

## LECTURE VII.

MORAL ARGUMENT—TESTIMONY OF CONSCIENCE  
AND HISTORY.

## I.

WE have seen how the power manifest in the universe leads up to God as the First Cause the all-originating Will. We have seen also how the order manifest in the universe leads up to Him as the Supreme Intelligence. But there is more in the universe than force and order; there is force which works for good, and a just and benevolent order; there are moral laws and moral actions, moral perceptions and moral feelings. Can anything be thence inferred as to whether God is, and what He is? I think we shall find that they clearly testify both as to His existence and character.

The moral law which reveals itself to conscience has seemed to certain authors so decisive a witness for God, that all other witnesses may be dispensed with. Kant, who exerted his great logical ability

to prove that the speculative reason in searching after God inevitably loses itself in sophisms and self-contradictions, believed himself to have found in the practical reason or moral faculty an assurance for the Divine existence and government capable of defying the utmost efforts of scepticism. Sir William Hamilton has also affirmed that "the only valid arguments for the existence of God, and for the immortality of the human soul, rest on the ground of man's moral nature." Dr John Newman has insisted that conscience is the creative principle of religion, and has endeavoured to show how the whole doctrine of natural religion should be worked out from this central principle. A well-known living theologian of Germany, Dr Schenkel, has attempted to build up a complete theology on conscience as a basis, starting from the position that conscience is "the religious organ of the soul"—the faculty through which alone we have an immediate knowledge of God. These thinkers may have erred in relying thus exclusively on the moral argument—I believe that they have—but the error, if error there be, shows only the more clearly how convincing that argument has seemed to certain minds, and these assuredly not feeble minds.

There is, besides, valuable truth underlying any exaggerations into which they may have fallen on the subject. There is probably no living practical

belief in God which does not begin with the conscience. It is not reasoning on a first cause, nor even admiration of the wisdom displayed in the universe, which makes the thought of God habitually and efficaciously present to the mind. It is not any kind of thinking nor any kind of feeling excited by the physical universe or by the contemplation of society, which gives us an abiding and operative sense of God's presence, and of His relationship to us. It is only in and through an awakened and active conscience that we realise our nearness to God—His interest in us, and our interest in Him. Without a moral nature of our own, we could not recognise the moral character and moral government manifested by Him. We might tremble before His power, or we might admire His skill, but His righteousness would be hidden from us, His moral laws would be meaningless to us, and their sanctions would be merely a series of physical advantages or physical disasters. But a God without righteousness is no true God, and the worship which has no moral element in it is no true worship. As, then, it is only through the glass of conscience that the righteousness of God can be discerned, and as that attribute alone can call forth, in addition to the fear, wonder, and admiration evoked by power and intelligence, the love, the sense of spiritual weakness and want, and the adoring reverence, which are indispensable in true worship—

such worship as God ought to receive and man ought to render—the significance of the moral principle in the theistic argumentation is vast indeed.

It follows, however, from the entire course of the reasoning in which we have been engaged, that the moral argument is not to be exclusively relied on. It is but a part of a whole from which it ought not to be severed. It cannot be stated in any valid form which does not imply the legitimacy of the arguments from efficiency and order. If other facts do not refer us back to a primary case, neither will moral facts lead us to the primary moral agent. If order is no evidence of intelligent purpose, moral order can be no evidence of moral purpose. The moral argument proves more, but also less, than the arguments which have been already expounded. It shows us that God is endowed with the highest moral excellence, and is the source of moral law and of moral government, but it does not prove Him to be the Creator of the universe or the Author of all order in the universe. It contributes to the idea of God an essential element, without which that idea would be lamentably defective, but it supposes other elements also essential to be given by other arguments. The office of bearing witness to the existence and character of God can be safely devolved on no one principle alone, even although that principle be conscience. It is a work in which all the principles of human nature

are privileged to concur. Either all bear true testimony, or all have conspired to deceive us. The self-manifestation of God is addressed to the entire man, and can only be rightly apprehended by the concurrent action of all the energies and capacities of the soul.<sup>1</sup>

