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CONSCIENCE AND CONSCIENTIOUS ACTION

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AT the present time Tribunals, appointed under an Act of Parliament, are engaged all over England in dealing with claims to exemption from military service based on the ground of "conscientious objection" to taking part directly or indirectly in warlike activities. Now it is no part of the professional business of moral philosophers to tell people what they ought or ought not to do or to exhort them to do their duty. Moral philosophers, as such, have no special information, not available to the general public, about what is right and what is wrong; nor have they any call to undertake those hortatory functions which are so adequately performed by clergymen, politicians, leader-writers, and wireless loudspeakers. But it is the function of a moral philosopher to reflect on the moral concepts and beliefs which he or others have; to try to analyse them and draw distinctions and clear up confusions in connection with them; and to see how they are inter-related and whether they can be arranged in a coherent system. Now there can be no doubt that the popular notions of "conscience" and "conscientious action" are extremely vague and confused. So I think that, by devoting this paper to an attempt to elucidate them, I may succeed in being topical without being impertinent.

I shall begin by trying to describe what I understand by "conscience," in the widest sense of the word. I have no doubt that it is often used in certain narrower senses, which I shall indicate in due course. I think that failure to recognize this ambiguity often leads to misunderstandings and disputes which are mainly verbal.

All civilized languages which I know or have heard of contain adjectives like "right" and "wrong," "good" and "evil," or their

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equivalents. This shows that human beings from the earliest times have had certain experiences which they took to be cognitions of acts, intentions, motives, etc., as having certain characteristics, viz. *moral* ones, which can take opposed forms. Again, retrospection assures most of us that we too have had such experiences when we have contemplated certain actions, dispositions, or characters, whether our own, or those of other real people, or those of fictitious persons in novels or plays. I am not at present concerned with the question whether there really are moral characteristics and whether we really do cognize them. I am concerned only with the plain psychological and historical fact that most of us, and most of our human predecessors back into prehistoric times, have had experiences which they took to be cognitions of such characteristics in acts, dispositions, characters, etc. I shall call these experiences "ostensibly moral cognitions."

It is an equally plain psychological fact that, when a human being contemplates an action or disposition or character in which these moral characteristics seem to him to be present, he is liable to feel certain kinds of emotion which he would not otherwise feel. All languages have words like "remorse," "feeling of guilt," "feeling of obligation," "moral indignation," and so on; and most of us know what such words indicate from our own experiences of such emotions. I propose to call these "morally directed emotions."

Here I must interpolate some remarks in order to ward off possible misunderstandings. We must notice that nothing ever has or could have *only* moral characteristics, any more than a word could have *only* meaning without any particular sound or visible form. Anything that has moral characteristics will also have certain non-moral ones; and, what is more, its moral characteristics will always depend upon certain of its non-moral ones. If I am told that a certain act was wrong, it is always sensible for me to ask: "Why? What *made* it wrong?" And the answer that I expect would be an indication of some characteristic which can be fully described and understood without the use of any moral term, e.g. that it was a refusal to return a borrowed article, that it was an intentionally misleading answer to a question, that it was an intentional infliction of unnecessary pain, and so on. I propose to call those non-moral characteristics on which moral characteristics depend "right-making," "good-making," and so on.

Now emotions may be and often are felt towards acts, experiences, etc., in respect of their non-moral characteristics. Suppose, e.g. that a friend grants me a favour unfairly at the expense of another person because he likes me and does not like him. I shall tend to view this act with a non-morally directed emotion of complaisance in respect of its non-moral characteristic of being an act of special

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love and favour towards myself. But I shall tend also to view it with a morally-directed emotion of disapproval in so far as it is an act of unfairness towards my rival. It is, I think, quite possible to feel a non-morally directed dislike for an act in respect of those very right-making characteristics which give it a rightness which calls forth one's moral approval. Our attitude towards certain acts of stern justice towards their sons by typical Roman fathers is of this mixed kind.

