

# On Being So Placed

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One of the main points of crisis in modern civilization concerns, in my view, the relation of conscience and authority. Where these two are not simply taken to be polar opposites, neither tolerating the claims of the other, the one is often subordinated to the other. This may be right. Unfortunately what should then dominate is often made subordinate and *vice versa*. Thus Fr Eric D'Arcy writes:

Of course, one of the elements of the decision which one's reason ultimately makes will be the guidance of authoritative and skilled moralists whose standing we accept; but it has to be the individual's judgment of conscience that this *is* an authority which we may safely accept. As Mr Hare says, other people cannot make decisions of principle for us unless we have first decided to take their advice or obey their orders (*Conscience and its Right to Freedom*, Stag edition p 216).

D'Arcy goes on to quote Newman in support:

Certainly, if I am obliged to bring religion into after-dinner toasts (which indeed does not seem quite the thing), I shall drink – to the Pope, if you please – still, to Conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards (*Difficulties of Anglicans*, 1910, vol 2 p 261).

Now we may I think take these authors as referring here to a common, non-technical notion of conscience which, we might want to say, is our knowledge, either of what we ought to do or of the rightness or wrongness of what we have done, or merely the memory of an unambiguously evil deed. But here at once the difficulty would meet us of the erroneous conscience. If this is as much a conscience as a correct one is then it seems we cannot characterize conscience as knowledge, not even as *our* knowledge. It will only be a *seeming* knowledge of right and wrong, and a seeming only to ourselves moreover.

Or, if conscience *is* knowledge, must we not say the erroneous conscience is only so-called, but in reality not a conscience? A character in one of Muriel Spark's novels feels bad, "conscience-stricken", whenever she fails to use an opportunity offered for petty theft. Such an example would seem to create difficulties for the view that

As far as a given action is concerned, an erroneous conscience is binding in exactly the same way as is a correct one. Provided

it be certain, an erroneous conscience shows a man what is God's will in exactly the same way as does a correct one (Genicot, *Institutiones Theologiae Moralis*, Brussels 1931, cited with approval by D'Arcy, op cit pp 125-6).

For if both bind in 'exactly the same way' then conscience binds not in virtue of what *is* right but of what seems right to the agent, as if the question of what is right need not arise and cannot be applied here. But then my conscientious judgment that I am bound to follow my conscience will itself only bind in virtue of such a course seeming right to me and we cannot, except academically, interest ourselves in whether this judgment *is* right. But unless it is known to be right neither it nor the ethical theory based on it is of any interest or relevance to moral problems.

It follows from this that the principle of following conscience right or wrong, cannot be a primary or foundational axiom of any consistent moral system, but must be introduced at a later stage.

It might be that someone in a state like the lady in the novel (D'Arcy gives the example of Himmler) is bound by her "conscience" in the sense that she does wrong *not* to follow it. But this would only be to argue that it followed from what we knew of her state of mind that any other action could only proceed from an evil motive. It would not imply that in following her conscience she did right either. That is, to take up the theological reference, we need not assume that every man is shown 'what is God's will' in *all* the ways that His friends are, though those ways that are common may be 'exactly the same'. This may be all that Genicot meant.

The lady in question, or Himmler, are not hereby condemned to eternal perplexity, for all that follows is that for them a first requirement of "coming to the light" or doing good would be for the state of their consciences to alter, whether through their own good sense or some other agency.<sup>1</sup> However, I cannot see that perplexity is in itself an objection to what I have been saying. It only arises psychologically when there is a clash of two standards both recognized in conscience and this of itself directs the subject to find a solution. But this process may take years or even be left in abeyance up till death. A certain measure of such perplexity is in any case our common lot, like it or not. So the man whose conscience is so much in error that he can't do right either way may not be such a *rara avis* unless we are obliged to admit (we are not) that "the peace of a good conscience" is the common experience.

