

Conscience¹

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As we plan in the following essay to discuss the conscience, we are not disguising the difficulty of this subject.

We all know from experience what we mean by conscience; each of us knows those thoughts within ourselves that accuse us or excuse us. And yet, although in the practice of living nobody hardly ever mistakes the significance of the conscience, nevertheless the doctrine of the conscience is far from established, and it is difficult to define scientifically what we should understand conscience to be. The questions regarding what conscience is—whether it is a distinct capacity in a person or identifies merely an activity of one of our capacities, whether it possesses a unique content, whether and in what place it belongs in the moral life and in ethics—these and so many other questions are frequently answered in various ways. There is so little agreement in using the term *conscience* that in the second edition of his *Theologische Ethik*, the learned and profound Rothe thought that he was required to remove that term from science and replace it with other more specific terms.²

There certainly will not be many who join Rothe in this conclusion, surrendering this familiar term, choosing another that would be foreign to our experience and thus make even greater the distance [28] between science and ordinary life. It simply comes down to making careful distinctions.

To begin with the term itself, the etymological meaning, which is not decisive but nonetheless can shed much light, is clear and in many languages is identical. The prefix *con* as in the word concatenate means “with.” The basic meaning of the Dutch (German), Greek (*suneidēsis*), Latin (French, English) is the same, and points to a “knowing with,”

1. Appeared originally as “Het Geweten,” in *De Vrije Kerk* 7 (1881): 27–37, 49–58; included in *Kennis en Leven* (Kampen: Kok, 1922), 13–27. Pagination from *De Vrije Kerk* is provided in brackets.

2. Richard Rothe, *Theologische Ethik*, 2nd ed., 5 vols. (Wittenberg: Zimmerman, 1867–71), II § 177.

indeed, “along with” someone. The question becomes: With whom? Whether with God, as people have often suggested, though the word does not indicate this; or with another person who was an eye- and ear-witness along with us; or with oneself, so that a person knows and apprehends something through one’s own experience. In itself, the term *conscience* does not yet possess any ethical significance. It merely points to a shared knowing. Only when the linguistic usage began applying that term to the shared knowing with ourselves with regard to our moral situation, and thereby incorporated in that term an evaluating of oneself, did the term *conscience* receive that moral meaning that we ascribe to it in the present day. In French, the term “conscience” has the still broader meaning of consciousness, and the phrase “conscience morale” refers specifically to what among us is called conscience. The ethical meaning of the term is thus an acquired one that has a history. With short strokes we wish to sketch that history.³

Among the Greeks, neither *suneidos* nor *suneidēsis* appear in the ancient literature. We should not forget, however, that one should not conclude from this fact that the matter itself was unknown. Even though the term is absent, there [29] are sufficient traces that indicate that moral awareness was not lacking among the Greeks. Already with Homer we find repeated mention of fearing and worshiping the gods, who avenged and punished evil that people committed. The Erinyes [the Furies] are “the personification of the feeling of grievous injury and painful indignity, aroused by the intentional transgression of sacred rights.”

It is nevertheless remarkable that the term *conscience*, which was certainly native to linguistic usage far longer than we can demonstrate, was not incorporated into scientific language and discussion. We look in vain for this term even with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Perhaps this fact can be explained on the basis that Greek Ethics was indissolubly connected with the state, so that norms and standards were to be found within that objective authority rather than in the subjective and individual conscience. Moreover, the three philosophers mentioned above viewed morality intellectually and derived its standard from rational understanding, which evaluated good and evil. Only when the life of the state lost its prominence in Greece, and individualism increased, was the term *conscience* increasingly incorporated in the science of the moral life. Along this line, we encounter the term first in the later philosophical literature, with Dionysius Halicarnasus (± 30 BC), Diodorus Siculus

3. Cf. Kähler, *Das Gewissen: Die Entwicklung seiner Namen und seines Begriffs*, 1 Hälfte, *Altertum und neues Testament* (Halle, 1878).

(under Augustus), Plutarch (AD 50–120), and especially among the Hellenists.

Whereas among the Greeks, the conscience derived its content especially from the awareness of the limits assigned to people by the gods (*hubris*), among the Romans conscience was determined especially by their innate sense of dignity, virtue, and honor. Among the Romans, then, conscience had an entirely different character, and manifested itself as an authority that was respected and feared. The serious [30] and sober character of the Roman, the sense of justice and equity unique to the Roman, were points of contact for the lofty significance and seriousness of the conscience.

