The Evangelical Quarterly

JANUARY 15TH, 1932

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF CONSCIENCE

I. INTRODUCTION

THERE are three main series of problems of conscience :—

(*a*) What is conscience, what are its essential elements ?

(*b*) How does conscience originate, how does it evolve (ontogenetically as well as phylogenetically) ?

(*c*) What is its validity—is it fallible—what is its reliability—can it be educated, improved—can it be weakened, annihilated ?

Of these three series we will give our attention to the first and endeavour to give an analysis with the help of the phenomenological method, as it is used in the phenomenological school of philosophy—by Husserl, and especially by Max Scheler.

A study of conscience is as important and interesting as it is difficult and intricate. Its import one realises when one discerns the role the phenomenon of conscience plays in religion and morals, in art and literature, in history and in our daily life. The intricacy of this phenomenon one descries when reading what is written on conscience by theologians, philosophers, philologists, etymologists, psychologists, sociologists, biologists and educationists. The unanimity of opinion among the learned on the problem of conscience stands in a thorough indirect proportion to the import of this phenomenon in culture and life. Although every one of us knows what conscience is, when it upsets our emotional balance and stirs profound experiences in us, we hardly seem to know what this phenomenon is, and how it functions, when we wish to determine it in thought and to analyse it. It is not so very difficult to collect at least fifty different definitions of conscience propounded by different

thinkers on the subject, and even to suggest a new one, if you should think it wise or necessary.

This rather embarrassing confusion of human thought on the subject is to some extent explicable, when we consider the profundity of this phenomenon, the thorough entanglement and integration of this phenomenon with other phenomena of consciousness, the seriousness, the personal value, the intensive arousing and the vital importance of the phenomenon in the lives of human beings with their individual and personal differences. Had conscience been a more superficial phenomenon, and thus easier accessible to penetrating thought, had conscience been less complex, relatively more isolated from other phenomena and thus easier distinguishable, had conscience been less serious, less disturbing and of less vital importance to all the different individuals with their differences—then undoubtedly conscience would not have had so confusingly many different meanings. A second group of reasons explaining the ambiguity of the meaning of conscience refers us to the laws of evolution of language and of its idioms, an evolution which, as is well known, is even more conditioned by emotional than by merely logical determinants, and refers us also to the etymological origin and evolution of the word conscience itself. A last group of reasons refers us to false logical determinations in logical analyses of the concept of conscience, to the influence of system-formation in philosophy on the conceiving of the essence of this phenomenon, and to the generally inadequate procedure in philosophy and science, particularly in psychology and education, when this phenomenon is analysed and determined.

Time forbids to enter upon these causes of confusion now. They all, however, point to the same effect, viz. the confusing ambiguity (Vieldeutigkeit) of the term conscience. Different phenomena, real or imaginary, are called conscience; of the same phenomenon different concepts have been construed; almost all the analyses of whatever conscience may be, might have been, or has been conceived to be—differ. Real progress in the study of conscience is only possible, when an Ariadne-thread is found, which could lead us out of this maze of thought. This thread can only be the discovering of that very special, unique and objectively given phenomenon, relatively isolated in analysis from the entanglement with other kindred phenomena—the objective phenomenon ultimately meant, when we speak of

having experienced the voice of conscience in us. The method best adapted to this purpose is, according to my conviction, the phenomenological method.

II. The Method

This method, in contrast with the logical and scientific generalising methods, is a method of individualisation, a metaphysical method of essential differences. Not the common elements or common factors in a group of phenomena are primarily considered in this method, but the individuality and uniqueness of each phenomenon on account of what it is, just what it essentially is. This method differs further from other methods in maintaining as the prime criterion of analysis the distinction between the essential and the unessential or accidental elements of the phenomenon concerned, and in eliminating by the use of this distinction step by step the unessential elements until the ultimate essence of the phenomenon is grasped in its self-evidence as purely and as clearly as is possible. The phenomenological method is a technique of intuition. Intuition may be defined in contrast with sensual observation as rational observation of the immediately given ultimates. We all have such intuitions when we grasp ultimate meanings, when we grasp self-evident axioms, when we distinguish between the moral, the immoral and the amoral, between greenness and redness, between two and three, between left and right, between the beautiful and the ugly, between love and hate, and so forth. We however generally perform these intuitions in an impure and prejudiced way. The phenomenological procedure is a method in which these intuitions are controlled as strictly and as objectively as possible, and which essays to purify our daily intuitions from our prejudices and from the haphazard way in which we generally perform them. The phenomenological method is in consequence not concerned with the causes and the evolution of phenomena but with their essential nature on account of which they are just what they ultimately are. In so far as the inductive method of the empirical sciences is a causal, a generalising, an aposterioric method, formally giving results of probable value, and in so far as the phenomenological method is metaphysical and is concerned with essentials, individualises, is *a priori* and formally gives results of apodictic value, these two methods are mutually contradictory supplements.

