

# “Conscience Is Learned” by Alexander Bain

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*Alexander Bain* (Thoemmes)

### **About the author...**

Alexander Bain (1818-1903) was self-educated until he entered Marischal College in Aberdeen Scotland. With his submission of an article to the *Westminster Review*, he became acquainted with John Stuart Mill and was drawn into utilitarianism and empiricism. As one of the founders of British psychology, he sought to explain all mental processes in terms of physical sensations and rid psychology of metaphysical hypotheses. His books *The Senses and the Intellect* (1855) and *The Emotions and the Will* (1859) were standard textbooks in psychology well into the next century. Bain founded the psychological journal *Mind* in 1876—today it’s a well-known philosophy journal.

### About the work...

In his *Moral Science*,<sup>1</sup> Bain uses his insight into the nature of the will for an explication of ethical theory. In many ways, Bain anticipated pragmatism; in fact, Charles Sanders Peirce’s well-known statement, “different beliefs are distinguished by the different modes of action to which they give rise”<sup>2</sup> originated from Bain’s notion of belief as the preparation to act. In the brief selection below, he explains the origin of conscience and how our consciences are shaped. If Bain is correct, conscience cannot be a reliable guide to a consistent ethics across different cultures and during different times.

#### From the reading...

“Still more striking is the growth of a moral sentiment in connexion with such usages as the Hindoo suttee. It is known that the Hindoo widow, if prevented from burning herself with her husband’s corpse, often feels all the pangs of remorse, and leads a life of misery and self-humiliation.”

## Ideas of Interest from *Moral Science*

1. How does Bain define “conscience”? Is his definition congruent with the contemporary use of the word?
2. According to Bain, how are the emotions and self-interest related to conscience?
3. How is conscience shaped by education, law, and authority? Explain what Bain means by the “effect of contiguous association”?
4. According to Bain how does conscience develop in children who were neglected by their parents?
5. Does Bain distinguish between the mores and the morals of a society? What reasons does he provide for his judgment?

1. Alexander Bain, *Moral Science: A Compendium of Ethics* (New York: D. Appleton, 1869) 42-45.

2. Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1935), ¶ 398.

## **The Reading Selection from *Moral Science***

### **[Nature of Conscience]**

It may be proved, by such evidence as the case admits of, that the peculiarity of the Moral Sentiment, or Conscience, is identified with our education under government, or Authority.

Conscience is described by such terms as moral approbation and disapprobation; and involves, when highly developed, a peculiar and unmistakeable revulsion of mind at what is wrong, and a strong resentment towards the wrong-doer, which become Remorse, in the case of self.

It is capable of being proved, that there is nothing natural or primitive in these feelings, except in so far as the case happens to concur with the dictates of Self-interest, or Sympathy, aided by the Emotions formerly specified. Any action that is hostile to our interest, excites a form of disapprobation, such as belongs to wounded self-interest; and any action that puts another to pain may so affect our natural sympathy as to be disapproved, and resented on that ground. These natural or inborn feelings are always liable to coincide with moral right and wrong, although they are not its criterion or measure in the mind of each individual. But in those cases where an unusually strong feeling of moral disapprobation is awakened, there is apt to be a concurrence of the primitive motives of self, and of fellow-feeling; and it is the ideal of good law, and good morality, to coincide with a certain well-proportioned adjustment of the Prudential and the Sympathetic regards of the individual.

The requisite allowance being made for the natural impulses, we must now adduce the facts, showing that the characteristic of the Moral Sense is an education under Law, or Authority, through the instrumentality of Punishment.

### **[Conscience Formed by Association]**

(1) It is a fact that human beings living in as formation of society are placed under discipline, accompanied by punishment. Certain actions are forbidden, and the doers of them are subjected to some painful infliction; which is increased in severity, if they are persisted in. Now, what would be, the natural consequence of such a system, under the known laws of feeling, will, and intellect? Would not an action that always brings down punishment be associated with the pain and the dread of punishment? Such an association is inevitably formed, and becomes at least a part, and a very important part, of the sense of duty; nay, it would of itself, after a certain amount of repetition,

be adequate to restrain for ever the performance of the action, thus attaining the end of morality.

There may be various ways of evoking and forming the moral sentiment, but the one way most commonly trusted to, and never altogether dispensed with, is the associating of pain, that is, punishment, with the actions that are disallowed. Punishment is held out as the consequence of performing certain actions; every individual is made to taste of it; its infliction is one of the most familiar occurrences of every-day life. Consequently, whatever else may be present in the moral sentiment, this fact of the connexion of pain with forbidden actions must enter into it with an overpowering prominence. Any natural or primitive impulse in the direction of duty must be very marked and apparent, in order to divide with this communicated bias the direction of our conduct. It is for the supporters of innate distinctions to point out any concurring impetus (apart from the Prudential and Sympathetic regards) sufficiently important to cast these powerful associations into a secondary or subordinate position.

