfishness we affirm to be incapable of entertaining a motive strong enough to keep man in the pursuit of virtue. Such a motive must address itself,

not to the diversified interests of the heart, but to the radical and ineffaceable sentiments of an indwelling morality. Then, and only then, can it be strong enough to keep mankind in the paths of virtue and in allegiance to God.

Notwithstanding the length of these remarks, we beg leave to lay before our readers the opinions of one, on the doctrines of Paley, who must ever have weight in this country, on the subjects both of theology and morality. We mean the Rev. Dr. Alexander. In a recent and most admirable work of his, on the science of morals, he expresses himself thus:—"According to this view, unless a man is persuaded that he shall gain something by keeping his word, he is under no obligation to do so. Even if God should clearly make known his will, and lay upon him his command, he is under no obligation to obey, unless certain that he shall receive benefit by so doing. This is indeed to make virtue a mercenary thing, and to reduce all motives to a level. And as self-love, or the desire of happiness, is the only rational motive, the only conceivable difference between the good and the bad consists in the superior sagacity which the one has above the other to discern what will most contribute to happiness." It is evident that this system, in its practical operation, must ever contravene that system, both of morality and religion, taught in the Holy Scriptures. The great object of that Book is to bring men off from the basis of selfishness, and to place them upon a basis of virtue. Its great command is, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and all thy soul, and all thy mind, and all thy strength." Now, is it possible for a creature, who possesses such an affection to the Deity as this, to serve him from the hope of reward? What need of such an expectation? How abhorrent the very idea of reward to a bosom filled with such love! This affection itself—(and it is the very soul of all true morality and religion,)—prompts to obedience; it is the only principle that can prompt to obedience. Now, to supplant this principle, as also that of love to man,—to supplant these, and substitute in their stead *supreme self-love*, is to overthrow both the teachings of Christ and the principles of sound morality. And we venture, moreover, to say, that the greatest conflict of the pious, and of all generous minds in this life, is to separate

from the true motive of morality and religion this very element of self-regard. The feelings of self-esteem and self interest are so strong in us all, that it requires great effort and *great grace* to suppress their intrusions upon even our best actions. They spring up unbidden, and often poison with their moral malaria even the good deeds we are attempting to perform. But according to Paley, we should contend just the other way. We should not strive to repel these intruders, but welcome them as guests, since their presence and operation are *essential* to the virtue of an action !

We come now to what we consider the most difficult part of this discussion ; and the more so, because we are compelled to differ from some of those excellent Divines with whom we have heretofore so heartily agreed. When we speak of the authority of conscience, we are apt to be misled by the language. Authority is exercised by kings, magistrates, officers and parents. It supposes an intelligent ruler, a system of laws, and rational subjects. But when we apply this term to a *mental faculty*, we must certainly exclude from it all these accessory ideas of regular human administration. And yet, even metaphysicians, when discoursing upon the mere *powers* or *capacities* of the human mind, employ a sort of court-language, as if they were describing the administration of some great monarch. This is a great fault, especially with Mr. McCosh, whose vivid imagination seems always ready to give a scenic representation to mental processes.

That the different mental faculties have distinct offices, and that each one either does or ought to predominate in its specific sphere, will be readily admitted. Reason is supreme in all abstract truth ; the will on all matters of choice ; the emotions in all objects of affection ; the imagination in the province of fancy ; and the conscience in the domain of morals. Now, each of these mental faculties does and must take the lead in its particular field of operation. Yet, as our consciousness will testify, most of our actions are the results of not one only, but of several of these mental powers. Indeed, the relation between these mental faculties is so intimate, that in most cases the action of the one must take place before the action of another can exist. All then, that we can mean by the authority

of a mental power, is simply its precedence over the rest in any one action. And all that we can mean by the obedience, or subjection of one mental faculty to another, is simply the posteriority of its operation. Reason asserts that a certain abstract proposition is true; at once the will and the heart concur in the conclusion. The proposition was addressed to the reason, and *its* decision must be, of course, that of the entire mind or soul. At another time, an object may be presented to the emotion of love. The point now to be decided is, shall such an object or person be loved? If the case be a doubtful one, the reason may again be called upon to do its office: that is, to compare, judge, decide, etc. In other cases, however, the heart overleaps the tardy work of reason, and responds at once to the object, as soon as presented. Shall a mother love her babe? It is not her intellect, but her heart that solves that question. The same is true of the conscience.—Where a question of morality admits of doubt, the reason may be called in, and may be long employed in its investigations before the conscience is prepared to act. But in all obvious cases, this faculty acts *instantly*, and approves or disapproves of a certain act as soon as perceived. There are obviously then a precedence and a sequence in mental operations. But when we transcend this beautiful order in which the mental faculties operate, and establish within the soul a sort of spiritual administration, with all the paraphernalia of courts and palaces, we evidently use language very loosely, and are in danger of being misled altogether in reference to the mind and its powers.

