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Self-knowledge.

BY THE REV. WALTER R. WHATELY, M.A.

THERE are few things in the life of man more tragic, and perhaps none more strange, than his ignorance of his own heart. The heart of man, no doubt, is full of mystery. It is like some half-discovered country, of which part lies open to the sun, and part is wrapped in mist and covered by dark forests, whose innermost recesses few have ever explored. We need not wonder, though we must lament, that this darker region, this dim mysterious *hinterland* of the soul, lies so largely outside the normal range of man's self-knowledge. More strange, and far more perilous, are the errors that he makes in the open country. There many a false oasis, green and fertile, spreads itself before his eyes, where in reality is nothing but desert sand. It is here that the tragedy principally lies. Mere ignorance is less dangerous than delusion, especially when that delusion lies on the side of self-satisfaction. The worst peril is not the darkness, but the mirage.

The importance of attaining to a true knowledge of self is admitted, I suppose, by all serious-minded people. But there are probably multitudes who fail to realize that such knowledge is very difficult of attainment, and who neglect the subject, not because they underestimate its importance, but because they fancy that they already know themselves sufficiently well for all practical purposes.

Yet one might suppose that the experience of life would teach even a superficial observer that real self-knowledge is a comparatively rare possession, and therefore presumably one that is not very easy to acquire. How often and how completely do men deceive themselves in this matter, not only on points of detail, but with reference to their whole moral and spiritual status! It would seem as if that awful vision of self which followed hard upon the first transgression had grown dimmer as the centuries rolled by, and man had lost by degrees the

consciousness of his unfitness for the presence of God. Not that there is any matter for surprise in this. It was the inevitable result of a growing alienation from God. The one true guardian of the moral sense is the consciousness of God, and it was because men refused to retain God in their knowledge that they lost the true conception of sin, and with that truth the power to read their own hearts aright. It is, therefore, where religious ideas are most debased that self-deception appears in its most striking forms. The self-righteousness of the animistic heathen is almost past belief. Warneck tells us that the pure morality of the Gospel makes little impression at first upon the degraded Battaks of Sumatra, not because they do not recognize its goodness, but because they cannot be made to realize that they fall short of it.

In Christian lands the light of the Gospel has, of course, done much to dispel the mists of self-deception from the mind. Yet, even among Christians, how widespread and sometimes how deep the darkness is! It was to a Christian Church that the solemn words were spoken: "Thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked." And here, also, let us note, the error had its root in loss of touch with God. It is a strange and solemn picture. Within the house all is wealth and comfort and complacency, while He Who is Lord and Master of all, Whose household the Church is, stands in the street outside, and knocks unheeded at the door!

There are, of course, intermediate moral causes of self-deception. Some of these are too obvious to require comment. The pride that resents criticism, though conscience itself be the critic, the moral indolence which neglects even to raise the question whether all is well, the habits of sin which blunt the finer perceptions of the soul, the cowardice which shrinks from peering into the dark corners, and tries to forget the spectres by which it knows, or fears, that they are haunted—all these are familiar to us.

But there are other causes, distinct from these, though often blended with them, causes which are not in themselves directly ethical, not sins, in fact, but temptations, and, perhaps, for that very reason, more apt to escape our notice. I propose to glance at three of these—temperament, circumstances, and religion—considering under each head one or two specific examples.

1. Let us take first the imaginative temperament. The chief danger, I think, which besets the imaginative man as such, is the habit of living mentally in a world of his own making, a world more congenial to his feelings, especially to his self-esteem, than the real world around him. This construction of an ideal world leads almost inevitably to the construction of an ideal self within it, an imaginary actor upon an imaginary stage. The man becomes "the hero of his own epic"; a halo of romance is round his head; he goes from strength to strength, and from victory to victory. And all the while, it may be, upon the real battle-ground of life, the tide of victory is running the other way, and he is all unconscious of the disaster. "Strangers have devoured his strength, and he knoweth it not."

We need not wholly condemn such day-dreams. They may have, in some respects, a salutary influence upon the mind. But they do tend, I think, to obscure a man's vision of the real world, and of his conduct in that world. And the false estimate thus formed is formed all the more easily because it is not wholly false. The thought of heroism, however egotistic its form, implies a love of heroism. The error is, that the man has isolated one element in his character, and mistaken it for the whole.

