

What is Special about Conscientious Objection?¹

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Abstract

The deliverances of our conscience are heartfelt, but not necessarily reason-based, moral convictions that concern our own behaviour. The fact that conscientious objections to a regulation, like a prohibition or obligation, express a heartfelt conviction that it is morally wrong to comply or morally permissible not to comply with the regulation provides a moral reason to respect the conviction because failing to do so is likely to cause objectors considerable suffering. But for conscientious objections to succeed in justifying exempting objectors from complying with the regulation, the suffering caused by forcing compliance must outweigh the suffering produced by exempting them from compliance. In the case of obligations, this necessitates that others with a similar competence are available to replace them. Conscientious objectors can never justifiably demand to be granted exemptions. This takes acts of generosity made feasible by favourable circumstances, such as this availability of replacements.

Key words: Conscience, conscientious objection, suffering, act of generosity

1. Introduction

Conscience does not any longer have a central place in moral philosophy. This is probably because few philosophers nowadays believe that the voice of our conscience gives us *knowledge* about what is right or wrong. What our conscience gives voice to is rather our *beliefs* or *convictions* about what is right or wrong.² We shall not assume that what we believe or are convinced about have to be propositions capable of truth or falsity in a strict sense. As far as the notion of conscience is concerned, its

¹ We are grateful to two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments.

² Cf. ‘conscience only refers to what individuals *believe*, independently of any external, objective proof or justification’ (Alberto Giubilini: ‘Conscience’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2021, Edward N. Zalta, ed.). See this entry for some historical information on the use of this concept.

deliverances might lack truth-value all together, like desires. Therefore, conscience is of peripheral interest in moral epistemology.

When conscience is discussed in moral philosophy nowadays, it is usually in the context of *conscientious objection*. A conscientious objection is an objection to regulation, either a (positive) obligation or a prohibition (or ‘negative’ obligation), which is socially sanctioned. The objection provides a moral reason to be exempt from having to comply with the regulation. So, the existence of conscientious objections implies that some deliverances of our conscience are capable of providing moral reasons for exempting us from complying with the regulation in question. This raises the question: what is it about deliverances of our conscience that enables them to provide moral reasons for exempting us from complying with a regulation, i.e. enables them to give rise to conscientious objections against such compliance? In a nutshell, the answer we want to defend is that we have a conscientious objection just in case we have *a heartfelt moral conviction, the contravention of which would make us suffer*. The strength of this objection is a function of the magnitude of this suffering, but in order for us to have a conscientious objection, the objection need not be *successful*, that is, the magnitude of the suffering that the reason generates need not be so great that it outweighs contrary reasons and, so, justifies an exemption. In other words, the reason in question is a so-called *pro tanto* reason; it need not be a decisive reason, sufficient to justify an exemption.

There are several aspects of this proposal that call for elucidation:

(1) It is plausible to think that the deliverances of conscience that constitute conscientious objections are moral convictions, but more should be said about what kind of moral convictions they are. We shall suggest that they are specific or particular moral convictions about ourselves in particular.

(2) We claim that the characteristic of these moral convictions that enables them to constitute conscientious objections is that they are *heartfelt or strongly endorsed* convictions such that contravening the convictions causes significant *suffering*. We shall assume that to generate such suffering, it is necessary to have a moral *conviction*, that is, a belief in something that we are *certain* or *fully assured* about. But we shall argue that in order for us to have a conscientious objection, it is not necessary that we take the moral conviction to be based on sufficient or good reasons, let alone that it in fact be based on such reasons.

(3) Conscientious objections exist even if they are not *successful*, i.e. even if they fail to provide reasons that are sufficient to justify exemptions. For they may be up against contrary reasons that have greater weight. What these contrary reasons are depend in particular on whether conscientious objections are objections to negative or positive obligations. In the former case, they consist simply in how great the amount of suffering will be if exemptions are granted compared to the suffering generated by turning down the objections. In the latter case, this involves such matters as the availability of replacements for the objectors who are exempted. We shall provide some examples of these different kinds of situations in sections 4 and 5, respectively, but shall not attempt a fuller review of these kinds or more penetrating analyses of particular examples.

