PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Contemplating Conscience

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From the outset the distinction between layers or types of conscience has made me feel somewhat ill at ease, as if I were sensing an inherent clash with logic.
Only recently did the space open up for me to have a fresh look at this subject.

In the first part of this article entitled: The Gem, I appreciate the revolutionary insight concerning conscience of Bert Hellinger, which has not yet even begun to sink into the worldwide collective consciousness.

In part two: The Entanglement, I discuss what in the constellation world I believe to be understood as the 'collective conscience', suggesting this to be a misnomer.

In part three: The Opening, I outline the growth potential of the personal conscience towards a spiritual dimension.

The Gem

In order to get an inkling of the enormity of Bert Hellinger's insight which enabled him to formulate what conscience is in essence, it is helpful to look at the accumulated views of philosophy, science, art and theology on the subject.
The internet is loaded with references, yet I was unable to find Hellinger mentioned amongst 300 entries dealing with conscience. [1]

The view on conscience generally held is perhaps best formulated in the Columbia Encyclopedia as:

> *"a sense of moral awareness or of right and wrong. The concept has been variously explained by moralists and philosophers. In the history of ethics, the conscience has been looked upon as the will of a divine power expressing itself in man's judgements, an innate sense of right and wrong resulting from man's unity with the universe, an inherited intuitive sense evolved in the long history of the human race, and a set of values derived from the experience of the individual. Psychologists also differ in their analyses of the nature of conscience. It is variously believed to be an expression of values differing from other expressions of value only in the subject matter involved, a feeling of guilt for known or*

unknown actions done or not done, the manifestation of a special set of values introjected from the example and instruction of parents and teachers, and the value structure that essentially defines the personality of the individual." [2]

Sifting through the numerous references to conscience it emerges that one single word is missing, the one that Bert Hellinger 'discovered' in this context. The word is: Belonging.

With all that's written about the subject, conscience has the quality of a Fata Morgana, a Mirage, appearing to be real, yet impossible to grasp firmly. That simple word 'belonging' is what makes the difference.

Belonging, or rather the need for belonging is of paramount importance for us as human beings. If we look through the phylo- and onto- genetic lens, considering how we humans have developed as a species and are developing as individuals, we find that need deeply ingrained in our hereditary make up. Without belonging we cannot survive.

How do we ensure our immediate survival after having been born? We demonstrate our belonging to our mother by smiling at her, thus inducing in her the flow of love that keeps us alive. We continue to do everything necessary to ensure our belonging and are guided in this by our endowment with an inner sense organ that 'tells' us when our belonging is at risk or is safe, comparable to our sense of balance. [3] (p.57)
Although this 'organ' – the *'capacity for conscience'* [4] is commonly felt by us like an inner voice letting us know what is good or what is bad, it is not to be understood as equivalent to an inbuilt radio-like device enabling us to 'receive' messages sent by a transmitter residing outside of us. Over the course of many centuries this phenomenon was recognised as and declared to be the absolute voice of God. By and large, humanity went along with this notion and still does.

It took someone like Hellinger, who was prepared to look at it from a purely phenomenological point of view to realise that there are no absolute 'goods' or 'bads' that our inner voice is making us aware of. That inner voice tells us only what is good or bad, helpful or unhelpful for our belonging. It is not an absolute voice, only relative – relative to those whom we depend upon for our, first physical later psychological, survival.

Columbia Encyclopedia ends its definition of conscience by describing the phenomenon that there is no universal conscience. Almost baffled, yet calling it a 'practical matter' it is virtually asking: how come this is so? without putting a question mark:

> *"As a practical matter, the consciences of different people within a society or from different societies may vary widely."* [2]

Hellinger takes this phenomenon a step further by describing the most extreme dynamics of different consciences coming into contact with each other:
People going to war with a good conscience against people who have a different yet equally good conscience – killing one another with a good conscience.

This Gem (thank you Barbara Morgan for the apt label) of an insight is simple and clear: Conscience is intrinsically connected to our need for belonging, guiding us always in relation to our individual need; never coming as an absolute voice of authority from outside ourselves.