Similar in its working, however different in its nature, is the sanguine temperament, the spirit which, in all departments of life, persistently assumes that all is going well, and which, more from optimism than from egotism, revolts from the very conception of failure. It was this spirit, I think, more than pride (though that, no doubt, was present also) that prompted the Apostle Peter to say, "I am ready to go with Thee to prison and to death." The same optimism which at one time forbade

him to believe that his Master was really going to be put to death, at another time forbade him to believe that he himself might fail in the hour of trial.

Here, again, we have the half-truth which is usually the most dangerous of lies. The courage with which Peter credited himself was a real element in his character. Probably he was ready then—he certainly was on a later occasion—to face imprisonment and death in his Master's cause. We think often enough of the thrice-repeated denial in the High Priest's house, but we forget the garden of Gethsemane, and the brave disciple who drew his sword single-handed in the face of an armed mob to protect the Master whom he loved. His confident declaration was no mere idle boast, but it revealed a very imperfect knowledge of his own heart. He made the same error that the man of imaginative temperament makes : he mistook one element in his character for the whole, the fitful impulse of his nobler moments for the fixed and dominant habit of his life.

2. The second cause of self-deception is the meretricious glory shed upon our good deeds by an improvement in our outward circumstances. The point will be familiar to readers of Mozley's "University Sermons." A man of small means gives, let us say, a tenth of his income to the poor. His affairs prosper ; from comparative poverty he rises to abundant wealth. He still gives away a tenth of his income, but that tenth, which was formerly £15 or £20, is now £500. In the world of religion and philanthropy he makes a larger figure than before. Is it not likely that, partly because of the applause which he now receives, he will make a larger figure in his own eyes also? Yet what is this but self-deception? His generosity has not really increased ; it has only been set in a more conspicuous light. Nay, it has actually decreased ; for while the proportion of his giving remains the same, the self-sacrifice involved is less than before. He has forgotten our Lord's comparison of the rich men's gifts with the poor widow's farthing contribution. He has mistaken a gift for a grace, and thinks that he is going forward in the path of virtue, when he is really going back.

And this is an error against which we all need to guard ourselves. It is not peculiar to rich men, or confined to the sphere of charitable giving. There is a chronic tendency in our nature to tamper with the ledgers of the soul. We debit our environment, all too readily, with a large portion of our sin, but we seldom give it a corresponding measure of credit for our supposed virtues.

3. The third cause is what I have somewhat vaguely called *religion*. I mean by this a religious profession, more or less earnest, but not necessarily rising to the level of vital Christianity.

The danger here involved is that of enlisting our faults in the service of our religion, and thinking that by so doing we have transformed them into virtues. This tendency is especially rampant in religious controversy. How prone we are to think that where the defence of the truth is concerned, the wrath of man does work the righteousness of God! How much there is that passes current as pure and holy zeal for truth, which is really alloyed, and that in no small measure, with bad temper, narrow-mindedness, and lack of charity! It is not surprising, perhaps, that we should be deceived in this way. Human nature is extraordinarily susceptible to the influence of names. In every department of life—political, social, religious, or other—men allow themselves to be taken in by specious designations, behind which the real facts are hidden. We can hardly expect that the sphere of character should be immune from this tendency. Just as the old rebel society is reconstituted under a new title, and the old heathen idol is baptized with the name of a Christian saint, so it is with the denizens of the human heart. Within the walls of Mansoul the Diabolonians linger on with feigned surnames, and the vices of the old man are enrolled among the virtues of the new.

I have left myself no space to dwell on another cause of self-deception—the adoption of an inadequate standard of moral conduct, an error which arises from neglect to study the moral teaching of the New Testament, and which leads men to an unduly complacent estimate of their own characters. Now,

whatever be the right method of acquiring self-knowledge—a question which we shall discuss presently—it is obvious that the first requisite for such knowledge is an honest and prayerful study of Christian ethics. How can we gauge the nature or extent of our shortcomings unless we know accurately what it is that we come short of?