It is, perhaps, especially important in conducting the moral argument to ask ourselves distinctly, Whence ought we to begin? Is there any point, any fact or principle, from which we are in reason bound to start? Inattention to this preliminary inquiry has caused many to look at moral facts *en masse*, as it were, and to endeavour to draw an inference from them in virtue of something common to them all. This can only lead to confusion and error. Moral facts are of two radically distinct classes, and cannot be comprehended under any higher generalisation, which can be taken as the foundation of a theistic inference. The facts need to be distributed and interpreted—to have their characters discriminated; and we must begin with the principle by which this is done—that is, with conscience itself. We need no more attempt to judge of moral qualities without reference to our moral perceptions and feelings—to the information given us through conscience—than to pass a judgment on colours before seeing them, or irrespective of how they appeared to us when we saw them.

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix XXV.

If we look at the moral facts of the universe from any outside point of view—not from that of conscience—how can we escape ascribing the evil as well as the good to God, and trying His character either from both or from the preponderance of the one over the other? But if we do so,—if we seek to rise to God through an induction from all moral facts—we shall form a miserable notion of God, and we shall, besides, ride rough-shod, as it were, over conscience. For what is it that conscience declares most clearly about moral good and evil, right and wrong? Is it not that they are radically antagonistic—irreconcilable and contradictory,—that they cannot have the same ultimate author—that if the one be the expression of God's will, the other must be the expression of His aversion? If conscience have any testimony to give about God at all, it is that, as the author of good, He must be the enemy of evil. The contemplation of the moral world may perplex us, but conscience is an assurance that evil, however perplexing, is not to be referred to the same source as good.

The testimony of conscience on behalf of God has been presented in various ways, and it need not surprise us to find some of them unsatisfactory. I regard as unwarranted the view that conscience is "the religious organ of the soul," the sole faculty through which the human mind is in contact and communion with God. There is no one specific

power or organ of the mind in virtue of which exclusively man is a religious being. It is by the whole make and constitution of his nature, not by a particular faculty, that he is framed for religion. I more than question if we have a right even to ascribe to conscience an immediate intuition of God. It brings us, some have affirmed, in a strict and positive sense into the real presence of God, with nothing intervening between us and Him—He as the absolute personality standing sharply and distinctly over against our personality. This doctrine has, however, one obvious and serious difficulty before it. Conscience—that is a word which has got in ordinary use a very clear and definite meaning. We all know what conscience is as well as we know what the eye or the ear is, and we all know what an act of conscience is as well as we know what seeing or hearing is. It is not more certain that by the eye we see colours, and that by the ear we hear sounds, than that by conscience we discern good and evil. When, therefore, any man comes and assures us that through conscience we have an immediate apprehension of God, it is natural that we should answer at once, You may as well assure us that through sight we immediately hear sounds or smell odours. What we immediately apprehend through conscience is the right or wrong in actions, and therefore not God. Morality is the direct object of conscience ;

God can therefore only be the presupposition or postulate of conscience, — can only be given in conscience as implied in morality. This, I say, is an obvious objection to the assertion that God is immediately known in conscience. It is an objection which has not been got over, and which, I believe, cannot be got over.<sup>1</sup>

The argument from conscience, like all the other theistic arguments, is extremely simple. It is the obvious inference from the most obvious facts of our moral consciousness. It demands of us no subtle analysis of conscience. It is not dependent on the truth of some one particular theory as to the origin of conscience. It is based directly on what cannot be denied or disputed,—the existence of conscience, the existence of certain moral judgments and feelings common to the experience of all men. Conscience exists. It exists as a consciousness of moral law; as an assertion of a rule of duty; as a sense of responsibility. When it pronounces an action right, it does so because it recognises it to be conformed to law; when it pronounces an action wrong, it does so because it recognises it to fall short of or to transgress law. It acts as the judge of all that we do, and as such it accuses or excuses, condemns or approves, punishes or rewards us, with a voice of authority, which we may so far disregard, but the legitimacy

