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"LET US CONSIDER ONE ANOTHER TO PROVOKE UNTO LOVE AND TO GOOD WORKS."—HEBREWS x. 24.

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DIVINITY.

ESSAY ON CONSCIENCE.

'And why even of yourselves judge ye not what is right?'—Luke xii. 57.

It may occur to some of the readers of this periodical, that among the many able treatises and discourses which have been published on the subject of conscience, by different authors, there are two admirable sermons by Mr. Wesley, one designated "On Conscience," the other "The Witness of our own Spirit;" and an excellent article by Mr. Watson, in his "Biblical and Theological Dictionary;" with other pieces on the same subject in the writings of Dr. Adam Clarke, and in other publications connected with Methodism; and that, therefore, the present article is unnecessary. The writer, however, would suggest, that as the subject on which he now ventures a few observations is one of great practical importance, and concerning which, there is reason to believe, some serious mistakes still exist, from the manner in which some persons plead the approbation of conscience, in justification of proceedings, the rectitude of which, on the ground of Christian principle and morality, is often very questionable; and as it is a faculty of exercise of the mind, which, in its decisions of self-approbation or self-condemnation, becomes a source of pleasure or pain in this world, as it will become one of happiness or misery in the world to come; it is important that we should understand its nature and office, and it may not therefore be superfluous or useless again to institute the inquiry, What is Conscience?—and when and how far may we depend upon the rectitude of its decisions, in its verdict of approval or disapproval of our moral conduct?

It is well known that *summa conscientia* (or) and *conscientia*, from which, in French and English, is derived the word "conscience," are each compounded of two words, and literally imply, the knowledge of two or more things together; that is, the knowledge, or inward perception and consciousness, which a man has of things both present and past, relating to himself, his inward tempers and outward actions; and the judgment which he forms concerning the moral character of those tempers and actions, as being right or wrong, good or evil: or it is "the testimony and secret judgment of the soul, which gives its approbation to actions that it thinks good, or reproaches itself with those which it believes to be evil." In stating further the nature, design and functions of conscience, (though without pretending to any superior acquaintance with the philosophy of the human mind,) there are two or three very common errors, which it is important briefly to notice:—

1. There are some persons who, supposing conscience to be "an internal monitor, implanted in us by the Supreme Being, and directing to us on all occasions what is right or wrong," conclude, that they are right in all they do, if they can honestly plead the authority and approbation of their conscience; and this is with them a sufficient justification for the omission of what is by others affirmed to be their duty, and for the commission of acts inconsistent with the spirit and exercise of Christian love. And it is true, that a justly celebrated writer* has observed, "What is it to which a wise man will pay more attention than to his reason and conscience, those divine monitors by which he is to judge even of religion itself, and which he is not at liberty to disobey, though an angel from heaven should command him?" But another writer,† equally celebrated, seems with

more accuracy to observe, "Who sees not that conscience may be conformable or repugnant to the law of nature?—may be certain or doubtful? It is a maxim of every law, human and divine, that a man ought never to act in opposition to his conscience; but it will not from thence follow, that he will, in obeying the dictates of his conscience, on all occasions act right. An Inquisitor, who burns Jews and heretics; a Robespierre, who massacres innocent and harmless women; a robber, who thinks that all things ought to be in common, and that a state of property is an unjust infringement of natural liberty,—these, and a thousand perpetrators of different crimes, may all follow the dictates of conscience." Paine, the infamous author of the "Age of Reason," declared that a fever, which he and those about him expected would prove mortal, made him remember with renewed satisfaction that he had written the former part of that wicked work; and he knew, therefore, he said, by experience, the conscientious trial of his own principles. And let it be remembered, too, that Saul of Tarsus, while he shut up many of the saints in prison, and gave his voice against them when they were put to death, and punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme, and, being exceedingly mad against them, persecuted them even unto strange cities,—while thus engaged, he could plead the authority and approbation of his conscience, and "verily thought with himself that he ought to do many things against the name of Jesus of Nazareth." And yet such was his sense of guilt afterwards, that he confesses himself to have been a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious, and a murderer, and, in a word, the greatest of sinners; and, as Doddridge observes, paraphrasing the confession of St. Paul, "though he acted in a very rash, savage, and criminal manner, yet he did not therein contradict the sentiments of his conscience; and thereby shows, by the way, how much guilt a man may contract without acting directly contrary to the convictions of his mind, if he has neglected an impartial care in forming his principles of action." And all this is in accordance with the prediction and declaration of our Lord to his disciples, that their persecutors and murderers would think that they did God acceptable service in destroying them. So that men may be acting morally wrong, and wickedly in the extreme, while following what they profess to believe and declare to be the dictates of nature or conscience; and be guilty and condemned before God in those very acts on account of which they may indulge in self-approbation, and in the confidence of being approved by their Maker.

