

The Unconscious Development of the Spiritual Life

A Sermon¹

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And he said, So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed upon the earth; and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should spring up and grow, he knoweth not how.—Mark iv., 26, 27.

PSYCHICAL research has been revealing curious facts of late. Things once thought miraculous, like the stigmata of the cross on the bodies of mediæval saints, can be duplicated to-day wherever the hypnotizer can find a patient sufficiently susceptible; careful experiments go far toward establishing the ability of peculiarly sensitive persons to read, without the aid of ordinary sensuous symbols, the contents of another mind. The fact that there may be in the same body, and connected with the same brain, two distinct selves, each ignoring the presence of the other, each in a way complementary to the other; which take turns in occupying the field of consciousness, one self sleeping while the other wakes, one expressing itself through the voice in speech while the other expresses itself through the hand in writing—these, and a host of similar facts, once denied and ridiculed, are coming to be accepted data of psychology.

Now, when new facts do not fit into old theories, there is only one thing to do. We must make new theories large enough to give these new facts room. That is just what psychology is doing to-day. To explain these facts we are compelled to assume that the self is more than we are conscious of. As Mr. F. W. H. Myers has expressed it, there is a subliminal consciousness, so deeply buried that ordinarily we are not aware of its existence. Only when the flow of our ordinary consciousness is arrested or diverted does this deeper consciousness manifest itself. It is in this buried consciousness that all these powers inhere for which the upper or ordinary consciousness has no place and of which it can give no explanation. According to this view, the spirit or soul of man floats in nature like a solid in a liquid. A part only of the solid object is visible. The other part, and usually the larger part, is hidden beneath the surface. The self of which we are conscious is only one section, perhaps a small section, of the total self.

Below the surface stream, shallow and light,
Of what we say we feel; below the stream,
As light, of what we think we feel, there flows,
With silent current strong, obscure, and deep,
The central stream of what we feel indeed.

If, now, psychologist and poet are right; if a large part of each man's self is below the threshold of his own consciousness and beyond the reach of his own observation, it behooves us in all our practical concerns to take account of this subconscious self.

For example, we shall not be surprised to find the best part of our education stored up in this deeper self. As long as you measure a man's education by the amount of information he has at his tongue's end, ready at a moment's notice to be dumped upon an examination-paper, so long his education will seem to you a very small and superficial thing. It is comparatively little that the average mind can hold in this conscious, explicit form. The college student is often unable to pass as good an examination for admission to college after he has graduated as he passed when he entered. There are many college professors, for that matter, who could not without considerable special preparation pass the entrance examination at all. New lines of interest crowd out and obliterate the old so fast that what the wisest man carries with him as conscious actual possession is almost insignificant. Does it then follow that education is not worth the time and money that it costs? By no means. For a man's conscious information at any given moment is the least part of his education. The real value of his education is the power it has devel-

oped; the mastery over the sources of knowledge; the capacity to judge correctly; the ability to take up new questions in a scientific method; the sagacity to see the essential principle underneath the complex details. As long as the college boy merely shows off his newly acquired scraps of linguistic lore and scientific information, the plain, sensible farmers and business men laugh at him and despise his pretentious education. But when the college graduate in business mounts to success, a flight at a time, when he makes his mark on politics with an incisiveness and force which are the despair of men of narrower training; now that the highest prizes of professional success are passing more and more exclusively into his hands—even the hardest-headed business men are coming to recognize that there is something to education besides the little smattering of language and science and mathematics which a boy remembers from his college course.

This principle, which we all recognize in education, our text applies to the religious life. "So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed into the earth, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should spring up and grow, he knoweth not how."

If you judge religion by that part of it which shows above the surface, it seems to be a very superficial and contradictory affair. A creed half tradition, half mystery; an emotional experience alternating between ecstasy and despair; a course of conduct in which the avowal of the loftiest motives is followed by surrender to the basest impulses—this is what we find when we look most searchingly into our conscious selves. And, finding this experience in us, we naturally infer that the religion of our neighbors is no better. And hence we come to doubt whether there is any consistent and satisfying reality in religion anyway. The souls are rare to whom this bitter and despairing doubt has never come. The air is full of the cries of multitudes who have looked into themselves just deep enough to see these contradictions, and who have gone forth from this sad experience to warn their fellows that all religion is a delusion and a snare.