Among the Romans, then, the term *conscience* was ordinary and customary. Cicero speaks of the *magna vis conscientiae* (the power of conscience), and of its *grave pondus* (heavy weight); he viewed it as innate to all people and by nature private and believes that if conscience were to be lost, everything would disintegrate (*de nat. deor.* 3:35, *de legib.* 14).

The familiar proverb, *conscientia mille testes* (conscience is a thousand witnesses), proves how, among the Roman people, the conscience was viewed as a moral authority for living. Among them, the moral possessed an independent character and domain, and it did not function for them, as it did among the Greeks, in the category of aesthetics. The adage of Horatio is well-known: *hic murus aheneus esto, nil conscire sibi, nulla pallescere culpa* (Let that be your wall of bronze, to be free of guilt, with no wrongs to cause you pallor) (*Epist* I, 1.60). For Seneca, the conscience possessed an even greater significance (*Epist* 41.43, 97), whereas the gripping paintings of the bad conscience by Juvenalis (*Sat.* 13:1) and Persius (*Sat.* 3:35) are generally known.

Moving now to the Old Testament, we are struck immediately by the fact that the Israelite possesses no distinct word for referring to what we call *conscience*. In Ecclesiastes 10:20, the Hebrew word *madda* was incorrectly translated in the Septuagint as *conscience* [*suneidēsis*]. Although the term may well be absent in the Old Testament, the subject itself is nevertheless present. Already on one of the first pages of Holy Scripture, in the narrative of the fall (Gen. 3), conscience appears and its origin is explained. Before the fall, human beings had no conscience, at least not in the sense in which we are discussing it. Awareness of self and awareness of God [31] coincided at that point. No voice arose within the person at that point, which, as it were, stood over against the person and could accuse the person. The possibility of conscience thus coincides with the possibility of sin. Sin is the basis of the existence and operation of the conscience. For conscience is an awareness of having acted, not uprightly,

but wrongly, and is thus first and foremost negative, presupposing sin. Immediately after transgressing God's command, conscience manifested itself in the fact that the eyes of Adam and Eve were opened, and out of shame and fear they attempted to hide before God. Conscience is thus a "Symptom der Erkrankung" ["symptom of the disease"], the shattering of our awareness of God and our awareness of self; it is the knowledge of our fallen moral condition.⁴

In that sense, conscience appears more often in the Old Testament. The moral evaluation of our condition and of our actions, which we refer to as the conscience, is described by the Hebrew as *the heart*. By this it means that domain within the person where awareness of self occurs, where the person reflects about him- or herself. Thus, for the Israelite the heart is the core and the essence of our personality, the center of life, the seat of a person's entire spiritual life, and it therefore includes more than what we understand by conscience. The moral evaluation of our actions is one of the operations of the heart. The word *heart* has a broader meaning in Joshua 14:7, for example, where Luther translates it as "Gewissen," but where it means something close to "as far as I know." We see clearly that *heart* often refers to nothing other than *conscience*, however, in passages like 1 Kings 2:44 [32] where [Solomon] says to Samuel: you know the evil that *your heart* knows that you have done to David; in 1 Samuel 24:6, 2 Samuel 24:10 (cf. 1 Sam. 25:31), where David's heart struck him regarding the evil he had done. So then, the heart is the knower and the evaluator of the evil that we have committed (1 Kings 8:38, 47; Eccles. 7:22; cf. Gen. 42:21). The law of the Lord is written on the tablets of the heart (Jer. 17:1; 31:33; cf. 20:9). Especially important is Job 27:4–6, where Job confesses his innocence and verse 6b declares: "my heart does not reproach me for any of my days [my entire life]." In addition, in this connection all those passages come to mind where Israel's godly ones confess their innocence or expose the depth of their awareness of guilt (Pss. 17:1, 3; 18:[20–24]; cf. also Pss. 6; 38; 32:4; 5; 51; Job 15:20; Prov. 28:1; Deut. 28; 29).

