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“As a Keeper Joined to Man”: Conscience and Early Modern Self-Surveillance

Paul Strohm

Medieval and early modern societies were devoted to practices of surveillance. Priests, confessors, spiritual directors, prying Jesuits, and others were on the lookout for telltale signs of irregular devotional behaviour. Meanwhile, gossips, curious neighbours, juries, commissions of inquiry, sheriffs, and justices kept a close eye on the secular side. But responsibility for the most comprehensive surveillance of all lay with the individual conscience. From its privileged vantage-point, at the boundary between the self and the world, conscience probed every aspect of its subject's activities. Seeing and knowing all, conscience might act from time to time in a personal capacity, might seem a loyal (if sometimes harsh) ally. But it was no secure friend and its loyalties ultimately lay elsewhere. Something of a secret agent, it was busy gathering information for the proceedings of a remote but inevitable tribunal. Conscience's final responsibility was to testify at a final hearing before God's bar of justice, assuring vindication or punishment of the Christian soul at the end of time.

There is a respect in which every action – by each medieval and early modern European person – was constantly overseen or “surveilled.” This surveillance was aimed at unearthing private or even secret information and bringing it to view. It was conducted undercover – from a place of concealment, or, at any rate, a highly indeterminate location. This information might be dealt out piecemeal, shared with the subject with a view to his or her reformation, but its ultimate destination was a high tribunal, where it be fully disclosed as part of a legal process

overseen by an implacable judge whose sentences were irrevocable.

I am referring to the self-monitoring activities of the medieval and early modern conscience. Conscience operates from what amounts to a concealed location, perching on the boundary that links inside and outside, separating the self from the world. From this privileged vantage-point, it observes – pries into – every aspect of its subject’s activities. Its aim is to miss nothing, taking full notarial account of its subject’s actions and motives, filing them away for later reference. Occasionally it will announce itself, communicating one or another of its findings, in a “voice” of mysterious origin that only its subject can hear. Persons sometimes delude themselves into thinking that, because this lurking conscience knows all about them and from time to time consents to address them, it is somehow their own – referring to it, increasingly in and after the seventeenth century not just as “conscience” but as “my” conscience or “your” conscience. Yet its ultimate loyalties are not at all to the self whose activities it has so patiently observed. Even though it might behave, at one moment, as a stalwart friend and confidant, nudging its subject towards better behaviour, at the crucial, final moment it reveals another loyalty altogether. At this moment, conscience will abandon its place of concealment – much in the manner of an embedded counterspy who turns “state’s evidence,” shedding an assumed identity to testify in a public tribunal. This tribunal – the most public and final of all – is that final hearing at the bar of justice, conducted by God and bent on the permanent vindication or endless punishment of the Christian soul at the end of time. This is when conscience gives its evidence, files its report, acting as God’s vicar, God’s notary, responsible for keeping close account of its subject’s behaviour and, ultimately, filing an unflinchingly objective account of its subject’s actions, in a summative assessment of his or her eligibility for salvation or damnation.

A crucial mandate for conscience’s activities occurs in Romans 2:15, when Paul addresses the situation of the Gentiles. These Gentiles possess no secure relation to the Law, and must therefore assess their own conduct, according to the work of the law as written in their own hearts. In this task of self-assessment they will be aided by a working confederate, their own conscience. These Gentiles “ostendunt opus legis scriptum in cordibus suis, testimonium reddente illis conscientia ipsorum” (“show the work of the law written in their hearts, even as their conscience testifies to them”). The Douay translation of the Bible has “testimonium reddente” as “bearing witness,” which at least hints at the possibility that conscience might serve in a supportive way or as a

potential ally. But the biblical *testimonium* has a more adjudicative sense, predictive of an ultimate courtroom scene in which testimony – whether for good or ill – is given. This rather less loyalist interpretation of conscience’s role is borne out by the clause that completes the verse: “et inter se invicem cogitationibus accusantibus, aut etiam defendentibus” (“and with their inward thoughts, either accusing or defending themselves”).