It is the old fallacy of taking a part for the whole. We saw that if you judge education in that way, and suddenly take a cross-section of the student's intellect, you find but little there to show as the conscious and explicit outcome of his education. It is the unmeasured and unmeasurable promise and potency which his years of training have given to his mind that justifies the student's education.

And so it is in the religious life. It is not the infinitesimal fraction of spiritual truth that you have apprehended already; not the poor, petty experiences that you have gone through; not the filthy rags of a righteousness with which you have succeeded in clothing yourselves, that constitute the worth of your religious life. It is the truth, not that you have gotten hold of, but that has gotten hold of you with such power that, though you know but little of it, yet you are sure there is infinitely more, and you surrender your mind to its gradual reception; it is the experience, not that you have had, but that you are sure you might have and ought to have, and which you invite into your life by habits of consecration and devotion; it is the conduct, not which you have wrought out as a finished achievement, but which you plant far in advance of present attainment as your ideal and your goal, and vow never to cease your aspiration and endeavor until the ideal shall be real and the goal is won—these are the deep and real grounds of Christian confidence. In other words, we are saved, not by retrospection, nor yet by introspection, but, as Paul says, by hope; by faith and not by works; by aspiration toward what we shall be, not by satisfaction with what we are. To put it in a single sentence, we are saved,

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not by profession of our own religion, but by confession of the Christ.

Granted that your creed is hazy on many points of doctrine. That, indeed, is a misfortune. Clearness is preferable to confusion, light to darkness, in religious as in secular affairs. Yet even the creedless soul need not despair. There are truths you cannot doubt. That the world is the expression of measureless wisdom and beneficence and power you cannot fail to recognize. That the true, brave, kindly, self-sacrificing life and character of Jesus Christ is an incarnation of such goodness and grace as God must have if he is worthy of our worship you cannot fail to see.

That this Spirit of Christ is not withdrawn from the world to-day, but still lives in greater or lesser measure in the lives of Christ's followers, this, too, those of us who have known Christian fathers and mothers and teachers and friends, this, too, we cannot bring ourselves to deny. Yet if you put these three insights together, you get, not, to be sure, the scholastic doctrine of the Trinity, but a Father to worship, a Son of God to follow, a Holy Spirit to revere in the hearts of others and to welcome to your own. And if you see and respond to this with your mind and heart, you are thereby making confession of your faith in the only formula which the New Testament prescribes. Or, take the line of emotional experience. You look into your heart, and fail to find there any rapture of affection for God, any ardor of devotion to his cause. Despair not; be as cold-blooded and clear-sighted as you please, however much or little you may feel, there are certain things which you must see. You see the hard earnings of honest toil snatched from the laborer by fraud and misrepresentation; you see wife and children robbed of husband and father and doomed to beggary and want by drunkenness and debauchery; you see the peace of homes blasted by brutality and lust; you see the honor of men sacrificed to avarice and the purity of women sold for a price; you see friends alienated by malice and hearts broken by unkindness, the poor crushed beneath the unfair advantage taken by the rich, children abused by the tyranny of superior strength. In a word, you see sin and evil in the world, and you find the elemental passions out of which sin springs surging up in your own heart.

Over against all this stands Christ and the ideal of character which he represents. Sharp and pronounced is his antagonism to all these forms of sin. Over against sensuality he sets a purity which had power and charm to win the vilest from their shame; over against cruelty he sets a kindness which drew little children to his arms and brought outcast lepers to his feet; over against avarice he sets a generosity which spent a lifetime in doing good; over against self-indulgence he sets a self-control which could fast in the wilderness, and over against asceticism he sets a geniality which made him a welcome guest at the houses of the rich; over against falsehood and pretense he sets a loyalty to truth which was faithful unto death; and over against malice and hate he sets a love which pitied the ignorance and prayed for the forgiveness of his murderers.