A phenomenological description generally takes the form of: X is not A, not B, not C, not D, but is X. Logically this is mere tautology. Phenomenologically, however, it is the discovering or indication of what X essentially is. These steps are not logical arguments and are not intended to give logical demonstrations; they only intend to direct your intuition to what ultimately is meant. The self-evidence of the ultimate, which you are supposed to grasp, is the phenomenological proof. These steps have therefore only a methodological value, and only show the way to arrive at the self-evidence of the ultimate concerned.

The phenomenological method reveals ultimates or makes the implicit essence of the phenomenon explicit. The following metaphor may illustrate what is meant. The accidental or unessential encloses the essential as a shell encloses a kernel, and to arrive at the kernel the shell has to be peeled off. Likewise, to arrive at the essence of a phenomenon the non-essential cover has to be stripped off. This stripping-off Husserl calls "Eink-lammerung," i.e. put into brackets. For instance, if one wishes to grasp the essence of a clock, one must deliberately divert his attention from the unessentials, e.g. that it may be made of wood or of metal, that it may be driven by a spring or by electricity, that it may have fixed movable pointers, and so forth. All these attributes have to be put into brackets or to be stripped off. This will be evident if you compare a spring-driven clock with a sundial or with an hour-glass. By thus diverting your attention from the unessentials, the essence will appear on its own accord, in this case, that a clock is an instrument for measuring time. On the other hand no clock can be made, i.e. the essence of clock-being cannot be realised, without covering it, i.e. without using metal, or wood, or glass, or a spring, or electricity, etc. The same procedure may be applied to many phenomena, e.g. sympathy, pride, life, organism, colour, time, space, number, light, and so forth. This method is primarily only applicable to immediately given phenomena and therefore not to God or deity, nor to construed concepts of science, as for instance the electron, the gene, etc., as realities; only secondarily it may be applied to one's concepts, for instance the concept of God, the concept of an electron, and so forth, which then is a phenomenological analysis of our concepts of phenomena and not of the objectively given phenomena themselves.

Having arrived at the core of the phenomenon, its ultimate essence, it will be many a time a matter of the utmost difficulty to describe it, as for instance is the case when you endeavour to describe to a colourblind person the ultimate quality of greenness. The ultimates have to be seen or to be grasped in their self-evidence. When the phenomenologist arrives at such an ultimate (ein Urphenomen), which cannot be described in any direct way without falling into tautology, he generally makes use of metaphorical or of analogical descriptions. Such indirect descriptions have no logical validity and are no proof, nor may they be taken literally—they are only used as a last resource to point out to your intuitive eye in an indirect way the nature of what is seen and meant. The self-evidence of the characteristics thus indirectly revealed and described is the only proof the phenomenologist can and intends to give.

It is necessary, whenever applying this method, to put aside all knowledge, theory, prejudice, etc., you may have of the phenomenon concerned and to allow the phenomenon to speak for itself, to reveal its ultimate essence and meaning in its own objective light.

After this somewhat superficial description of the method, we may now proceed to the subject of our lecture.

III. The Groups of Conscience

Collecting all the different real and imaginary phenomena, either popularly or scientifically honoured with the name of conscience, we can divide them into six main groups, of which the first three may be eliminated as they clearly do not reveal to us the phenomenon we are in search for.

The first group is the metaphorical group. One may speak of the conscience of the twentieth century, the conscience of humanity, the conscience of the government, the conscience of the church, the conscience of the Labour Party, and so forth. You will find no one definite objective phenomenon directly in correspondence with these metaphoric expressions.

The second group somehow identifies conscience with the whole person, the whole human nature, the whole moral character, etc. So says, for instance, MacDougall: "Conscience is the whole moral personality, is identical with moral character." It is however clear, I think, that when we speak of the voice of conscience in us, or of the workings of conscience in man, we do

not mean his whole moral personality, but some very definite and individual phenomenon within the moral sphere. Such very indefinite and vague determinations of conscience do not disclose the phenomenon in its identity and uniqueness to our view, but conceal it. It is evident, I think, that many moral processes and functions in man, as for instance the moral judgments of others, the moral counsels to others, the love of your fellow-beings, etc., may not be identified with conscience, and that what we ultimately mean by conscience is not the whole moral nature, moral personality or moral character.