The 'Entanglement'

This heading was chosen for two reasons. The ***concept*** of 'the collective conscience' deals first and foremost with the phenomenon of entanglement between an excluded member of the system with a later born one, as we understand it within the context of constellations; at the same time I am sensing an entanglement of sorts when personal and collective consciences are treated as quasi equivalents.

In my understanding we are dealing here with two separate insights of Hellinger's: one is about the nature of conscience and the other about the workings of the human system, the collective, in its effort to remain intact and complete. The attempt to unite both insights as one overriding phenomenon called conscience is misleading and confusing; at least that's how I have perceived it.

Personal conscience means: the conscience of the individual person, whereas collective conscience does **not** mean: the conscience of the collective, a fundamental difference. Whilst we rightfully regard the collective or system of which we are a part as an entity, we go astray if we treat it as an entity of human kind.
Ascribing anthropomorphous [5] qualities to the entity/system, makes this entity out to be human-like. Here I find the root cause of my confusion:

On the one hand Hellinger says:

> *"It is not accurate to see this collective conscience as a person, to personify it and attribute it with having personal aims and pursuing them in a calculated manner.* [6] (p.3)

On the other he implies that the collective is indeed endowed with a human-like conscience of its own in the following description:

> *"The collective conscience is a group conscience. While the personal conscience is felt by the individual and is in the service of the individual's belonging and the individual's survival, the collective conscience attends to the family as a whole and to the group as a whole. It is in the service of the survival of the group as a whole."* [6] (p.2)

The path towards solution of this discrepancy is found in his statement:

> *"This collective conscience operates as a drive, a* ***collective drive*** *that wants only one thing: to save and restore completeness*." [6] (p.3)

In this latter statement, he firstly recognises that the collective is endowed with a drive (towards completeness) rather than with a conscience. Secondly he has stopped using the term 'collective conscience' and replaced it with a different term.

In naming this force that operates within us the 'collective drive' , we give it all due credit and acknowledgment. At the same time, we eliminate the possibility for confusion in our understanding of what 'conscience' really is and what functions it fulfills. Thus we are keeping those two profound insights apart.

Separating the two perceptions: firstly, what conscience is, its functions and consequences and secondly, the effects of a systemic drive for completion leading to entanglement, may make it easier for the general public to come to an understanding of the fundamental difference between the traditional view of conscience and the one that links conscience with our need for belonging. For me, this is an understanding which is so desperately needed in our conflict-ridden, troubled world, through which we can more clearly see the way out, or better still, the way ahead.

It may add further clarification to consider how the individual experiences the calling of conscience:

Only our 'personal' conscience is consciously experienced; we feel good or bad as far as our belonging in its various facets is concerned or good or bad concerning the balance of give and take. We have, however, no conscious awareness of the intra-systemic insistence on completeness resulting in entanglements, regardless of how good or bad we feel as consequence of the hold those entanglements have over us.

Our ‘personal’ conscience gives us a felt sense; systemic pressure (the collective drive) does not. We can only be aware of the effects that this systemic drive passes on to us, unable to link cause and effect.

Also to be considered is the question of choice which enables us to distinguish personal conscience from the effects of systemic pressure (the collective drive) on us as individuals. Though at times only in a small way, we always have a choice when our personal conscience speaks to us, yet sometimes this choice can make the difference between life and death, as illustrated by the following story often told by Bert:

A man (the biblical Abraham) hears the inner voice commanding him to sacrifice his son and follows this instruction almost through to completion before being stopped.[7] The alternative one in this tale hears the same command yet he stops to consider it and then refuses to carry out the instruction. [8] (p.43). All conscientious objectors make this choice, prepared to suffer the price they have to pay for doing so. Muhammed Ali did it most famously.

Systemic pressure exerted on us, however, leaves us with no choice. We have no say whatsoever in the nature of our entanglements: which excluded person from our system we become entangled with or to what extent. We continue to suffer the consequences of entanglement, without awareness, unless of course it is brought to light, perhaps in the course of a constellation.

For a moment let’s try and simplify matters and imagine our personal conscience to be represented by fruits hanging collectively on a tree.

