

The Search for a Nuclear Conscience

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Biography of Jeremy Kessler

Jeremy Kessler is a JD/PhD student at Yale's Department of History and Yale Law School. His work focuses on the legal history of conscientious objection in the United States. He is especially interested in the rise of what is called "selective conscientious objection" – a refusal to serve based not upon one's opposition to war in any form, but upon one's beliefs about the immorality or illegality of particular wars. Such selective objection challenges traditional notions of citizenship and sovereignty. He has subsidiary interests in American and European intellectual history, military and diplomatic history, and the history of human rights. Prior to his graduate work at Yale, he was a Gates Scholar at the University of Cambridge, where he studied the history of science.

The Search for a Nuclear Conscience

In this talk, I'll examine some post-WWII efforts to integrate the moral force of conscience with the unavoidable complexity of the modern world. I suggest that these efforts offer a fresh perspective on Jeffrey's definition of art as "an act of will in accord with a mature conscience," an act that creates a form of "actionable knowledge."¹ Indeed, Jeffrey Rubinoff's own perception of art responds to a historical moment marked by the advent of strategic bombing and the nuclear threat.² Accordingly, I place Jeffrey's definitions of art within a broader history: the history of post-WWII attempts to synthesize conscience and complexity, individuality and interdependence.

In his recent history of American non-violence, Joseph Kosek argues that the years following the Second World War were "an age of conscience, a period deeply concerned with the sanctity of moral action amid the crushing force of destructive mass ideologies."³ This period notably included the first nuclear disarmament movement, decolonization, the Civil Rights struggle, and Vietnam protest. Kosek suggests that these mid-century phenomena continued a tradition of conscientious action dating back to radical Christian opposition to the First World War. And yet Kosek dates the beginning of the age of conscience specifically to August 6, 1945, the day an American bomber dropped its nuclear payload on Hiroshima.⁴

This dating presents a puzzle. If the "age of conscience" unfolded in response to the novelty of nuclear war, why would it be typified by a pre-existing tradition of dissent, one that had arisen to oppose an earlier form of warfare? Kosek does not squarely address this question,

¹ See Karun Koernig, "Art as a Source of Knowledge" (2012), 2.

² See Jeffrey Rubinoff, "Through the Lens of Endgame," (2011), 9.

³ Joseph Kip Kosek, *Acts of Conscience: Christian Nonviolence and Modern American Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 192-193.

⁴ *Ibid* 193 ("The age of conscience began on August 6, 1945.").

but he does suggest that “the Bomb” acted mainly as an amplifier – making the conscientious politics of the early twentieth century more salient than ever. I’d like to complicate Kosek’s story and suggest that the WWII pattern of strategic bombing, a pattern that culminated in the U.S. nuclear strike on Japan, introduced a fundamental discontinuity into the logic and practice of conscience.⁵ The first part of my talk will elaborate upon the conundrum of conscientious objection in the thermonuclear age. The second part will explore new approaches to conscience that arose in response to an awareness of the complexity of the post-WWII world, responses that include Jeffrey’s own.

I. Conscientious Objection in the Thermonuclear Age

In order to understand the dilemma of the conscientious objector in the thermonuclear age, we first must understand the earlier model of conscientious action that failed him. In the wake of WWI, veterans of anti-war protest combined a radical Protestant commitment to individual non-conformity with the spirit and tactics of Gandhian non-violence. The resulting synthesis appealed to “the individual moral compass as guide for social change” and sought to achieve social change by staging “acts of conscience” – public spectacles that celebrated the “sanctity of moral action” in the face of the oppressive forces of modern social organization.⁶ While many people often participated in a single spectacle, at the heart of each spectacle was the exhibition of a “personal moral witness” – acts of conscience “relied on bold individual action rather than organized mass pressure.”⁷ Acts of conscience, such as ghastly prison fasts and

⁵ The contemporary belief that the use of the Bomb followed from the logic of earlier WWII bombing campaigns was widespread. Two weeks after the nuclear assault on Japan, for instance, *Life* magazine explained to its readers that “The very concept of strategic bombing . . . led straight to Hiroshima.” Quoted in Boyer 1994, at 215. For similar opinions, see *ibid* 214-217.