The third group identifies conscience with moral consciousness. Rashdall and Elsenhaus, for instance, do this. The phenomenon we are in search for is not the moral consciousness. Conscience is personally bound in the sense that it is aroused or stirs only when one's own moral value and moral welfare is at stake, but never when the moral value of other persons is at stake, at least in so far as the person concerned is not responsible for it. If I hear, for instance, of a theft or of a murder somewhere in China, I may perhaps venture to pass a moral judgment on those deeds, but my conscience will not stir in me on account of what was thus done. Conscience has to do only with your own personal comings and goings and not with those of others, in so far as you have no responsibility for them. In this sense conscience is the most individual, the most egocentral and egopetal of almost all your experiences. Moral consciousness, however, is not limited to the value of your own deeds and dispositions—it passes judgments on others too. This distinction now is not meant as a mechanical division in the sense that all processes and functions of moral consciousness, which relate to other persons, do not constitute conscience, but that those which relate to one's self do constitute conscience—as many a process in moral consciousness relating to your self, for instance moral self-love, humility, etc., is not equivalent to conscience either. In conscience your knowledge and experience of your moral worth has a new colour and depth, a new meaning, a peculiar kind of personal actuality, of uniqueness and seriousness, which moral consciousness as such of others *and* of yourself lacks. Accordingly conscience and moral consciousness are not equivalent.

These three groups, viz. conscience in a metaphorical sense, conscience as equivalent to moral personality or moral character,

and conscience as identical with moral consciousness, we eliminate, because they evidently do not reveal to us the identity and uniqueness of that definite and objectively given phenomenon, which we mean when we speak of the voice of conscience or of conscience as a unique and real experience.

The other three groups identify conscience somehow with moral knowledge, somehow with moral will or moral strivings and conations, and somehow with moral emotions respectively. They may be called the rationalistic, the voluntaristic and the emotionalistic concepts of conscience respectively. The rationalistic concept may be either intellectualistic in so far as it attributes to conscience some syllogistic function or other, or it may be intuitionistic in so far as is maintained that moral knowledge is attained immediately by some function of immediate or intuitive evaluation or other. The rationalistic concepts of conscience take conscience to be moral knowledge, or a moral function of knowledge, or a faculty of moral knowledge, or some kind of moral sense, or of moral intuition, and so forth. The voluntaristic concepts of conscience identify conscience somehow with moral will, moral strivings, moral aspirations, moral force, moral instinct, or moral urges, etc. The emotionalistic concepts of conscience take conscience to be equivalent to moral emotional experiences, moral feelings, moral shame, remorse, compunction, sorrow, moral happiness, and so forth. These different concepts of conscience refer to different kinds of moral phenomena, aptly or inaptly called conscience, and suggest to us the following hypotheses: (*a*) the essence of conscience is a moral syllogistic function; (*b*) it is an intuitive moral evaluation; (*c*) it is a moral driving force; (*d*) it is a moral emotional experience. Our phenomenological procedure will have to examine the validity of these hypotheses in our analysis of conscience, and to strip off, or to put into brackets, those attributes or elements which do not reveal to us the ultimate essence of conscience in its identity and uniqueness.

IV. Conscience and Moral Knowledge

Imagining before our mind's eye the experience of a phenomenon we undoubtingly take to be the voice of conscience, our first question concerning it is: Does this phenomenon essentially presuppose moral knowledge?—and our second question will be: Is the phenomenon essentially identical with moral knowledge,

especially with moral knowledge concerning the value of our own deeds, dispositions and character ?

With regard to the first question the answer is evidently in the affirmative: Conscience essentially presupposes moral knowledge, knowledge of moral values, of norms, of standards, of laws, in short of the moral thought. Conscience would be impossible without some moral knowledge or other. Where conscience stirs, we even find it to be very sensitive to delicate nuances of moral value. He who intends to subdue conscience, generally does so by deliberately diverting his attention from the moral value of his deeds or dispositions, which aroused it. This kind of ostrich-policy clearly proves the case. We may concede to all rationalists that moral knowledge is somehow an essential condition of conscience.

