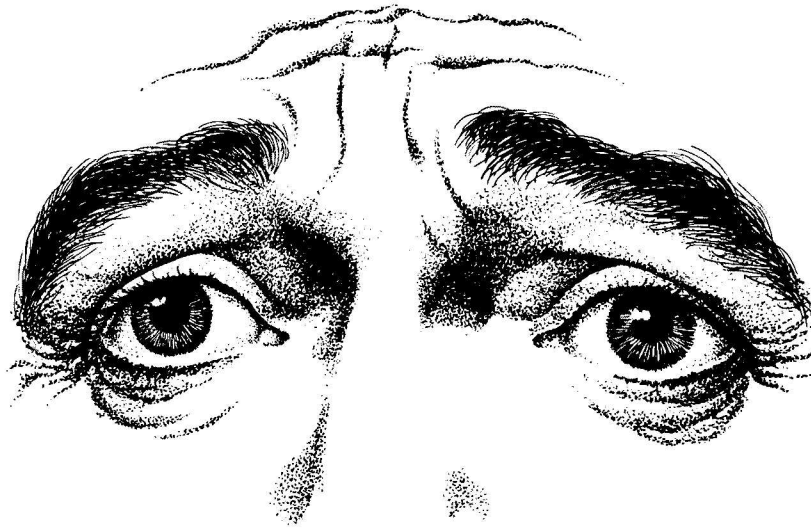


# The Hound of Heaven

Desmond Ford

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"The ultimate purpose of conscience is not merely to function as a condition for health and sound personality, but as the hound of heaven pursuing us and depriving us of supposed strength until we are taken by him who is love."

The old-fashioned graduate student trembled slightly before the committee of examining professors. "Do you believe in absolutes?" came the ominous query. He paused, breathing sharply, and replied, "Absolutely not."

## Moral Absolutes

The parable is for our day. The crucial question of modern thought is whether we are to interpret man in terms of the cosmos, or the cosmos in terms of man. If we do the former, man becomes a meaningless **thing** like all else; and one absolute alone remains to us, the absolute that there are no absolutes. Then away with traditional categories of good and evil, right and wrong. Confess that the guiding lines for conduct were but the invention of pragmatic communities, and that for us they have blurred. Let relativity be the touchstone for everything except itself!

From Darwin to Dewey modern man's creed has been forming, until its essence can now be summarized in a single statement, "I believe in Nature Almighty." But if nature alone is the ultimate reality, then man is merely a sophisticated animal, and "anything goes." It has become apparent that what ultimately "goes" is not merely morality, but the health of the body and mind. Personality goes, and then life.

Dr. Armand Nicholi, once senior psychiatrist at Harvard University, when addressing a group of church leaders, discussed what he called the "criteria of emotional maturity." Central to his presentation was

the affirmation that while it is difficult to get psychiatrists to agree on almost anything, most agreed that basic for any healthy personality is "a sound, consistent conscience with well-defined moral precepts." He continued by saying that the "new morality" has not succeeded in banishing guilt feelings, and that these were being everywhere evidenced by moods of despondency and the desire for self-punishment.

C.S. Lewis wrote in the same vein when he declared that

two facts are the foundation of all clear thinking about ourselves and the universe we live in. First, that human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it. Secondly, that they do not in fact behave in that way. (*Mere Christianity*, p. 7)

Lewis dismisses the rationalization that the idea of a universal law of decent behavior can be disqualified just because different civilizations have had contrasting moralities. Says he:

There have been differences between their moralities, but these have never amounted to anything like a total difference. If anyone will take the trouble to compare the moral teaching of, say, the ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, Hindus, Chinese, Greeks and Romans, what will really strike him will be how very like they are to each other and to our own. (*Ibid*, p.5)

## Testimony of Our Experience

Let's leave the scholars for a time and think on our own experience. We do not need degrees in psychiatry or philosophy in order to say "Amen" to the statements of Nicholi and Lewis. They have merely distilled the essence of the daily experience of Mr. Everyman. Furthermore, we know intuitively that if we interpret man by the cosmos, meaning evaporates; but if, on the contrary, we judge the cosmos by man, we find that meaning exists and that it is woven from the strands of rationality, beauty, and morality. None of these are demonstrable, but all of them exist as the basic axioms of human existence.

We are all conscious, for example, of that little figure who sticks closer to us than any brother. At times he shakes his fist and stamps his feet, and at times he

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claps his hands and says "Bravo." Whenever we ignore him, he makes us smart for it. But if we follow his counsel, although our way may appear the harder at first, our heart rejoices.

To the first murderer the little man appeared as an omnipresent awful eye. In Victor Hugo's poem of Cain he represents the murderer fleeing from Eden. Many miles from his crime he lay down to sleep at the foot of a mountain. But as he gazed into the sky, he beheld an awful eye peering into his guilty soul. Rising in haste, he ran to the farthest point of land jutting out into the sea, but lol on the rim of the ocean, looking like a rising sun, appeared the haunting eye again.