Still more broad and important than in the Old Testament is the place that conscience occupies in the books of the New Testament. Nevertheless, it is a phenomenon that is remarkable and, for those who see in Jesus nothing more than a moral teacher, inexplicable that in the four Gospels, the word *conscience* does not appear, and Jesus never appeals to the conscience or talks about it. The only place in the Gospels where the conscience is mentioned is John 8:9—a passage that, suspicious to the

4. See Schenkel, "Gewissen," in Herzog, *Real-encyklopädie für protestantische theologie und kirche* (Stuttgart: Besser, 1856), 5:129–42 and A.F.C. Vilmar, *Theologische Moral* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1871), 65–115.

critics, contains little of importance and merely one comment of the writer. Nonetheless, from that it does not follow that Jesus is denying the conscience with regard to its significance and value, for he always maintains and presupposes the moral awareness of people and the capacity for repentance. But we do indeed see that Jesus, who himself always performed his Father's will, who himself never experienced the condemning and accusing voice of conscience in his innermost being, did not assign to conscience that place [33] that is assigned to it by many today in the domain of the moral life.

For the New Testament teaching about the conscience, especially Paul comes to our attention. Just as in the Old Testament so too with Paul, the *heart* is the seat of original knowledge of God (Rom. 1:21). Especially important is Romans 2:15, where Paul says of the Gentiles that by their actions they show that the work of the law has been written in their hearts. For in doing by nature the things that belong to the law, they prove that the work commanded by the positive law is written also in their hearts as a work commanded by God, as a moral obligation. With those actions, which prove the existence of a law in their heart, their moral awareness, their conscience, agrees, both their own personal conscience as well as the public conscience that comes to expression in the shared mutually accusing or excusing thoughts. According to Paul, then, the conscience is not the law itself; nor does the conscience contain this law, for the law was written in the heart. But together with the actions the conscience testifies in the heart concerning the existence of that law, a testimony that at the same time pronounces a verdict in the thoughts as to whether the law has been violated.⁵

With Paul and with the other New Testament writers, however, the word *suneidēsis* possesses not only that [34] narrow meaning which we use to refer to the conscience that speaks, but also the broader meaning of awareness, knowledge. This is what we find in 2 Corinthians 4:2, 5:11, 1 Corinthians 8:7, Hebrews 10:2, and 1 Peter 2:19; in the last three of these passages, the word appears with an object, something to which and by which it is bound. This is perhaps also the meaning we find in Romans 13:5. In Romans 2:15, 9:1, 2 Corinthians 1:12, Hebrews 13:18, Acts 23:1,

5. On this passage cf. the commentaries of Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, Friedrich Adolph Philippi, Johann Peter Lange, and others. See also Weiss, *Biblische Theologie des N. Testaments*, 3rd ed. (Berlin, 1880) §§ 253–54; Vilmar, *Theologische Moral* §§ 55, 77–79, 95. I would also draw attention to the unique explanation of Gottlieb Christoph Adolf von Harless, *Christliche Ethik*, 7th ed. (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1875) §§ 69–70, who understands “the work of the law” to refer not to “that doing, through which God’s Law is fulfilled” but to the judging and directing feature of the law.

24:16, [and] 2 Timothy 1:3, [conscience] involves not merely a certain awareness, but at the same time it testifies regarding our actions.

Despite the great value attributed to the witness of the conscience in these passages, the conscience is not infallible and immutable. The will of God remains the same, of course, but the conscience whereby the subject is bound to that will does change in its witness and judgment, according to the knowledge and development of an individual or of a people. Thus in 1 Corinthians 8:7 Paul speaks of a knowledge of the idols that is “with a conscience that feels that the idol is something and has a power to defile the food.” Thus, some Jewish Christians felt compelled by their conscience to observe the Mosaic law. The conscience can be bad, defiled, offended, and must then be cleansed by the blood of Christ (Heb. 9:14; 10:2, 22). And even among those who are already Christian, the conscience often continues to be bound to something that in itself is not prohibited, and it sometimes continues to operate in an undeveloped, weakened condition.⁶ We find instruction concerning this in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10, along with Romans 14, where Paul teaches that each person’s conscience is binding for that person, but not for others. The apostle [35] thereby acknowledges the individuality of the conscience, although he holds before the stronger brother the requirement that he not give offense to the weaker brother, for whom in fact Christ also died. For each person, strong or weak, the rule was that everything not proceeding from faith (from the firm conviction that what we are doing is good) is sin. The truth of the opposite, naturally, does not follow at all.