It follows from all this that we may often think that we are feeling an *unmixed* morally directed emotion, when what we are really feeling is a mixture of morally and non-morally directed emotion. And we may sometimes mistake a purely non-moral emotion, such as fear of discovery and punishment or malice, for a morally directed emotion, such as remorse or righteous indignation. But the possibility and even the frequency of such mistakes has no tendency to show that there are not specifically moral emotions. The very fact that we recognize that we are liable to make these mistakes, strongly suggests that there are specifically moral emotions.

Lastly, it is an equally plain psychological fact that the belief that a certain course of action would be right does exercise a certain attraction or compulsion on most people and thus provides them with a motive-component for doing it. Still more obvious is it that the belief that a certain course of action would be wrong exercises a certain repulsion or inhibition on most people and thus provides them with a motive-component against doing it. Sometimes every other feature in alternative A is such as would make one prefer it to B. To do A might benefit me and other people, and to do B might injure me and other people. But to do A would involve breaking a promise which I gave, after due consideration, to a person who is now dead and therefore cannot release me. If I believe that it is wrong to break a promise given under those conditions, this one feature in A may make me reject it and choose B. I am not at present considering such cases from an ethical point of view; all that I am concerned with here is the psychological fact that they happen and are perfectly familiar. All civilized languages have words like "ought," "duty," "obligation," etc. All these words refer to the fact that the supposed rightness of an action gives rise to a motive-component for doing it, and that the supposed wrongness of an action gives rise to a motive-component against doing it, and that these specifically *moral* motive-components may conflict with others which arise from one's belief about the non-moral characteristics of the action. I shall refer to these psychological facts as "moral motivation."

Here again we must notice that non-moral motive-components, based on the attractiveness or repulsiveness which an action derives

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from the non-moral characteristics which we believe it to have, will generally co-exist and co-operate with components of moral attraction and moral repulsion. In consequence of this a person may often think that he is being moved by purely moral motives when really his total motive for choosing or rejecting an alternative contains both moral and non-moral motive-components. And we may sometimes mistake a purely non-moral motive, such as desire for comfort or safety, for the moral motive of desire to do what is right as such. But the possibility and even frequency of such mistakes has no tendency to show that there is not moral motivation.

We may sum up these facts by saying that the vast majority of sane adult human beings are capable of ostensibly moral cognition, of morally directed emotion, and of moral motivation. Now every such person is also capable of *reflexive* cognition, i.e. of contemplating himself, his experiences, dispositions, intentions, motives, and actions, from various points of view. To say that a person "has a Conscience," when this phrase is used in its widest sense, is equivalent to asserting the following three closely connected propositions about him. (1) That he has and exercises the cognitive power of reflecting on his own past and future actions, and considering whether they are right or wrong; of reflecting on his own motives, intentions, emotions, dispositions, and character, and considering whether they are morally good or bad; and of reflecting on the relative moral value of various alternative ideals of character and conduct. (2) That he has and exercises the emotional disposition to feel certain peculiar emotions, such as remorse, feeling of guilt, moral approval, etc., towards himself and his own actions, dispositions, etc., in respect of the moral characteristics which he believes these to have. (3) That he has and exercises the conative disposition to seek what he believes to be good and to shun what he believes to be bad, as such, and to do what he believes to be right and avoid what he believes to be wrong, as such.

I propose to describe this as "the phenomenological sense" of the phrase "having a conscience." I think that the most sceptical of speculators about morals would hardly deny that most people nowadays and throughout the course of history have "had a conscience," in this phenomenological sense. Let us consider where ethical scepticism would be relevant to this question. The most radical form of scepticism would deny that adjectives like "right," "morally good," "obligatory," etc., really stand for characteristics. Its advocates would allege that sentences in which such words occur as grammatical predicates are really interjections or commands masquerading as statements about certain peculiar characteristics of actions, dispositions, persons, etc. If so, those experiences which seem to most people to be cognitions of moral characteristics cannot

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really be so; for there will be no such characteristics to be cognized. But it can hardly be denied that there are experiences which *seem* to be cognitions of moral characteristics. If there were not, it is impossible to see why moral sentences in all languages should have been couched in the indicative form with a moral adjective as grammatical predicate. So I do not think that such an ethical sceptic, if he knew his business, would attempt to deny that there are *ostensibly* moral cognitions, and this is all that is involved in the cognitive part of the definition of "having a conscience," in the phenomenological sense of that phrase.