⁶ *Ibid* 192-193.

⁷ *Ibid* 193, 235.

brazen draft-card burnings, offered seemingly utopian – yet vividly realized – alternatives to the anonymous violence of contemporary society.⁸

At the origin of this utopian mode of performance was a realist's intuition: by refusing to fight, the WWI-era conscientious objector could effectively remove himself from the war's primary mechanism of violence – the drafted army. At the limit, if the vast majority of men became conscientious objectors, the killing power of armed conflict could be significantly reduced. As violence became increasingly rationalized and concentrated in the era of strategic bombing, however, this relationship between individual refusal and the systemic conditions of violence began to break down. The vast majority of men could refuse to fight in a modern air war (especially a nuclear war), and it would not make a whit of difference. Thus, while the strategic bombing of civilians expanded the range of those who suffered from war, it also complicated the relationship between individual action – or inaction – and killing.

Strategic bombing heralded a revolution in the organization of warfare, as combat transitioned from a competition between mass movements to a competition between bureaucracies. Thermonuclear conflict was the apotheosis of bureaucratic combat, involving relatively few decision-makers, increasingly automated decision-making processes, and massive, focused force. Yet even as nuclear conflict narrowed the range of lethal decision-makers, it actually made it more and more difficult to remove oneself from the primary mechanism of violence. While killing was now the province of an elite group of specialists, all national policy, including the management of the economy and even the most peaceful of diplomatic efforts, operated beneath the nuclear umbrella. Under conditions of nearly instantaneous annihilation, all

⁸ This public opposition of individual conscience to mass organization would become, according to Kosek, a bi-partisan affair, characterizing both the young man who burnt his draft-card in the name of individual freedom and the Holy Spirit, and the old man – such as Whittaker Chambers – who publicly renounced communism in the name of the same freedom and the same God. Ibid 199. In both cases, a public spectacle *performed* the efficacy of the individual conscience in the face of crushing, organized opposition.

national life was conscripted into the game of nuclear brinksmanship. Refusal to participate was no longer a meaningful means of resistance.

Not only did this nuclear system undermine “personal moral witness” as a direct means of reducing killing, it also challenged the power of spectacle as an effective form of political persuasion. The “mode of dissent” preferred by early twentieth-century activists – the “act of conscience” – was undermined by “the prevalence of political spectacle in modern life.”⁹ In a society increasingly dominated by mass media and modern policing, spectacular acts of dissent became both less novel and more carefully controlled.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to the spectacular power of the “act of conscience” came from the government’s own deployment of the politics of spectacle. Between 1954 and 1961, the United States conducted “Operation Alert,” a vast program of civil defense drill which Guy Oakes has called “full scale annual rehearsals for World War III.”¹⁰ Nuclear civil defense was “inherently and crucially theatrical,” implicating whole nations in the vivid rehearsal of a well-managed apocalypse.¹¹ Under these surreal conditions, the theater of conscience looked like just one more performance – not resistance but capitulation to the systemic staging of the nuclear age.

Confronted with the challenges of systematic violence and government spectacle, activists and theorists in the 1950s and 1960s began to experiment with modes of conscientious action that favored complexity over simplicity and that sought to move beyond the model of individual moral witness. In the newly-established organ of radical pacifism, *Liberation*, Bob Pickus called for “a marriage between a concern for eternity and the politics of time – between

⁹ Kosek 2009, at 238.

¹⁰ *The Imaginary War: Civil Defense and American Cold War Culture* (1994), 84.

¹¹ *Ibid* 2.

that which compels the single soul and that which speaks to the intelligence of all.”¹² This search for a synthesis of individual integrity and systematic thought would typify the more ambitious approaches to conscience in the nuclear age.

