

July 1961

READING 6

EMOTIONAL PARTS OF CENTRES

CONSCIENCE

There seems to have been general interest last week in the reference to *Conscience*. If you compare the great religions you will find nowhere but in the Christian Gospels any stress on the idea of conscience. It's true that the Greek word (*syn-eidēsis* 'knowing all at once') which the Authorized version translates as 'Conscience' seems to occur only once in the Gospels; namely in St. John's account (Ch.8, v.9) of the woman taken in adultery; for there when Jesus has said, 'He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her', they 'being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last'. (In Greek, as in French, the same word has to do for both 'consciousness' and 'conscience'.) Nevertheless it cannot be denied that this idea is right at the heart of the Gospel teaching where the individual realization of Truth is often in conflict with 'collective morality'.

Now in our System there is the same stress and exactly the same meaning; for Conscience occupies the same place with regard to emotion as Consciousness with regard to ideas. Consciousness by its derivation means 'Knowing all at once everything about a given idea' and conscience means 'Feeling all at once everything about yourself in a given situation'. There is also the same contrast between conscience and conventional morality, as shown in the following quotation from a meeting with Mr. Ouspensky in New York:

Further, in connection with the question of good and evil, we must try to understand the relative positions of morality and conscience. What is morality and what is conscience? We can say first of all that morality is not constant. It is different in different countries, in different centuries, in different decades, in different classes, with people of different education and so on. What may be moral in the Caucasus may be immoral in Western Europe. For instance, blood revenge there is a moral thing; if a man refuses to kill somebody who killed his distant uncle, he would be considered most immoral. (In other countries it is only moral to kill in exacting the death penalty for murder or in time of war.) So morality is always different; it is always changing. But conscience never changes; it is a kind of emotional understanding of truth in certain definite relations, generally in relation to behaviour, to people and so on. This is always the same; it cannot change and it cannot differ in one nation or another, in one country or another, in one person or another... To have a moment of conscience is to feel at once all that you ever felt about somebody or something... and if you have such a moment you will see how many contradictions there are in your emotions... In the state of conscience we see them all at once; that is why it is such an unpleasant state – that we build special 'buffers' or 'shock-absorbers' to avoid it.

(Pause for discussion)

After working in a School for some time (if it is the right sort of School that stresses the importance of conscience), the buffers gradually disappear and conscience wakes much more often and acquires a new meaning and new functions in relation to the three Lines of Work. With regard to work on oneself, supposing one's aim be to wake up, conscience reminds one

sharply that at some particularly significant moment one fell asleep; or that one missed a quiet half-hour of near-consciousness that one had promised oneself. This reminder must never be allowed to turn negative, always it is a spur to fresh endeavour. Then when one begins to work with and for other people (that is on the second line), conscience pricks one very often: 'Why did you say all that? Why didn't you say the one necessary thing? You neglected so and so just when they needed you.' Yet again these painful pricks are never negative but like the voice of 'one that careth for us'; and after a time they bring about the state so often described by Thomas à Kempis:

Love feels no burden, disdains no labours, would willingly do more than it can; complains not of impossibility because it conceives that it may and can do all things. It is able therefore to do anything, and it performs and effects many things, where he that loveth not faints and lies down.

Love watches, and sleeping slumbers not; when weary is not tired; when straitened is not constrained; when frightened is not disturbed; but like a lively flame and a torch all on fire it mounts upwards and securely passes through all opposition.

Whosoever loveth knoweth the cry of this voice...

So conscience and consciousness go naturally hand in hand.

But it is on the third line of work (work for the School as a whole) that an awakened conscience becomes absolutely vital. It often happens that when people meet with something new and exciting their conscience goes to sleep. Without their realising it, identification with their new enthusiasm leads them into words and actions that harm the School and its aims. That is why the Leader of a School has to be very careful to rely only on those in whom he is sure that conscience is still awake. Thus conscience makes use of a very important kind of memory, and lapses at important moments were referred to by Mr. Ouspensky as 'loss of memory'. But though seeing harmful actions being done, one must be very careful not to become negative oneself, not *mind* or dwell on them. Latterly, the worst criticism Mr. Ouspensky could allow himself, even when a member of his own family was doing a lot of harm, was: 'Who is he? I don't know him.' One can remind oneself of St. John 14:1

Let not your heart be troubled... in my Father's house are many mansions.

And once more from Thomas à Kempis:

What is it to thee, whether that man be such and such, or whether this man do or speak this or that? Thou shalt not need to answer for others but shall give account for thyself.

(Pause for discussion)

You can see that in the Work, conscience becomes inseparably connected with aim – individual aim, aim of a Group, aim of a School. In ordinary life all is confusion; Hamlet can say:

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,

whereas thought is really the opposite of conscience, and it is 'the pale cast of thought' that

chiefly puts both conscience and resolution to sleep! And conscience does not make cowards of us; it can make us very brave:

Let love repine and reason chafe,
 There came a voice without reply:
 'Tis man's perdition to be safe
 When for the Truth he ought to die.'

But there is one sense in which Hamlet was right. The possession of an awakened conscience can give us a semblance of weakness when we are dealing with people in whom conscience has been destroyed. That is the perpetual handicap of the Christian Powers in dealing with the leaders of totalitarian states. The absence of conscience gives such people a great show of power; for they are not troubled by normal codes; their promises mean nothing and they can easily shake hands with the right and stab with the knife hidden in the left hand.

CONCLUSION

To return to the four-roomed house – Conscience belongs to the Emotional parts of the centres, and is in the second room (in the middle storey). Like other creative sides of man's nature, it lies dormant in all normal people and in ordinary life it is only occasionally aroused: and like them its promptings rapidly become mixed with identification and negative imagination and spoiled. But if aroused frequently, it can bind all the emotional parts of the different centres together; and has a special function in relation to the Fourth Room. Thus it prepares a man so that he can enjoy the ecstasy of Consciousness in the Higher Centres without losing his memory. In the quotation from St. Luke (61/19a) it is conscience coupled with 100% attention that keeps the 'loins girded about and the lights burning,' so that your Lord finds you watching when he returns from the wedding. Let us preserve its purity and protect it from all negative elements, such as worry and depression or a harsh, narrow and puritanical attitude towards other people.

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