If there are no ethical characteristics, it cannot be their presence in the actions, etc., which we contemplate, that moves our emotions. But that would not affect our definition. Granted that a person believes that there are moral characteristics, and believe that such and such of them are present in certain objects which he contemplates, there is no reason why this belief (however false or baseless it may be) should not evoke in him specifically moral emotions towards those objects. The ethical sceptic will, indeed, have to regard those emotions rather as a disbeliever in ghosts might regard the fear which a superstitious person would feel in a room which he believes to be haunted. But any reasonable person would admit that, even if ghosts do not exist, a specific kind of fear is felt by persons who believe in ghosts when they are in places which they believe to be haunted. What is more, a disbeliever in ghosts might himself feel such a fear in such circumstances, though he would judge it to be unreasonable. Similarly an ethical sceptic might himself continue to feel morally directed emotions, though he would have to regard them as unreasonable. And he should have no difficulty in admitting that most human beings do so. Therefore this kind of ethical sceptic need not deny that the emotional condition for having a conscience, in the phenomenological sense of that phrase, is fulfilled by most people.

Precisely similar remarks apply to the question of moral motivation. We are moved by our *beliefs* about the characteristics of things, regardless of whether those beliefs be true or false, well or ill founded. Since it can hardly be denied that most people believe themselves to be aware of moral characteristics in the actions, dispositions, etc., which they contemplate, the doctrine that all such beliefs are in principle mistaken is quite consistent with the contention that most people are susceptible to moral motivation.

An independent attack could, no doubt, be made on the applicability of the second and third clauses in our definition of "having a conscience." It might be contended that, whether we cognize moral characteristics or not, our beliefs in the presence of such characteristics never evoke any specific emotion and never influence our

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actions. Our emotions, it might be said, are evoked and our actions are influenced *only* by what we believe about the *non-moral* characteristics of what we are contemplating. But we proceed either to deceive ourselves or to try to deceive others about the direction of our emotions and the nature of our motives.

I think that this kind of scepticism is usually based on some general theory of human action, such as psychological hedonism, which would rule out the possibility of specifically moral emotion and motivation. I need only say that all such general theories rest on certain rather subtle verbal confusions, and may safely be rejected. A more empirical basis for such scepticism is the admitted mixture of non-moral emotions and motives with moral ones, and the admitted possibility of mistaking one of the former for one of the latter in any particular case. As I have already said, it does not seem to me that the facts about mixture and about mistakes and sophistications are adequate to support the sweeping negative conclusions which have been based on them, in face of the strong *prima facie* evidence for moral motivation and moral emotion.

I see no reason, then, to qualify my assertion that, in the phenomenological sense of the phrase, practically every sane adult human being "has a conscience," whatever may have been the case with himself as an infant or with his prehistoric ancestors. Of course an individual may happen to live in an environment in which his conscientious dispositions are hardly ever excited or are constantly suppressed. They may then atrophy or become warped, as any other set of dispositions would be likely to do under similar circumstances.

We must now notice some important negative facts about having a conscience, in the sense defined. (i) To say that a person has a conscience, in this sense, neither entails nor excludes that this person holds any particular theory about the nature of goodness or rightness or moral obligation. It neither entails nor excludes that he holds any particular theory about what makes good things good or right acts right. And it neither entails nor excludes that he holds any particular theory about the nature and sources of our moral knowledge and belief. A plain man, with no theories on any of these subjects, can have a conscience and act conscientiously. So too can persons who hold the most varied theories on these points; a man can be a conscientious Utilitarian, a conscientious Intuitionist, a conscientious Hegelian, or what not. All that is necessary is that he shall believe that, in some way or other, he can form a reasonable opinion about the rightness or wrongness, goodness or badness, of various courses open to him, and that his opinions on such matters shall be capable of evoking his emotions and influencing his decisions.

