

## Tract 13: St. John of the Cross and the “Well-Formed” Conscience

Thinking about a well-formed conscience, I am puzzled about how to answer these questions. Is it possible that someone’s conscience be mistaken and yet well-formed? Could the conscience of an intelligent, informed, and serious adult Catholic be at odds with clear Church teachings on an important issue and yet be well-formed? Do the requirements for a well-formed conscience differ depending on the age of the person, say at twenty versus forty? What are the reasons for answering these questions as you do?

If these questions were put to readers of this essay, I believe the transcript of the ensuing discussion would extend to a book or two. If I am right about this, then the expression “well-formed conscience” these days is a term of cant, “a set form of words repeated perfunctorily or mechanically,” “a stock phrase . . . repeated as a matter of habit or form,”<sup>1</sup> and as such should be avoided. Twenty-first-century American society is an ever-fertile mine of cant terms and phrases, but that does not excuse us from doing what we can by promising never again to use “well-formed conscience” without explaining what we mean by it.

My preferred substitute is “a correct conscience correctly formed,” which I admit is not much better, but at least it is not cant, resolves one ambiguity, and may call forth the question of what might be meant by “correctly” as opposed to “incorrectly.” The adverb suggests there are *steps to be taken*, requirements to be met, which if not met make for at least an incorrectly formed conscience, even if not necessarily an incorrect or mistaken one. The “steps to be taken” are the primary interest here, steps that have been

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<sup>1</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., under the third general group of meanings for “cant” as a noun, meanings derived from *cantus*, “singing,” “song,” “chant” (5a and 5b).

routinely (not universally) ignored or downplayed in the recent debates over Covid, number one, and the current controversy within the Church over the primacy of conscience, number two. I hope in this essay to do something about that.

The “steps to be taken” turn out to be an extraordinarily complex matter, but I want to offer a small—but what I take to be vital—contribution to filling in the blanks. To accomplish the task I have in mind, there is no more helpful a source than the works of St. John of the Cross on the topic of “attachments.” St. John himself believes that the topic lies at the foundation of the spiritual life and the path toward perfection and holiness, for he devotes the first book of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, the first and foundational work of his corpus, almost exclusively to that topic.<sup>2</sup> We will begin with what he has to say there about attachments, then show the relevance of his treatment to the question of the “steps to be taken,” and finish with further observations from other parts of his writings.

## I

By “attachment” St. John means an inordinate love for some good contrary to perfect love for God. He understands “appetite” in the Aristotelian-Thomistic sense as an inclination toward or desire for some good, and in most cases he has in mind the concupiscible or irascible, animal appetites. Though he often uses “appetite” where “attachment” or “inordinate appetite” would be called for, uncertainty regarding St. John’s meaning in such contexts is ordinarily easily resolved. We are here principally concerned with one particular effect of our attachments discussed by St. John, that of blindness.

By definition, an attachment is contrary to perfect love for God, and since two contraries cannot exist in one subject, “darkness, an attachment to creatures, and light, which is God, are contraries and bear no likeness toward each other, as St. Paul teaches in his letter to the Corinthians . . . What conformity is there between light and darkness? (2 Cor 6:14)” (*Ascent* 1.4.2 [p. 123–24]).

The appetites . . . enkindle concupiscence and overwhelm the intellect so that it cannot see its light. The reason is that a new light set directly

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<sup>2</sup> Especially chs. 6–13 of *Ascent*, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* (Washington, DC: ICS, 1990), 130–51. For references in parentheses: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night* are cited by book, chapter, and section, while *The Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame of Love* are cited by stanza and section; all page numbers for any of these four works refer to this edition.

in front of the visual faculty blinds this faculty so that it fails to see the light farther away. And since the appetite is so close to individuals as to be actually within them, they are impeded by this interior light, feed upon it, and are unable to see the clear light of the intellect; nor will they see it until they extinguish this blinding light of their appetite. (*Ascent* 1.8.3 [p. 136])

In book III of *The Ascent*, St. John adds a striking twist:

Those, then, whose joy is unpossessive [i.e., unattached] of things rejoice in them all as though they possessed them all; those others, beholding them with a possessive mind, lose all the delight of them all in general. The former, as St. Paul states, though they have nothing in their heart, possess everything with greater liberty (2 Cor 6:10); the others, insofar as they possess things with attachment, neither have nor possess anything. Rather, their heart is held by things and they suffer as a captive. (*Ascent* 3.20.3 [302–3])

The goods to which we are attached by our disordered emotions become the masters we serve, who must be served, no questions asked.