With these explanations, we proceed to consider the question at issue: *Is a man bound to follow his conscience when its judgments are erroneous?* That the real point of debate may be understood, we give the following quotations from Drs. Dick and Alexander:—"An appeal" says the former, "may always be made from its (conscience's) decisions to the word of God, and as soon as a difference is discovered between its dictates and those of Scripture, the sentence which it has pronounced is void. Hence it is plain, that the plea of conscience will not be admitted to exempt us from guilt and punishment. And this, we may observe, is the unhappy situation of those whose consciences are not sufficiently enlightened; that

they sin, whatever they do ; in disregarding the voice of conscience, and in obeying it." Dr. Alexander maintains the same position :—"It is true, if a man's conscience dictates a certain action, he is morally bound to obey ; but if that action be wrong, he commits sin in performing it nevertheless. He who is under fundamental error, is in a sad dilemma. Do what he will, he sins. If he disobey conscience, he knowingly sins ; doing what he believes to be wrong ; and if he obey conscience, performing an act which is in itself wrong, he sins ; because he complies not with the law under which he is placed." Now, as much as we esteem the sentiments of the authors above quoted, we must think they have both fallen into error on this subject. This will appear from the fact, that they have here introduced two *opposite* rules of conduct, each of which the subject is bound at the same time to obey. The law of God dictates one course ; and the law of conscience another, directly opposite. To each of these laws a man is morally bound to submit. Now, it is evident, that a man can no more obey two such opposite rules at the same time, than that he can occupy two places at the same time, or than he can both love and hate the same object at the same time. The thing is *impossible*, and therefore cannot be a matter of moral obligation. The same difficulty is also seen when we consider the moral qualities of the action : it is both right and wrong—worthy of reward and also worthy of punishment ! Now, a human action *cannot* possess two qualities so diametrically opposite. As the same object cannot be white and black at the same time, so the same moral act cannot be both virtuous and vicious.

The errors in these statements, as we conceive, are twofold. The one consists in giving conscience a supremacy which does not belong to it ; the other in blending two distinct moral acts, and ascribing a common moral character to them, as if they were one. Conscience is neither a moral governor, nor a moral law. It is a faculty of the soul, fitting man for a moral government existing, not within, but without him. God is our only true moral governor, and his will is our only supreme moral law. Our subjection then, is not to be a subjection to conscience, (which, being a part of ourselves, would imply subjection

to ourselves,) but a subjection to God, as our moral governor. The very moment we set up conscience as a sort of rival to Jehovah, that moment we become idolaters, and sacrifice our real liberty. The care is very much that of the Papist, who is perfectly satisfied that when he has heard his priest he has heard his God; and that when he stands well with his priest, he also stands well in the court of Heaven. Now, to exalt the conscience into any such high position, and to obey its dictates with the full assurance that they must be right, is but to deify a faculty of the human soul, and to fall down in worship to ourselves. Man is a moral agent, possessed of certain mental faculties, all of which are designed to aid him in the prosecution of a virtuous course of conduct. But he is depraved; and there is not a mental faculty that is not erroneous in its operations. The reason is more or less blind, the will is perverse, the passions are deranged, and the conscience is dull, inefficient and easily perverted. This condition of the human soul is taught us by experience, observation and scripture. For a man, then, to trust himself to the dictates of any one of his faculties, or of all of them combined, is necessarily to hazard the peace and well-being of his soul. The decisions of conscience in many cases are just as much to be held in doubt, as those of the reason. And in attempting to ascertain our duty in such cases, we are not to consult, but to *instruct* our consciences. We must take the conscience itself to the revealed will of God, and there, and there *only*, obtain that light which is to guide us in the path of duty. Now, when this course is honestly and faithfully pursued, it is next to impossible that the conscience should be in "fundamental error." To suppose so, is to suppose either that the Bible does not adequately reveal the will of God, or that man is incapable of understanding that will when so revealed.