You see the difference between right and wrong; between the side of Christ and the side of sin. Can you see it and remain utterly unmoved? Have you no feeling of indignation against the sins and injustices and wrongs of the world? Have you no stirring of admiration, no prompting of devotion, no desire for fellowship with him who bravely and generously gave his time and strength, his matchless insight and his mighty influence, and, when the hour came, laid down life itself, that he might break the force of sin and deliver enslaved humanity from its cruel and degrading bondage, and establish among men the reign of gentleness and kindness and purity and truth and love? Can you stand in the midst of this mighty, world-historic conflict, where on the one side thousands and tens of thousands of men and women are being maltreated and robbed and betrayed by the sin of others, and degraded and polluted by sin in their own hearts; and, on the other side, thousands and tens of thousands of the best and noblest men and women the world has produced are banded together

in the name of Christ in the endeavor first to banish sin from their own hearts and lives, and then to do their utmost to banish it from the hearts and lives of others, and so remove its evils from the world? Can you stand indifferent between these contending hosts? Can you say that you do not care on which of these two sides you stand? Can you say that you would just as lief be counted as an ally of sin, and an aider and abettor in all the injustice and brutality which sin inflicts, as be counted a loyal follower of Christ and promoter of righteousness? When the real issue comes home to you, in clear, contrasted outlines, you feel as well as see the duty, yes, the privilege, of prompt enlistment on the side of Christ. Deep down in the unconscious depths of our real nature there is a sound core of loyalty to what is right and true. It may not rise to the surface in the form of sentiment which we can talk about, and fondle, and show off. But the profound response to the call of duty, the unswerving allegiance of our lives to what is true and kind and just and good, and to Christ as the supreme embodiment and historic champion of justice and mercy in the world; this response of our whole being to the outward voice and messenger of God—there is no heart so hard and cold and dead as to be incapable of that!

Trust this deeper feeling to the utmost. Do what it prompts. Do not wait for great storms of emotional experience to sweep over the surface of your more superficial consciousness. If there is enough of response to what you see Christ is, and what you know that he would have you do, to make you desire to be his disciple, that is all the emotional experience you need to start with. It is all that God asks for; and all that wise men will expect to find. It may not make so good a showing on examination; but the most silent and imperceptible turning of the depths of our moral nature toward duty, and toward God as the author of duty and the defender of the right, is worth more than whole tempests of froth and foam on the heaving surface of emotional excitement. The great question, after all, is not, "Have I a love for Christ of which I can be conscious all the time?" That way lies discouragement, despondency, despair. The great question, rather, is this, Have I Christ? Whether with little emotion or with much, am I resolved that what work I do shall be done in his name, what influence I have shall be cast upon his side; however cold and dead my emotions may become, however weak and blundering my efforts may prove, such as I am, I will be his? If you are thus resolved to serve him, you do love him; and the fact of this simple devotion is better evidence of love than all the protestations of affection with which the biographies of saints are full.

We have almost anticipated the application of this principle to outward conduct. Conduct is a better test than creed or emotion, but conduct, in its external and momentary aspects at any rate, is a very inadequate expression of the real self. If we are to test our Christian character by this, its practical product in our conscious experience, we shall find ourselves plunged in the slough of despond at the very outset of our journey. The scholar does not despair because, judged by absolute standards, every one of his college performances is worthless. The teacher has patience, not in consequence of what he sees, which is full of imperfection and error, but on account of what he cannot see now, but knows will appear hereafter. The willingness to try, the readiness to be corrected—these are the promise and potency of satisfactory work to come.

Character, like scholarship, is of slow growth. By painful effort, by laborious climbing, by frequent falls, we must slowly and gradually toil onward and upward. And here the great question is not, What have you done? but, What are you trying to do? Three men are on the mountain-side: one near the base, having taken only a few steps; the second is half-way up; the third is within a few rods of the topmost peak. Which of these three men is nearest the summit? "The third man, of course," every superficial onlooker replies. So it appears upon the surface. Let us look deeper into the minds and hearts of these three mountain-climbers. The first man's face is set resolutely towards the summit, and he is determined to neither pause nor rest until the summit shall be reached.

His will is on the heights already, and soon or late we know his resolute determination will bring his body there. The second man is "resting upon his path content," enjoying the prospect he has already gained, undecided whether to go up or down. His will is alternating between the summit and the base, and we cannot say in which direction he will finally proceed. This second man is farther from the summit than the first. And the third man—his feet are indeed near the summit, but they are directed downward. He has seen enough already; perhaps he is looking with critical contempt at the poor struggling climber away down there at the base. This man will never reach the summit. He is farthest from it of them all. And so the last is first, and the first last.