(ii) The fact that most people have consciences, in the sense

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defined, does not, so far as I can see, establish or refute any particular ethical theory. This is, of course, quite a different point from the one which we have just been discussing. It is one thing to say, e.g. that a person could equally well have a conscience whether he accepted or rejected Utilitarianism. It is quite another thing to say that a person could equally well have a conscience whether Utilitarianism be true or false. I assert that, on my definition of "having a conscience," both these statements are true, and that they would be equally true if any other ethical theory were substituted for Utilitarianism.

Now there is no doubt that the phrase "to have a conscience" has often been used in a narrower sense than this. I propose now to consider the more important of the narrower senses in which it has been used. In order to do this I must begin with a very brief account of the moral situation in which we appear *prima facie* to find ourselves. It is roughly as follows.

We seem to be under an obligation to do what we can to maintain and increase the amount of good and to diminish the amount of evil, of every kind, in the lives of other persons whom we can affect appreciably by our actions. Let us call this a "teleological obligation." *Prima facie* it seems that we have other obligations, not derivable from it, which limit it and may conflict with it; e.g. the mere fact that a person has made a promise seems to be enough to impose on him an obligation to keep it unless the promisee should release him. This obligation appears to be independent of any good that may be produced or evil that may be averted or diminished in others by keeping the promise. We seem to be under an obligation to keep it even when we have strong reason to believe that the consequences would be better for all concerned if we were to break it. Again, there seem to be non-teleological obligations which bear upon the direction and range of our teleological obligations. Granted that one has a duty to do good to others, it seems obvious to most people that a man has a more urgent duty to do good to his parents or his benefactors than to complete strangers.

Now there seem to be a number of non-teleological obligations, e.g. to answer questions truly, to keep one's promises, and so on. And they are liable to conflict, not only with our teleological obligation, but also with each other. E.g. a person may have made a certain promise and he may afterwards be asked a certain question. And it may be impossible to keep the promise and answer truly. In order to keep the promise he must tell a lie, and in order to answer truly he must break the promise. The only remaining alternative is to refuse to answer the question; but in many cases refusal to answer would, for all practical purposes, be equivalent to answering in a certain way and betraying a confidence which one had promised to keep.

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Now there is an important epistemological difference between teleological and non-teleological obligations. Suppose I am in a situation where several alternative actions are open to me, and that I am trying to fulfil the teleological obligation to produce as much good or as little evil as I can in others. In order to discover my duty I shall have to consider elaborately the probable remote consequences of the various alternative courses of action. Now this involves a great deal of wholly *non-moral* reflexion on the properties of things, the dispositions of persons, the laws of nature, and so on. The conclusions of such reflections will generally be highly uncertain, and one's capacity to conduct them successfully will depend on the extent of one's knowledge about non-moral facts and the degree of one's capacity for reasoning about physical, psychological, social, economic, and political matters. The *moral* insight that is needed will be concerned only with estimating and comparing the goodness and badness of the consequences which one thinks it likely that the various alternative courses of action would produce. Suppose, on the other hand, I am in a situation where non-teleological obligations are predominant, such as truth-telling and promise-keeping. Then in most cases the ascertainment of the relevant non-moral facts is perfectly simple and straightforward and can be performed without any expert knowledge or technical skill and instruction. If one has made a promise and is asked a question, there is generally not the least difficulty in being certain as to what answers would be lies and what answers would be breaches of promise. Here, then, almost the whole of the cognition involved is specifically *moral*; it is concerned with seeing that making a promise, as such, imposes an obligation to keep it; that answering a question, as such, imposes an obligation to answer it truthfully; and with estimating the relative urgency of these two obligations in cases where they conflict.

It is not surprising, therefore, that many people should be inclined to use the word "conscience" in such a way that conscience, on its cognitive side, is confined to the task of intuiting non-teleological obligations and estimating their relative urgency.

Suppose we take "conscience" in this narrower sense. Then it will follow that, if Utilitarianism be true, no one has a conscience. For the essence of Utilitarianism is that there are no non-teleological obligations. And, if there are none, no one can intuit them and estimate their relative urgency; though non-Utilitarians may mistakenly think that they do so. According to the Utilitarian, what makes it obligatory to keep a promise is not the mere fact that the promise has been made. What makes it obligatory, when it is so, is that we are under the obligation to produce as much good and as little evil as possible by our actions, and that experience has shown that promise-keeping on the whole leads to better

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consequences than promise-breaking. And similar remarks apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to all the alleged non-teleological obligations.