The conclusions of conscience are not, in this version, foreordained; one’s conscience can report its own conclusions, whether for good or ill. Furthermore, the gravity of the matter – and the unsettling nature of conscience’s assessment – is heightened when we proceed to the following verse (2:16) and realise the circumstances of conscience’s report. For conscience is not simply engaged with day-to-day decision-making on its subject’s behalf, but files its final report with God, upon the day of Doom, in order to determine the subject’s eligibility for salvation: “in die, cum iudicabit Deus occulta hominum” (“on that day, when God shall judge the secrets of men”). Even in the course of this short biblical passage, conscience occupies a shifting position, commencing as an apparent ally, giving testimony to the self, then shifting into the more neutral stance of an observer ready to join either the prosecution or the defence, and then finally as a testator in another kind of trial altogether, laying bare the subject’s most carefully guarded secrets in order to abet God’s judgement of his or her soul at the end of time.

So the effect of Romans 2:15-16 is to install conscience as a kind of arch-snoop, a possessor of privileged information which might be “leaked” in small segments aimed at nudging the suspect towards better behaviour, but which finally will be at the disposal of a judicial process over which the suspect has no control at all.

Conscience has always enjoyed multiple sponsorship, passing easily from its origins as Greek *syneidesis* and Roman *conscientia* to the protective sponsorship of the emergent Roman Church, to added centrality within evangelical Protestantism, and, in more recent centuries, adoption by humanists and other ethically inclined parties who have adapted it to their views as well. But it is the unprecedented sway of conscience in early evangelical theology that will most interest me here. Views of conscience are particularly fully aired in Jean Calvin’s *Institution of Christian Religion*, as promptly brought into English in Thomas Norton’s superb 1561 translation. Calvin’s is, of course, an innovative and exploratory work, but there we also find conscience involved in many of its traditional pursuits, ferreting out hidden secrets and exposing them

to view in testimony before the judgement seat of God. Especially, he says, when persons

haue a feeling of the iudgement of God, as a witness ioynd with them, which doth not suffer them to hide their sinnes but that they be drawne accused to the iudgement seate of God, that same feeling is called Conscience. For it is a certain meane betweene God and man, because it suffereth not man to suppress in him selfe that which hee knoweth but pursueth him so farre til it bring him to guiltines. (Book 3, Chapter 19)

Conscience's task is to wield its intimate knowledge to bring to light things the subject knows but would rather conceal. In other words, this is not a friendly or lenient but rather a stringent conscience, as loyal – or in fact more loyal – to God than to the individual. Elsewhere in the *Institution*, Calvin will explore the possibility of conscience “going native,” softening and becoming overly intimate with the body which it must perforce inhabit. But we see none of that here. This is an adamant conscience, aligned with the investigative task as Paul originally described it:

This is it which *Paul* meaneth, where he saith that conscience doth together witnes with men, when their thoughts do accuse or acquite them in the iudgement of God, [. . .] as it were a keeper ioynd to man, to marke and espie all his secrets, that nothing may remaine buried in darknesse. (Book 3, Chapter 19)

Conscience is here imagined as a jailer, a “keeper,” assigned to spy upon its captive and bring incriminating materials to light. (This reminds me of the records of the Gunpowder Plot, when the imprisoned plotters were placed in specially designed cells which permitted jailers to listen in on their whispered conversations, transcribe them, and report them to their superiors.) Nothing is to be unobserved, no secret unreported. “Whereupon,” Calvin adds, “also commeth that olde Prouerbe, Conscience is a thousand witnesses” (Book 3, Chapter 19).

Shakespeare captures this notion of conscience bringing secrets to light, bearing multiple witnesses, and speaking in multiple tongues in his account of Richard III's moment of reckoning on the eve of the Battle of Bosworth. Here is Richard, under conscience's assault:

My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
And every tongue brings in a several tale,
And every tale condemns me for a villain. (5.3.193-95)

And this condemnation occurs within the familiar scenario of a trial. Not, in this case, the final trial before the bar of God, but a bar nonetheless, and the last earthly arbitration that Richard will face: “All several sins, all us’d in each degree, / Throng to the bar, crying all, ‘Guilty! guilty!’” (5.3.198-99).