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix XXVI.

of which we cannot dispute. It claims to rule over body and soul, heart and mind, all our appetites, affections, and faculties; and the claim is implicitly admitted even by those who have most interest in denying it. But it does not rule, nor pretend to rule, as an autocratic authority; it does not give us, nor pretend to give us, a law of its own: on the contrary, it claims to rule in us only in virtue of recognising a law which is over us; its authority is derived wholly from a law which it interprets and applies, but does not create. It thus speaks not of itself but as the deputy of another. It unequivocally declares itself a delegated authority. Some may say that the law of conscience is set by man's own will, and that the will is a law unto itself; but this assertion cannot bear examination. The will apart from reason and conscience is a mere force, not a true will. It has a rational law only through its connection with reason, a moral law only through its connection with conscience. Whoever affirms that the will is its own law must grossly abuse language, and signify by the term will what others mean by reason and will, conscience and will. He must do worse than this, bad as it is. He must contradict the plain dictates of his own consciousness. The will and its law are distinctly felt to be not one but two. The will is clearly realised in our moral experience as not legislative, as not giving itself a law but as being under a law, the

law which conscience apprehends. To identify the will and its law is to confound entirely distinct things. For the will to rule the will, it would need at once to command and to obey, to be bond and free, dependent and independent. To be its own rule were for it to be without rule. Conscience claims to rule my will in virtue of a law which cannot be the expression of my will, and which cannot be anything else than the expression of another will; one often in antagonism to mine—one always better than mine—one which demands from me an unvarying and complete obedience. It comes to me and speaks to me in defiance of my will; when my will is set against hearing it, and still more against obeying it; when my will is bent on stifling and drowning its voice. It warns, threatens, condemns, and punishes me, against my will, and with a voice of authority as the delegate or deputy of a perfectly good and holy will which has an absolute right to rule over me, to control and sway all my faculties; which searches me and knows me; which besets me behind and before. Whose is this perfect, authoritative, supreme will, to which all consciences, even the most erring, point back? Whose, if not God's? Those who object that this argument is a mere verbal inference, or that it rests on a double meaning of the word law, do not understand it, simple as it is. They may be honest enough disputants, but their objection

is strangely superficial. In the utterly irrelevant criticism of a word they lose sight of a great fact, and so necessarily fail to perceive its momentous significance. From no mere word, whether law or any other, but from that consciousness of moral dependence which no moral creature can shake off, which conscience implies in every exercise, which reveals itself in a thousand ways in the hearts and lives of men, do we conclude that there is One on whom we morally depend, that we have a holy Creator and Judge to deal with. Reason takes no mere name, but it takes the fact that man feels himself under a law of duty, that he is conscious of obligation and responsibility, that he has a conscience which does not counsel but which commands him to do what is right and to resist what is wrong; and it finds this fact inexplicable, this consciousness a delusion, this conscience a false witness—unless there be a holy God, a Moral Governor.

Conscience reveals a purpose as well as declares a law. Its very existence is a proof of purpose. The eye is not more certainly given us in order that we may see, than conscience is given us in order that we may use all our powers in a righteous and beneficent manner. Is it conceivable that any other than a righteous God would have bestowed on us such a gift, such a faculty? Would an intelligent but unrighteous God have made us to hate and despise what is characteristic of his

own nature? Would he have made us better than himself? The purpose which conscience reveals is certainly not our own purpose, just as the law which it declares is not the law of our own will. The purpose which finds its expression in conscience, and our own purpose, are often felt by us to be in direct antagonism. Our souls may be tortured by the conflict between them. But in all phases of the conflict we are sensible that it is our purpose which ought to be abandoned; that the purpose which we dislike is that which we are bound to accept and to obey. In this way, also, conscience speaks to us of a righteous God by speaking in His name. If the inference from effect to cause, from manifestation of purpose to intelligence, is good anywhere, it is good here; and it warrants us to believe that the First Cause of conscience is a righteous Being.<sup>1</sup>