2. This faculty or exercise of the mind has been considered and described as the moral sense, or as an instinctive perception or intuitive knowledge of right and wrong, morally considered,—a testimony as certain and infallible, as the testimony of our eyes to the existence, colour and figure of the bodies about us. But this is surely a mistake. Instinct operates uniformly; it is the same in all individuals of the same species, and if conscience were the moral sense, or a moral instinct, then would its decisions be always and uniformly the same on the same moral facts, in the case of every individual, and of all individuals of the same species. The contrary, however, is the fact. There is great diversity and change in the moral judgments of men, for not only does conscience, in different persons, give a different verdict in the same moral case, but conscience, in the same persons, will at one time approve of that which at another time is the object of its disapprobation. Thus we have seen that the conscience of Saul the persecutor allowed and approved at one time of his hostility to the church of Christ; while, not

long after, the conscience of Paul the Apostle disapproved and denounced that hostility as cruel and wicked, for which, however, he says, he obtained mercy, because he did it "ignorantly in unbelief." A member of the Romish church may plead the dictates of his conscience for refusing to read the bible, professing to believe that for him to read it would be wrong. The same individual becoming a member of the Protestant church, and being better instructed, would as conscientiously engage in the reading and study of the Holy Scriptures, believing it to be his duty and privilege so to do. The Jew, in ignorance and unbelief, may still reject the Lord Jesus as the Messiah, and declare that he does so with the approbation of his conscience; while the Christian as conscientiously believes that it is his duty and happiness to receive him and trust in him as the Son of God. "In one person," says Mr. Fletcher, "it is easy under mountains of guilt; and in another, it is unreasonably scrupulous about mere trifles; it either strains at a gnat, or swallows a camel; when it is alarmed, in some it shows itself ready to be made easy by every wrong method; in others, it obstinately refuses to be pacified by the right." Thus we see that moral instinct, or moral sense, is no infallible guide or criterion of right and wrong. "For if," says Locke, "conscience be a proof of innate principles, contraries may be innate principles, since some men will, with the same conscience, prosecute what others avoid." And hence the diversity and mutability of the decisions of conscience arise altogether out of the rule of judgment by which those decisions have been formed, and the influence of circumstances, education, example, society, and the predominant habits and passions of the mind. "Upon the whole, it seems to me," says Paley, "either that there exist no such instincts as compose what is called the moral sense, or that they are not now to be distinguished from prejudices and habits; on which account they cannot be depended upon in moral reasoning."

These conclusions are not invalidated by any reference to the condition of mankind, as left alone to the dictates of what is called natural religion, or the light of nature, shed forth upon the human mind by Him "who coming into the world enlighteneth every man," and who are therefore supposed to have a natural sense of moral good and evil, and whose case and responsibilities are thus stated by the Apostle to the Romans, (ii. 14, 15.) "When the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves; which show the work of the law written in their hearts; their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another." It is not denied, that men, strangers to revealed religion, possess an internal and natural power of distinguishing the moral qualities of actions, as, between justice and injustice, humanity and cruelty, gratitude and ingratitude, the acknowledgment and worship of the Creator, and an utter disregard to his existence and authority; and that when this light and power are permitted to operate with a legitimate influence on their minds, their consciences, or moral judgments, on these subjects, will be according to truth and the will of God; and acting agreeably, to their convictions of truth and duty, they will be accepted with God: this, indeed, seems to be the doctrine of the Apostle in the passage above cited. But is it not a fact, that such is the "ignorance and unbelief," the blindness and perversity, of the human mind, that men, even those possessing a divine revelation, and pleading the decisions of conscience, "call evil good, and good evil; put darkness for light, and light for darkness;

* Beattie on truth.

† Bishop Watson.