I am not at present concerned to discuss the truth or falsity of Utilitarianism, so I will confine myself to the following three remarks.

(i) In deciding what he ought to do in any situation, a Utilitarian would have to consider carefully, not only what the consequences of various alternative actions would probably be, but also what kinds and amounts of good and evil would attach to each of these consequences if it were realized. It seems inconvenient to use the word "conscience" in such a way that intuition and comparison of *goods and evils* would not be a function of conscience, whilst intuition and comparison of *non-teleological obligations* would be so.

(ii) Suppose that Utilitarianism is false, and that there are non-teleological obligations. It can hardly be denied that there is *also* the teleological obligation to produce as much good and as little evil as one can. The mistake of Utilitarianism would be to hold that this is the *only* obligation, and to fail to see that there are others, equally fundamental, which limit it and may conflict with it. Truth-speaking and promise-keeping will be duties not reducible to beneficence, but beneficence will still be one duty among others. Therefore, in deciding what one ought to do in a given situation, it will often be necessary to consider the relative urgency of the teleological obligation of beneficence and certain non-teleological obligations, such as truth-telling and promise-keeping. In order to estimate the urgency of the obligation of beneficence it will be necessary to enter into precisely the same kind of calculations as Utilitarians consider to be necessary in every case, since this urgency will plainly depend on the nature and amount of good to be produced or evil to be averted by one's actions. It seems to me that it would be highly inconvenient to use the word "conscience" in such a way that it was part of the function of conscience to compare the urgency of various non-teleological obligations, but was no part of its functions to compare the urgency of non-teleological obligations with that of teleological ones or to compare that of two or more teleological ones with each other.

(iii) Nevertheless, the considerations which have now been brought to our notice do suggest that the following explanatory sentences should be added to our definition of "having a conscience." We must distinguish between the *purely factual* and the *purely ethical* considerations which are involved in any attempt to decide what we ought to do in a given situation. Both factors enter in all cases. The purely factual elements are generally (though by no means always) obvious, even to quite ignorant and simple people, when only non-teleological obligations are in question; but, when teleo-

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logical obligations have to be seriously considered, they may be highly complex and uncertain and may demand technical knowledge and skill of an advanced kind. Now conscience, as such, is concerned directly only with the purely ethical factors. The operation of forecasting the consequences of various alternative actions, as distinct from estimating the goodness or badness of these consequences, could be performed as well or better by a person who had no conscience. But, although this intellectual process cannot itself be assigned to conscience, it is an essential condition without which conscience cannot do its own proper work in situations of any complexity. A person who is trying to find out what he ought to do is not using his conscience properly if he fails to inform himself as fully and accurately as possible of all the relevant facts, or if he omits to apply his utmost care and skill to the task of forecasting the remote and the indirect consequences of the alternatives under consideration.

When the word "conscience" is used in such a way that conscience, in its cognitive aspect, is confined to intuiting and balancing non-teleological obligations, I shall say that it is used "in the intuitionist sense." I have now tried to show that this is an inconveniently narrow sense. But the word is often used in senses which are even narrower than this, and I will now consider some of them.

It is held by some people that certain kinds of non-teleological obligation are so urgent that a person ought not under any conceivable circumstances to do an action which would infringe any of them. This claim has been made, e.g. for the obligation to answer a question truthfully if at all. Now it seems to me that the word "conscience," and phrases which contain it, are often used in such a way as to imply that a person cannot have a conscience unless he holds this opinion, and that his conscience is in operation only on occasions when his action or his refusal to act is based on his belief that one of these unconditional obligations is involved. I should consider it most undesirable that the word should be used in this narrow way. For the opinion in question is almost certainly mistaken; and, even if it were true, it has been rejected by many people who, in any ordinary use of language, has been scrupulously conscientious, such as John Stuart Mill. It would plainly be unfortunate to use the word "conscience" in such a way that no one could be said to have a conscience unless he were mistaken on an important point of moral theory, and that no one could be said to be following his conscience except when he was under the influence of this delusion. The utmost that can be granted to the intuitionist is that we can see directly that certain relationships, as such, impose certain component obligations on us, and that some of them are so urgent that any act which would conflict with any

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of these has a very strong tendency to be wrong. In certain cases this is true, not only of all the *actions* open to one, but also of the only remaining alternative, viz. *refusal to act*. If we care to say that, in such cases all the alternatives are wrong, we can do so; but we shall then have to admit that we ought to choose that alternative (be it one of the actions or refusal to act) which is the *least wrong*. And in complex cases there is not the faintest reason to believe that we have intuitive knowledge as to which one this is.