But our theologians will tell us, that the case supposed is that of one who has done all this, and is still in error. He has examined the Scriptures prayerfully and honestly, and has conscientiously come to certain conclusions, both as to its doctrines and precepts. Still those conclusions are erroneous. Now, in such a case, we say without hesitation, that such a man is bound to receive, as God's revealed truth, that which, after such examination, he



conceives to be such. But this is not subjection to conscience, but to God. Faith is here placed, not in the decisions merely of a mental faculty, but in the infallible teachings of the Holy Ghost. That such a man should err as to the *essentials* of the Gospel, is improbable in the last degree; that he should mistake on some of its minor points, is very likely. We cannot conceive, however, that such mistakes should vitiate his obedience. Errors in religion, when they arise from carelessness, prejudice, pride of intellect, or any other like cause, are certainly criminal. But those errors, which even the best men are liable to make on this subject, and which arise from causes beyond their control, can certainly never inculcate them in the sight of God.

Another mistake, as we conceive, in these statements is, that actions are blended that are entirely distinct. We will illustrate our meaning by the following supposition: A man is on trial for his life. He is really an innocent man, but is accused of murder. Evidence is adduced on both sides; but the jury incline to that which condemns him. They bring in a verdict of "guilty." Now, if these men are entirely honest and conscientious in such a sentence, they certainly cannot be blamed for it, though it consigns an innocent man to the gallows. Where then, is the error? It consists in their not giving sufficient weight to the exculpatory evidence. This is the error; and it becomes a crime, or not, just as it originated in good or bad motives. If the jury were prejudiced against the accused, or if they were bribed to bring in such a verdict, we consider them as guilty in the highest degree. But if the error arose from incapacity, misrepresentation, or any like cause, it was certainly not criminal. How would it sound in this case to say, that if the jury should bring in a verdict of "guilty," they are criminal, because the man is innocent; or, if they should pronounce him "not guilty," they are equally criminal, because they have violated their consciences! Here are certainly two distinct acts—the one which considers and examines the testimony; and the other which pronounces the sentence. The verdict is evidently erroneous; but it is *criminal* only as it has been arrived at by honest or dishonest means. In the days of Calvin, it was believed

to be right to punish heretics with death. Such punishments are now considered by most Christians, as altogether improper and wicked. Now, if the Reformers were entirely honest and sincere in their belief and practice, we may consider them as in error, very great error; but certainly not as criminal. That which inculcates a very large portion of mankind in obeying, as they allege, the dictates of conscience, is not that they yield to honest convictions, honestly formed, but that "loving darkness rather than light," they give themselves up to their evil prejudices and practices, without the use of those means of information that might easily rectify their conduct. It is in this way that the great body of papists and of heathen idolaters continue in sin. The one class refuse to employ the light of nature for the correction of idolatry; and the other class, with equal pertinacity, reject the Scriptures, in order to preserve their traditions. Such persons are guilty, not only for their corrupt practices; but for their perverted consciences. What, then, is their duty? To obey a misguiding conscience, and continue in idolatry? Evidently not. Their first and chief obligation is to come to the light, and to test their creed by whatever means God, in his providence, may have afforded them. But such persons, it is alleged, believe that they are already, in the light, and that all others are in darkness. We admit this; but deny still that they are morally bound by either their faith or consciences. In *their own view*, they are so bound; but such a view is erroneous, and might easily be corrected were they disposed to use the proper and obvious means for such correction. Their indisposition to do this is their chief crime, and any creed they may form, and any judgments of conscience they may make, in this state of voluntary ignorance, is a nullity; yea, an impiety: and they are in truth bound by them in no sense whatever. All acts of worship, too, rendered to God under these circumstances, so far from being acceptable, can only meet with his abhorrence.

We will close these remarks by a brief consideration of the case of the Apostle Paul. Saul of Tarsus having been educated "after the most strictest sect" of the Jewish religion, and at "the feet of Gamaliel," was of course a bigoted Pharisee. So far then, as education and position are

concerned, he was ill-situated to appreciate the facts and evidences of Christianity. Still, the moral phenomena that had taken place in Jerusalem for several years previously were very remarkable, and such as should have called forth from him a candid examination. Instead, however, of giving to the subject such attention, he became exceedingly indignant, and continually "breathed out slaughter and threatening" against the church. The remarkable testimony and triumphant death of Stephen, which he witnessed, made no impression on him whatever. In fact, it seems to have quickened his false zeal, and to have made him but the more active "in binding and delivering into prison both men and women." Now, upon this conduct of his, the Apostle afterwards both pronounces a reprobation and enters an apology. He declares that "he is less than the least of all saints, and not worthy to be called an Apostle, because he persecuted the church of God." In another place, he designates himself, on the same ground, as "the chief of sinners, a blasphemer, a persecutor and injurious." Now, it is evident that Paul's conversion had no effect whatever in changing the moral character of the persecutions that took place before that event. It changed his *views* of those persecutions, taking them from a false, and placing them in a true light. But the moral character of those acts were the same, both before and after the Apostle's conversion. His conduct, then, as a persecutor, was in truth criminal, in a very high degree. Was he, then, *bound* to pursue such a course? What bound him? Not truth and righteousness, for these were on the other side of the question. Not the Scriptures, for these predicted the coming of the Messiah. Not any command from God, for he was persecuting and destroying his church. What bound him? Hear his own testimony—"For I verily thought with myself that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth." It is here stated, that his erroneous convictions led him to persecute the church. This is the *best* certainly that can be said of the case; for it is certain from the narrative, that along with such false views of duty there existed great violence of passion and prejudice. The amount of this explanation is, that the Apostle, at the time, *believed* that he ought to persecute the church; *therefore*,