Cain then put a tent over himself, but the thick skins could not keep out that vision. He built a roof of heavy timber, but the eye shone through. He built a tower of stone and hid in the lowest dungeon, but the glowing eye pierced the stones. Finally they constructed a tomb beneath the ground and buried the haunted man as though he were dead; but in the tomb he found another was there, the eye was still focused upon him.

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The little man and the eye are but metaphors for conscience. Conscience — that hound of heaven, the rack of the Almighty, the nemesis within, the prophet of eternity, the fingerprint of the Creator, that critic whom the bravest fears — exists as universally as mankind. Conscience blesses as well as curses. Heeded, it is the condition for health — physical, mental, and spiritual.

#### **The Ever-Present Conscience**

Two thousand years ago the cock crowed for the big fisherman. A dart pierced him, and he fled into the darkness to weep as though with his tears he could flood away the past. From the maelstrom of remorse and self-reproach emerged a new man who could stand unmoved amid the tempests of persecution and pray calmly while being crucified inverted on a cross. The cock still crows. It crows for most of us several times a day. Our response determines destiny, for our cock crowing is the shrill call of conscience which cannot be intimidated or entirely silenced.

Only one man has ever lived in complete accord with his conscience. He spoke with authority on truth, for he himself was and is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. To a generation as corrupt as our own he gave the following warning: "Your eye is the lamp of your body, when your eye is sound, your whole body is full of light; but when it is not sound, your body is full of darkness. Therefore be careful lest the light in you be darkness. If then your whole body is full of light, having no part dark, it will be wholly bright, as when a lamp with its rays gives you light" (Lk 11:34-36).

Christ here says the filling of our entire spiritual being with light depends on the spiritual eye of the conscience. It is the conscience which, according to its condition, admits or retards the entrance of saving

light. It can illuminate the whole personality, or, if ignored, it can leave man a decaying loathsomeness — a grave within, as the Pharisees to whom this warning came (Lk 11:44).

It is apparent from these words of Christ that it is possible for conscience to be diseased, and partly or wholly blind. As a sun dial tells the time only when the sun is shining upon it, so conscience is reliable only when reflecting the beams of him who is the Light of the World. Said a Hindu to a British administrator, "Our conscience tells us that it is right to burn our widows on the pyre of their husbands." "Yes," replied the officer, "and **our** conscience tells us to hang you if you do."

#### **Conscience Illuminated from Heaven**

Significant indeed is the fact that the Gospels record more cases of blindness healed than of any other malady. These were instances of men who had eyes but no sight, until they met the Great Physician. When Richard I of England was languishing in an unknown dungeon of Europe, his minstrel Blondel traveled throughout the land singing the favorite airs of the king before the dungeon bars of every castle he could find. One day his song without was responded to by the voice of his king within. Thus the way was paved for Richard's return from exile and restoration to his throne. Even so, the conscience of man dwells in darkness like a captive king in a dungeon, until the music of heaven wakes echoes hitherto unknown in the prison and inclines him to cry out for release. The entire world will go out into insanity and darkness if it rejects the music of God's revelation, which alone can bring restoration to conscience.

Let us note a typical case of Christ's healing of the blind. It shows the only way to moral enlightenment and health for ourselves today. "And he cometh to Bethsaida; and they bring a blind man unto him, and besought him to touch him. And he took the blind man by the hand, and led him out of the town; and when he had spit on his eyes, and put his hands upon him, he asked him if he saw ought. And he looked up, and said, I see men as trees, walking. After that he put his hands again upon his eyes, and made him look up: and he was restored, and saw every man clearly" (Mk 8:22-25).

Seven times in these few verses the touch of Christ is referred to by direct statement or inference. Here then is the source of healing for conscience — contact with the living Christ. The son of thunder wished lightning to destroy a whole village. But later on he wrote the epistle of love (1 Jn 4). The point needs to be emphasized that the modern confusion over right and wrong is the result of rejecting him who alone can give light. To reject the Spirit of God is to invite continued darkness. The conscience is able to shine, is constructed to shine, but it is not alight until it has been lighted by the kiss of heaven.

Before God in the beginning said, "Let there be light," he said, "Let there be Spirit"; for we read that "the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light" (Gen 1:2,3). Light will not make the waters of life glad unless the Spirit of Christ first moves upon them. Our age can never hope for the solution to its problems international, national, or personal, until like the blind man we submit to the light brought by Christ.

The sufferer of Mark 8 came as a beggar to Christ, and he was not turned away. It took humility to be led by One unseen where he knew not, and then to receive spittle at the site of his malady. Note that the man was separated from the multitude, led away into quietness, and told to look up. The Scriptures admonish us, "Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil" (Ex 23:2). To stand with Christ often means to stand separate from the careless throng.