Each fruit is an integral part of the tree, belongs to the tree and is totally dependent on the tree, yet throughout its allotted time, the fruit is subject to the drive of the tree to remain intact and complete as a tree. The tree has no regard for the individual fruit, shedding it before full ripeness, if necessary for its ongoing survival; no conscience is felt or operating here.

The Opening

Summing up the above leads me to the conclusion that the capacity for conscience, i.e. the ability to monitor our state of belonging, is an exclusive feature of human beings and like everything human, it is subject to change and development, not entirely unlike our capacity for singing. Many of us are content with allowing that capacity to develop only under the shower, others proceed all the way towards singing in a concert hall or opera house.

We are born into a specific systemic environment and for sheer survival reasons initially we subscribe to 100% of the dos and don’ts of our system;

yet this subscription does not remain static. As we grow up, our personal conscience expands as well, in tandem with our relating to more and more members of our system and beyond.

With the expansion of our personal conscience we inevitably experience inner conflict: for example when we feel a different conscience in relation to our mother from what we experience in relation to our father who left the family or perhaps later in life when our conscience with regard to our own origin is very different to the one relating to our life partner's lineage. Constellation work deals quite frequently with the suffering arising out of such conflicts.

Conflicts of conscience can be dramatically non-resolvable. The story of Romeo and Juliet serves as a universal reminder of the most fatal consequences of such inner turmoil. More often than not when in conflict we make a choice and commit ourselves to one side, usually the one which is most familiar or comfortable for us.

However, there is another possibility with this inner conflict which takes us forward: instead of choosing one side, we have the potential to choose to step beyond it by looking at both sides from an outer perspective. When prepared to risk losing our belonging we can take that step and reap the benefits of personal growth and an expanded kind of belonging. One example would be the movement of one's conscience from a National towards a Continental and perhaps even a Global one.
In his description of spiritual conscience Hellinger alludes to this inner growth, bringing with it an increasing ability to serve life, love and peace. [6] (p.13)

Spiritual conscience does not mean conscience of the spirit, just as collective conscience does not mean conscience of the collective. It is not, in my understanding, a force that *"guides us beyond the boundaries of the personal conscience."*[6] (p.13). If there are such boundaries it pushes them outwards from within. It is rather a metaphor for the growth potential of the personal conscience, not of a different rank or quality, but more like the widest possible expansion of our conscience.

Personal and spiritual conscience rest on a continuum. Moving from a personal to a spiritual conscience is like moving from the narrow to the wide; not a linear movement but a multi-dimensional, concentric one, behaving like sound-waves emanating from its source outwards. This movement provides an opening for us towards the universe – considered to be the seat of the Spirit.

Our ordinary, personal **conscience** is the guiding capacity with which we are endowed for the purpose of relating to our environment in optimal harmony by progressively making decisions to serve our changing needs for belonging. At

the same time, our conscience is rather like a barometer indicating the stage of development of our inner spiritual/ethical being

The fruit on a tree may be shed early in its development or may just reach a stunted level of growth, but it reaches a state of full ripeness when all conditions work well. Our personal conscience has an equivalent potential. We are capable of reaching the fulfillment of spiritual awareness or consciousness, however far removed from that state of ripeness we may presently find ourselves.

In the spiritual realm conscience and consciousness merge.

Dedicated to Bert Hellinger with gratitude for all the gifts received

Notes:

1.http://www.answers.com/topic/conscience
2. Columbia Encyclopedia www.answers.com/topic/conscience
3. Bert Hellinger, Peace Begins in The Soul, Carl-Auer-Systeme 2003
4.Wikipedia: "Common secular or scientific views regard the ***capacity for conscience*** *as probably genetically determined, with its subject probably learned or imprinted (like language) as part of a culture."*
5. http://www.answers.com/topic/anthropomorphous "Ascribing human motivation, characteristics, or behavior to things not human, such as inanimate objects, animals, or natural phenomena "
6. http://www.cf-evajacinto.pt/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/On-conciences-Bert-Hellinger-2007.pdf
7 The Holy Bible, Genesis 22, Knox Version p.17 - recommended reading in this context, MD-
8 Hellinger, The Churches + Their God, Hellinger Publications 2013

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