Two practical conclusions follow obviously from this recognition of the unconscious growth of the religious nature. First: we must make sure that we plant the seed of truth deep in the soil of mind and heart. When you plant seed in the ground, you cannot see it grow at first. You must have faith in what you cannot see. You must leave the seed to grow of itself. But you must plant it, to begin with. You must know that it is there. The ground does not bring forth fruit of itself. The sower must cast seed into the ground. And this is a conscious process. This is left for each man consciously to do for himself. The winds of heaven will sow all sorts of weeds and tares. The good seed must be selected and planted by the hand of man. And I leave this question for each thoughtful mind to ponder: Have you planted the seed of a worthy character in your own heart? and are you watering it, and keeping the weeds down, day by day? Notice, please, that I do not ask whether the plant has grown to any particular height. I do not ask whether the fruit is ripe upon its branches. That is a minor matter. I ask you simply to consider whether you have consciously committed your heart to God; whether you have taken Christ as your Lord and Master, your standard and your ideal; and whether day by day you are opening your heart in meditation, in aspiration, in communion to him and to his gracious influence? If you have not, then do it at once. It is not a great thing, not a hard thing, to do. There is no possible excuse for waiting. The simplest creed, the slightest stirring of feeling, the feeblest genuine determination to do right, is all you need to start with. Plant now the seed of a sincere acceptance of Christ as your Lord, and be assured that, if watered and cultivated by systematic habits of devotion, that buried seed will spring up and grow, and crown your life with noble character and splendid usefulness. Delay not, oh! delay not to plant this precious seed in the springtime of your lives. Youth is the time for planting; manhood and womanhood for growth; old age for maturing; and eternity is the storehouse of the ripened grain. This word let me leave with any who have not done the simple act of accepting Christ as Lord and Master of their lives: Plant the good seed; plant it at once, before the seedtime is gone by.

And also one word to those who have planted the good seed; who are conscious that they have given their hearts to God; who have accepted Christ as Lord and Master; who are renewing their consecration to him day by day in established habits of meditating upon his word and lifting up their hearts to him in worship and in prayer. To you I say, Trust this good seed to do its work in its own time and in its own way. Above all things, don't pull it up by the roots every now and then to see how it is growing. Remember that you have just two things to do: to plant the seed, and to keep it provided with proper nourishment and care. And rest assured that if you do your part the seed will do the rest. Don't be impatient for the fruit. It will not come all at once. For a long time after planting you will see no visible signs of even the plant, to say nothing of bud and flower and fruit. That is the time when young Christians who have not pondered our parable fall into dejection and despair. They have planted the seed, and it has not come up. They have nothing to show for it. They have given their hearts to Christ, and he has given scarcely a token of recognition. They have no sure creed that they can proclaim; no experience that they can

relate in meeting; no manifest change in deportment to which they can point with pride as evidence of their conversion. Well, friends, if our parable is true; if there is a deeper self than that which appears upon the surface, this, far from being an occasion for regret, is evidence that the seed of a true Christian character is growing in just the humble, quiet, natural way in which God would have it grow; in just the way in which Jesus tells us that it must grow, if it is to be a vigorous, healthy plant, and bear sound, sweet fruit at last. Silently and slowly, but steadily and surely, the truth that God's service is your first concern, the feeling that Christ's character is your supreme ideal, the determination that your life shall be lived in the spirit of love which he imparted to the world—these ideals, principles, and aspirations are gradually transforming your ways of thinking, your currents of emotion, your springs of action. Let the good work go on. Keep near to God by study of his Word, by submission to his will, by fellowship with those who, like you, are seeking to know and serve him. But think as little of yourself as possible. Do not take account of stock of your spiritual attainments. Keep near to God, and trust him to do his work in his own good time. The Bible does not tell you that you shall walk all the way by sight. It does not promise quick and visible returns for every investment. Have we really learned, with all our orthodoxy of creed and confession, the one great lesson, so simple yet so essential, that we are saved by the slow transformation wrought within us by a cherished faith, not by the sudden exhibition of accomplished works; and that the source of our salvation is the Christ whom we gradually appropriate by love and trust, not our own power to repeat a creed, or lead a meeting, or accomplish a reform?