All the feelings, emotions, and affections which gather around the apprehension of right and wrong, which accompany the sense of duty or conviction of obligation, point to the same conclusion. The consciousness of good or ill desert, remorse and self-approval, moral hopes and fears, concur in referring to a holy God. They imply that man is a person related not merely to things and laws, but to another person who is his rightful and righteous Judge. The atheist himself, when he grieves even

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix XXVII.

for secret and private sins, or enjoys the inner peace which only his own heart knoweth, mourns and rejoices as if in the presence of a higher personal Being—the God whom he denies. Neither his sorrow nor his satisfaction is fully intelligible if his soul have before it only an impersonal law or the abstract nature of things ; both presuppose that he has some kind of consciousness of being under the cognisance of a Person possessed of moral attributes. If men felt that they were responsible for their evil thoughts and words and deeds to no one higher than themselves or their fellows, is it conceivable that the consciousness of guilt and the fear of retribution would have been what experience and history testify them to have been? Would prayers and penances and sacrifices have prevailed so widely, if the law of right and wrong when broken had been merely felt to be broken—if there were no underlying sense of the existence of One behind the law whose righteousness must be satisfied, and whose wrath must be turned away by the breaker of the law? Would there have been in that case any moral conflicts in the human heart akin to those which a Sophocles or a Shakespeare has delineated? Were there no God, there ought to be no fear of God awakened even by crime ; but atheism itself cannot protect a criminal when alive to his guilt from being haunted and appalled by fears of a judgment and a justice more terrible

than those of man. When we are perfectly willing to bear any pain which the mere laws of nature attach to our sins, and when our reason assures us that we have nothing to fear on account of them from the law or even the opinion of society, why, if our moral natures are not seared and deadened, do we yet fear, and fear most when most alone? "Inanimate things," says Dr Newman, "cannot stir our affections; these are correlative with persons. If, as is the case, we feel responsibility, are ashamed, are frightened, at transgressing the voice of conscience, this implies that there is One to whom we are responsible, before whom we are ashamed, whose claims upon us we fear. If, on doing wrong, we feel the same tearful, broken-hearted sorrow which overwhelms us on hurting a mother; if, on doing right, we enjoy the same seeming serenity of mind, the same soothing, satisfactory delight which follows on one receiving praise from a father,—we certainly have within us the image of some person to whom our love and veneration look, in whose smile we find our happiness, for whom we yearn, towards whom we direct our pleadings, in whose anger we are troubled and waste away. These feelings in us are such as require for their exciting cause an intelligent being; we are not affectionate towards a stone, nor do we feel shame before a horse or a dog; we have no remorse or compunction in breaking mere human law: yet, so it is,

conscience excites all these painful emotions, confusion, foreboding, self-condemnation; and, on the other hand, it sheds upon us a deep peace, a sense of security, a resignation, and a hope, which there is no sensible, no earthly object to elicit. 'The wicked flees, when no one pursueth;' then why does he flee? Whence his terror? Who is it that he sees in solitude, in darkness, in the hidden chambers of his heart? If the cause of these emotions does not belong to this visible world, the Object to which his perception is directed must be Supernatural and Divine; and thus the phenomena of conscience, as a dictate, avail to impress the imagination with the picture of a Supreme Governor, a Judge, holy, just, powerful, all-seeing, retributive."<sup>1</sup>

It will, I need scarcely say, be objected to the arguments which have now been presented, that conscience is a product of association or a consequence of evolution; that it has been developed either in the experience of individuals or in the course of ages, out of sensations of pleasure and pain, out of benefits and injuries; and that the convictions and feelings implicated in it are due to the circumstances under which it has grown up and the causes which have combined to generate it. But to this it may be answered either that conscience has not been shown to have grown up

<sup>1</sup> Grammar of Assent, pp. 106, 107.