Richard has no avenue of escape from conscience’s belated assault, because of conscience’s location within his own mind and because conscience’s accusations arise within his own thoughts about himself. This is Richard’s predicament of conscience, as he describes it:

What do I fear? Myself? There’s none else by.
 Richard loves Richard, that is, I am I.
 Is there a murderer here? No. Yes I am.
 Then fly. What, from myself? Great reason why –
 Lest I revenge. What, myself upon myself?
 [. . .]
 Oh no! Alas, I rather hate myself
 For hateful deeds committed by myself. (5.3.182-90)

Later, girding himself for battle, Richard makes the mistake of thinking he can laugh conscience off:

Conscience is but a word that cowards use,
 Devis’d at first to keep the strong in awe:
 Our strong arms be our conscience, swords our law! (5.3.309-11)

Yet this is mere bravado; his quandary of conscience cannot be easily ignored. It arises from an inner division, a permanent rift, that allows conscience the dual aspect of relentless critique on the one hand, yet critique founded on privileged – and incontrovertible – inner knowledge on the other. Conscience is already inside the gates of self, ineradicably stationed somewhere within his own mind. Richard finds himself, in other words, in a situation of inescapable self-scrutiny – already granted permanent residence, his conscience cannot be silenced, blinded, or expelled.

This bind – in which one is subject to the scrutiny of a second self at once an observer and commentator upon one’s actions – may be thought a general human dilemma, but also a dilemma which is quite specifically associated with early modernity and what may be considered the modern sensibility.

A crucial expositor of this divided sensibility – in which a self cannot escape from an excruciating awareness of being observed by its

implacable double – is the late sixteenth-century Puritan theologian William Perkins (1558-1602). His views are expressed with particular pertinence in his 1596 “Discovrse of Conscience.” There, Perkins launches his discussion in terms already familiar to us, citing Paul in support of conscience’s activities of giving testimony and bearing witness about our deeds before the bar of God. But then he launches, quite brilliantly, into effectively new terrain, describing conscience as a kind of second self within the self, whose responsibilities of self-assessment never end:

there bee two actions of the understanding, the one is simple, which barely conceiveth or thinketh this or that: the other is a *reflecting* or doubling of the former, whereby a man conceives or thinkes with himselfe what he thinks [. . .] The mind thinkes a thought, now conscience goes beyond the mind, and knowes what the mind thinkes, so as if a man would goe about to hide his sinfull thoughts from God, *his conscience as it were another person within him, shall discover all.* (518; emphasis added)

This is, in my view, a completely transformative moment in the history of consciousness, representing a kind of “fall” into excruciating self-awareness. Humankind can no longer merely, as Perkins puts it, “barely” conceive something (conceive something simply or innocently without a secondary awareness of ourselves as conceiving it) but must henceforth be aware that it thinks, “reflecting” upon or “doubting” the process of thought itself. Perkins here describes a state of permanent, and inescapable, self-surveillance. A state in which no deed goes unobserved and, at least potentially, no misdeed unpunished. No wonder that Shakespeareans have found their way to Perkins, and have found him invaluable in examining Hamlet’s strange paralysis of will and penchant for debilitating self-critique. In his soliloquy about the debilitating effects of conscience (“Thus conscience does make cowards [of us all],” 3.1.82), Hamlet speaks at once of consciousness and conscience (for the two senses of the word were still intertwined in the early seventeenth century), and in each sense he finds himself immobilised by excessive self-awareness. Perkins has identified a crucial component of modern self-identity at its point of emergence, situated in practices of self-surveillance initiated and informed by the self-monitoring activities of Christian (and, at least in Perkins’s case, Protestant) conscience.

If all this self-surveillance were just ruminative, that would be one thing. But under the dominion of conscience, it can be quite acerbic and self-punishing in its effects. Rather than a calm interlocutor, conscience often turns out to be a short-term nuisance and pest, and longer-term

aggravation – an ongoing and most unpleasant commentator on one's present behaviour. Actually, conscience always had an outspoken and irascible personality. It has been typically described by a cluster of punitive terms: it can not only admonish but also prick, bite, pierce, gnaw, and all those other things that conscience is reputed to do. Conscience acquired its irritable disposition early; its aggressive tendencies are already in full display in conscience's first prominent appearance as a speaking character, in Augustine's *Confessions*. Here as ever since, conscience is portrayed as a speaking voice, a voice heard, resisted, and finally successful in beating its subject down. It first announces itself as a chiding voice, "muttering" within. Its accusation is that Augustine knows everything necessary for conversion to the Christian faith, but has postponed the step. And conscience's rather waspish accusation leaves him "inwardly gnawed and violently confused with horrible shame" (Book 7, Chapter 18; my translations).