it was his duty to do. But this conclusion requires another condition to make the justification complete. His belief must have resulted from a careful and candid investigation of the whole subject. But he never instituted such an investigation. He arrived at his conclusions from ideas already existing in his mind, and took no pains to inform himself on the subject of Christianity. Hence his ignorance was criminal, and could be no justification of his conduct. Still, however, as such ignorance did exist as to fact, and his persecutions were not in the highest sense *wilful*, he mentions it, not as an apology for his crimes, but as somewhat mitigating their heinousness:—"But I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief." Here it is intimated, that had the Apostle acted as he did, with a full knowledge of the facts, his sin would have been strictly *unpardonable*. But his actual, though criminal ignorance, somewhat abated the malignity of his crimes, and "he obtained mercy." Will any one say then, with these facts before him, that Saul of Tarsus was morally *bound* to persecute the church? That he believed himself bound, he asserts. But was it so? Were not his views entirely erroneous? And can *error* bind? We believe firmly, that man has a conscience, and that there are innumerable cases in which he is morally bound to obey that conscience; but we cannot persuade ourselves that the same obligation exists where the conscience prompts to acts of immorality and sin. An enlightened and sound conscience never does this; and it is only to *such a conscience* that we consider a man morally bound to submit. When a man is perfectly sure—and this is not always easy to be ascertained,—but when a man is perfectly sure, that he has used all possible methods with absolute candor, to ascertain his duty, then his convictions are legitimate, and although his intellect may be in error, his conscience is sound, and its promptings are to be regarded. But there is an infinite difference between this case, and that of one who suffers his conscience to be perverted through inattention, false education, prejudice or passion.

But we must close; yet cannot do so, without recommending most cordially to the public, and particularly to the teachers of youth, the work of Dr. Alexander on Moral

Science. If this little volume have defects, they are chiefly these two, excessive brevity on the subjects treated of, and the omission of many topics that might be introduced. It is its *practical character* that gives such weight to the work of Paley. Nor is it likely that his book will be supplanted, until another, with sound principles, shall develop somewhat as he has done, the details of a moral system. Yet it is better to inculcate sound principles apart from the practical, than to enforce the latter upon a false basis. Truth is as necessary to sound morality as to pure religion; and if the practice of morality be enforced upon false principles, the fruit must be like the tree, beautiful without, but rotten within.

NOTE.—Since penning the article above, the writer has read in the Westminster Review, quite an able defence of the utilitarian doctrine, as held by Jeremy Bentham. The views of Bentham differ from those of Paley in this respect, that while utility is applied by the latter chiefly to the interests of the agent himself, the former gives it a broader signification, by making it refer to others also. The reviewer distinguishes between these two systems, designating the one "The Happiness Theory of Morals," and the other, "The Theory of Motives, or the Selfish System." "He (Bentham,) never dreamed of defining morality to be the self-interest of the agent. His greatest happiness, principle, was the greatest happiness of mankind, and of all sensitive beings." This theory is certainly far less objectionable than that of Paley; and did it but extend itself beyond the limits of humanity and of all "sensitive beings" on our earth, and refer also to God and all his intelligent creatures, it would approach very nearly to that of Edwards, in his treatise on "God's last end in the creation." We subjoin, upon this theory, the two following observations. It errs, first, as we conceive, in a mistaken view of the relation between utility and right. There can be no doubt but that whatever is right is useful, or that whatever is truly useful is right. Rectitude and utility are inseparably connected; and the only question is, which has *precedence* of the other—which are we to consider as *causal*, and which as *consequential*. The The defenders of independent morality, place rectitude or

right in the foreground; the utilitarians place it in the back-ground. The subject, it appears to us, is of easy explanation. Right, or rectitude, is the agreement of an accountable agent's conduct with some moral rule previously existing. Both parties make this to be right; or rather right to mean this. The only difference here is, that the one class deduce the moral rule or law directly from existing relations; the other from such a law from experience, upon the principle of deduction. When a certain relation is perceived to exist, the absolute morality men either infer the rule of duty from it, or admit the justice of a rule already enacted. The utilitarian deduces his rule from a great number of the general consequences of an act, all tending the same way, viz: to the happiness of mankind. Each, however, establishes his rule or law, agreement with which is what is meant by the term *right*. Take, for instance, the crime of murder. Both parties have admitted it, as a rule, or principle, that murder is wrong. But how have they reached this rule, or principle? The advocate of absolute morality, by considering the *relation* of man to man, and of all men to society and to God. The utilitarian, by casting up the evil *consequences* of permitted murder. Yet, with each murder is a crime; and agreement with the rule or law prohibiting it, is a virtue.