That conscience is good and pure that is washed in the blood of Christ, that is sanctified through faith, and in which the Holy Spirit himself bears witness (1 Tim. 1:19; 1 Pet. 2:19; Rom. 9:1). So only that Christian conscience is good that feels bound solely and entirely and closely to the divine will known to us from revelation. A distinction exists, then, between the conscience of the converted and that of the unconverted. The conscience of the former can still be weak and stained and unclean. But it is nonetheless initially cleansed, and has become conscious of faith. The working of the conscience always remains the same. It is always condemning in nature, it consists of the awareness of having acted wrongly. John the apostle teaches us (1 John 3:19–24) that the heart (in the Old Testament sense of conscience) can do nothing but condemn; in itself it knows no forgiveness; but the Christian conscience consists in this, that it does not merely condemn us, but also points us to the

6. Cf. Heinrich Friedrich Theodor Ludwig Ernesti, *Die Ethik des Apostels Paulus*, 3rd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1880) § 23.

forgiveness of sins in Christ. Brothers, if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows all things.

Thus both Old and New Testaments contain varying declarations that are extremely important for a doctrine of the conscience, which can invite a construction of that doctrine. Nevertheless, it took a long time before the conscience was discussed separately in the Christian church. [36] Only a few comments appear here and there among the church fathers, made by Clement of Alexandria, Origen, but especially by Chrysostom in his Homilies.⁷ In the Middle Ages, the conscience was discussed often in the areas of casuistry and Scholasticism but without people understanding the correct concept and the true significance of the conscience. The Reformation was accompanied by a favorable change in this regard.

As an act of morality and faith, the Reformation had a powerful influence on moral life. All the Reformers defended the moral consciousness of human beings. Especially the Reformed emphasized the conscience. Among them the matter arose as part of their natural theology, in connection with their discussion of the “small remnants” of the image of God, in the subject of Casuistics (*casus conscientiae*), which developed in Protestant soil as well, and in the subject of Ethics, which was treated separately for the first time by the Reformed theologian Danaeus (1577).

In more recent times, the conscience was discussed especially by Kant, who formulated as strongly as possible the autonomy of the moral person, ascribed a formal infallibility to the conscience, and understood a declaration of God to be absolutely binding. The frequent treatment devoted to the conscience since that time is closely connected with the powerful reversal that has occurred in the life and consciousness of the nations since the previous century. Being averse to all philosophical, metaphysical, and theological questions, people nowadays focus their attention almost exclusively on anthropological questions. The doctrine of the conscience has now found a home in the field of anthropology. Perhaps later, we will have an opportunity to show in more detail both the bright side and the dark side of this newer [37] perspective.

The problem of the conscience is made especially problematic today by those devoted to the teaching of evolution. Whereas these people view the conscience as something that is absolutely not original in the human being, but has developed along a completely natural path, others see in it the human being’s religious-moral organ par excellence, the origin and the principle of all moral and religious life. Thus, the opinions diverge

7. Johann Kaspar Suicer, *Thesaurus ecclesiasticus* s.v. *suneidos*. [Presumably, this reference is to the 3rd ed. (Utrecht, 1746); 1st ed. (Amsterdam: Wetstenium, 1682); 2nd ed. (Amsterdam: Wetstenios, 1728).—Ed.]

significantly, and the literature dealing with the conscience has grown to be virtually boundless.⁸

At a later time we hope to ascertain what the conscience is, what role it should occupy in the moral life according to the teaching of Scripture and that of experience.

In our previous article, we said that the doctrine of the conscience nowadays had to take into consideration the perspectives about human beings in general, and very particularly about their moral consciousness, that are placed at the center by the advocates of the Darwinian paradigm. After all, Darwinism, since it teaches that human beings have descended from the animals, cannot be satisfied without arguing and demonstrating the relevance, with respect to the spiritual essence of human beings, that such a spiritual being must and can be explained on the basis of the variation of material substance. In opposition to those who see precisely in the spiritual essence, especially in the conscience, what is peculiar to human beings, what distinguishes the human being from all other beings, for the Darwinians it comes down to applying the idea of development, i.e., of evolution, also to the spiritual life of human beings, and to justifying this application scientifically. This has already been attempted by various defenders of Darwin's paradigm, especially by both British philosophers Alexander Bain and Herbert Spencer. According to them, the conscience cannot be anything specifically human, nor a special capacity, nor an individual phenomenon; for then the conscience remains unexplained and evolution would not apply here. According to Darwinism, it must be a phenomenon that is present in human beings, while not belonging only to them, but composed from various component parts, able to be explained in its component factors, while analogies of those different factors must be able to be identified in animals.