(4) Conscientious objections give reasons to *exempt* objectors from having to comply with a regulation, that is, from having to act in accordance with it or being subjected to it. More precisely, they may be to the effect that such compliance is morally wrong or at least that it should be morally permissible not to comply. Conscientious objections do not give reasons for *revoking* the regulation in question or for making exemptions which can be incorporated into the regulation as explicit exceptions to it. They cannot make up such exceptions, since granting conscientious objectors exemptions should be understood as *acts of generosity* made feasible by favourable circumstances, such as the availability of adequate replacements. They are not anything objectors *can justifiably demand*, or to which they have a *right* or *entitlement*.

In the following sections we discuss these claims in numerical order.

2. The Kind of Moral Conviction Involved in Conscientious Objection

What sort of moral convictions must our conscience express in order for us to have conscientious objections? They must be moral convictions about *our own* behaviour or treatment, about it being morally wrong for us to act or to be treated in some way, or it being morally permissible for us not act or be treated in some way. You may have a moral objection to US soldiers fighting in the Middle East, but it is only if you yourself are a US soldier who could be commanded to fight there that your objection to this could be conscientious. This is because such objections must come from your conscience, and then they are per force concerned with situations in which you might find yourself. This connects with the point that a conscientious objection must engage

the subject's emotions. In general, moral convictions that apply to our own behaviour or treatment are more likely to affect our emotions than moral convictions that apply only to others. For example, we are more disturbed if we have to do what we consider morally wrong than if others have to do what they and/or we consider wrong (though we shall see that in some circumstances we are capable of doing what we consider wrong without qualms).

Moreover, we suggest that it is definitive of the judgements of our conscience that they are *applied or particular* moral judgements about us *specifically* as opposed to *abstract or general* moral judgements which are about us only because they are about everybody, like the Kantian imperative 'Act only on maxims that you can at the same time will to be universal laws', or the utilitarian imperative 'Act so that you maximize happiness'. Unfortunately, it is tricky to supply a general characterization of the difference between abstract and applied moral judgements, but an abstract judgement like 'Act so that you maximize happiness' leaves plenty of room for the question 'How should I act in *this* situation in order to maximize happiness?', whereas a particular conviction like 'It is morally wrong for you to kill this person who is innocent and does not consent to being killed now' leaves considerably less room for corresponding questions about how you should act in order to comply. More particular moral convictions are thus more directly applicable.

These considerations lead up to the proposal that conscience is a capacity to produce convictions about how it is morally right or wrong for us to behave in various particular situations. But it could reasonably be objected that this is too narrow. For it could be maintained that conscience makes pronouncements about other kinds of normative rightness and wrongness than moral rightness and wrongness, like *prudential* rightness and wrongness. Suppose you are convinced that you ought to quit smoking, but you backslide and light up. This could surely give you a bad conscience. However, by giving voice to prudential judgements, conscience cannot produce conscientious objections, since these would have to be objections against your behaviour *towards yourself*, e.g., an objection against your harming yourself by lighting up. And such objections to yourself do not make sense. Thus, we may safely take it that the deliverances of conscience that are relevant to the issue of conscientious objection are particular moral judgements which are specifically about our relations *to others*.

3. *The Moral Convictions Must Be Heartfelt*

We now turn to (2), the claim that conscientious objections must be heartfelt moral convictions. We need not rule out that conscience could be an organ also of lukewarm, tentative beliefs about what is morally wrong or permissible for us. But if someone is only slightly more inclined to think that obeying a law is morally wrong than that it is not wrong, this fact cannot provide any noteworthy moral reason for letting them refrain from obeying it. It is only if it is a matter of a *strong, heartfelt conviction* that obeying a law would be morally wrong that there is such a reason to exempt objectors from having to obey it. Our hypothesis is that this is because acting contrary to such a conviction will cause objectors significant *suffering* – suffering here being understood in a broad sense that covers anything that harms or is of negative value for individuals.