Of course, in due time faith will produce appropriate works; the grown stalk will bear fruit after its kind. Yet here, too, we must have much patience with ourselves. We must not expect the ripened and perfected fruit all at once. Your first works will be failures and defeats; your second, blunders and mistakes; after that you may expect such partial and moderate success as invariably crowns fidelity and constancy and courage. Does this seem a gloomy and depressing prophecy? It is merely a modern version of the words that follow my text: The earth beareth fruit of herself: first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear.

O friends, if the seed of a sincere and sustained desire and purpose to follow Christ is really planted in your heart and watered by daily prayer and meditation, trust God implicitly; trust the seed's inherent power; trust the fertility of your own deeper nature; and wait patiently for God to do his work. You will fail; you will err; you will sin; and for a long time your new purpose will manifest itself chiefly in overtaking your faults after they are committed; and that, you know, is penitence. By and by your new God-given purpose will grow stronger and gain upon the ingrained habits of selfishness and sin; and then there will come many a bitter struggle into your life. In the end you will conquer; and then your divinely implanted life will get the start of the old and dying impulses of crude, selfish, and sensual desire; and then the matured product of your long-buried faith will be manifest in a character confirmed in righteousness, and a conduct visibly consistent with the spiritual standard so long invisibly cherished.

Then the wonder will be all the other way. At first we wonder that a man who has confessed Christ, and is honestly trying to follow him, can give so little evidence of it in conduct. As we have seen, this makes us critical and censorious of others, disheartened and despairing about ourselves. When, however, we look on the mature and developed Christian, when we see such serenity in bereavement, such patience in trial, such fortitude in sorrow, such supremacy over appetite, such self-control in passion, such fidelity to the costly right against the profitable wrong, such loyalty to searching and unwelcome truth against easy and accepted error, such sympathy with the weak and suffering, and such fearless opposition to oppressive wealth and unrighteous power, then the wonder is all the other way, and we ask, How can such strong and

sweet and noble character consist with frail human nature? The answer, however, is not far to seek. Long ago, in the days of seedtime, there was sown in this soul the tiny seed of an earnest aspiration to become more and more like Christ. For weeks and months the seed lay buried, giving little or no outward proof of its presence, and even its possessor doubted at times whether it were actually alive. Then came the early years of failure and defeat; then the years of sore temptation and bitter conflict, when the old self and the new fought desperately for the supremacy. And now the new life has so completely conquered that the spirit of Christ has become a second nature, putting forth the fair leaves of appropriate conduct, and bearing the precious fruit of Christian character. Then we understand the meaning of another closely related parable which tells us that the kingdom of heaven is very small in its beginning, but very great in its final outcome. It is like a grain of mustard-seed, which, when it is sown upon the earth, though it be less than all seeds that are upon the earth, yet when it is sown groweth up and becometh greater than all the herbs, and putteth out great branches, so that the birds of the heaven can lodge under the shadow thereof.

These truths, then, let me leave with you. Our nature is deeper than our consciousness can fathom. Therefore the most important transformations may take place unobserved. Hence the importance of making sure that in this deep, rich soil of our subconscious selves the germ of the spiritual life is planted by conscious acceptance of Christ, the perfect spiritual ideal, and constantly watered by habits of communion and devotion. And, finally, having opened our deeper nature to the influence of this implanted germ, with the confident assurance that, without restlessness about our spiritual progress, or haste to produce visible results, we may sleep and rise night and day, we may confidently hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord.



The Law of Obedience

By Hamilton W. Mabie

In reading Marlowe one is brought face to face not only with tragic situations but with the elemental tragedy—the tragedy which has its rise in the conflict between the infinite desires of the soul and the rigid restrictions of its activity. The master of “the mighty line” never learned that lesson of self-mastery which Shakespeare studied so faithfully; he was always wasting his immense force on the impossible, and matching his powerful genius against those immutable conditions imposed upon men, not to dwarf but to develop them. In art no less than in morals supreme achievement is conditioned, not only upon a free use of one’s powers, but upon a clear recognition of their limits; the great artist never attempts the impossible. In “Tamburlaine,” however, Marlowe strove to portray a personality which transcended human limitations, and to pass beyond them himself by the sheer force of his genius; but neither the conqueror nor the dramatist evaded the play of that law which binds ultimate freedom to immediate obedience. Shakespeare, on the other hand, achieved the most impressive success in modern literature when he dealt with the same problem in “Lear”—a success based on a clear perception of the exact limits within which the human personality may express itself.