[50] In this way, some attempt to explain the conscience in the basis of the feeling of pleasure and pain, of what is pleasant and unpleasant, whereby the ethical is deduced from the aesthetic, the good from the beautiful. Others think that the conscience has been composed and gradually formed through living under an authority in a society, which forced certain actions and laid those upon an individual as norms. It arose from fear of punishment and various other emotions, like vanity, sympathy, etc., which motivated a person to do these or those deeds, and gradually by means of custom such deeds were viewed as good, and other deeds conflicting with them were viewed as evil. According to Darwin

8. For the literature, see Schenkel, "Gewissen," in Herzog, *Real-encyklopädie*; Doedes, *De leer van God* (Utrecht: Kemink, 1871), 85–96; and especially the abundant list in the recently published third edition of Ernesti, *Die Ethik des Apostels Paulus* §§ 22–23.

himself, moral awareness is to be explained on the basis of the influence that the social instincts, which originated within us by living in a society, gradually acquired over the egoistic inclinations, which strove only for the gratification of the individual at the cost, if necessary, of the group.

No matter how it is presented, however, in all these explanations, the conscience nonetheless remains a product of circumstances. Had these been different, then the conscience itself would have acquired a different content. All duties are accidental. Insisting that this is good and that is evil are not rational and necessary claims but result from situations and circumstances that in turn were inherently accidental, or, if you will, necessarily had to be this way because the laws of nature command it, for at this point, accident and fate lie right next to each other and make little difference. In its entirety, morality is and remains, in one word, conventional.

Now it is true and must immediately be granted that in the empirical conscience as we know it from daily experience and observation, there is much that is accidental; it includes many elements that do not automatically [51] belong to the conscience but by means of different circumstances, nurture, status, occupation, etc., have come to be included and have, as it were, grown to be intertwined with conscience. The content of our conscience is derived largely from outside, and thus differs enormously among different peoples. Everyone knows examples of that. What is valued by one nation as being most highly moral and praiseworthy is disapproved by another as deeply immoral, so that Pascal said, “Vérité en deçà des Pyrenées, erreur au delà” (Truth on this side of the Pyrenees, error beyond). In Babylon, prostitution—not in daily life but on the occasion of some religious festivals and thus consecrated by means of religion—was viewed as a highly praiseworthy deed. The Jews considered lighting a fire on the Sabbath to be impermissible and forbidden by their conscience. Even among those who adhere to the same religion and agree in matters of morality, wide differences can nonetheless be observed. The one person takes a walk on Sunday without feeling any remorse; the other person would not be able to do this without self-incrimination. All of these are examples that could be multiplied by people from the immediate vicinity. The conscience of one person is narrow and is often still bound to an “idol”; that of another person is broad, since for him, as people often say, virtually anything goes.

Thus we cannot deny that many accidental elements are incorporated in the conscience and that its content is largely formed from the outside. Largely, but does that mean totally? Does the conscience possess absolutely no content, not even questions, in common? Is it entirely blank, merely a “tabula rasa” on which can be written whatever one’s birth,

nurture, and environment want to write? Many answer these questions negatively and say that the conscience does possess some kind of universal content, like, for example, “*Suum cuique*” [“To each his own”]. Among the widespread differences one can nonetheless observe some similarity among differing [52] peoples. Paul says that the Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things that are of the law and thus are themselves a law. And it is clear that we cannot make the conscience over into something we want, but often it resists something that we would be willing to adopt. As the ethical organ of human beings it has an affinity for the ethical, like our eye is designed to see the light. Nevertheless it is very difficult to identify which duties are specifically necessary pronouncements of the conscience, entailed innately and not received from the outside. It even seems to me that wanting to go back to that, and after settling all the differences, wanting to maintain a conscience with a certain chief rule or a pair of duties as its content, is already very unhistorical, recalling the evil time of Rousseau’s “*retournons à la nature*” [“back to nature”], and would finally show itself to be an impossibility. We always know the conscience only concretely, as it is historically formed within the family, state, and society, through religion, art, and science by all the moral authorities of a people.