It might be retorted that if suffering of great magnitude provides moral reason, so does very slight suffering, only this is a very weak reason. But consider another case. We would not say that the fact that your feet will be wet and cold if you wade into pond to save a drowning child presents you with a moral reason not to save the child. However, if it could be reliably predicted that your wet and cold feet would cause a pneumonia that would kill you, you would have a moral reason not to save the child. It may even be a reason that morally justifies you not saving the child which could be codified as an exception to your obligation to save the lives of other humans. Yet, there seems to be only a difference of degree between these two effects on you.

Here the most reasonable strategy – which we shall adopt – seems to be to grant that we could have moral reasons that are extremely weak but that they can be disregarded because they make no difference in practice. Accordingly, we would say that if the contravention of a deliverance from our conscience produces only very slight suffering, this does not give us any conscientious objection. We speak of moral *convictions*, i.e., beliefs with a high degree of assurance, in order to imply that the suffering caused by contravention would be ‘significant’.

Describing objections as conscientious implies that the objections refer to something in the mind of the objectors. It might however be thought that this mental phenomenon is not that of an endorsement of a conviction being strong and heartfelt, but of the *objectors regarding themselves* as having sufficient or good justificatory reasons for the conviction. By contrast with there being *in fact* such reasons, this is of course a fact about the mind of the objectors. If there are in fact such reasons for

objecting to a regulation, this would mean that the regulation should be revoked or revised to comprise some exception. But this need not be true in cases of conscientious objections, though it may; they are offered as more informal *excuses* for objectors omitting to follow a regulation which remains in place, unrevised. Furthermore, to concede that there is in fact a sufficient or good reason to object to a regulation would put us in an awkward position when we deal with conscientious objections to regulations that we would like to uphold.

Of course, it may be that people's endorsement of a moral conviction is often strong and heartfelt because they take themselves to have sufficient or good reasons for it. This is what we expect of people who are rational, but people are frequently not rational. The strength or tenacity with which people endorse a belief is obviously not necessarily a function of the rational justification they think they have for it. Just as people may have a firmly endorsed, heartfelt belief along with having rational justification for it, they may have such justification for a belief without it being a firmly endorsed, heartfelt belief of theirs. Many people appear to think that there are strong reasons to abstain from eating meat, yet they go on consuming meat without feeling uneasy about it because they have been accustomed to doing so since childhood, and most people around them do so as a matter of course. Others may have a heartfelt conviction that meat-eating is morally wrong without having considered what reasons there are for this view. Their endorsement of it might be due to a strong visceral or gut reaction to eating meat, perhaps as a result of having seen scenes from a slaughterhouse. These people are likely to suffer considerably if they are forced to eat meat, and we suggest that this supplies them with a conscientious objection to it.

All normative moral theories, whether consequentialist, deontological, contractualist, or virtue ethical recognize the prevention or removal of suffering – in the current wide sense of an experience that is negative for individuals – as a moral reason. So, advocates of all moral theories should recognize that the stronger the reluctance of someone is to perform an action, and the more they will suffer if they are compelled to do it, the greater the moral reason to exempt them, other things being equal.

The suffering that agents are liable to undergo when they have to act contrary to their moral convictions is a morally bad effect just like the more typical morally bad effect of the suffering that patients may undergo when agents act on them physically. The following example will bring about how close the analogy between these forms

of suffering is. It will also show that patients no less than agents could have conscientious objections, in their case against being treated in some ways. There is a moral reason to exempt from mandatory vaccination against an infection people who have a condition such that if they have this vaccine, they are as likely to be harmed as much as people in general are likely to be harmed by the infection. Now imagine that the condition of these people that enables the vaccination to trigger the infection is not of the usual biological or medical sort, like some allergy, but a heartfelt conviction that it is morally wrong to be vaccinated against this infection. It is the fact that they hold this conviction strongly and, accordingly, would be violently upset were they subject to vaccination that could interact with the vaccine to produce the harmful symptoms. It is irrelevant for the occurrence of this effect whether their reasons for the conviction are splendid or crappy, or non-existent; what is crucial is simply how strongly they endorse the conviction. The content of the conviction is relevant only indirectly in so far as it underpins the endorsement.