Commenting on “the great prostitute . . . with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk” (Rev 17:1–2), St John writes:

Where does this poisonous harm fail to reach? . . . She reaches out to all states. . . . The text says they were inebriated. No matter how small the amount of this wine of joy [i.e., attachment to natural goods, especially beauty], it immediately takes hold on the heart and subdues it, producing obscurity in the reason, as happens with those who get drunk from wine. . . . [The soul] will find itself a captive of its enemies, grinding at the mill like Samson with his eyes plucked out and the hair of his first strength cut. (*Ascent* 3.22.4–5)

Plucked-out eyes and the hair of strength cut are effects not confined to sensual attachments only, but can be found in the attachments to any object.

It seems obvious to me that St. John owes these remarks ultimately to the positions of Aristotle and Aquinas, though I do not pretend to know the details of their lineage. Aquinas is forever quoting Aristotle’s “as a man

is, so does the end appear to him,”<sup>3</sup> meaning that a person’s views regarding what is good and bad can be affected and possibly distorted by his emotional dispositions (i.e., qualities of the animal appetites), should they themselves be distorted. To that topic Aquinas devotes an article entitled “Whether the will is moved by the sensitive appetite?”

That which is apprehended as good and fitting moves the will by way of object. Now, that a thing appears to be good and fitting, happens from two causes: namely, from the condition, either of the thing proposed, or of the one to whom it is proposed. For fitness is spoken of by way of relation; hence it depends on both extremes. And hence it is that taste [*gustus*], according as it is variously disposed, takes to a thing in various ways, as being fitting or unfitting. Wherefore as the Philosopher says (*Ethics* 3.5): “According as a man is, such does the end seem to him.” Now it is evident that according to a passion [emotion] of the sensitive appetite man is changed to a certain disposition. Wherefore according as man is affected by a passion, something seems to him fitting, which does not seem so when he is not so affected: thus that seems good to a man when angered, which does not seem good when he is calm.<sup>4</sup>

Distorted emotional loves cause our animal appetites to be distorted and, according to Aristotle, Aquinas, and St. John of the Cross, can cause distorted views of the good. They are thus rich sources of incorrect conscience.

If someone does not believe in the power of attachments to cause distorted views of the good, I would simply ask him to consider the debates over matters Covid or the primacy of conscience and to reflect upon the possible sources of those disagreements. In the case of Covid, matters of fact can explain some of it, but not in the case of the supremacy of conscience. Even regarding Covid, I find it impossible to believe that the complexity of questions about facts can account for the entire dispute. For example, think about masks or closings and shutdowns, or disputes within the Catholic Church over church closings and steps to be taken when masses were being celebrated.

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<sup>3</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.5.1142a32–b1.

<sup>4</sup> *Summa theologiae* [ST] I-II, q. 9, a. 2, corp.

## II

Attachments, distorted emotions, are a universal feature of our human nature except for "our tainted nature's solitary boast" and her Son. We detach ourselves from them here and now or we do so later in Purgatory. "Pay me now, or pay me later," and if reports about the "later" can be believed, the news from there is not good. No reasonably sane, honest, and reflective human being will deny that he is subject to attachments. A second harmful effect of attachments mentioned by St. John is that of weakness. If I know that I should or should not do something, why do I often not act or refrain accordingly? Often the answer is obvious: it is because I have an attachment, a disordered emotional love for something inconsistent with perfect love of God.

So, we know some of our attachments and know that we should be working on them. That is partly why the Church establishes penitential seasons and encourages (or at least should encourage) a detached life. But what about the attachments we do not know we have? Those attachments remain real, and their effects remain real. They weaken us even while we are unaware of their presence. And they blind us too, bringing about one of the worst forms of blindness there is, blindness to their very existence, to our own wretched and miserable condition. They distort what "is apprehended by us as good and fitting" without causing any awareness on our part. Attachments, then, have the potential for being powerful distorters of conscience.

Now, finally, we arrive at the "step to be taken" that is the topic of this essay. The expression "correctly formed" is a topic of immense complexity, but here is a necessary feature in the list of things one must do: strive to know one's attachments, to uncover those presently hidden, and conscientiously work against them at the level of action, thought, and feeling. This in a nutshell is St. Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, the opening section of which reads in part: "We call Spiritual Exercise every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments, and, after their removal, of seeking and finding God in the disposition of our life for the salvation of our soul."<sup>5</sup>

This single "step to be taken" can be further divided into sub-steps; some may be baby steps, and some certainly are not. And never underestimate the power of attachments to turn what otherwise would be a baby step into a mountain climb. First, I must admit that I do have attachments and that I could safely wager my life on some of them being hidden from me,

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<sup>5</sup> *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Based on Studies in the Language of the Autograph* (Chicago, IL: Loyola University Press, n.d.). Also see no. 319.

if not from the people around me. Second, I must truly want to discover them, pleading with the intensity of the blind beggars in the Gospel of Matthew—"Lord, I want to see"—and make this a living daily prayer. Third, I can observe other people and consider that the attachments common to them are likely to be mine as well, and by reflecting on my own wrongful behavior, uncover the underlying attachments. Fourth I should consult sources, persons or writings, to discover the unrecognized attachments I may have. And these steps and others like them must be taken daily and in the right spirit. Halfhearted engagement is insufficient. To do this well, the virtues of love for truth and honesty, humility, and courage are necessary.