It remains to notice one further narrowing of the word "conscience." Sometimes it is used in such a way that a person would be said to be following his conscience only in so far as he bases his decision about what he ought to do on some alleged divine revelation. In many cases, I think, this amounts to little more than the previous usage decorated with theological frillings. The pronouncements of conscience about what is unconditionally wrong are regarded as, in some sense, the voice of God speaking in and to the individual; and so the agent can take them to be infallible without arrogating too much for himself. In other cases, however, the situation is quite different. Certain actions are regarded by the individual as unconditionally right or unconditionally wrong, not because he sees this for himself by direct inspection, but because he believes that God has given a ruling on the matter either in inspired writings or in the traditions of a divinely founded and directed church.

I will now leave the notion of conscience, and pass to that of a conscientious action. Conscience, as I have defined it, is a system of cognitive, emotional, and conative *dispositions*, and it is only when these dispositions are in operation that we have conscientious action.

The question whether an action is conscientious or not is mainly a question about the agent's motives in doing it. We must clear up the notion of motive a little before we can give a satisfactory definition of "conscientious action." Suppose that an agent is contemplating a certain possible course of action in a given situation. He will have various beliefs and expectations about its qualities, its relations, and its consequences, e.g. he may believe that it would be unpleasant to himself, that it would please his mother, and that it would be a breach of a promise made to his father, and so on. Some of these beliefs and expectations will attract him towards doing the action, some will repel him from doing it, and others may leave him unmoved. I call any belief about an action which attracts one towards doing it a "motive-component *for* the action," and any belief about it which repels one from doing it a "motive-component *against* the action." Suppose that a certain action is in fact chosen and performed. Then I say that the agent's "total

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motive *in* doing the action" was the resultant of all the motive-components for doing it and all the motive components against doing it. And I say that he did it "*because of*" the former, and "*in spite of*" the latter.

Now suppose that there were several components for doing a certain action, and several against doing it, and that it was in fact done because of the former and in spite of the latter. Let us call the former *a*, *b*, and *c*, and the latter *u*, *v*, and *w*. Now consider, e.g. the component *a*. We can ask ourselves the following question about it. Would *a* have been sufficient, in the absence of *b* and *c*, to induce the agent to do this action in spite of the components *u*, *v*, and *w* against doing it? Or did the component *a* need to be supplemented by *b* or by *c* or by both in order to overcome the influence of *u*, *v*, and *w*? If and only if the first alternative is true, we can say that *a* was "a *sufficient* motive-component for doing the action." Next we can raise the following question. Would *bc* have been sufficient, in the absence of *a*, to induce the agent to do the action in spite of the components *u*, *v*, and *w* against doing it? Or did *bc* need to be supplemented by *a* in order to overcome the influence of *u*, *v*, and *w*? If, and only if, the second alternative is true, we can say that *a* was "a *necessary* motive-component for doing the action." Lastly, suppose that *a* had been the only component for doing the action. Then we could say that "the action was done *purely* from the motive *a*."