Regarding non-psychological perplexity Fr D'Arcy seems to argue that if we called Himmler wicked for holding such principles as he did then we would have to call a theologian who held we should kill an unborn child to save the mother wicked, such action being 'unjust and murderous'. This *ad hominem* consideration seems to me valid, but not pertinent. For we are not considering

the wickedness of persons, of which God is judge, but of actions, including that of espousing wicked principles. This of course was but one of Himmler's known wrongs, whereas a theologian's views are often not put to the test, so it is not *just* for such espousal that Himmler is thought wicked. We are arguing that there is no requirement that each person should in any given state of being have at least one right action open to him. It might be as wicked to follow a sufficiently erring conscience as it is to disobey it when not moved thereto by sounder instincts, as was Huckleberry Finn when he helped the slave-boy.

The art of Mark Twain and the theoretical analysis of Collingwood (cf *Principles of Art*, pp 284-5) converge upon the same point: that the moral conscience may be vitiated by a corrupt consciousness. They enable us, without calling in question the received doctrine that it is always culpable to act against conscience, to understand why, hypocrisy apart, conscientiousness has an equivocal name in the world: why it suggests officiousness, busy-bodydom, and obstinate insensibility, as well as straightforwardness and disinterestedness. And so they dispel the mystery in the fact that many conscientious men are more detestable than any rogue (Alan Donagan: *The Theory of Morality*, Chicago 1977, pp 141-2).

That is, pretensions to or even convictions of sincerity need not come into play here. I may believe I am a man of goodwill without being one, and others may recognize and be nauseated by an inveterate hypocrisy of which I am quite unconscious. There is no guaranteed minimum of realism we can bring to bear on our self-analyses, nor is the concept of "secret faults" self-contradictory. As for culpability in this connection, it can always be argued that such blindnesses are the results of culpable actions, whether performed by oneself or ancestors. Anyway they would still be faults even if no one were culpable. Yet the point stands that sincerity as such does not excuse. Ignorance, even where not self-induced, may yet be crass or supine, and even the best may free themselves more slowly than they ought from inherited distortions.

So there seems to me a certain extravagance in this discussion as set up by Fr D'Arcy and, *a fortiori*, Hare and Kant, as if we were entirely at the mercy of this fallible conscience, this mere seeming knowledge. Fr D'Arcy writes of authoritative guidance but then as it were dismisses it with the remark that it must be the 'individual's judgment of conscience that this *is* an authority.'

Such reasoning, especially when coupled with R. M. Hare's theories, has been shown to be confused by Professor P. T. Geach:

Must we then say: "A man has to judge for himself"? In one way this is a triviality; in another way of taking it, plainly silly.

If it means that whatever a man judges to be so, *he* is judging

to be so, then this is a tautology from which nothing interesting follows; if on the other hand it means that a man is logically debarred from accepting anybody's authority about anything, then it is a plainly silly principle. A man who decides to rely on an authority is indeed making a judgment about that authority; but in so doing he is not assuming the position of judge, not setting himself up as a higher authority (*Reason and Argument*, Oxford 1976, p 24).

But besides this and, it seems to me, equally fundamental, such reasoning ignores the experience of children. Children start off obeying their parents long before they think of questioning such obedience. They are so placed. Also, it cannot *always* be true that we have to decide to accept an authority or a principle on other grounds, for then we would have an endless regress. Unless we have a stock of self-evident principles or guides to action we are going to have to simply take advice or accept orders at some point if we are to begin practical moral life at all. Now this is just the position of the child. It seems to me it would be odd if the childlike attitude of unquestioning acceptance which is the foundation of all virtue built up in later life should simply disappear without trace in more mature moral behaviour, as if it had been merely childish, like tantrums.