According to our proposal, these people have a conscientious objection against being forced to undergo vaccination, but the strength of this objection is a function only of the amount of suffering *directly* caused by the fact that their conviction is contravened. The further suffering from the infection caused by this suffering in conjunction with the vaccination adds to their objections against being vaccinated, but it is not a part of their objection in so far as it qualifies as conscientious. If such further suffering were counted as a part of their conscientious objection, it could become absurdly encompassing.

It should also be emphasized that the suffering which determines the weight of a conscientious objection must be due to the contravention of a moral conviction and not simply to the action that contravenes it. To exemplify, suppose you live in a country in which voting is mandatory. You are convinced it should be permissible not to vote. Now if you are forced to vote despite your conviction, the *effort* it costs you to do so does not contribute to giving you a *conscientious* objection against voting if it results from the action of voting itself, and you would have put in this effort even if you had voted without being opposed to being under an obligation to do so.

4. The Success of a Conscientious Objection

If the opposition to being vaccinated is very strong, and the magnitude of the suffering directly caused by ignoring it consequently is very great then – regardless of

whether the suffering is prone to trigger an infection – these objectors could have a conscientious objection to vaccination that is even *successful*. This is especially likely if the objectors are comparatively few and the infection not particularly serious, for then their suffering might well outweigh the rather small benefit that forcing them to be vaccinated would bring.

It might be objected, however, that somebody could have a very intense, heartfelt opposition to complying with some law and, consequently, be convinced that it is morally right to break it, although most of us would think that such a contravention is clearly morally wrong. The implication of the present account that such individuals could have a conscientious objection to the law may then appear counterintuitive. To exemplify, suppose their powerful desire to have sex with children prompts paedophiles to be convinced that this practice is morally permissible. Surely, it might be protested, their powerful desire does not supply them with a conscientious objection to a legal prohibition on having sex with minors.

We have claimed that a conscientious objection is a heartfelt *moral* conviction, but what counts as a moral conviction is controversial. For instance, some would say that egoism could be a possible moral view, while others think that egoism is opposed to morality, and some may think that all the seven deadly sins are moral vices, whereas others are of the opinion that, say, gluttony and pride are not immoral. There may be no fact of the matter regarding what belongs to morality; rather, what counts as possible moral views may be an evaluative issue. Now, we are inclined to take the view that what is decisive with respect to conscientious objection is whether *the objectors themselves* would classify their convictions as moral. Nevertheless, people who disagree with this classification may refuse to regard objections as conscientious because they reject the objectors' classification of them as moral. This may be why they conclude that the paedophiles do not such an objection.

But there is another response we put more weight on. Let us agree that the account here advanced implies that the voice of conscience could tell paedophiles that sex with children is morally permissible and that the suffering that would be inflicted on paedophiles by not granting this permission constitutes a moral reason for granting it, so that they are in possession of a conscientious objection. It could instead be pointed out that this suffering is plausibly outweighed by the suffering of the children who would be the victims of paedophiles and who might be traumatized for life if the

paedophiles were given free rein. Therefore, the paedophiles would not have a *successful* conscientious objection against a law banning sex with children.

A successful conscientious objection is an objection that defeats contrary reasons and justifies an exemption. In the next section we shall consider cases which concern exemptions to having to discharge professional duties, and then these reasons will include facts about the availability of competent substitutes for the exempted objectors. But in the present case, and the case of vaccination, in which the exemptions do not concern obligations to do something to others, the reasons deal only with the magnitude of the suffering caused by not granting the exemption compared with the suffering caused by granting it.

This argument raises the question of the possibility of paedophiles – akin to Robert Nozick’s utility monsters³ – who have *enormously* strong desires to have sex with children and who would suffer so much from having these desires frustrated that their suffering would be greater than the suffering of the children who would be their victims if the paedophiles were allowed to go ahead. We could also imagine that there are children who will not be harmed by such sexual activities. But the great majority of real-life paedophiles and children are surely not of this sort, and if there were a few exceptions, it would be hard to identify them and give permissions to have sex in these special cases. If, however, these exceptions could not be kept apart from the great majority of cases in which adults should be prohibited from having sex with children, this prohibition would in effect be revoked. A prohibition against a practice would serve no function if most of those who are inclined to engage in the practice are exempted from complying with it.