Agreeing thus in the establishment of rules, and in the nature of right, and also, for the most part, in external morality, wherein do these men differ? As already stated, in the *relative position* of right and utility. The one class consider utility the cause, and right the effect; the other maintain that right is the cause, and utility the effect. With the latter it is that we agree. The subject may be illustrated thus: In the family there exists a law requiring children to obey their parents. Now, what is the basis of this law? Is it that obedience to parents is useful in its general consequences? or, is it the relation existing between parent and child? Certainly it is the latter, and not the former. Utility follows as a consequence; but it is not the "foundation" of this filial morality. So in the State; there exists a rule that the subject shall obey the sovereign. But what is the basis of this rule? The relation between sovereign and subject, or the general good

consequences of obedience? The former, unquestionably, and not the latter. The peace and order which spring from obedience to constitutional authority are the *fruits* of such obedience—the virtue of the act consisting essentially in the obedience itself. The same result is attained, if we proceed a step higher, and apply the principle to the Divine government. The creature should honour, worship and obey the Creator. But why? Is it because the general consequences of such reverence and obedience are beneficial, or on account of the relationship between the parties? Certainly it is the latter, and not the former. Still we maintain that right and utility are inseparable. Considering the relations between parent and child, sovereign and subject, Creator and creature, as so many fixed conditions of things, it is impossible but that a law, harmonizing with these relations, should be right; or that conduct, agreeing with such law, should be anything else than useful. Right, however, both in every act of legislation, and also of obedience, has unquestionably a higher place than utility, and should always claim from men superior regard.

Our second remark is, that the same objection may be raised against the utilitarian scheme, as to its *fickleness*, that has been advanced against the doctrine of absolute morality. Both Bentham and Paley treat the subject of conscience, as applied to morality, with ridicule. "One man," the former says, "has a thing made on purpose to tell him what is right and what is wrong, and that it is called a moral sense; and then he goes on to work at his ease, and says, such a thing is right, and such a thing is wrong. Why? Because my *moral sense* tells me it is!" It ought to be remarked here, that this objection lies not against the legitimate exercise of conscience in matters of truth and duty, but against its *perverted* exercise. We must think that many absolute morality writers carry the doctrine of conscience too far. As, however, we have already discussed this subject, we need not allude to it here. But are not the same objections available against the advocates of utility? Utility is by no means a matter so palpable that all are agreed concerning it. Indeed, there are quite as many debates and controversies on this point as on that of right. And here too, every man has

his *notion*, or *opinion*, or *conviction*, as in the other case. Indeed, it could not be otherwise. How is utility perceived? By the understanding. And how are moral relations and laws perceived? By the understanding. How is it, then, that the understanding can be infallible in one of these cases, and altogether erroneous in the other? Are we told that the general consequences of actions are more obvious than the relations that mankind sustain to each other? This we deny. Are not the relations of parent and child, sovereign and subject, as palpable to the understanding, as are the consequences that flow from obedience or disobedience, oppression or protection? Indeed, we consider the *relations* as decidedly more clear than the *utilities* arising from them. And if this be so, then is there likely to be far more difference of opinion among men, as to the utility of laws and actions, than there can be as to their essential morality. We do not then, consider the doctrine of utility as answering its purpose, either in furnishing a more obvious "external object" as the basis of morality, or in harmonizing the diversified opinions of men. It fails in both particulars; relations being fully as palpable to the mind as general consequences, and right creating not more controversy certainly, than utility.

---

## ARTICLE II.

### UNIQUENESS AND SUPERIORITY OF OUR LORD'S TEACHING.

The only panacea for our sin-disordered world is faith in God through our Lord Jesus Christ. If religion is worth anything, it is worth everything. So it has been regarded by the wisest and greatest, best and happiest men that have ever lived. The salvation of the soul is, therefore, the highest personal concern of every man. It is the great necessity of his nature. Even the trials and sorrows of the world teach us that we need higher consolation than this earth affords. The Gospel reveals to us this higher consolation. It leads us to a Rock that is