Nor does conscience seem to derive much enjoyment from its activities of observing and reporting upon human conduct. Rather than executing its duties with patient dispatch, the early modern conscience often seems rather taxed, if not downright overwhelmed, by them. In his previously mentioned *Institution*, Calvin often describes conscience as wracked by a sense of its own insufficiencies. Calvin's conscience is itself wounded and imperfect, requiring the assistance of God to "heal its sore" (Book 3, Chapter 4). Hardly triumphal, this conscience is shaken by uncertainties and doubts about its ability to perform its task. "When our conscience beholdeth onely indignation & vengeance, how can it but tremble and quake for feare" (Book 3, Chapter 2), Calvin exclaims. These are the costs of an observer under "deep cover," a surveillance artist who cannot conclusively separate his perspective from that of the people he has set out to observe. In this respect, Calvin's conscience shares the predicament of undercover police who run a risk of over-involvement and over-identification with the objects of their surveillance.

Perkins's conscience does a somewhat better job of self-maintenance, but still lends itself to a commotion of tangled recrimination between itself and the person whose activities it observes. His conscience is not just a companion and certainly not an ally, but the accusations stemming from its evaluative activities lead (in his description) to shame, to sadness, to fear, and ultimately to

desperation, whereby a man through the vehement and constant accusation of his conscience comes to be out of all hope of the pardon of his sinnes. This made *Saul*, *Achitophel*, and *Iudas* to hang themselves; this makes many

in these daies to doe the like; as appeareth by the declarations of such as have bin prevented, when they were about to hang or drowne themselves, or to cut their owne throats. (“A Discovrse of Conscience” 536)

These are cases in which conscience abandons its responsibilities of neutral surveillance – its role as dispassionate notary and account-keeper – and commits to direct accusation, to the distress of the afflicted party.

Perkins’s examples of self-harm remind me of a prominent mid-sixteenth-century case, described by John Foxe in his *Acts and Monuments* (1653). It involves the jurist Thomas Hales, an evangelical by religious persuasion but nevertheless continuing in his judicial office after the accession of Mary and the turn back to Catholicism. In this awkward situation, Hales unwisely pursued an outdated Edwardian policy by finding against the private performance of a Catholic mass, for which he was expelled from office and, shortly thereafter, imprisoned. His defence was that his disputed finding had been a matter of personal conscience, and he was unrepentant for it: his decision, he said, was intended to “shewe forth my conscience: and if it were to do againe, I wold do no lesse then I did” (1184). An angry exchange with Chancellor of the Realm Gardiner pivoted on this matter of conscience, with Gardiner sarcastically deriding Hales’s stance: “Ye Maister hales, your conscience is knowen well inough. I knowe ye lacke no conscience” (1184). Hales, at this stage, was still plucky in his own defence, throwing the conscience insinuation back at Gardiner:

My Lord, ye maye do well to serch your owne conscience. For mine is better knowen to my selfe then to you. And to be plaine, I dyd as well vse iustice in your sayde Masse case by my conscience as by the lawe, where in I am fully bent to stand in tryall to the vttermoste that can be obiected. (1184)

Conscience is, however, a particular kind of ally. Not fickle, exactly, but unbending, and its testimony can work against, as well as for, its subject. Hales, imprisoned, tortured, seduced, and importuned, would ultimately waver, and gain his freedom by temporarily abjuring his faith. This is the point at which conscience – on double business bound – turns against Hales, casting him “in a great dump, and sorow with him self” (1184). His is a “heauye troubled mynde [. . .] being brought to an extreme desperation by the worme of his conscience” (1185). Considering himself deeply at fault by his abjuration, “he ws cast fourthwith into a greate repentaunce of the deede, and into a terror of conscience therby,” a terror occasioning “much care and anxietie of

mynd” (1185). Briefly alone in his chamber, “he wyth a penknife [. . .] wounded hys selfe in diuers places, and would without fayle haue likewise killed hym selfe” (1185). Then, broken, and delivered from jail, Hales

getteth hym selfe home vnto his house, where either for the greatnes of his sorowe, or for lacke of reste and reason, [. . .] hauing all thinges set in an order a good whyle before, that perteyned to his testament, castinge hym selfe into a shallow ryuer, was drowned in the yeare 1555. (1185)