If we have a duty to act on our conscience, it seems inexplicable that we would not also have a duty to act on a correct conscience. Some very wise or very attached person might argue to the contrary, but for the life of me, I cannot make out what that argument might come to. And if we have a duty to act on a correct conscience, then we have a duty to act on a conscience correctly formed, that is, when all the steps to be taken to achieve a correct conscience have been taken. The distinction between a correctly formed versus incorrectly formed conscience represents a continuum, of course, but whatever steps in the "steps to be taken" list were not taken in a particular individual's case, they are all steps he could reasonably have been expected to take in the range of circumstances surrounding his action at the time. The idea is that it is wrong to demand of someone what he could not have done under the circumstances. Thus the expression "correctly formed," in addition to its vagueness, has two meanings, one given normal and common circumstances, and one given the peculiar circumstances of an individual. The extraordinarily useful and important distinction between "material" and "formal"<sup>6</sup> is of great help here. The list of "steps to be taken" viewed materially contains all steps that could reasonably be expected of normal agents under normal circumstances, whereas the list viewed formally must conform to the peculiar circumstances of individuals regarding what might reasonably have been expected of them, there, and then.

Normal adult human beings should know about attachments and their blinding effects, and therefore they can reasonably be expected to take appropriate steps to protect themselves from this blinding, and if they fail to do so and their blindness remains, then they are responsible for the continued presence of their blinding emotional attachments, and then for whatever ignorance that may ensue, and then for their mistaken conscience, and then for the resulting wrongful action, and then for the resulting harm. The

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<sup>6</sup> *ST* I-II, q. 20, a. 1.

principle here is "voluntary in cause": the foreseeable result of a voluntary action is itself voluntary and something for which we are responsible.

Ah, but what "normal human beings should know about attachments and their blinding effects" is one thing, and what most people actually know today and what they can reasonably be expected to know today are quite different things. Who has told them, has warned them of the risk of incorrect conscience incorrectly formed caused by their attachments? The Church, one would think, should be expected to have sounded the warning, but this eager listener has somehow missed the warning, if indeed it has ever been issued with the clarity and insistence that could reasonably have been expected. So, the condition "incorrect conscience correctly (formally) formed" may be widespread. But the feature "correctly (formally) formed" does not remove the feature "incorrect" and the damage resulting from it. And that damage is not merely the harm caused by the incorrect conscience. A failure to form a correct conscience is a harm in itself even if we are not culpable for that error. It is not a moral evil, but it is a rational and natural one. We are expected to grow in maturity of conscience, and our failures in doing so are failures of our rational capacities, and their causes are causes of imperfectly rational acts and imperfectly rational animals, and thus sources of real evil, though not necessarily moral and blameworthy evil. Light is better than darkness in the rational animal not simply owing to their contrasting consequences but in its own right. Our world in some ways resembles the world of Jesus's time—"They were like sheep without a shepherd"—though it must be admitted that the sheep of our day might have a good deal of responsibility to bear on their own.

### III

The blindness brought about by our disordered emotions and attachments is an immediate and generic harm, but what are their remote and specific harms? We have seen one, incorrect conscience, but where there is an incorrect conscience, especially about an issue clear in its nature, "incorrectly (formally) formed" is a harm not likely to be far distant. Are there any others? The following are some of St. John's more striking observations.

First, *arrogance toward God specifically, arrogance regarding truth generically*. In *The Dark Night*, St. John speaks of the benefits the "dark night and purgation" brings, the dark night being the purgation of disordered appetites:

Individuals commune with God more respectfully and courteously, the way one should always converse with the Most High. . . . [Beginners in the spiritual life who have not yet been cleansed from their attachments] did not act thus, for that satisfying delight made them somewhat more daring with God than was proper, and more discourteous and inconsiderate. . . . When [Moses] heard God speaking to him, he was blinded by that gratification and desire and without any further thought would have dared to approach God, if he had not been ordered to stop and take off his shoes (Exod 3:4–5). This instance denotes the respect and discretion, the nakedness of appetite, with which one ought to commune with God. . . . Having left aside the shoes of his appetites and gratifications, he was fully aware of his misery in the sight of God. (*Dark Night* 1.12.3 [p. 386])

Those who have been freed from their attachments are no longer “discourteous and inconsiderate” only with respect to God. They have become “fully aware of their misery [imperfections] in the sight of God,” that is, with respect to the truth. Having been purified of their “inconsiderateness” and folly and arrogance, they have begun to know themselves better, and so have begun to acquire humility at last. Their conscience (i.e., their self-will) is no longer their god.