By what method is the much-needed knowledge of our own hearts to be acquired? A method very commonly advocated and practised, and supposed to be enjoined by St. Paul, is that of self-examination. But the command “Examine yourselves” does not, I think, go beyond a broad and simple recommendation to persons who must have known that they were sinning, to ask themselves plainly with what motives they were coming to the Lord’s Supper, and (in 2 Cor. xiii. 5) whether they were even “in the faith.” They do not, surely, sanction the minute and anxious introspection which is sometimes recommended as a regular habit of the Christian life. Nor is such a habit easy to reconcile with the attitude of mind enjoined in Phil. iv. 8.

The dangers of minute and habitual introspection are surely obvious. It is almost certain to lead either to discouragement or to self-satisfaction. And the danger in the former direction—danger of weakened witness for the Gospel, of distorted judgement, and perhaps even of deranged intellect—is increased by the widely prevalent delusion that discouragement is the work of the Holy Spirit. The natural result follows. Over this Bridge of Sighs man passes to the other side, the side of self-complacency. Nay, he occupies both positions at once: he is self-complacent over his very self-condemnation; he is proud, not, perhaps, actually of his sins, but of his consciousness of them. There are spiritual invalids who do really “*enjoy* bad health,” and who seem never to face the searching question, “*Wilt thou be made whole?*”

It is never desirable to make either sin or self a principal object of contemplation; habitual meditation either upon our sin or upon our virtue is unhealthy—on our sin because it is sin, on our virtue because it is ours. Whatever precise form

the practice of introspection takes, it is always exposed to the dangers of egotism and morbidity, because it concentrates the attention upon self more than upon God, and upon sin more than upon holiness. One or both of these errors will inevitably intrude, and either involves self-deception.

And this last point is the crucial one. The method stands condemned by the simple fact that it does not yield the desired result. It does not really lead to self-knowledge. It may, no doubt, bring to light certain faults the existence or the extent of which had not before been realized. But a minute acquaintance with certain details is not only very inadequate to compensate for a distorted view of the whole, it is actually a principal factor in producing the distorted view. We fail to see the forest for the trees. We get, at best, a sort of Japanese picture, precise in its details, but false in proportion and perspective. The method is too analytic for the subject-matter. Human personality cannot be assessed in this way. It is not the sum-total of our acts and thoughts, or the net total when good and bad have been weighed against each other and a balance struck. It is something other and greater than that. The deepest and most vital thing in the life of the soul is its relation to God, and where this relation is not known, there is no self-knowledge worthy of the name.

This fact alone, then, is sufficient to condemn the introspective habit. For it is just here that it is most important not to lose the forest in the trees. The natural man needs to learn that the disappearance of particular vices does not necessarily mean an improvement in the essential condition of the soul. It may mean the very opposite. Reform without repentance is a movement away from holiness and from God. It turns the prodigal son into an elder brother, the publican into the Pharisee. The Christian needs, more often, to be reminded that particular faults unsubdued are not necessarily proofs of a state of alienation from God. God accepts the heart as a living whole, whatever rectification of details may yet be required. In other words, we are justified by faith. (This last phrase

should remind us that a false theory of self-knowledge is really part of a false theory of salvation.)

Conviction of sin is not, therefore, in the Christian the whole of self-knowledge. It is not so even in the natural man. For the soul of man is not only sinful, but precious; it has a value for God; and this all-important fact throws light upon its nature. But more than this must be said of the spiritual man. Regeneration for him is no mere potentiality; it is a fact; and it is the deepest fact of his soul; it is his character. And because the habit of introspection tends to rob him of his assurance of salvation, it militates against real self-knowledge.

The main reason, I suppose, why this method fosters self-deception is that it is too internal and subjective. At every stage the investigation is hampered by the pride, the fears, and the prejudices of the investigator. A trial is seldom well conducted when the defendant sits on the bench. To reach a satisfactory result a man would have to stand at once inside and outside his own personality.

For criticism from without, however useful in its right place, cannot make up what is lacking in the internal method. We cannot get an harmonious view by mechanically combining two different standpoints, even when the two verdicts do not clash; and when they do—which is a frequent occurrence—a third tribunal is required to arbitrate between them.