My suggestion until now has been that conscience’s active screening of personal behaviour is a form of surveillance in its own right. Moreover, it is a particularly active form since it enjoys a flow of privileged “inside” formation, a platform from which to launch verbal assaults, and an unassailable “power position” as God’s own designated witness, notary, and leading testator before the bar at the end of time. But conscience neither operates in a vacuum nor alone. Conscience’s is a prestigious and influential voice – a highly imitable voice – and the voice and perspective of conscience are widely adopted by participants in other kinds of worldly surveillance systems. By this means, the already enormous authority of conscience is augmented through its articulation with other, external, and more worldly forms of surveillance, correction, and punishment. The voice of conscience, within, is seconded and reinforced by its similarity to other voices one encounters in the world – voices of those in designated capacities whose own task is to surveil, reproach, and, when necessary, punish persons under their charge for impulses and behaviours they have sought to conceal from the world.

Located within “surveilling” societies, medieval and early modern institutions and governmental entities designated numerous religious and secular authorities to keep close tabs on behaviours, and authorised them to intervene by disciplining their subjects. On the religious side, priests, confessors, spiritual directors, prying Jesuits, and inquisitorial bodies were constantly on the lookout for tell-tale signs of irregular or undisciplined devotional behaviour, and were not slow to adopt sanctions ranging from emphatic corrective language through corporal abuse to attain their objectives. And then, on the secular side, gossips, curious neighbours, juries, commissions of inquiry, sheriffs, justices, and other interested parties kept a close eye on all facets of public and private conduct. (One measure of public opinion’s prestige is that reputation – the shared public estimation of a person’s behaviour and standing in his or her community – mattered more than evidence and

eyewitness testimony in judicial decisions.) And these bodies of inquiry and assessment were empowered by a full range of verbal and physical sanctions, torture not excluded.

So I want to conclude by suggesting that, in medieval and early modern society, the impact of (inner) surveillance under the dominion of conscience was immeasurably enhanced by its close collaboration with other (outer) forms of disciplinary surveillance exercised within the society as a whole. One's own conscience – conscience within – is constantly supplemented by a rich cacophony of voices, operating in sanctioned religious and civil capacities, to ferret out, constrain, and punish prohibited behaviours.

Arvind Thomas has drawn my attention to a familiar passage which describes the close coordination (or perhaps I should say “collision”) between a moment of private self-scrutiny under the dominion of conscience, and the more public and institutional enlistment of conscience to constrain individual behaviour. This is Margery Kempe's episode of conscience, precipitated by postnatal depression. She sends for her confessor, “for sche had a thyng in conscyens which sche had neuyr schewyd be-forn that tyme in all hyr lyfe” (6f).¹ (Once again, *conscyens* here refers both to self-awareness of consciousness and to conscience or self-accusation). Kempe's own conscience never gets its airing, though, since her confessor steals a march on personal and inner conscience by addressing her in the voice of public and institutional conscience – a voice, nonetheless, arrayed in the sharp and accusatory and reproving tone we have come to associate with conscience in all its manifestations:

whan sche cam to the poynt for to seyn that thing which sche had so long conselyd, hir *confessour* was a lytyl to hastye & gan scharply to vndyrnemyn hir er than sche had fully seyde hir entent [. . .]. And a-noon, for dreded sche had of *dampnacyon* on the to syde & hys scharp *repreuyng* on that other syde, this creatur went owt of hir mende & was wondyrlye vexid & labowryd with *spyritys* half yer viij wekys & odde days. (7)

We could simply write off the priest's response as that of a testy and overburdened religious functionary, but I also hear his voice of “sharp reproof” as allied to, and deriving much of its strength from, its congruence with the voice of conscience, which Kempe has already heard inside her own head. This movement from self-examination and self-accusation to the external standpoint of an authorised spiritual

¹ Passages from Margery Kempe's book are diplomatically emended here.

representative is nearly seamless: the confessor picks up and continues a punitive theme, and even a tone of voice, that Kempe has already been directing against herself. This confessor is striking for his uninterest in learning what Kempe's "secret" might actually be. Dominance and control are the objectives here, and the impact of his voice is guaranteed, not only by his vocation, but by the prior momentum of the self-assessment and self-accusation to which Kempe has already subjected herself.

