

Review - Conscience: A Very Short Introduction

Written by James Wakefield

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JAMES WAKEFIELD, APR 25 2013

Conscience: A Very Short Introduction

By: Paul Strohm

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011



Paul Strohm's *Conscience: A Very Short Introduction* (hereafter *Conscience*) is, as its title suggests, a short book, and I shall try to be brief. First, though, I should explain what this review is doing in this journal. *e-International Relations* is an admirably broad church. Nonetheless it is primarily a journal about politics, sometimes extending to the morally-charged debates in political theory, but even then a step removed from the conscience itself. By way of justification, let me offer this: appeals to the conscience are commonplace in the language of politics. Those who disagree with our political preferences, whatever they are, are routinely judged for disobeying the demands that (we assume) their consciences must make of them.

The conscience holds less sway in mainstream secular academic moral and political philosophy. Undergraduates sometimes arrive at university confident that what morality requires is obvious, for after all, it is what their consciences tell them. Recondite moral theories serve only to complicate matters. Disabusing new students of such firmly-held convictions is often a necessary first step toward their engagement with normative arguments; it must be shown that their intuitions, on close inspection, are not the reliable barometers of right and wrong that they originally supposed. Where the conscience does appear in academic philosophy, it is usually relegated to a supporting role beneath more sophisticated theory. (John Rawls, for example, assures us that we all share an intuitive 'sense of justice,' but leaves it to rational Kantian procedures to supply its content.) The question arises, then, of what the conscience can offer political and moral theory. Is it a quaint and outmoded metaphor, unable to tell us much about right and wrong without some extraneous theory to support it? If not, what other role could it play?

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Early on in *Conscience*, Strohm announces that he will treat the conscience 'not as an unvarying constant, but as a feat of human invention with a distinctive and eventful history all of its own.' [1] In the first chapter he takes us on a rapid tour from the Classical origins of the concept, through its adoption and reinvention as a Christian institution, to its diversification after the arrival of Protestantism. We are shown how the familiar Western conceptions of the conscience were shaped by intense theological debate without ever becoming mired in arcane concerns. Strohm's lightness of touch is impressive, and readers will recognise some aspect of the contemporary conscience at every stage of this potted history.

This trend continues in chapter 2, in which Strohm charts the emergence (or re-emergence, given its Classical origins) [2] of an account of the conscience independent of religious presuppositions. In this chapter we meet a range of important philosophers, including John Locke, Immanuel Kant (often thought of as a formula-bound rationalist, but, as his *Metaphysics of Morals* shows, also a formidable theorist of the conscience), and J.S. Mill. Alongside these we find fictional examples, drawn from Dickens' *Great Expectations*, Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and even Disney's *Pinocchio* (in which we see the protagonist's conscience cheerfully manifest as Jiminy Cricket). This diversity makes for an entertaining and accessible read, but these forays into fiction are not just side-shows; they are used to bring out important continuities in the concept of conscience, between versions expounded by figures as diverse as Jiminy Cricket, Gandhi and the authors of the Bible, all of whom refer to the same 'still small voice' that restrains, cajoles and rebukes those subject to it. [3]

Chapter 3 introduces three 'critics of conscience': Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche and Freud. Although these three 'are hardly a clique or cadre,' they are 'united by their disdain for the idea of conscience as an unproblematic agent of self-improvement or an unstinting advocate of public morality.' [4] Strohm picks out relevant passages from *Crime and Punishment* and *Brother Karamazov*, *Ecce Homo* and the *Genealogy of Morals*, *The Ego and the Id* and *Civilisation and its Discontents* to illustrate how each author characterises the concept. Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche both conceive of the conscience as one half of a 'split subject, at odds with a hostile or punitive voice that has already penetrated any defensive perimeter and taken up residence within the mind.' [5] Freud re-articulates this idea in terms of the ego, identifying the 'hostile voice' of the conscience with the subject's father. Strohm notes that despite these critics' doubts about earlier assumptions of the conscience's reliably edifying character, they each end up 'grant[ing] conscience a certain grudging respect,' and are unwilling to abandon it altogether. [6] Even if we doubt its value and its usefulness, its small, hectoring voice remains a persistent feature of human self-consciousness.

Chapter 4 covers the idea of a *right* to conscience, taking the readers from 17th-century conscientious objection to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and familiar controversies of the present day. Strohm makes no attempt to solve these complex and diverse problems, but as ever, he illustrates them beautifully, referring to a range of philosophical, literary and real-world sources in order to show just how deep the relevant issues run. Aside from the specific examples offered, readers will have no difficulty recognising how the conscience plays an important though sometimes overlooked role in contemporary debates about value, freedom and toleration. Running throughout Strohm's overview is the insistent claim that while the conscience is controversial and sometimes frustratingly difficult to pin down, it must not be sidelined completely. The chapter's conclusion is telling:

Claims of conscience on the part of those with whom we disagree can be irksome and even noxious. Even so, we all need some of it. I don't know of anyone who wants less of it, for themselves or for others. To be sure, the occasional mad person commits an atrocity in the name of conscience, and such aberrations cannot be avoided. Yet, if we take conscience to be a principle of dissatisfaction which urges action upon a foundation of belief, and which won't allow us to rest until its work is done, then we must grant the necessity for more of it in the world. [7]

The last chapter extends this theme. Strohm offers further examples of the conscience presented as a *voice*, or something with substantive content (wherever that content originates): as before, the sources are diverse, ranging from Hegel to Eminem. Discussing the problem of identifying the proper demands of the conscience, Strohm concedes that the demands of one person's conscience cannot be relied upon to square with those of another. Once again he insists that this should not lead us to abandon the conscience altogether. Nonetheless it has come close to being silenced outright. The torture and maltreatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib is offered as an example: while those responsible for carrying out (and photographing) these acts seem to have done so without much bother from

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their consciences, their subsequent reports on what had occurred in that 'disturbing sociocultural vacuum'[8] suggest that, somewhere along the way, if only after the fact, the 'still small voice' made itself heard. The conscience, we are reminded, is 'the ethical field upon which, for those in the Anglo-American and European traditions, a cry of indignation is most likely to be raised.'[9]

The *Very Short Introduction* series is now widely recognised as a useful point of departure for beginners in a whole array of subjects. *Conscience* – the series' 273rd instalment – is a valuable addition to that library. It is at once an accessible, thought-provoking and often entertaining introduction to a controversial topic. Some readers may object that Strohm's treatment has an inappropriately Christian and Western bias, describing the development of one specific account version of the conscience at the expense of those that arose from other traditions. ('Other societies,' says Strohm, 'have functioned ethically without conscience at all.')[10] Others may object that some indispensable philosophical, literary or historical account of the conscience has been left out of the selection. Neither of these objections should give us cause for worry. There are certainly other stories to be told about the conscience, but Strohm never claims that his is definitive. Whether or not we agree with his claims about the concept's Western heritage, the book contains a wealth of interesting material that will prompt students to think critically about the moral underpinnings of politics and the modern world as a whole.

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[1] Strohm 2011: 1-2

[2] Strohm 2011: 38

[3] Strohm 2011: 53

[4] Strohm 2011: 59-60

[5] Strohm 2011: 67

[6] Strohm 2011: 71 and 74-5

[7] Strohm 2011: 94-5

[8] Strohm 2011: 119

[9] Strohm 2011: 121

[10] Strohm 2011: 120

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