### **Our Conscience at Work**

God brought cosmos from chaos in the beginning by the moving of his Spirit and the speaking of his word combined. Ten times we read in the Bible's first chapter, "And God said." And so today, it is still the Word of Christ that brings enlightenment and cleansing. We need to listen afresh to his Ten Words from Sinai, which lead the darkened soul to feel its need for the regenerating Spirit and which indicate the way in which we are to walk.

Let us ponder this connection between the blind and Christ. Conscience was never meant to be separated from him who formed it. This becomes apparent as we consider the divine purpose in conscience. All that the New Testament says about the moral law of God can be said of conscience, for the latter is but the mind's perception of the former, plus the feelings inevitably associated with such perception. Thus, when the New Testament says the law is our tutor to bring us to Christ (Gal 3:24), we are meant to understand that our mere perception of right and wrong cannot bring us health unless it brings us first to him who is Life Incarnate. What the Bible calls repentance is nothing more or less than the right response of an awakened conscience.

**The conscience of man dwells in darkness like a captive king in a dungeon, until the music of heaven wakes echoes hitherto unknown in the prison and inclines him to cry out for release.**

When the Spirit of God shines into a man's heart and illuminates him regarding the true nature of his duty, a battle begins which climaxes victoriously only when penitence and faith are experienced. First, man finds that his awakened conscience criticizes his outward actions of temper, passion, and selfishness. Next the inward sins of thought and carnal desire are condemned. Our sins of omission are also spotlighted as never before. And finally we confess that our real problem is not what we have done but what we **are**.

Henry Ward Beecher pictured the believer's experience aptly as follows:

When a man begins to labor to satisfy his conscience, his conscience becomes exacting faster than he can learn how to perform. His ideal, associated with his moral sense, augments more rapidly than his performance. So that the more he does, the less he is satisfied. Many a man will witness to me here that the most violent exertions that he ever put forth were toward reformations that brought him the least of comfort.

Here stands an old house that has been a hundred years without repair. The old master dies, and a new man comes in, and with him comes reformation and reparation. He sends for his architect and

master workman, that commence searching to ascertain what is required to be done. There is a shingle off, which must be put on. But when that is taken off, it is found that the very boards, to which the shingles are fastened, are rotten. And these must come out. And when these are taken out, it is found that the very beam under them is decayed. And this must come out. And by probing it is found that there is decay all through the building. And the result is, that when the house is gone through, the man has spent enough to have build a new one, and still it is an old one. Part leads to part, and disclosure to disclosure, and decay to decay; and it seems as though it was almost impossible ever to make it good.

That is but a faint emblem of the work of reformation in the human soul. When a man begins to probe his disposition, he finds it to be a very different thing from a house. A house is inert, and offers no resistance to his attempts to renew and renovate it, but the human disposition is an ever-fertile, ever-growing, ever-recreating center. And a man is conscious that the more he tries to regulate it, the harder it is to do it.

**The modern confusion over right and wrong is the result of rejecting him who alone can give light. To reject the Spirit of God is to invite continued darkness.**

Thus does conscience, as the hound of heaven and the rack of the Almighty, press us sorely as some inevitable nemesis. Deflated, emptied, poverty stricken spiritually, at last we confess to Heaven that we are absolutely unable to love God with all our hearts and our neighbors as ourselves, and in absolute self-despair we look to him who has promised to create a new heart for the penitent. In such a manner do the law and conscience kill the old "I" of self-dependence and self-righteousness. John Bunyan quaintly expressed the Christian's ensuing relief from remorse when he described his own experience:

One day, as I was passing into the field, and that too with some dashes on my conscience, fearing lest yet all was not right, suddenly this sentence fell upon my soul, 'Thy righteousness is in heaven;' and methought withal, I saw, with the eyes of my soul, Jesus Christ at God's right hand; there, I say, is my righteousness; so that wherever I was or whatever I was doing, God could not say to me, 'He wants my righteousness,' for that was just before him. I also saw, moreover, that it was not my good frame (feelings) of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame (feelings) that made my righteousness worse; for my righteousness was Jesus Christ himself.

### **The Gospel as a Source of Health.**

The gospel alone can educate and suffice conscience. But it is a gospel that must be received afresh every day. In the story of Mark 8 we note that a single touch was not enough to bring fullness of vision. Repeated contact with Christ is the soul's need, lest the world cast a returning film of sin over the newly cleansed eye of the soul. The chastenings of conscience recur daily in order that we might learn to live close to the cross. Although victory over revealed sins becomes the believer's privilege, Luther's words remain true that the Christian is "always a sinner, always a penitent, and always right with God." Christ, through conscience, ever breaks us in order to make us. And here is the ultimate purpose of conscience, not merely to function as a condition for health and sound personality, but as the hound of heaven pursuing us and depriving us of supposed strength until we are taken by him who is love. □