What we want is a method which combines the intimacy of self-consciousness with the objectivity of outward criticism, a knowledge which is at once immanent and transcendent, which is our own, yet not our own. The very statement of the problem suggests the solution. God alone can stand in such relation to the human soul. Self-knowledge can only come by Divine revelation. And the conclusion reached in this way is surely also in accordance with the teaching of Scripture. What else is meant by the Psalmist's prayer, "Search me, O God, and know my heart," and by the New Testament promise, "If in anything ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you?"

How different is this revelation by the Spirit of truth from

our own amateur self-scrutiny ! How much healthier the process, how much more trustworthy the result ! The one humbles a man, but does not crush him ; the other is all too apt to crush, but has no real power to humble.

This is not, however, the full solution of the problem. For Divine grace, though miraculous, is not magical in its working ; it does not supersede human activity, but works in and through our moral and intellectual faculties. The oil of God's blessing stays when the recipient no longer provides an empty vessel. We still need a method which—however inadequate in itself, as all human methods must be—has an inherent natural fitness to serve as a vehicle and medium for the teaching of the Spirit.

Where are we to look for such a method ? There is one ready to hand which fulfils, I think, the desired conditions : the contemplation of goodness in the lives of others, and especially in the life and death of Christ Himself. For as in the physical world there are some things which are most clearly seen when we are not looking directly at them, so it is in the moral world : we get the clearest view of our own faults when we are contemplating the goodness of other people. There are few sights so humbling as this. Few things bring home so forcibly to us our own weakness and selfishness, the lowness of our ideals and the poverty of our lives, as the contemplation of some life or deed of exalted heroism and self-sacrificing love.

And if the view of our own unworthiness thus presented is more searching than that obtained by the practice of introspection, it is also more bracing in its effects. The man who has lived a great life before us has done more than merely show us our own littleness ; he has lifted us by the cords of humility and reverence and hope some way, though it be but a little, nearer to his own level. This is especially true of the heroes of faith. For they, more than others, speak to us not only by their strength, but by their weakness, because we know that the power which turned that weakness into strength is available for all who believe.

But we cannot rest content with the contemplation of holiness in our fellow-men. A deeper humbling and a higher

uplifting, and therefore a more perfect self-knowledge, are wrought in us by the contemplation of God Himself, and especially of God incarnate in Christ Jesus. It was the vision of Jehovah high and lifted up that drew from Isaiah the cry, "Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips"; and, similarly, it was the revelation of the Son of God that wrung from Peter the confession, "I am a sinful man, O Lord."

Yet this, again, would not, if it stood alone, give us all the light that we need. We have already seen that for perfect self-knowledge the consciousness of sin must be supplemented by the consciousness of salvation. For that we must go to the "place called Calvary." There, indeed, we are humbled more utterly than before. Only in the unspeakable cost of redemption do we see the full and final estimate of our sin. But it is there, as nowhere else, that we find assurance of the fact of redemption, an assurance still needing to be brought home to the individual by the indwelling Spirit, but finding its objective ground and guarantee in the atoning death of Christ.

It is, therefore, at the Cross that genuine Christian self-knowledge begins. And the Cross is no mere starting-point which we leave farther and farther behind as we progress. It is the permanent and energizing centre from which self-knowledge radiates outward through the whole life, and shines "more and more unto the perfect day."

For the sight of the Cross has a threefold value and meaning in our lives. It is the ideal of holiness, the measure of our sin, and the pledge of our redemption. It tends, therefore, to produce in us a consciousness of the true nature of holiness, of our own shortcoming, and of our nature and standing as children of God—the three necessary elements, as we have seen, of Christian self-knowledge. And the methods of cultivating self-knowledge which have been suggested in the foregoing pages, the study of Scripture and the contemplation of the lives and deeds of saints and heroes and, above all, of Christ Himself, are only so many ways of developing in our minds this threefold consciousness, so many media through which these three great

primary rays of light, into which the Cross, like a prism, breaks "the white radiance of eternity," may shine upon us and illuminate the darkest corners of our hearts and lives.

Knowledge of God, knowledge of self—the two are linked inseparably together, and as the one progresses the other progresses also. Both are present, from the first, in the normal Christian consciousness, but though present, they are not as yet perfect; there is a great work of development still needing to be done, and their full and final perfection is reserved for the life beyond, where the day breaks, "and the shadows flee away." "For now we know in part, but then shall we know even as we are known."