Second, *inability to relate to things in their reality*. Those who have been freed from their attachments

delight in [temporal] goods according to the truth of them, but those who are attached delight according to what is false in them; they delight in the best, the attached delight in the worst; they delight in the substance of them, those sensibly attached delight in the accidents. . . . The spirit, purged of the clouds and appearances of the accidents, penetrates the truth and value of things. . . . Joy [that has not been purged of attachments] clouds the judgment like a mist. . . . The denial and purgation of such joy leaves the judgment as clear as the air when vapors vanish. (*Ascent* 3.20.2 [p. 302]; see also *Dark Night* 1.12.4 [p. 387])

Third, *a base way of being and thinking*. The third of the evils caused by attachments mentioned by St. John in the book I of the *Ascent*, in addition to those of blindness and weakness, is that of defilement. The soul in the dialogue with the Beloved in the *Spiritual Canticle* calls the appetites of the lower, animal part

girls because as girls attract lovers to themselves by their affection and grace, so these pleasant sensory operations and movements [of uncleaned, disordered appetites] strive persistently to attract the will of the rational part to themselves. They try to draw it out of its interior to a desire for the exterior things that they crave. They also endeavor to move and attract the intellect so it may be *wed to them* in their base way of feeling, and they strive to bring the rational part into conformity and union with the sensory. (*Spiritual Canticle* 18.4 [p. 547])

Fourth, *difficulty in raising one's thoughts to God*. St. John writes in *The Living Flame of Love* that one can be in obscurity without culpability, but even then

it is impossible for [the soul] to lift its eyes to the divine light, or even think of doing so, for in never having seen it, it knows not what it is. Accordingly, it will be unable to desire this light; it will rather desire darkness because it knows what darkness is, and will go from darkness to darkness, guided by that darkness. One darkness cannot but lead to another. (*Living Flame* 3.71 [p. 703])

The amount of despair caused in this world by attachments, even when incalculable, cannot be told or imagined.

And finally, *failure to advance in the way of perfection*. In book III of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, St. John considers harms that can result from attachment to various kinds of goods, including even what he calls "moral goods": moral virtues and actions, observance of God's law, political prudence, and good manners. One may wonder how these goods could possibly be the cause of harm, but St. John succeeds in finding seven different kinds, the fifth of which is

failure to advance in the way of perfection. As a result of attachment to satisfaction and consolation in their works [i.e., their moral goods], some usually become discouraged and lose the spirit of perseverance. This ordinarily happens when God leads them on by giving them hard bread, the bread of the perfect, and takes away the infant's milk so as to prove their strength and purge their weak appetite so they may taste the substantial fare of adults. For when the occasion of practicing some mortification is presented to these persons, they *die* to their good works by ceasing to accomplish them, and they lose the spirit of perseverance. (*Ascent* 3.28.7 [p. 320])

I conclude with a warning St. John of the Cross issues not to those whose judgments are blinded by their attachments, but to those who leave them in their blindness. St. John is addressing spiritual directors who mislead their directees and cause them to take false turns in their path of prayer. But that is just one form of blindness, and the relevance of St. John's admonition to this essay needs no comment.

Perhaps in their zeal these directors err with good will because they do not know any better. Not for this reason, however, should they be excused for the counsels they give rashly, without first understanding the road and spirit a person may be following, and for rudely meddling in something they do not understand, instead of leaving the matter to one who does understand. It is no light matter or fault to cause a soul to lose inestimable goods and sometimes leave it in ruin through temerarious counsel.

Thus one who recklessly errs will not escape a punishment corresponding to the harm caused, for such a one is obliged to be certain, as is everyone in the performance of duties. The affairs of God must be handled with great tact and open eyes, especially in so vital and sublime a matter as is that of these souls, where there is at stake almost an infinite gain in being right and almost an infinite loss in being wrong. (*Living Flame* 3.56)

I end this essay with a second series of questions. They are intended principally for issues about which there is no general agreement but which should pose little difficulty for a correctly (materially) formed conscience. How likely is it that any random individual's conscience is correct? How likely is it that any random individual's conscience is correctly (materially / formally) formed? How likely is it that any random individual whose conscience is mistaken would change his mind were a clear and sound argument for the truth be presented to him? What are the reasons for answering these questions as you do?

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