Check for updates

Conscience

JESSICA MURRAY
University of Western Australia, Perth

THE word "conscience" appears everywhere in Victorian writings across realms of discourse, in which it assumed an edge of ambivalence and energy often difficult for us to perceive in the twenty-first century. Today conscience may tend to uneasily evoke associations with the reputed moralism of much Victorian fiction or with conceptions of the self, founded in Protestant theology, as unified and coherent. For this reason, conscience may seem a residual concept, which calls to mind traditional views of Victorian culture. However, various critical strains in Victorian studies have recently suggested the possibilities bound up in examining this word anew: Andrew Miller's important *Burdens of Perfection* emphasizes the inescapable centrality of moral psychology in the period and connects conscience to the evangelical obsession with self-scrutiny, while Jesse Rosenthal's *Good Form* sees the intuitionist concept of the moral sense as informing the experience of novel reading.[1] The difference between these studies suggests something significant about the multivalence and complexity of conscience: rather than a unified or stable concept bound up in Christian (and especially Protestant) theology, its shifting, suggestive meanings expose not only broader social and ideological shifts but the ways these shifts are registered and created in language as the word was adapted into emergent discourses in theology, moral philosophy, science, law, and literature.

The Victorians were themselves aware of the complex processes of linguistic and historical change underpinning conscience. The Anglican theologian and intuitionist philosopher, F. D. Maurice, expressed the dominant view of conscience at midcentury as "that in me which says 'I ought' or 'I ought not','" a moral "faculty" whose supremacy is ordained by God.[2] But Maurice also reflected on the fluctuating meanings of conscience in interesting ways. Drawing on an analogy of "Nature" from Horace's *Ars Poetica*, Maurice describes the way a word like conscience "may undergo [changes] in different periods,"

Jessica Murray holds a PhD in English and literary studies from the University of Western Australia, where she currently works as a sessional tutor and guest lecturer. Her research explores the concept of conscience in the nineteenth century at the intersections of literature, law, moral philosophy, and science.

Victorian Literature and Culture, Vol. 51, No. 3, pp. 367–370.
© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press.
doi:10.1017/S1060150323000116

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150323000116 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with seasons of "decay" and "renewal." As Maurice's engagement with Horace suggests, his account encodes a valuing of tradition in opposition to mere "fashion" or "slang," which debases words by making them "bear a certain impress without reference to [their] origin or history."[3] This valuing of tradition, however, even as it privileges certain usages and conceptions of conscience, is one that is invested in acknowledging the complex history of its meanings, and its capacity to be "renovat[ed] and adapt[ed]" over time.[4]

Perhaps the most destabilizing "renovations" of conscience (to borrow Maurice's term) are imagined in Charles Darwin's *Descent of Man* (1879). Darwin adapts conscience into his scientific theory of evolution, but the word segues between emergent and older understandings. His chapter on "The Moral Sense" is a complex network of engagement with sources in moral philosophy and theology as well as science: Darwin shares with Maurice a belief in the "supremacy" of conscience and its affiliation with the word "ought" but locates the source of this supremacy in highly developed social instincts, founded in sympathy, rather than God. This gives rise to the possibility of "widely different lines" of moral conduct: "If . . . men were reared under precisely the same conditions as hive-bees, there can hardly be a doubt that our unmarried females would, like the worker-bees, think it a sacred duty to kill their brothers, and mothers would strive to kill their fertile daughters."[5] Moreover, for Darwin it is language, itself developing organically, that is central to the acquirement of a conscience in animals with "active and highly developed . . . intellectual faculties," and he grounds this in the capacity of language to express "the wishes of the community" and "the common opinion how each member ought to act for the public good."[6]

George Eliot was both influenced by Darwin's theories and fascinated by language, and connects conscience in her fiction to sympathy and memory: in *Daniel Deronda* (1876), conscience fractures and multiplies, shifting away from its theological moorings to become "the voice of sensibilities as various as our memories."[7] This registering, or creating, of a shift in conscience's meanings is an example of the way Eliot's interest in language and its relation to historical change is bound up with her literary practice.[8] Underpinning Eliot's imagining of conscience is a keen awareness of the limitations of language and its capacity to misrepresent. In *Middlemarch* (1871), the banker Nicholas Bulstrode clothes his selfish passions in the language of evangelical piety: when an opportunity arises to silence his blackmailer—coincidentally entrusted to his care—by

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150323000116 Published online by Cambridge University Press

disregarding a medical prescription, he struggles with himself in prayer. But what Bulstrode represents as private communion with his conscience, and God, is in truth an exercise in self-deception, and the narrator intervenes with a question: "Private prayer is inaudible speech, and speech is representative: who can represent himself just as he is, even in his own reflections?"[9] In questioning the limits of language and representation, Eliot in turn raises questions about the word "conscience," which register wider ontological uncertainties.

The multiple meanings of conscience in the Victorian period, which ramified across realms of discourse, have the potential to speak in important ways to our current disciplinary preoccupations. However, perhaps more vitally, the processes by which conscience accrues these meanings offer a resource for examining in tension, or in frictionless cooperation, different or seemingly contradictory facets of Victorian culture. Finally, examining conscience reveals something of the Victorians' own complex investment in language and in the capacity of (key)words to register and enact social change.

Notes

1. The "moral sense" was closely affiliated (and sometimes used interchangeably) with conscience. Philip Davis's 2002 chapter on "Mind" in *The Victorians* volume of *The Oxford English Literary History* also suggests the ways conscience was adapted into emergent sciences of mind, which often continued to have a theological or spiritual dimension. Philip Davis, *The Victorians: The Oxford English Literary History*, vol. 8 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Andrew Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); Jesse Rosenthal, *Good Form: The Ethical Experience of the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).
2. F. D. Maurice, *The Conscience: Lectures on Casuistry, Delivered in the University of Cambridge* (1868; London: Macmillan, 1872), 27.
3. Maurice, *The Conscience*, 15–16.
4. Maurice, *The Conscience*, 16.
5. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1879; London: Penguin Classics, 2004), 122.
6. Darwin, *Descent of Man*, 122.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150323000116 Published online by Cambridge University Press

7. George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (1876; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 431.
8. Melissa Raines, “Language,” in *George Eliot in Context*, edited by Margaret Harris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 177.
9. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871; London: Penguin Classics, 1994), 569.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150323000116 Published online by Cambridge University Press