The child should behave so because he is so placed, by reason of recent birth, the rights of his parents, smallness of size, ignorance etc. Now we do not continue so placed, but we do continue to be placed in some way or other, as spouses, parents, citizens, members of a church, members of the human community, professionals. This means, I think, that it is not entirely or absolutely up to our consciences to select or, worse, set up our authorities, any more than this was open to the child. Rather, it is the business of conscience to discriminate between authorities, that is, to discern just how we are placed, not to go to work as if we were not in place at all, "rational natures" not necessarily human, but could place ourselves at some or any point.

This idea of being placed in some way or other might seem to correspond in some ways to the traditional notion of the duties of one's state. One might argue that even a philosopher who feels he ought to question everything does so in the first instance because he feels that this is a duty consequent upon his state as a philosopher (or as a man). He is so placed, whether or not he so placed himself, and that state in which he now finds himself is logically prior to those duties consequent upon it.

Whether or not he so placed himself? This indeed is a major difference between the child's state and some of those other placings listed above. Not all, however. Parenthood is not always (is it ever?) chosen, citizenship rarely so, while membership of the hum-

an community is chosen only in the sense that suicidal impulses are resisted. Only spouses and professions seem normally to be the objects of choice.

So it does not seem that the involuntariness of the child's state, under which we can include his intellectual limitations, can be made a reason for not extending unhesitating submission to the duties of place or state to all concerned fields. It is in any case clear off-hand that once I have chosen a spouse I have contracted a set of duties, and the more so the more freely I chose her rather than less so. The more I was then the less free I am afterwards vis à vis the bond I have contracted. This indicates that if we could voluntarily be born as children we would if possible be more strictly bound to obedience. The same reasoning applies to professions.

So it is not because of the lack of freedom not to be children that their state is unique, a negative condition it is the glory of adulthood to escape from. The uniqueness of childhood consists rather in its being for every man a condition and foundation for any other state or place in life that he shall have been a child. But this uniqueness, unlike the supposed unique lack of choice, gives no rationale for imagining that being submitted to authorities, any more than eating, is uniquely childish and ceases at maturity.

Infant baptism might seem problematic here precisely because people object to generalizing duties of place or state from their one legitimate instance, childhood, which is just the point in question here. But then they must find another reason besides involuntariness, neither unique to the child nor the essential reason for his subjection. "He went down and was subject to them," voluntarily. It belongs to being a good child that one obey, willy-nilly, and it belongs to being a good Christian that one remain faithful, whether or not one had control over the initial step, provided of course we assume the baptized infant is truly made a Christian, as sacramental theory teaches. If it did not there would be no point in the practice. Besides, in so far as the life of faith is likened to the life of virtue, childish or otherwise, which it is the task of parents to inculcate, as all but extremists agree, this one might seem the least extension of the notion among those considered. The argument here is of course in answer to possible *Christian* objections and presupposes that serious moral difficulties will not justifiably arise, as they might for someone "born into" the Aztec religion. A Muslim reader may *mutatis mutandis* consider infant induction into Islam, a practice one may equally approve given the parents' view of the matter. (Naturally, the Christian will insist that his later going over to Christianity would not be infidelity as would the contrary move, but that does not affect the argument since *bona fide* Muslims have real obligations in conscience, and this can without contradiction be thought at least at times to include an

obligation not to be brought to question their beliefs unless so inspired by grace.)

Nor is there a proof of autonomy in the power to commit suicide, for it belongs to one's state as a man that one ought not to exercise this power. Or rather, it is only after this would have been proved not to be the case that it could be used to establish the privilege of autonomy, i.e. of the right to ignore one's state or place in life. But unless that is assumed the denial of the right of suicide which is supposed to prove it stands. For claiming the right to end one's life at will is naturally seen as the quintessence of such autonomy (e.g. Dostoyevsky's Kirilov, Nietzsche's Zarathustra).

