



Conscience (Role in Morality) in Catharine Beecher (1800-1878)

Therese Boos Dykeman

For Catharine Beecher, the susceptibility in our moral constitution, which is “excited by the intellectual judgment of our own feelings and conduct as either right or wrong,” is “usually denominated *conscience*.” In the twelfth chapter, *The Moral Susceptibilities of Common Sense Applied to Religion*, Beecher defines conscience in that way and follows with an assessment of moral right and wrong, or “whatever relates to the regulation of mind in reference to the rules of right and wrong” First, the aim of the law of sacrifice requiring the “greatest possible good” and the “least possible evil” discerned as “voluntary suffering to promote the welfare of others,” she deems the “highest kind of good.” Second, in the design of our moral constitution, is a “sense of justice.” In all, moral susceptibility involves intellectual judgment and emotions of “approval or remorse.” One is obligated to do a thing only when one has the intellect to perceive right and the moral susceptibilities, otherwise, one “ceases to be a moral and accountable being.”

In her essay *Cause and Effect in Connexion with Fatalism and Free Agency*, Beecher claimed that the doctrine of free agency, “one of those intuitive, irresistible and universal truths,” establishes “the truth of our own personal identity.” To prove this, we must “appeal to our own consciousness.” By “words, feelings and actions” man proves his existence to be the same today as yesterday. Conscience for Beecher is not only what allows mankind to judge right and wrong, but as consciousness, proves our identity as a free agent. Individual consciousness empowers each person to decide which desire to gratify and for which bad choice to “feel remorse.” One is also to expect that others have that same power.

Primary Sources:

Beecher, Catharine E. 1839. An Essay on Cause and Effect in Connection with the Difference of Fatalism and Free Will, in *Biblical Repository* 2.4 (October), 382-408.

Beecher, Catharine E. 1857. *Common Sense Applied to Religion; on The Bible and the People*. NY: Harper & Brothers.

Beecher, Catharine E. 1874. *Educational Reminiscences and Suggestions*. NY: J.B. Ford.

Dykeman, Therese B. & Rogers, Dorothy G. (eds.) 2002. *The Social, Political and Philosophical Works of Catharine Beecher*, 6 vols. Bristol, England: Thoemmes Press, vols. 2-3.

Secondary Sources:

Hall, Mark David 2000. Catharine Beecher: America's First Female Philosopher and Theologian, in *Fides et Historia*, Vol. XXXII, No. 1 (Winter/Spring), 65-80.

Keywords:

conscience, consciousness, conduct, evil, identity, moral, remorse, sacrifice