CHAPTER 4

THE FUNDAMENTALS OF CONSCIENCE

Egerton Ryerson (1871) writes, "But whatever may be the diversity of terms or of expression, all agree as to the existence and office of conscience. Of its tremendous and often crushing power we have frequent illustrations" (p. 55). The broad opinion is that conscience is part of human nature. "There is a mass of evidence that shows that conscience, this moral sense, this inner light, is a universal phenomenon" (Covey, 2004, p. 77). However, as illustrated in Chapter Three, as soon as those definitions attempt to include aspects of the nature and function of conscience, variety abounds. Some of these attempts include:

> "Conscience is … the expression of man's inner awareness, with special reference to ethical conduct" (Schar, 1973, p. 83).
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> Conscience is, "That still, small voice within that assures you of what is right and that prompts you to actually do it." (Covey, 2004, p. 5)
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> "Conscience makes sure that all evidence is available, for it is the self-conscience of everything that takes place within judgment". (Moyar 2008, p. 345)
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> Quoting Kant, "Conscience is the bond between duty and obligation" (Lehmann, 1963**,** p. 33)
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> Also credited to Kant, "Conscience is an instinct to pass judgment upon ourselves in accordance with moral laws…. Its judgment is not logical but judicial" (Anosiki, 2000, p .2).
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> Conscience is the faculty within each of us with which we search for life's ultimate meaning and distinguish right from wrong, good from bad. (Hayes, 2009, p. 10)
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> Referencing Thomas Aquinas, "Conscience is…the bond between law and responsibility". (Lehmann, 1963, p. 31)
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> Conscience discloses the gap between our actual selves and that image of ourselves that we already have in virtue of the "natural inclination" towards the fulfilment of man's end. (Macquarrie, 1970, p. 114)

Over recorded history, the many attempts to define the nature and function of conscience have revealed differences primarily to do with authority, the role of reason, and motivation. In spite of this, and for the purposes of my argument, fundamental aspects do emerge that can inform the usefulness of the vocabulary of conscience formation in moral education. These fundamentals, as they are

explored below, include: its reflexive nature, self-judgement, standards (morals, principles, beliefs, values) moral emotions, its relational (reciprocal, prudent) nature, and motivation. Before jumping into this exploration, however, I want to expand, and thereby challenge, what might be an assumption regarding conscience. In so doing I want to acknowledge the complexity of the concept and ensure that its usefulness in moral education is not reduced to an over-simplified framework.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THE WORD "RIGHT"?

I opened this book suggesting that by unpacking the simple phrase, "It is the right thing to do", we can advance the understanding and usefulness of the notion of conscience. The word "right" needs unpacking itself. Impulsively, and quite naturally, when we hear the word "right", we associate it with the opposite notion of "wrong". Likewise, common usage of the word "good" (typically tied to an understanding of conscience) triggers the association with "bad" or "evil". But when one looks at the moral behaviours and acts of conscience for which the phrase, "It was the right thing to do" is uttered, it seems to me that the nature and function of conscience go far deeper than the dualistic notion of right versus wrong, or good versus evil. I would suggest that the true educational potential of the notion of conscience can only be recognised once this simplistic approach is challenged and the dualism it implies is broadened. Specifically, then, the meaning of the word "right" in the statement, "it's the right thing to do", has to be considered. I want to start here because it is a key example of the risk of falling back into a more familiar mindset, which I referred to in the Introduction.

When one hears the phrase, "it's the right thing to do", this statement might imply, "because it would be wrong not to do otherwise". Ryerson (1871) takes this position in his text, *First Lessons in Christian Morals; for Canadian Families and Schools*. He states,

> The idea of right and wrong is among the first principles of the human mind…. There may be differences of opinions as to what is and what is not right action… but every system and every age admits and assumes the essential difference between right and wrong…. These self-evident propositions are called intuitive truths. (p. 52)

Although a dictionary definition for conscience typically utilizes the right/wrong dualism, I do not think that this reflects all that conscience is about. Understanding why an act of conscience feels right may be so because to do otherwise would feel wrong. However, it may also feel right for other reasons that really have little to do with the right/wrong dualism. I want to return to some other, yet equally familiar phrases spoken in an act of conscience that were offered in the Introduction to this book. They include, "I'm not sure why, but this is just something I have to do", "It's who I am, it is what I believe", and, "Doesn't everyone think like that? Wouldn't anyone do that in the same situation"? These utterances do not imply that what is not right must therefore be wrong. More