**From the reading...**

“The constant habit of regarding with dread the consequences of violating any of the rules, simulates a moral sentiment, on a subject unconnected with morality properly so called.”

By a familiar effect of Contiguous Association, the dread of punishment clothes the forbidden act with a feeling of aversion, which in the end persists of its own accord, and without reference to the punishment. Actions that have long been connected in the mind with pains and penalties, come to be contemplated with a *disinterested* repugnance; they seem to give pain on their own account. This is a parallel, from the side of pain, of the acquired attachment to money. Now, when, by such transference, a self-subsisting sentiment of aversion has been created, the conscience seems to be detached from all external sanctions, and to possess an isolated footing in the mind. It has passed through the stage of reference to authority, and has become a law to itself. But no conscience ever arrives at the independent standing, without first existing in the reflected and dependent stage.

We must never omit from the composition of the Conscience the primary impulses of Self-Interest and Sympathy, which in minds strongly alive to one or other, always count for a powerful element in human conduct, although for reasons already stated, not the strictly moral element, so far as the individual is concerned. They are adopted, more or less, by the authority imposing the moral code; and when the two sources coincide, the stream is all the stronger.

(2) Where moral training is omitted or greatly neglected, there is an absence

of security for virtuous conduct.

In no civilized community is moral discipline entirely wanting. Although children may be neglected by their parents, they come at last under the discipline of the law and the public. They cannot be exempted from the associations of punishment with wrong. But when these associations have not been early and sedulously formed, in the family, in the school, and in the workshop, the moral sentiment is left in a feeble condition. There still remain the force of the law and of public opinion, the examples of public punishment, and the reprobation of guilt. Every member of the community must witness daily the degraded condition of the viciously disposed, and the prosperity following on respect for the law. No human being escapes from thus contracting moral impressions to a very large amount.



*Union Terrace, Aberdeen, Scotland, the city where Bain was appointed to teach in 1860. (Library of Congress)*

(3) Whenever an action is associated with Disapprobation and Punishment, there grows up, in reference to it, a state of mind undistinguishable from Moral Sentiment.

There are many instances where individuals are enjoined to a course of conduct wholly indifferent with regard to universal morality, as in the regulations of societies formed for special purposes. Each member of the society has to conform to these regulations, under pain of forfeiting all the benefits of the society, and of perhaps incurring positive evils. The code of honour among gentlemen is an example of these artificial impositions. It is not to be supposed that there should be an innate sentiment to perform actions having nothing to do with moral right and wrong; yet the disapprobation and the remorse following on a breach of the code of honour, will often be greater than what follows a breach of the moral law. The constant habit of regarding with dread the consequences of violating any of the rules, simulates a moral

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sentiment, on a subject unconnected with morality properly so called.

The arbitrary ceremonial customs of nations, with reference to such points as ablutions, clothing, eating and abstinence from meats,—when rendered obligatory by the force of penalties, occupy exactly the same place in the mind as the principles of moral right and wrong. The same form of dread attaches to the consequences of neglect; the same remorse is felt by the individual offender. The exposure of the naked person is as much abhorred as telling a lie. The Turkish woman exposing her face, is no less conscience-smitten than if she murdered her child. There is no act, however trivial, that cannot be raised to the position of a moral act, by the imperative of society.

Still more striking is the growth of a moral sentiment in connexion with such usages as the Hindoo suttee. It is known that the Hindoo widow, if prevented from burning herself with her husband’s corpse, often feels all the pangs of remorse, and leads a life of misery and self-humiliation. The habitual inculcation of this duty by society, the penalty of disgrace attached to its omission, operate to implant a sentiment in every respect analogous to the strongest moral sentiment.



*Marischal College*, where Bain first studied natural philosophy and later, in 1860, when Marischal College became part of the University of Aberdeen, Bain taught logic and literature. (Library of Congress)

## Related Ideas

Alexander Bain, *Moral Science: A Compendium of Ethics*<sup>3</sup> Bain’s 1869 work on ethics presented by the University of Michigan Library as part of the Making of America digital library of primary sources.

Gordon Graham, “Scottish Philosophy in the 19th Century”<sup>4</sup> in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. An excellent summary of Bain’s psychology and how it differs from Reid, Ferrier, and Hamilton, where Bain is viewed as a founder of empirical psychology.

Robert M. Young, “Alexander Bain: Transition from Introspective Psychology to Experimental Psychophysiology”<sup>5</sup> in *Mind, Brain and Adaptation in the Nineteenth Century*. An online chapter on Bain’s psychology from a well-received book on the mind-body problem.