This, however, does not yet mean that moral knowledge in some form or function is equivalent to conscience. You may have moral knowledge of the doings of others; this is not conscience. You may even have moral knowledge of your own doings without conscience stirring in you. Take for instance an extreme example of a hardened criminal, who definitely may know of the immorality of his deeds and character, but who may enjoy it and even cynically laugh over it. This kind of moral knowledge of one's own deeds everyone may experience in his life some time or other, but no one will identify this kind of moral self-knowledge with conscience. We cannot therefore concede to the rationalists that moral knowledge as such in each form or function is identical with conscience. Rationalists are either intellectualists or intuitionists. Intellectualists, for instance Cronin, Jodl, and many others, generally conceive the essence of conscience to be a syllogistic function of applying moral standards to particular deeds or dispositions. Intuitionists, for instance the Moral Sense School, Schopenhauer, Rashdall and others, conceive the essence of conscience to be some kind of immediate moral evaluation. The phenomenologists, Max Scheler, Nicolai Hartmann, von Hildebrandt and others, have recently given profound and, as I think, convincing analyses of the moral intuition or of the immediate moral evaluation—but they rightly do not identify this moral intuition with conscience. Whether now somebody attains moral knowledge in a syllogistic or in an intuitive way or, as usually, in both ways—none of these is identical with conscience, however much conscience may

essentially presuppose them. Intellectualists and intuitionists are in the right in so far as they attribute to conscience the element of moral knowledge as an essential element; they err when they identify conscience with either some moral syllogistic function or with some kind of moral intuition. Had conscience been nothing but moral knowledge as such, its power and influence as well as the role it played in culture and life would have been exceedingly small, its incessant coercion would have been inexplicable. Could a Saul, a MacBeth, a Raskolnikow, be understood if conscience were nothing but moral knowledge, either syllogistic or intuitive? It is something more profound and more central than mere knowledge, that calls a halt to our experiences and bids us to review our life, our intentions and our acts.

V. Conscience and the Moral Driving Forces

The voluntaristic theories of conscience take the compelling factor, the moral driving force, as the essence of conscience. Conscience may be some moral drive or moral urge, it may be the moral imperative, the practical reason, the moral will, or it may be a moral instinct, a moral disposition, or a moral determining tendency, or the love of the good and the aversion to the bad, and so forth. These compelling factors may be of moral nature only, or they may be deepened and supported by and integrated with religious factors. The Catholic synteresis emphasises the voluntaristic aspect of conscience; it is *stimulans ad bonum et remurmurans malo.* Paul Haberlin conceives conscience to be the moral force tending to realise the personal idea. Martineau, Beneke, Lipps and others also conceive the essence of conscience voluntaristically.

Does conscience essentially presuppose this moral driving force, the love of the good and the aversion to the bad? It seems to me evident that without an active tendency towards moral elevation and away from moral debasement conscience would be inexplicable and even impossible. Why should conscience express itself in pangs and compunctions, if there were no real necessity for man to strive for the good and to subdue the evil, and if man did not experience the original moral urges to be of basic import? The active tendencies to realise the moral good is essential to conscience; without which it could not be. The voluntarists are right when they insist that the moral driving force is somehow an essential condition of conscience.

This, however, does not mean that conscience is identical with some or all of the moral determining tendencies. The moral dispositions and inclinations, the moral will, the experience of the call of duty, or of the call of your ideal vocation in life, the love of your neighbour and of yourself, the love of God, and so many more moral driving forces, are all possible without the experience of conscience. When one, for instance, hears the call of duty and enthusiastically obeys this call, no conscience stirs in him. This is a moral experience of unique import, but it is not conscience. When, however, you feel disinclined to obey the call of duty, or you experience some inner check or obstacle to obey, then conscience may stir in you, may emphasise it to be your duty and may compel you to attend to the call. If you fulfilled your duty without the support of conscience, you may experience some moral satisfaction or happiness, which is not equivalent to what is generally called good conscience. But if you did your duty, and experience the possibility that you could have disobeyed the call, the soothing knowledge of not having disobeyed brings that tranquillity of mind, which is called good conscience. Another example may illustrate the difference between conscience and the moral elevating tendencies as such. If somebody intends to arouse moral love and moral aspirations in an audience, he has something quite different in his mind and will make a quite different appeal to his audience than would be the case if he intended to arouse the audience's consciences. In the first case the attractiveness of the positive ideal will be emphasised; in the second case he will primarily refer to the unpleasant and improper state of the present and past situation; in the first case he will appeal to their love and ideals; in the second case he will emphasise that they may not allow the present condition to remain as it is, and he will point out to them their responsibility and duty. A third example will suffice. You may love your neighbour unselfishly without your conscience being aroused; but whenever you allow selfish motives to intermingle with this love, conscience may stir in you. These examples clearly indicate that moral urges are not equivalent to conscience and are possible without conscience being aroused. They also indicate that, although conscience essentially presupposes these activities towards moral elevation, conscience somehow also stands in a very definite relation to the actual or potential immoral and evil tendencies. Conscience then not