We can now apply these general considerations to the particular case of conscientious action. An action is conscientious if the following conditions are fulfilled. (i) The agent has reflected on the situation, the action, and the alternatives to it, in order to discover what is the right course. In this reflection he has tried his utmost to learn the relevant facts and to give each its due weight, he has exercised his judgment on them to the best of his ability, and he has striven to allow for all sources of bias. (ii) He has decided that, on the factual and ethical information available to him, the action in question is probably the most right or the least wrong of all those which are open to him. (iii) His belief that the action has this moral characteristic, together with his desire to do what is right as such, was either (a) the *only* motive-component for doing it, or (b) a *sufficient and necessary* motive-component for doing it. If the first alternative is fulfilled, we can say that his action was "*purely* conscientious." If the second is fulfilled, we can say that it was "*predominantly* conscientious." The following would be an example of a predominantly conscientious action. Suppose that a person, after reflection, decides that the right action for him is to undertake military service. Suppose that the two motive-components which induce him to undertake this action, in spite of fear, love of

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comfort, etc., are his belief that it is right, together with his desire to do what is right as such, and his dislike of being thought cowardly by his friends. Then the action is predominantly conscientious if (a) his desire to do what is right, as such, *would* have sufficed to overcome his fear and his love of comfort even in the absence of his dislike of being thought cowardly, whilst (b) his dislike of being thought cowardly *would not* have sufficed to overcome those motive-components in the absence of his desire to do what is right, as such. In such a case we can say that the non-conscientious component for doing the action which the agent believes to be right is indeed present but is superfluous and insufficient. It would be absurd to refuse to call the action "conscientious" merely because a superfluous and insufficient non-conscientious motive-component for doing it happened to co-exist with the sufficient and necessary conscientious motive-component for doing it.

We come now to a much more difficult and doubtful case. Suppose that the agent's belief that the action is right, together with his desire to do what is right as such, is sufficient, but not necessary, to induce him to do it, in spite of the components against doing it. This would be illustrated by our old example if we varied it in the following way. We must now suppose that the agent's dislike of being thought cowardly *would* have sufficed to overcome his fear and his love of comfort and *would* have induced him to choose the course of action which he believes to be right, even if his belief that it is right and his desire to do what is right, as such, had been absent. The situation may be described as follows. The non-conscientious motive-component for doing the action is still superfluous; but now we must say that the conscientious component for doing it is equally superfluous. Each is sufficient, and therefore neither individually is necessary; all that is necessary is that one or other of them should be present. If you confine your attention to the *sufficiency* of the conscientious motive-component, you will be inclined to say that the action *is* conscientious; if you attend only to the *superfluity* of this component, you will be inclined to say that it is *not* conscientious.

We pass now to another difficult and doubtful case. Suppose now that the agent's belief that the action is right, together with his desire to do what is right as such, is necessary but not sufficient to induce him to do it in spite of the components against doing it. This would be illustrated by the following modification of our old example. We must now suppose (a) that the agent's belief that it is right for him to undertake military service, together with his desire to do what is right as such, would not have sufficed, in the absence of his dislike of being thought cowardly, to overcome his fear and his love of comfort; and (b) that the latter motive-

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component, in the absence of the former, would also not have sufficed to overcome his fear and his love of comfort. Each of the two motive-components for doing the action is now necessary, and therefore neither of them individually is sufficient. If you confine your attention to the *indispensability* of the conscientious motive-component, you will be inclined to say that the action *is* conscientious; if you attend only to its *insufficiency*, you will be inclined to say that it is *not* conscientious.

I will group together purely and predominantly conscientious actions, in the sense defined above, under the name of "*fully* conscientious actions;" and I will group together the two doubtful cases, which we have just been discussing, under the name of "*semi-conscientious* actions." The two kinds of these can then be distinguished as (i) actions in which the conscientious motive-component is sufficient but superfluous, and (ii) actions in which the conscientious motive-component is indispensable but inadequate.

If a person does an act which he believes to be less right or more wrong than some other act open to him at the time, he does it in spite of his desire to do what is right, as such. Any action of this kind may be called "*contra-conscientious*."

It is plain that a great many of our deliberate actions are neither fully conscientious, nor semi-conscientious, nor contra-conscientious; for many are done without considering them and the alternatives to them from the standpoint of rightness and wrongness. Such actions may be called "*non-conscientious*." A non-conscientious action may be such that, if the agent had considered it and the alternatives to it from the standpoint of rightness and wrongness, he would have judged it to be the most right or the least wrong of the alternatives open to him. And it may be that he would then have done it for that reason alone or for that reason combined with others which are superfluous and insufficient. If both these conditions are fulfilled, we may say that this non-conscientious action was "*potentially* conscientious." In a similar way we could define the statement that a certain non-conscientious act was "*potentially* contra-conscientious."