### From the reading...

“The Turkish woman exposing her face, is no less conscience-smitten than if she murdered her child. There is no act, however trivial, that cannot be raised to the position of a moral act, by the imperative of society.”

## Topics Worth Investigating

1. In the reading, Bain associates conscience with “our education under government, or Authority” by means of the instrument of punishment. First, Solomon Asch points out:

There are acts that we feel we should do, although failure to comply does not involve painful consequences. There are times when we feel we have acted wrongly, although there is no prospect of punishment. The reverse is also the case; we may expect punishment from society without the slightest conviction of wrong. These observations contradict the causal explanations

3. *Moral Science: A Compendium of Ethics* (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=moa;idno=AJF1462>)

4. “Scottish Philosophy in the 19th Century” (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/scottish-19th/>)

5. “Alexander Bain: Transition from Introspective Psychology to Experimental Psychophysiology” (<http://www.human-nature.com/mba/chap3.html>)

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of current behavioristic and psychoanalytic accounts which trace the genesis of obligation to dread of punishment.<sup>6</sup>

How do you think Bain would respond to this apparent contradiction of the formation of an “internalized inhibitory process” or conscience? Second, suppose a religious-based government educated children to believe it is morally correct to kill with malice aforethought all persons of a different faith. Would the conscience of citizens in that state then be in approval of an ethically wrong action? How can Bain distinguish arbitrary but obligatory customs from principles of right and wrong? On what basis can he demark the moral sentiment of conscience from the moral sentiment formed by obligatory customs? In this regard, Bain notes, “The constant habit of regarding with dread the consequences of violating any of the rules [of a code of honor], simulates a moral sentiment, on a subject unconnected with morality properly so called.” Is Bain tacitly distinguishing between a (prescriptive) ethics and a (descriptive) morals?

2. In Bain’s goal to unite psychology and physiology, he distanced himself from John Stuart Mill and the utilitarians. He sought to explain mental association in terms of neural connections. Given this background, speculate as to how Bain might conclude that belief is merely “a preparation to act.” Bain states, “There may be various ways of evoking and forming the moral sentiment, but the one way most commonly trusted to, and never altogether dispensed with, is the associating of pain, that is, punishment, with the actions that are disallowed.” Does Bain’s connection of pain with an associated moral sentiment here anticipate the James-Lange theory of emotion?<sup>7</sup>
3. Bain points out, “We must never omit from the composition of the Conscience the primary impulses of Self-Interest and Sympathy . . .” In respect to concurrence with these “natural impulses,” the action of killing infidels would seem to be in accordance with self-interest with no attendant feeling of revulsion, but the action would also seem to conflict with sympathetic regard of the individual with the attendant feeling of revulsion. Wouldn’t the natural impulses in such a case *not* be in complete accordance with conscience?
4. Would Bain’s account of the formation of moral sentiment by means of contiguous association of the pain of punishment with disallowed actions

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6. Solomon E. Asch, *Social Psychology* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1952) 355.

7. The theory entails emotions result from physiological events rather than causing them. As William James illustrates, “. . . we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble . . .” James summarizes the theory as “the bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as the occur IS the emotion.” William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1913), 2:449-450. The view that some actions are not by their nature the effect of desire is essential to a defense of free will.



differ in kind or differ in degree from either classical conditioning or operant conditioning of behaviorism<sup>8</sup>? Does Bain anticipate Thorndike’s law of effect?<sup>9</sup>

5. In the last part of his *The Emotions and the Will*, Bain argues for a behavioral determinism.<sup>10</sup> Yet, in his *Moral Science: A Compendium of Ethics* published the same year, he explains the psychological basis of ethics. If determinism is true, how is a science of ethics possible?
6. To what extent would Bain agree or disagree with the following legal characterization of “conscience”:

Conscience is defined to be internal or self-knowledge; the judgment of right and wrong, or the faculty, power, or principle within us which decides on the lawfulness or unlawfulness of actions and affections, and instantly approves or condemns them. Conscience is called by some writers the moral sense, and considered as an ordinary faculty of our nature. *People v. Stewart*, 7 Cal. 140, 143.<sup>11</sup>

First, would Bain agree that law and custom that shape the moral sense or would he agree moral sense shapes law and custom? Second, are the two parts of the judicial definition from *People v. Stewart* logically consistent?

7. The Christian conception of conscience implying devotion to moral law and attention to sacrifice in hope of a further future existence historically developed from the early Greek conception of conscience as shared knowledge and rational conduct to live well. Does the fact that the meaning of conscience changed significantly since the time of the early Greeks imply conscience cannot be an innate faculty? Would such a claim be an instance of the genetic fallacy?