II. *Toward the Mature Conscience*

I’ll now survey three attempts to open conscience up to the challenges of complexity. The first arose out of earlier pacifist protest, and sought to use the legal technology of conscientious objection in increasingly strategic ways. In the 1960s, the specter of nuclear war and the ongoing conflicts over decolonization gave birth to a new figure, the “selective conscientious objector.” While the traditional objector was a pacifist – an individual opposed to all war because of absolute moral or political beliefs – the selective objector opposed particular wars, either because of their ends (such as colonial conquest) or their means (such as nuclear force). While the traditional objector opposed his transcendental belief in the immorality of violence to the compromised complexity of the here-and-now, the selective objector argued that certain kinds of war were inimical to existing legal and political systems, and sought to participate in the development and enforcement of those systems.

For instance, when the International Peace Bureau met in Reutlingen, Germany in August 1968 for its annual conference, it signaled a shift from the politics of personal testimony and spectacle to the design of new systems of communication and control. The Bureau was a coalition of major international organizations, including Amnesty International and the Quakers. Members of these organizations produced a working paper, *The Right to Refuse Military Service*

¹² Quoted in Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (1987), 150.

and Orders, that served as the agenda for the conference.¹³ The “main intention” of this document was not to declare the individual supreme over the nation or the community of nations, but “rather to stimulate further discussion on the implementation of Human Rights regarding conscientious objectors.” The authors noted that “the vast majority of nations have accepted in principle the Universal Declaration on Human Rights,” and argued that pursuing change within such a pre-existing framework was more promising than individual dissent from all systems of governance.¹⁴

This focus on formalization and systemic reform would mean a break with the “act of conscience” model, which privileged personal testimony. The I.P.B. took leave of the more anarchistic members of the peace movement, those who took “a more or less ‘anti-governmental’ attitude and therefore, do not ascribe, much relevance to the question of institutionalized recognition.” Seeking to move beyond the dyad of the human v. state, the IPB report interposed an international legal order that could mediate both inter-state conflicts and conflicts between citizens and their countries.

In this model, the conscientious objector was no longer an absolute pacifist but a subtle legal agent, capable of embodying and enforcing the mandates of a universal system of law, applicable to all states and individuals. The modern, selective conscientious objector, sought not to vindicate his personal allegiance to transcendent principles, but to integrate his own life in a global order.

Beyond the realm of law, other activists and theorists pursued similar projects of integration in the 1960s and 1970s. I will briefly consider two: Gregory Bateson’s pursuit of an “ecology of mind,” and Paulo Freire’s project of “conscientization.”

¹³ International Peace Bureau, *The Right to Refuse Military Service and Orders: A Working Paper Prepared for the International Peace Bureau Conference in Rentlingen/Stuttgart, Germany, 25-30th August 1968* (Geneva, 1968).

¹⁴ Ibid 5.

A. Environment and Education

Gregory Bateson was trained as an anthropologist but quickly branched out into a wide-ranging investigation of the relationship between the human and his environment, both social and natural. In the post-WWII era, Bateson came to believe that an array of “catastrophic dangers” had been created by humans as a result of errors in the Western theory of knowledge – errors in our understanding of the relationship between the individual mind and the complexity of the world.¹⁵ Among these dangers, Bateson listed “insecticides . . . pollution . . . atomic fallout . . . the possibility of melting the Antarctic ice cap.”¹⁶ Writing in 1971, Bateson’s student, Mark Engel, identified Bateson’s ecology of mind as particularly vital for the “generation born since Hiroshima . . . who are searching for a better understanding of themselves and their world.”¹⁷ Bateson’s basic insight was that mind and environment were mutually constitutive. The more an individual tried to impact the world around him, the more both he and his environment would be transformed – often in ways contrary to his narrow purposes and vision.

Bateson posited three systems that constituted human life on earth – “the individual human organism, the human society, and the larger ecosystem.”¹⁸ It was the work of consciousness to somehow establish a steady state – survival – between these three systems. In order to do so, however, consciousness – initially lodged in the individual human – would have to expand. Bateson thought that modern consciousness had indeed been expanding, but often in pernicious ways.