It was this type of autonomy, which replaces knowledge of duty with "free" decision of the will, that Pope Gregory XVI had in mind when he wrote of 'that absurd and erroneous opinion, or rather delirium, of liberty of conscience' (*Mirari vos*, 1831), which it seems to me Professor Cameron has misleadingly presented as contradicting the right of religious liberty:

... religious freedom could be tolerated for the time being but not approved, except as an accommodation to the brute facts of the modern world ... the doctrine was solemnly affirmed by the highest authorities. Gregory XVI ... quoted with approval by Leo XIII etc. (Editor's Introduction to Newman's *Essay on Development*, Pelican pp 46-47).

I should be free to decide in conscience, assuming I have not committed myself, regarding religious truth, and certainly the medieval Church *approved the toleration* of unbelieving Jews and their rites out of respect for their consciences, since at that time it had no need to "accommodate itself" to this or any other despised heretical minority, and hence St Thomas explicitly says that to baptize their children against their will would be contrary to natural justice (IIa-IIae, QX, art. xii). Certainly the modern Church does not approve their unbelief, any more than does the New Testament. In any case *such* freedom of conscience is nothing like the claim that I can make my conscience the measure of truth, but rather that it should let itself be measured by it without unwarranted interference. Making my conscience the measure of truth is the 'absurd and erroneous opinion, or rather delirium' since it makes nonsense even of the concept of an opinion. It would have been incredibly absurd of the Pope to use such language of the ordinary doctrine of liberty of conscience on which the act of Christian faith is based. He speaks of 'the most foul well of indifferentism,' and foul it is. The question Professor Cameron discusses is complex and particular, and I confine myself to saying that the encyclical quoted neither affirms nor supports the doctrine that 'Catholics, on their principles, have no duty to tolerate Protes-

tants'. It rather condemns theories of the type of 'universal prescriptivism' in our our own day, which recognize no antecedent (or subsequent) moral law,<sup>2</sup> but which see reason as a limitation on freedom.

Just as no sane person regards the child's unconditional subjection to his parents, without previous autonomous choice of conscience, as unwarranted interference, so, I suggest, may the case be with other powers in life. It is up to our consciences to discern what they are, not to constitute them. Thus Newman makes clear that he could not *recognize* papal authority apart from the discernment of his conscience. He need in no sense mean to say that the authority of his conscience is above that of the Pope.

In recommending someone as a good lawyer or doctor I am not claiming to be myself an even better lawyer or doctor (Geach, *op cit eodem loco*).

Geach here is not merely making a debating point. It is not because the skills of doctors or lawyers are estimated by results external to that skill that we don't need to be better lawyers or doctors. Rather, these results lead us to judge that they have skill, and it is *this* judgment, *however* arrived at, that can be made without being ourselves so skilled. By parity of reasoning then I can judge who or what shall be an authority for my conscience without thereby claiming that my conscience is more discerning in the particular field than the authority it discerns. A mathematician produces, perhaps, no results external to his skill, yet no one is in principle debarred from discerning which mathematicians are more commendable quite apart from how much mathematics he himself knows. The reason of course is that even where there are no external results proper, there are always certain external or accidental signs of someone's skill, e.g. the explanatory power of their theories, which commend it to discerning observers, and this is the case with authorities. Newman, again, is a prime example. He did not submit to the Pope on account precisely of external results (as if the Pope were like a lawyer good at getting people off the hook) but because of certain signs indicating, he considered, the truth of the Catholic claims, and hence requiring a submission of conscience which was truly such, and none the less so, because discerned by conscience. It was not at all a mere judgment that he expected this authority to agree with his conscience on future occasions. That would have been a fake submission, and this, it seems to me, *mutatis mutandis* applies both epistemically and deontically.

1 St Thomas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia-IIae QXIX, VI ad 3um, "quia potest ab errore recedere".

2 On this topic I would just add that it is no more clear that the Vatican II Declaration implies freedom to apostatize under all conceivable regimes (and Aquinas as quoted by Cameron does not deny much more than this, since he is not there discussing non-Catholics) than it is that freedom to marry implies freedom to desert or divorce.