But regardless of the situation, this is incontrovertible and is evident always and everywhere; namely, that the conscience exists. No one has sunk down so deeply on the path of sin but that conscience allows its voice still to be heard. No person is absolutely without conscience, but only Satan and his angels are. *What* is good and *what* is evil may be dominated by the greatest possible difference. *That* good and evil exist, that both are not the same, as the Materialists today want to have us believe, is a knowledge innate to every person. The awareness of duty, of something requiring unconditional obedience, is implanted within every human being. Experience teaches us only *that* there is something; but *why* that something exists, whether it be good or evil, beautiful or ugly, true or false, that is [53] what experience does not teach us. And even with that we are not satisfied, we not only observe, we also criticize and repeatedly pronounce our judgment. We cannot avoid doing this, we must always evaluate, whether to approve or disapprove, to esteem something as lofty or lowly. Nothing exists in connection with which a person considers observation alone to be sufficient, not asking about the reasonableness and necessity thereof. The Positivism of A. Comte does indeed teach that science must let go of all those value judgments and must be satisfied simply with the observation of facts. The person includes his or her reason and conscience in science and investigates the why and the how.

Thus a person does not receive the categories of good and evil, and thereby also of true and false, beautiful and ugly, just and unjust, from the outside, but possesses them a priori and brings them along in advance. This is the same situation as with the categories of logic. In thought itself, the laws of thought are gradually manifested. The more we think, the better we learn how and why we must think precisely this way and not otherwise. In this way as well, the awareness of good and evil gradually becomes apparent in the doing of good and evil. If humanity had not fallen, then it would have learned to know wrong thinking and wrong action not by experience, but at most as a prohibition, as a limit upon good thinking and good acting. Then, by means of always doing the good according to the inner impulse of their nature, they would always have entered more deeply into the knowledge of the essence of that good, that is, of God himself, as well. But now they learn to know the evil by their own painful experience. The evil rose to human awareness when people had done evil. And since they now do neither only good nor only evil, but always both are involved in all their [54] deeds and words, and intermingled, as it were, they learned in this manner to know neither the one nor the other purely, and they apply the category of good and evil impurely at best and always in accordance with the standard given them by the society.

Thus the conscience becomes manifest after the deed. Every consciousness presupposes a being such that moral consciousness also presupposes a being, a moral situation. If that situation happens to be normal, which means as it was supposed to be according to the given moral notions, then the conscience is silent, and it provides us with tranquility, a consciousness of having acted well and thus, as a consequence, a pleasant, gratifying feeling. If that situation does not correspond with the standard of the conscience, however, then it avenges itself, accuses us, punishes us with remorse and awareness of guilt.

This is how the conscience manifests itself and pronounces its judgment independent from our will, without our help, often even in opposition to all our attempts to silence its voice. Though that occasionally succeeds, conscience nonetheless repeatedly raises its voice; often so strongly and vigorously that it drives the criminal to realize the significance of his secret crime and, like Judas, makes him seek deliverance and comfort in suicide. Shakespeare in particular, the poet of the conscience, portrays for us with poignant accuracy the power of the conscience, for example, in *Macbeth* and *Richard III*.

But if it is true that the conscience manifests itself in the awareness of good and evil and in the accusing or excusing of our actions, what then is that conscience itself in its nature and essence? Where is its seat with the

human person? What is its secret power with which it applies the category of good and evil to all our actions and words, to our entire situation? Is it a separate capacity within us, or should it be assigned to one of the three capacities of the human soul: thinking, feeling, or willing? [55] We think not. The conscience does not stand alongside our thought, feeling, or will, and even less is it included within one of these three. It stands above those capacities, has authority over them, and supplies each with its standard.

Thought, will, and feeling are only partially within our power, within the power of our personality. But the conscience does not allow itself to be dominated, and, occasionally given to slumber, it awakens with all the more power. That occurs because the conscience is the law of our own personality. Each thing has its own law; all life is bound to laws that manifest themselves gradually in life. The conscience is the law of personal life to the degree that this is in conflict with its own essence and idea. And that this life can deviate from its own law is precisely the mark identifying it as a personal, a free, life. The conscience is thus the rift between the ideal person and the empirical person, between what one must be and what one is, between ideal and reality. In this way, the conscience is not a voice coming within us and to us from the outside, one that is foreign to our own being, for then the power of the conscience would be inexplicable. No, it is the law of our own personality, which accuses us, and does so with regard to not simply some actions or words or thoughts, but often our entire selves, our entire personality, the entire empirical I. It is the person's own being that reacts and protests against the person as he or she really is. The human person is an amazing being! With awareness, spiteful, sinning and thinking with premeditation, manifesting therein the person's greatest freedom, one learns thereby to know best one's deep dependence. Sin is capriciousness, irrationality, and thereby it leads not to the freedom of the will but to its slavish bondage. Those who sin misuse their will and come to the discovery that they cannot do what they want, that they [56] are bound to the law of their own personal, moral being, and that as a personality they can indeed transgress that law but never with impunity, never without remorse and recrimination.