by association and development out of sensuous experiences, or that even if this were proved the argument would continue good; in other words, either the truth or the relevancy of the objection may be denied. All associationist and evolutionist theories of conscience seem to many of the most competent psychologists to have failed as regards their main object, although they may admit them to contain important elements of truth. This view I share. It does not seem to me that even Mr J. S. Mill, Prof. Bain, Mr Spencer, and Mr Darwin, have been able to show that conscience contains in it nothing original. But, of course, I am aware that the vindication of my dissent would require an adequate examination of associationism and evolutionism as explanations of the origin of conscience. No such examination is here possible. Nor is it required; on the contrary, a discussion of the kind ought, I believe, to be avoided in an inquiry like the present. No psychological investigation of a difficult and delicate nature is, so far as I can judge, essentially involved in the theistic argumentation at any stage. It is certainly unnecessary in conducting the moral argument to engage in any scientific disquisition as to the origin of conscience.<sup>1</sup> For our second or alternative answer will suffice. It does not matter, so far as our present purpose is concerned, whether

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix XXVIII.

conscience be primary or derivative. It exists; it bears a certain testimony; it gives rise necessarily to the thoughts and feelings which I have mentioned. Are these thoughts and feelings true? If not, conscience is a delusion; it utters lies; the completest moral scepticism is justified. If they are, the argument stands. The mode in which they have been acquired is in this reference a matter of indifference.

The argument from conscience, I may add, rests on the general and distinctive characteristics of our moral nature; not on the truth of particular moral judgments or the purity of particular moral affections. It cannot, therefore, be affected by the fact that moral perceptions and emotions admit of variation and development, and are sometimes false and depraved. However important in other respects may be the circumstance that men's thoughts and sentiments as to right and wrong are not always identical or even accordant, it is plainly irrelevant as an objection to any of the forms in which the argument for the Divine existence from the constitution of our moral nature has just been stated. It cannot be necessary to do more than merely indicate this, although some who maintain the wholly derivative nature of conscience appear to believe that the moral differences to be traced among men disprove all inferences from the moral faculty which they feel disinclined to accept.

## II.

Is the testimony which conscience gives to the existence and character of God confirmed when we look out into the moral world? No one will say that all is clear and unambiguous in that world—that it is nowhere shrouded in unpenetrated, if not impenetrable, darkness—that it contains no perplexing anomalies. There is an enormous mass of sin on earth, and the mere existence of sin is a mystery under the government of an omnipotent God who hates sin. There is a vast amount of apparently prosperous sin, and a vast amount of temporarily suffering virtue, and these are often severe trials of faith in the justice and holiness of God. Pessimism may exaggerate the emptiness and the sadness of life, but it has done service by exposing and discrediting the optimism which ignores the dark features and tragic elements of existence. Can an unprejudiced mind, however, even with all the sins and sufferings of the world before its view, and although consciously unable to resolve the difficulties which they suggest, refuse to acknowledge that the general testimony rendered by the moral world to the being and righteousness of its Author is ample and unmistakable? I think not. The conclusion which we have drawn from the char-

acter of the sentiments inevitably excited by the contemplation of virtue and vice, is also that which follows from the natural tendencies and issues of good and evil affections and actions. Virtue does not always meet with its due reward, nor vice with its due punishment, in any obvious outward shape; if they did, earth would cease to be a scene of moral discipline; but internal moral laws of an essentially retributive nature are in incessant operation, and show not obscurely or doubtfully what is the judgment of God both on character and conduct. Virtue is self-rewarding and vice is self-punishing. Virtue tends of its very nature to honour and life, vice to dishonour and death. There are outward bonds between virtue and happiness, vice and misery, which may be severed; but there are also inward bonds which cannot be broken—relations of cause and effect as inflexible as any in the physical world. Virtue may be followed by no external advantages, or may even involve the possessor of it in suffering; but infallibly it ennobles and enriches, elevates and purifies the soul itself, and thus gradually and increasingly imparts “a peace above all earthly dignities.” Vice may outwardly prosper and meet only with honour from men, but it cannot be said to be passing wholly unpunished so long as it weakens, poisons, and corrupts the spiritual constitution. Now this it always does, and never more actively than when

the individual who is guilty has silenced the voice of his conscience, and when a depraved society encourages him in his wickedness. The law—"he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption"—is never even for an instant suspended, although the growth and ripening of the seed into its fruit may be unobserved. In the very commission of sin the soul violates the conditions of its own welfare, destroys its own best feelings, impoverishes and ruins itself.