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8. Anxious children seem to internalize norms if negative consequences ensue, but fearless children seem to internalize norms more readily if positive consequences ensue. See Grazyna Kochanska, “Multiple Pathways to Conscience,” *Developmental Psychology* 33, No. 2 (1997): 228-240.

9. “Of several responses made to the same situation, those which are accompanied or closely followed by satisfaction to the animal will, other things being equal, be more firmly connected with the situation, so that, when it recurs, they will be more likely to recur; those which are accompanied or closely followed by discomfort to the animal will, other things being equal, have their connections with that situation weakened, so that, when it recurs, they will be less likely to occur.” Edward Thorndike, *Animal Intelligence* (New York: Macmillan, 1911), 244.

10. “The doctrine that all the facts in the physical universe, and hence also in human history, are absolutely dependent upon and conditioned by their causes. In psychology: the doctrine that the will is not free but determined by psychical or physical conditions.” Dagobert D. Runes, ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy* (Paterson, N.J.: Littlefield, Adams & Company, 1942), 78.

11. Editorial Staff of the National Reporter System, *Judicial and Statutory Definitions of Words and Phrases* (St. Paul: West Publishing Company, 1904), 1:1436.

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8. Bain points out the natural, inborn feelings of self-interest and sympathy do not make moral distinctions but instead these innate feelings often coincide with the ideas of moral law. Do you think Bain regards this connection as an accidental correlation or as a causal connection?
9. Bain’s characterization of conscience is not in strict accord with the modern definition of conscience, taken here, for example, from *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*:

The internal recognition of the moral quality of one’s motives and actions; the faculty or principle which pronounces upon the moral quality of one’s actions or motives, approving the right and condemning the wrong.<sup>12</sup>

In our reading, Bain states conscience involves “a peculiar and unmistakable revulsion of mind at what is wrong, and a strong resentment towards the wrong-doer . . .”. Would not it follow from his psychology of natural impulses that the resentment towards the wrong-doer be attributable to the natural, innate feelings of self-interest and sympathy rather than to the moral sentiment of conscience? Would not the strong resentment toward a wrongdoer be based on analogical reasoning *as if* the person were one’s own self rather than based on the immediate effect of one’s conscience?

10. Some religious leaders note that the simple nature of the conscience point to a divine origin, and, as a result, conscience is what sets mankind apart from the rest of the animal kingdom. Yet, historically, the contemporary religious conception of conscience arose from at least three different factors: (1) the cognitive aspect from early Greek thought,<sup>13</sup> (2) the emotional aspect from Joseph Butler<sup>14</sup> and (3) the remorseful element as a consequence of sin from René Descartes.<sup>15</sup> If we assume the biologists and anthropologists are correct in reducing conscience to a natural capacity acquired in the evolutionary prehistory of *homo sapiens* rather than assume some contemporary religious leaders are correct in supposing conscience to be an innate simple faculty of divine origin, can

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12. *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, prep. by William Little, et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 373.

13. See, for example, the charioteer myth in Plato, *Phaedrus* 245c—256b in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), 493-502.

14. See, for example, Butler’s statement, “This principle in man, by which he approves or disapproves his heart, temper, and actions, is conscience; for this is the strict sense of the word . . .” Joseph Butler, *Human Nature and Other Sermons* (Middlesex: Echo Library, 2006), 6.

15. See, for example, his reference to “repentings and pangs of remorse that usually disturb the consciences of such feeble and uncertain minds. . .” René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method and the Meditations*, 1901 ed. John Veitch (New York: Cosimo Publications, 2008), 25.

it still be reasonably argued that, regardless of the origin, human beings differ from other animals in kind because of their faculty of conscience?

11. Do you think the examples of feral children or “wolf children”, children who have grown up without social interaction, would constitute a definitive counter-example to the belief that conscience is an innate faculty of human beings? For example, the phenomenologist Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka writes:

Without initiation into language, feral children remain forever wild, with untapped human potentialities. In short, then the forms of the establishment of human life, the life of the social animal, naturally speaking, require first that the human be treated as a human being. Even to begin to realize one’s human powers, one must be the recipient of gestures which others make, and one must interpret these intentions on the basis of empathic intuitions.<sup>16</sup>

Most accounts of documented feral children recognize they never fully develop human capacities. Might not it be argued that just as linguistic ability is innate but not developed in feral children because of their lack of human interaction, so also moral ability is innate but not developed for similar reasons? Might it be that there is an innate or genetically based sense of fairness in human beings whose particular phenotypical expression is based on the environment in which the child is reared?

12. Explain why the dictates of conscience are not good grounds for determining ethics whether or not conscience is established religiously or conscience is established in accordance with developmental psychology. In both religion and science, a defective conscience or impaired moral sense can arise similarly: parental neglect, poor education, and peer isolation.

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### **Revision History**

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16. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, *Manifestations of Reason* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993), 321.

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