Thus it appears that the conscience stands above us and over against us and maintains an order that applies unconditionally, one that we can never assault with impunity. In the conscience we learn that we are not *nostris juris* (a law unto ourselves) but are dependent on a higher authority. In this way it is not an awareness that is merely moral but also religious. The conscience is mine, my property, it is the most individual feature, indeed, it is the person within the person. And yet the conscience is not my fabrication. Within me it is independent of my will. It is not a

product but much more a factor of my consciousness. It is the law of my own being that accuses me in the conscience and nonetheless stands far above me and goes beyond my personality. Thus it cannot be explained from within myself but points to an authority above me that has been given to me as a law of my personality. It is something absolute, something unconditional and valid above everything, something divine that manifests itself to me therein. God himself is the last factor of the conscience. This law of the personality points back to him as the Legislator. In this way it is indeed a voice of God that comes to us in the conscience. According to that divine side, according to its inner essence, in itself, not as it manifests itself empirically within us, the conscience is infallible and cannot err. At its deepest core the conscience is a knowledge shared not only with our selves but also with God; an awareness that we live outside of him, that by transgressing the law of our own personality we have thereby simultaneously broken *his* holy law.

Because the conscience has received from God the authority that it has over us, and it is his law that addresses us in our conscience, [57] which is independent of the will and power of all people, even from our own power and will, therefore the freedom of the conscience is a demand that cannot be refused. God alone, no human being, no matter who that might be, is judge of the conscience. To subject it to the judgment of the state, of the church, or of science is tyranny, a presumption of law that belongs simply and only to God and a violation of what in human personality is the most noble, tender, and sacred.

Nevertheless, the question can be raised whether that freedom must apply without limit. Is it not possible, and does not experience teach us, that misuse can be made of an appeal to the conscience, and something can be passed off as a conscientious objection that, according to virtually everyone's judgment, has nothing to do with that? This question is certainly difficult and not to be answered with a universal rule. Exceptional cases require exceptional rules. Consideration must always be given, however, that it is better to spare ten pretended conscientious objections than to mock one real conscientious objection. To invade the rights of the conscience is to violate the majesty of the divine law. Among the Reformed, compelling the conscience is folly, because it does not depend on us to believe whatever we wish, and it is the greatest cruelty—to use the words of Pictet—to obligate someone to condemn himself, because no one is saved by a religion that he considers to be false.

But it is a duty for each one, in order to form his or her conscience, to purify one's conscience and to rid it of untrue elements. The conscience is of incalculable gravity, it is an invincible power in the individual and in an entire people. But it is not supreme. It knows no deliverance but only guilt

and recrimination and remorse. In this way it points indirectly to something else that can satisfy, [58] form, and lead it. The supreme norm for our life is the divine law that may echo in our conscience as a voice that is dull and unclear and as though from a distance. Something can be a sin before God that nonetheless is not against our conscience. Therefore the subjective rule of our life must be brought increasingly into agreement with the objective one made known to us in God's revelation. With increasing measure, Christ must become the content of our conscience. He makes our conscience first genuinely free, independent of all external authority, and makes the law of our own personality correspond with God's holy will. To be good, a deed must be in agreement not only with our conscience but also with the law of God; and the opposite is just as true. Between the conscience and the law of God there is a close connection. The moral, i.e., the universal-human, law of the Ten Commandments is, after all, nothing other than the natural law, which was implanted in Adam. And although the conscience has often become deformed through sin, nevertheless it remained the norm of good and evil and carries within itself the unconditional validity of the good, and thus, as it is gradually purified by Christ, incorporating the law of God, it can assimilate itself. Therein that law of God proves itself to our heart always more as genuinely divine, that it agrees with the depth of our being; therein lies the persistent proof for the truth of Christianity, that it satisfies the deepest needs and pronouncements of our conscience, and Christ fulfills to the fullest within us the law of our own personality. Because they understood that, our Reformed theologians treated the *Theologia Revelata* before the *Theologia Naturalis*. Nature and Scripture are not hostile toward each other but belong together, and the one without the other is unfinished and incomplete.