"He that has light within his own clear breast,  
May sit in the centre, and enjoy bright day ;  
But he that hides a dark soul and foul thoughts,  
Benighted walks under the mid-day sun—  
Himself is his own dungeon."<sup>1</sup>

When we look from individuals to societies, we perceive the same truth confirmed on a more comprehensive and conspicuous scale. It is true that in the social world there are bad triumphs and impious successes—that the victory of good over evil is often reached only after a long series of defeats. But it is equally true that the welfare of society is dependent on a practical recognition of moral principles—that the laws of morality are conditions of the progress, and even of the existence, of society. A cynical moralist of the eighteenth century maintained that private vices were public benefits ; but, of course, his sophisms

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix XXIX.

were easily exposed: he failed to convince any one of the correctness of his paradox. No inductive truth can be easier to establish, or better established, than that righteousness exalteth a nation, while sin lowers and destroys it. The vicious affections which torment and debase isolated men, equally disturb and degrade a tribe or nation. The virtuous affections which diffuse peace and happiness in a single heart, equally spread harmony and prosperity through the largest community. Thus the general conditions of social life testify that God loves virtue and hates vice. Then, if we examine history as a whole, we cannot but recognise that it has been in the main a process of moral progress, of moral growth. The children of the present day may be born with no better dispositions than those of five thousand years ago, and men may be now as guilty, as wilful sinners against what they know to be right, as ever they were; in that sense there may be no moral progress; but of this there can be, I think, no reasonable doubt in the mind of any impartial student of history, that the thoughts of men have been surely, if slowly, widened as to liberty, chastity, justice, benevolence, piety—and that their feelings have been correspondingly modified, their manners refined, and their laws and institutions improved. There may be no such thing as the inheritance or transmission of virtue, and every

step of moral advance may have to be gained by the free exertion of each individual, people, and generation in succession ; but, as a matter of fact, our race does on the whole advance, and not recede, in the path towards good. Just as reason, although it may be feebler than the passions in a short struggle, can always conquer them if it get time to collect its energies—so virtue gains and vice loses advantages with the lapse of years ; for, while the prejudices which opposed the former subside and its excellences become ever increasingly apparent, as history flows onward, those who leagued themselves in support of the latter quarrel among themselves, its fascinations decay, and its deformities become more manifest and repulsive. Age is linked to age, and in the struggle of good and evil which pervades all the ages, victory is seen slowly but steadily declaring itself for the good. The vices die — the virtues never die. Some great evils which once afflicted our race have passed away. What great good has ever been lost ? Justice carries it over injustice in the end. Now, whatever be the means by which moral progress is brought about, the testimony which it involves as to the moral character of God is none the less certain. The successful application of Darwinian principles, for example, to the explanation of human progress, would be no disproof of design in social evolution. If a natural selec-

tion, based on force, were shown to have prepared the way for a natural selection based on craft, which in its turn gave place to justice, and that again to love, God must none the less be credited with having contemplated the final result, and that result must none the less be held to be an indication of His character. When what is called the struggle for existence has been proved to lead, not to the deterioration but to the improvement of life—to the greatest abundance of the highest kinds of life possible in the circumstances—it will have been vindicated and shown to have been a means to secure such ends as a wise and benevolent Being would entertain. When it has been proved to have constrained men gradually to recognise that the virtues are the conditions of the most desirable existence, and that the vices are so many obstacles to the attainment of such an existence, it will have been still further vindicated by having been thus shown to be the mode in which righteousness is realised in the world. It matters little, so far as the religious inference is concerned, after what natural process and by what natural laws moral progress has been brought about; for whatever the process and laws may be discovered to be, they will be those which God has chosen, and will be fitted to show forth the glory of His wisdom, love, and justice.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix XXX.