¹⁵ Bateson, “Pathologies of Epistemology,” in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972), 487.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Engel, “Preface,” in *ibid* at vii.

¹⁸ *Ibid* 440.

First, human consciousness was capable of exacting massive, rapid changes on its environment – for instance, through the use of nuclear weapons. Such potency threatened to short-circuit learning processes. By the time the true effect of human consciousness on the environment had been understood, it might well be too late for consciousness to adapt. Second, humans had constructed a variety of “self-maximizing entities” such as “companies, political parties, unions, commercial and financial agencies, nations.” These entities had the status of “persons” under the law but were, in “biological fact,” neither persons nor “aggregates of whole persons” but “aggregates of *parts* of persons.”¹⁹ These artificial entities thus exacerbated the *partiality* of consciousness – their growth only blinded consciousness to the total relationship between person, society, and world. National consciousness, corporate consciousness, class consciousness – all of these partial consciousnesses obscured vital causal relationships between human action and environmental change. To try to break through these partial consciousness, Bateson recommended love, art, interaction with animals, and religion.²⁰ In each of these activities, the really existing biological human could expose herself to the true interdependency of her organism and its surroundings.

In Bateson’s model, therefore, the problem with modern social systems – such as nations, corporations, even war – was not that they were too totalizing, but rather that they were too partial. The goal of Bateson’s account of human life was not to preserve the integrity of the individual over against the complexity of the system, but rather to open up individuals and their societies to the vast complexity of the relationships that bound them together. As with the new approach to conscientious objection, Bateson’s post-WWII ecology of mind insisted that individual life could no longer be preserved by solitary witness, protest, or performance. Rather

¹⁹ Ibid 446.

²⁰ Ibid 446-447.

the integration of the individual perspective into increasingly complex systems of order was essential.

A contemporary of Bateson's, Paulo Freire, also argued that individual integrity could only be achieved through a process of learning that implicated the individual in a vast network of social relations. While Bateson's approach situated learning within the expanse of the biological world, Freire addressed the situation of education itself, the social system that had arisen to impart knowledge about reality and to change human consciousness. Writing in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Freire was particularly interested in the education of the oppressed – of those billions of people who were increasingly marginalized by the complex technological, political, and economic systems that had placed the vast majority of killing and purchasing power in the hands of relatively few elite actors.

Freire distinguished between two forms of education – education for domestication and education for freedom.²¹ Education for domestication involved the “mere transference of knowledge” from an active subject – the teacher – to a passive object, the student.²² In this model, the work of education was merely to accommodate the student to the reality of the teacher. This model only perpetuates the condition of the oppressed, making their oppressed status seem inevitable, even natural. Education for freedom, on the other hand, involved a dialogue in which both teacher and student realize they are “unfinished, uncompleted beings [within] a likewise unfinished reality.”²³

Education for freedom thus quickly breaks the boundaries of any particular classroom and takes on a form of historical action, as teacher and student work together to transform their

²¹ Freire, “Education as Cultural Action: An Introduction” in *Conscientization for Liberation*, ed. Louis Colonnese (1971), 112-113; Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000 [1972]), 65.

²² Freire 1971, at 112; Freire 1972, at 71.

²³ Freire 1972, at 84.

reality – to organize new forms of knowledge, to establish new “facts on the ground.” Freire called this recognition that one’s reality is indeterminate and can be transformed, “conscientization.”²⁴