Although situations in which there are serious conscientious objections against a morally justified law should be distinguished from situations in which there are such substantial moral objections to a law that it should be repealed, we can imagine conscientious objectors defying the law with the intention of drawing public attention to the unjustifiability of the law and thereby having it revoked. This would be an instance of *civil disobedience*. In cases of civil disobedience, the intention behind the

³ *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, New York: Basic Books, 1974, p. 41. A referee raised this question.

disobedience is to bring about some political change such as having a law repealed, and this often requires that the disobedience attracts public attention.⁴

Civil disobedience differs from conscientious objection in two respects. First, in civil disobedience the aim could be the abolition of some law, while in conscientious objection the aim is the exemption of some people from the duty of following a law that remains in force. However, conscientious objectors may well believe that granting such exemptions to compliance with a law will eventually undermine the law, and that this would be a desirable outcome. Thus, conscientious objectors could simultaneously engage in civil disobedience, but these aspects are nevertheless distinguishable. Secondly, in civil disobedience the mental state of the agents is not a morally important factor; it is primarily the strength of the justification for their protest that is supposed to bring about the abolition of the law. In conscientious objection a fact about the mental state of the objectors – namely the suffering that compliance would cost them – plays a central role in the justification of their exemption. This is what is special about conscientious objection.

5. Granting Exemption an Act of Generosity

We have claimed that a successful conscientious objection to a regulation justifies *exempting* an objector from having to obey it, but this needs to be further explained. It may be possible to incorporate an exemption to a regulation as an explicit exception in it, but this is not so in the case of the exemptions which conscientious objections can support. We have seen that such codification of exemptions would scarcely be possible in the case of the prohibition of sex with children. Another reason for this is that conscientious objections may not *by themselves* be sufficient to justify exemptions. Whether they succeed in doing so depends on other factors, such as whether there are others who could replace exempted objectors. This implies that it will not do with a simple exception to a regulation like ‘except if you are strongly opposed to the regulation’. That an exemption is granted is instead *an act of generosity* made feasible by favourable circumstances, such as the availability of

⁴ Cf. John Rawls’s definition of civil disobedience as a ‘political act contrary to law usually done with the aim of bringing about a change in the law or policies of the government’ (*A Theory of Justice*, Harvard U. P, 1971, p. 364). In this connection, Rawls refers to a definition by H. A. Bedau.

substitutes. Conscientious objectors *cannot justifiably demand* to be exempted; this is not anything to which objectors can have a *right* or an *entitlement*. This is what we are now going to argue.

There are situations in which what the law justifiably prescribes differs from what morality prescribes. These situations are conducive to conscientious objections to the law because objectors could then be disposed to follow the lead of morality. Abortion illustrates such a situation. For a state could justifiably grant women a *legal* right to abortion even in circumstances in which they could reasonably be thought to be *morally* required to bear their children to term. This is possible because, in general, the law should not be as demanding as morality could be. It is not unreasonable to think that if a woman has voluntarily run the risk of becoming pregnant and her fetus is healthy, she is *morally* obliged to undergo the inconvenience of carrying it to term in order to give it a good chance of living a worthwhile life, perhaps by having it adopted after birth. Even so, it could be plausibly maintained that she should not be *legally* constrained to give birth to her fetus.

To give a related example: parents may be morally required to donate kidneys to their children if the latter need them to survive, yet few believe that these parents should be legally required to be kidney donors to their children. Another example could be that people in affluent countries may be morally required to give more to foreign aid than the law should require them to give. Most citizens would be incapable of complying with laws that were as stringent as moral norms could be.⁵

Even if there is justifiably a legal right to abortion, some people could be expected to take the view that it is morally wrong to comply with this law in some circumstances because they feel that the law should be more in line with morality. Nonetheless, there must be people who are trained to execute abortions competently and who are legally obliged to assist women asking for abortions, for this help is necessary in order for these women to be able to exercise their legal right in a safe and effective fashion. Therefore, in a state in which there is a general legal right to abortion, it should be made clear to people who contemplate undergoing training in