My suggestion here – that Kempe's own voice of conscience and the conscience-allied voice of reproof in which her confessor addresses her are mutually reinforcing – is an inferential one. But the linkage is much more explicit in the case of Elizabeth of Hungary and Conrad of Marburg, the severe spiritual director to whom she had sworn obedience. Valued perspectives on the relationship between Elizabeth and Conrad are found in depositions pertaining to her sanctity, taken from four women of her intimate acquaintance by the papal commission of 1235, popularly known as "Dicta quatuor ancillarum." There we see Conrad relying upon the operations of Elizabeth's own conscience, which he seeks to enlist in re-enforcement of his own demands. He joins his own voice to Elizabeth's own inner and watchful conscience, in such matters as forbidding any use of her husband's improperly gotten goods, requiring her abstinence from most food items served at their table:

Master Conrad ordered Elizabeth not to use any of her husband's goods *about which she did not have a clear conscience* [de quibus non haberet sanam conscientiam]. She observed this very strictly to the point that, though sitting at her husband's side at the table, she would abstain from anything that came from the dealings and profits of his officials. (Article 15; emphasis added; Latin qtd from Huyskens 115)

What we are seeing here is an alliance, in which Conrad enlists the watchful scrupulosity of Elizabeth's own conscience on behalf of his own strictures. Conrad not only relies upon Elizabeth's conscience as his inner ally, but, perhaps more importantly, addresses her in the strident and hectoring voice frequently employed by conscience itself.

Isentrud, one of Elizabeth's former handmaids, testifies to Conrad's abusive behaviour:

Master Conrad repeatedly tested her constancy, breaking her will in every way and ordering her to do things contrary to her nature. With the intention of afflicting her even more, he dismissed one at a time those members of

Elizabeth's household whom she loved, so that she would be grieved. [. . .] She was obedient to Conrad to the point that she did not dare to give food to us – Isentrud and Guda – when we came to see her, nor did she dare even to speak to us without permission. She bore with patience and joy not only these adversities and the contempt directed toward her, but the many lashes that Master Conrad, in his good zeal, inflicted on her, lest she slip from her purpose. (Article 31:5)

Conscience is typically responsible for lashes and torments in the exercise of its oversight, but normally of a figurative, rather than literal, nature. Conrad, however, lives in the world, and *his* lashes are real. His most flagrant beating was administered to Elizabeth for entering a holy cloister without Conrad's express permission, with the assistance of one sister Irmgard, who provided the key:

Master Conrad had her [Irmgard] prostrate herself alongside blessed Elizabeth and ordered Brother Gerhard to beat them hard with a certain kind of whip that was big and long. While Gerhard beat them, Master Conrad sang the *Miserere mei Deus*. (Article 47)

I have chosen the activities of spiritual directors and their hectoring of female devotees as illustrative occasions on which an inner voice of conscience is replicated and extended by an external authority speaking in conscience's own demanding voice and strident tone. This articulation of inner and outer – the watchful and self-regulatory operations of conscience together with the similarly watchful and regulatory activities of agents like confessors and spiritual directors and other minions of social control – persists to our own day. Although religion was its proving ground, similar linkages of internal assessment and external disciplinary sanctions may be discovered in various post-religious settings. I am thinking, for instance, of Freud's derivation of the domineering super-ego from parental and other prying and admonitory voices heard in early childhood. Freud observes that

[a]s a child grows up, the role of the father is carried on by teachers and others in authority; their injunctions and prohibitions remain powerful in the ego ideal and continue, in the form of conscience, to exercise the moral censorship. The tension between the demands of conscience and the actual performances of the ego is experienced as a sense of guilt. (37)

Or one could apply the same analysis to the operations of state surveillance and its enlistment of personal guilt and self-critique in more recent societies, as in the apparatus of Soviet state overview and control

that elicits Rubashov's self-accusation in Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (1940). But these are subjects for another time.

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