We touch at this point the essence of the deepest tragedy and the secret of the highest art; for the elemental tragedy is the struggle between the will and the conditions imposed upon its expression, and the secret of art resides in the depth and vitality of the artist’s mastery of his materials, and also in the clearness of his perception of the decisive line between the possible and the impossible. The Classical writers, with their delicate sense of proportion, harmony, and form, never attempted to pass beyond the limits of a sound art; they were sometimes formal and cold, but they were never tumultuous, unbalanced, and lawless. In Sophocles, for instance, one never loses consciousness of the presence of a genius which, dealing with the most perplexing and

terrible questions of destiny, is never tempted to pass the bounds of clear and definite artistic expression, but sustains the theme to the end with a masterful self-restraint and majesty of repose. In that noble balance, based on the harmony, not on the subjection, of the heart and mind of the artist, one gets a glimpse of one of the great ends of art; which is not to express but to suggest that which transcends human thought and speech. For the great play, statue, picture, speech, are prophetic, and find their fulfillment not in themselves but in the imagination which comes under their spell; the more complete their beauty, therefore, the more powerfully do they affirm the existence of a beauty beyond themselves. The definiteness of Greek art was not a limitation; it was a source of transcendent power. It is true, it shut the Greek artist out of some great fields; but he was not ready to enter them, and the divine apparition of beauty always moved with his work, and issued out of it as a soul is revealed by a body as beautiful as itself. The Venus of Melos is not the image of a saint, but there is that in the mutilated statue which makes the divine perfection not only credible but actual.

For there is in supreme excellence of any kind an immense exhilaration for the human spirit; a power of impulsion which leads or drives it out of itself into new spiritual quests and ventures. Dante had no thought of a reawakening of the mind of man; he did not discern that thrilling chapter of history so soon to be written; but to that great movement the “Divine Comedy” was one of the chief contributing forces. The production of such a masterpiece was in itself a new liberation of the human spirit, and set the currents of imagination and action flowing freely once more. It matters little whether a great book has definite teaching for men or not; it is always a mighty force for liberation. Greek art had its limitations of theme and manner, but its perfection brought constantly before the mind that ultimate perfection which it evaded so far as definite treatment was concerned, but the existence of which was implied in its own existence, and the fuller revelation of which it was always unconsciously predicting.

This thought hints at the working out in art of that deepest and most mysterious of all the laws of life which declares that he who would save his life must lose it; that sublime contradiction which seems always to be assailing man’s happiness and is always preserving it. The restraint of the great Classical dramatists, which to a man like Marlowe seems a surrender of power, is in reality the disclosure of a power so great that it makes us forget the limitations of the artist by giving us the freedom of the art. For when a man submits himself to the laws of his craft he ceases to be its bondsman and becomes its master. Marlowe evaded or refused this submission, and his work, while it discloses great force, makes us painfully aware of limitations and crudity; Shakespeare, on the other hand, cheerfully submitted to the laws of his craft, and his work, by reason of its balance and harmony, conveys a sense of limitless power, of boundless capacity for mastering the most difficult problems of life and art. Never was the glorious commonplace that a man becomes free by obedience more beautifully illustrated.

The Greek artist registered one of the most decisive advances in human thought when for the Oriental indeterminateness he substituted his own definiteness; and the human spirit took a great forward step when it discerned that, by subjection to the law of its growth, it would ultimately achieve that freedom which the Oriental mind had attempted to grasp at once and which it had failed to seize. Between Plato and Aristotle and the Oriental thinkers before them there was a great gulf fixed, which remains to-day impassable, although many fragile and fantastic structures have of late years swung airily over the abyss. In the Greek thought the foundations of Western civilization are set, and in that thought rest also the eternal foundations of art. For personality, freedom, and responsibility were the fundamental Greek ideas, and they are the ideas which underlie Western life and art. The Greek artist recognized the integrity of his own nature, and discerned his consequent freedom and responsibility. He