Given the theatrical definition of the “act of conscience” discussed above, it is striking that Freire criticized the *alternative* to “conscientization” – education as domestication – for its theatricality. He explained that “[c]ultural action for ‘domestication’ . . . implies the existence of actors who exercise their action upon ‘spectators,’ thus maintain[ing] the status quo and preserving the social order of domination.”²⁵ The problem with the traditional act of conscience, according to Freire, is that it is an ineffective mode of education. Even if the actor’s version of reality is somehow “better” or “truer” than other versions, isolated acts of conscience cannot hope to transform reality writ large, especially when the actor’s version of reality is opposed by the hyper-organized status quo. Rather than seeking to communicate or enforce a particular viewpoint in a theatrical manner, acts of “conscientization” begin a “problem-posing” conversation, a conversation that addresses humans as “unfinished” and seeks to remind humans of “their incompleteness.”²⁶ In short, acts of conscientization do not provide answers, but instead remind humans that they are historical creatures, in the midst of an ongoing, and potentially unending, process of natural and social development. It is this awareness of incompleteness that can spur humans to their own historically-conscious responses to present-day realities, their own attempts to create new modes of organization.

While visual art seems especially suited to the logic of spectacle that Kosek associates with the “act of conscience” and Freire with “education as domestication,” it does not seem impossible for visual art to engage in the alternative mode of education – education as

²⁴ Ibid 67.

²⁵ Freire 1971, at 113.

²⁶ Freire 1972, at 84.

conscientization. Such art would begin a process by which viewers come to understand their own lives as radically problematic and incomplete – as part of ongoing processes of development in which the viewers themselves can intervene. This awareness that the individual is necessarily implicated in larger systems is what Gregory Bateson’s ecology of mind sought to foster. In a similar manner, post-WWII advocates of conscientious objection sought to re-conceive of the relationship between individual objectors and complex legal systems, such that the objector would no longer just be a dissenter to but a shaper of systems of law.

III. Conclusion

In 1945, upon hearing the news from Hiroshima, the poet Randall Jarrell wrote to a friend: “I wish I could become a naturalized cat or dog.”²⁷ Confronted by the possibility that man – his species, his own kind – could destroy nature, Jarrell imagined retreating back into a pre-conscious, pre-human form of life. Jeffrey Rubinhoff, in keeping with an important if neglected tendency in post-WWII thought, sought an alternative approach, a re-imagining of human interiority that would be capable of confronting the complex brutality of the nuclear age. Jeffrey has written:

Nature, by the passage of time and the genetic sculpting of life has created a history that is crushingly honest and constantly probing the future. It is simultaneously innocent and guilty of the most destructive crimes that lead to the most magnificent creations. Without life there is no witness to this awesome and terrifying creative unfolding of the universe.

²⁷ Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (2d ed. 1994), 196.

As far as we know, we fragile humans are the only cognizant witnesses. With this capability comes the great responsibility of knowledge. This responsibility is a priori in those who are born artists. The act of will [in accord with a mature conscience] that I describe in my definition of art is the act of witnessing and recording this knowledge. This is the highest of human values – the recognition of the value of life itself. Therein resides the mature conscience.²⁸

I've attempted to place Jeffrey's notion of the mature conscience in a slightly wider historical field. In response to the systematization of violence introduced by WWII strategic bombing and post-war nuclear strategy, a variety of thinkers and activists sought new conceptions of conscience that integrated the individual perspective with the complexity of modern knowledge. This tendency in post-WWII culture, I suggest, can be understood as a search for what Jeffrey has called the "mature conscience." While the traditional "act of conscience" emphasized individuality and witness, the mature conscience introduced the problem of knowledge, the problem of natural and technological complexity. To be sure, the mature conscience, like earlier notions of conscience, stands witness to "the value of life itself." The "mature conscience" also recognizes, however, that "life" is no simple, irreducible substance, but the product of massive feats of organization.

In the nuclear age, individual witness would no longer be enough to affirm the value of life itself. Instead, humans would have to contend with the systems they had produced and that had produced them – contend with the fact that human life had created systems capable of ending the history of life itself. Only by bearing witness to – and participating in – this level of

²⁸ Jeffrey Rubinoff, "Art Beyond War: A Discussion About Prehistoric War and the History of Art by Artists" (2010), 10-11.

complexity could humans claim to be truly conscientious. I suspect that that it is this kind of witness, a witness that attests not just to the individual perspective but its irreducible embeddedness in the history of human life, that Jeffrey seeks to provide with his art.