

Book Review

Conscience – A Very Short Introduction

Paul Strohm

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In this, the 273rd volume in Oxford University Press' popular Very Short Introduction series, Paul Strohm, Professor of Humanities at Columbia University, takes a broadly historical and literary approach in his examination of conscience. Nevertheless, his approach is of considerable importance to bioethicists since issues of conscience and conscientious objection remain at the heart of many ethical debates. Even the most ardent advocates of euthanasia and physician assisted suicide, for example, recognize that conscience clauses would have to be a necessary element of any proposals to changes in the law to permit such actions in the UK. And the decreasing number of doctors prepared to carry out abortions and therefore exercising their right of conscientious objection not to do so, is currently causing much concern to abortion providers in Britain.

In 2006, the British Medical Journal commissioned Oxford's Professor Julian Savulescu to write a controversial article on conscience in which he stated his view that "a doctor's conscience has little place in the delivery of modern medical care." However since then, issues of conscience appear much more rather than less prominently featured in both healthcare debates and medico-legal cases. Strohm's concise but varied exploration of conscience in this volume leads him to conclude "we are far better off with conscience than without it" (p. 2) and he explains why the phenomenon is not so easy to eliminate from our ethical discourse.

The word "phenomenon" is chosen carefully as Strohm considers defining conscience other than in phenomenological language is almost impossible and so he offers instead what he calls a "cultural geography" of conscience (p. 3), though he concentrates principally on Western civilizations.

In the first century BC, both Julius Caesar and Cicero wrote about conscience, the latter in *Pro Milo* describing it as the principal "theatre of virtue" (*theatrum virtuti*) in which we perform for good or ill. However, Strohm sees the subsequent Christian appropriation of conscience as the major shaping factor of Western consciences and in particular, Jerome's choice in the late fourth century of the word *conscientia* for the Greek "*syneidesis*," in his Latin translation of the New Testament from

Greek. Whereas *syneidesis* referred solely to an internal quality, *conscientia* also incorporated an element of external reference to the law and public opinion and thus straddled the inner and outer aspects of human nature. Since, in the medieval period, the outer world was largely shaped by the Catholic Church, conscience had a stabilizing effect, as “it was furnished with a secure body of content in the form of Christian theology” (p. 11).

The more contemporary concept of the solitary conscience standing alone against accepted authority was foreshadowed to some extent in Langland’s fourteenth-century poem, *Piers Plowman*. However, Strohm interestingly associates this transformation of conscience primarily with Martin Luther. His 1521 declaration that his conscience was subject only to the words of God as revealed in the Bible, marked the rise of the Reformation conscience, bound by the individual’s response to God rather than shaped by the institutional Church.

Thus Strohm considers that, paradoxically, it was Luther and John Calvin, rather than Enlightenment philosophers who were responsible for the secularization of conscience during the seventeenth century. “The Reformation conscience...maintaining an inherently solitary vigil...often found itself in the position of a lonely spy, parachuted into enemy territory with a shortwave radio and a dying battery, awaiting a message that might never come” (p. 27). Indeed Strohm suggests that not only the Peasant’s War in 1525, but the seventeenth-century English Civil Wars also have these contending views of conscience at their heart.

Ironically it was John Locke, a Puritan physician, whose father was one of the Parliamentary force commanders during the Civil War, who became the first philosopher of the Enlightenment to denounce the conscience of the Reformed believer as being “nothing but the strength of his own persuasion.” Though Locke was himself a believer in divine illumination, he maintained that reason, rather than personal revelation, should be the arbiter of the legitimacy of conscience. Conscience could not be its own authority “since some men with the same bent of conscience, prosecute what others avoid.”

Yet unaided reason also remains vulnerable to error or self-interest and it is the eighteenth-century philosophers Emmanuel Kant and Adam Smith who turn to what is, according to Strohm, essentially a social consensus as a grounding for conscience. Smith anticipates Kant (and Rawls) in his 1759 *Theory of Moral Sentiments* in suggesting that “We endeavour to examine our own conduct as we imagine any other fair and impartial spectator would examine it.” Kant’s 1797 *Metaphysics of Morals* considers conscience as conducting “an inner court” in man but being wholly internal, it cannot objectively judge itself. Kant’s solution was that “all duties of a man’s conscience will...have to think of someone other than himself...as the judge of his actions, if conscience is not to be in contradiction with itself.”

However, Strohm points out that with secular consensus filling the void of rejected revelation, conscience is now left at the mercy of unquestioned external public opinion and how this is totally at odds with the modern concept of “prisoners of conscience,” unjustly imprisoned for *opposing* what the rest of society thinks. The ascendancy of this latter view of conscience, Strohm attributes primarily to John Stuart Mill who in his *Essay on Liberty* (1859) wrote that liberty consists of “first the inward domain of consciousness, demanding liberty of conscience in the

most comprehensive sense.” Thus, Mill argues that “the contents of an emancipated conscience” are provided neither by divine revelation, state dictats or social consensus but rather are a matter for the single individual. Conscience seems to have thus turned full circle, back to a secularized version of Calvin’s Reformed individual’s conscience.

Strohm next asks if conscientious objection should be a civil right? He first considers conscientious objection to military service to conclude that Western societies have, overall, been willing to accommodate, rather than punish, conscientious objectors to participation in active warfare. He then turns his attention to the bioethical question of healthcare professionals and conscientious objection. Taking as his examples the 2010 cases of Massachusetts pharmacists refusing to dispense “morning after” pills and UK Relate counsellor, Gary McFarlane’s conscientious objection to providing sex therapy to homosexuals, Strohm maintains that, just as in the case of pacifists, Western society considers “some deference is owed to persons of religious or moral scruple, so long as (it) does not compromise the right of patients to safe and prompt treatment” (p. 83).

Strohm then further explores the implications of the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights that “Everyone has the right to freedom of religion, conscience and thought” in the light of such areas as global cultural diversity and the fact that, however well intended, conscience can get it badly wrong, as the self-professed “good” conscience of most Nazis readily attests. This last example, however, does rather undermine Strohm’s suggestion that “personal conscience works best when it finds some point of attachment with shared belief” (p. 91), though he does acknowledge there are problems inherent in his suggested “resolution.”

Many bioethicists may feel very uncomfortable by Strohm’s analysis but few can question his conclusion that one of the key elements of conscience that makes it inherently controversial is that it is “crucially active in...persuading oneself not merely to entertain convictions but to *act* in matters of conviction. At its best and most successful, conscience not only drives or activates the desire to refine belief but also translates belief into action and engagement” (p. 92; emphasis mine).