only presupposes moral urges, but presupposes the actuality or potentiality of immoral inclinations or deeds as well. It is on account of these latter only, that in conscience you experience your moral value and moral welfare to be at stake. From this we may deduce that no conscience were possible, if there were no immorality or evil in man—that the perfect holy is essentially in no need of conscience, and that the perfect immoral being, who has no moral urges whatever, could have no conscience either. In consequence conscience cannot be taken to be simply equivalent to the moral driving forces or to the moral determining tendency as such, however much it may presuppose it. The voluntarists err when they somehow identify conscience with the moral will or with the moral driving forces.

VI. Conscience and the Moral Emotions

The emotionalistic theories of conscience identify conscience with moral emotions. This is done in the theories of Scheler, Leslie Stephen, J. S. Mill, Hoffding and others. Does conscience essentially presuppose moral emotional experiences? What would conscience be, if it were without its pains, pangs, compunctions, stings, twitches and qualms—if there were no remorse, fear, shame, despair, sorrow—if it aroused no feeling of impotence, of unworthiness, of defilement, or if it gave no feeling of peace, of calm, of joy, of serenity and of tranquillity of mind? Without emotional experiences conscience must fall back upon mere moral knowledge which, as we have seen, is as such no conscience. Conscience does essentially presuppose moral emotions. We may even go further and maintain that that conscience finds its most profound manifestation and its most adequate expression in emotional experience. This means that conscience essentially is an emotional experience, that the voice of conscience is the voice of the heart. The emotional experiences are the personally innermost experiences in human life. No experience of man is as intimate, as central and as profound as the emotional. What you know, remember or may think about, what you wish, desire or may will, is not so intimately and profoundly your own as what you experience emotionally. What you experience emotionally becomes in a sense personally more real and actual than what you experience in other ways. The emotional experiences confront one with personal deeper realities than other experiences. The knowledge of your moral

guilt is not as intimate and as personally real to you, as the emotional experience of being morally guilty or base. Conscience finds its highest, most adequate and most personal expression in the emotional undulations and tensions.

Conscience, then, is essentially a moral emotional experience. This does not yet mean that every moral emotion is an expression of conscience. We have already noted that conscience stands in some definite relation to the actual or potential immoral and evil tendencies. Many moral emotions, e.g. the happiness of having assisted the needy and the sick, or the gratitude of having been saved or of being loved, and so forth, do not presuppose the immoral and are possible without immoral inclinations and tendencies. Such emotional experiences do not give expression to the voice of conscience. Only those moral emotions, in which one experiences that one's own moral value and moral welfare is or somehow could have been at stake, are identical with the experience of conscience. Conscience in consequence stands in a very definite relation to the experience of real or possible moral guilt. Without the phenomenon of moral guilt, real or possible, conscience would not be. This now means that in conscience you not only know of your relation to moral guilt either intellectually or intuitively, you not only strive towards moral elevation, but that you experience this relation emotionally as a most intimate, personal and fundamental reality. In the bad conscience you experience your moral guilt as an undeniable, unavoidable and most unpleasant fact; in the warning or admonishing voice of conscience you experience this personal guilt as a menacing possibility, as something to be avoided at all costs; in the good conscience you experience the tranquillity or calm of not having succumbed to the immoral and evil, or of being not-guilty. Even the *good* conscience is no conscience, when it is not definitely related to the experience of being *not-guilty*. The emotional experience of your own goodness is no good conscience, and no experience of conscience whatever, but an immoral Pharisaic experience. So we arrive at the kernel or the essence of conscience as the emotional experience of your personal relation to real or possible moral guilt—the emotional experience of your moral value or moral welfare being at stake.

(*To be continued.*)

H. G. Stoker.

Potchefstroom University College, South Africa.