I have now completed the task of analysis and definition, and I will conclude my paper with a few remarks about conscientious action, as defined above. (1) There is a very important sense of "ought" in which it is true to say that a person ought always to do that alternative which he believes, at the time when he has to act, to be the most right or the least wrong of all those that are open to him. (There are, undoubtedly, other senses of "ought" in which this would not be true; but we are not concerned with them here.) For this sense of "ought" to be applicable it does not matter how ignorant or deluded the agent may be about the relevant facts,

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how incompetent he may be to make reasonable inferences from them, nor how crazy or perverted his judgments about right and wrong, good and evil, may be. But, the more fully this is admitted, the more obvious does the following complementary fact become. The most right or the least wrong act open to other individuals or to a society, in certain cases, may be to prevent a conscientious individual from doing certain acts which he ought, in this sense, to do, and to try to compel him to do certain acts which he ought, in this sense, to refrain from doing. Moreover, if other individuals or the authorities in a society honestly believe that the most right or the least wrong action open to them is to treat a certain conscientious individual in this way, then they *ought*, in the very same sense, to do so. What is sauce for the conscientious goose is sauce for the conscientious ganders who are his neighbours or his governors. This fact is often obscured because many people inadvertently or dishonestly confine their attention to cases, such as the trial of Socrates or of Christ, in which subsequent generations have held that the individual was, not only conscientious, but also correct in his ethical opinions, whilst the tribunal which condemned him was either not conscientious or was mistaken in its ethical opinions. It may be salutary for such persons to widen their purview by envisaging the case of a high-minded Indian civilian conscientiously securing the capture and execution of a high-minded Thug for conscientiously practising murder.

(2) It is sometimes said that, when an individual sets up his conscience against the general opinion of his society or of mankind, he is claiming "moral infallibility." If he knows his business, he is doing nothing of the kind. In order for it to be his duty, in the present sense, to do a certain alternative, all that is necessary is that he should think it *probable*, after considering the question to the best of his ability, that this alternative is more right or less wrong than any of the others which are open to him. Since he has to enact one of the alternatives, it does not matter in the least whether this probability is high or low. Nor does it matter whether the difference in rightness or wrongness is great or small. In considering the question, it is his duty to give full weight to the fact that most members of his society or most of the human race have formed a certain opinion about it. If he is a wise man, he will attach very great weight to this fact. But if, in spite of having done so, he comes to a contrary opinion, he ought, in the present sense, to act upon it, no matter how far short of complete conviction his opinion may fall.

(3) The last remark that I have to make is this. A *purely* conscientious action, in the sense defined above, must be a very rare event. It is hardly credible, e.g. that either undertaking or refusing military service could be a purely conscientious act, in that sense;

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for everyone fears death and wounds and everyone dislikes to be thought cowardly.

Now the definitions of "predominantly conscientious" acts, and of the two kinds of "semi-conscientious" acts, all have the following peculiarity. They all involve the notion of what *would* have happened if certain conditions had been other than they in fact were. This notion of the consequences of unfulfilled conditions always enters whenever the question of sufficiency and dispensability is raised. It follows that an individual can seldom be rationally justified in feeling a very strong conviction that an action of his was conscientious; for, in order to decide this question, he has to form an opinion as to how he would have acted in the *absence* of certain motive-components which were in fact *present*. It seems to me that *a fortiori* it must be almost impossible for anyone to decide rationally as to whether another person's action is conscientious or not.

If I am right in this, the Tribunals have been given a task which is, from the nature of the case, incapable of being satisfactorily performed. This, so far as it goes, is a strong ground against allowing exemption from military service on grounds of conscience and against setting up Tribunals at all. There are, no doubt, other reasons which point in the opposite direction; and Parliament has decided that, in the present state of public opinion in England, the balance of advantage is in favour of allowing exemption on such grounds, and has therefore set up Tribunals to consider claims. It only remains for us to watch with sympathy and interest the efforts of these well-meaning men to deal with questions to which God alone can know the answer.