⁵ Another reason for divergence between law and morality, which is irrelevant now, is that the law could not be efficiently applied to all the innumerable morally relevant circumstances ordinary life throws up. For instance, it may be morally wrong to lie in many circumstances which are too insignificant for the law to bother about.

disciplines like obstetrics and gynaecology that they will be under a professional obligation to carry out abortions if requested. If their conscience tells them that it would be morally wrong to do so in some circumstances in which this could be legitimately requested, they should be advised to choose training for some other speciality of medicine or some other profession altogether. A state should not grant its citizens a legal right to some form of healthcare if the professional help needed for safely exercising this right is not available and is not intended or expected to be available in the near future.

All the same, for reasons indicated, it is likely that there will be some obstetricians and gynaecologists who have a strong conviction that it is morally wrong to perform abortion. Then, we have argued, they may raise a conscientious objection to performing abortions whatever the source of their conviction may be. If they are strongly repelled by the idea of abortion simply because they have heard that their mothers came close to aborting them, this has the same weight as a conviction based on a concern for human life in general, given that performing an abortion would cost the objectors the same amount of suffering.

But by itself this fact is not sufficient to justify exempting them from performing abortions. There must also be a sufficient number of equally competent obstetricians or gynaecologists who are prepared to replace them for, as we have seen, this is a service which society is obliged to offer if it legally permits abortion. If the substitutes are not equally competent as the objectors, exempting objectors from having to discharge their professional duty risk causing more suffering than forcing them to discharge their duty. This is so, although forcing reluctant objectors would cause suffering not only to them but is likely to do so to their patients as well because it is reasonable to think that their reluctance is likely to make them do a less good job than their less reluctant colleagues.

Still, if the conscientious objectors are granted exemptions, this should be seen as *acts of generosity*. It is not anything they can *justifiably demand*, anything to which they have a *right* or an *entitlement*. For they have voluntarily chosen a profession which comprises a duty that overrides their qualms. But if their aim is one that naturally sparks sympathy, like the aim to preserve human life, and if there are equally competent colleagues who are ready to step in for them, it is reasonable to be generous and exempt the objectors. If, however, colleagues of objectors were to catch

wind of the fact that their objections rest on dubious reasons, they will be less likely to stand in for them.

Conscientious objectors are like debtors who are hard up to repay you money you do not need when payment is due. The situation of these debtors does not release them from their obligation to repay you; they cannot justifiably demand to postpone payment, but they can appeal to your generosity, and especially if you sympathize with their reasons for being hard up, they may do so with success.

Usually, when patients consult doctors, they want to have their health restored or their life preserved. Then doctors can in principle both fulfil their patients' aims and promote their health and life. In cases of abortion there is something of a conflict between these goals: fulfilling the pregnant woman's goal involves causing the death of her baby. This conflict is starker in cases of euthanasia, in which clearheaded patients consistently express well-grounded wishes to die because they are terminally ill and suffer excruciating pain. Then doctors cannot both fulfil their patients' wishes and preserve their lives. It is to be expected that in such circumstances some doctors are more moved by a desire to fulfil the wishes of their patients and, thus, conscientiously object to legal requirements to keep these patients alive against their wishes. It is natural to feel sympathy for such desire to respect the patients' wishes as well as compassion for the plight of the patients. But, again, doctors who have voluntarily chosen a profession that includes an obligation to sustain life even under these circumstances do not have a *right* to be exempted.

We have discussed the duties of doctors to perform abortions and to sustain human life which are part and parcel of professional roles that are voluntarily undertaken. What if you have not voluntarily undertaken an obligation, but it has been compulsively imposed on you, as in countries in which there is military conscription at least for all men? Since it is in general morally wrong to kill human beings, it is not surprising that some of those who are conscripted have a heartfelt opposition to military service that involves training to kill. According to our view, they could voice a conscientious objection to do military service irrespective of whether their opposition consists in an aversion derived from a reason-based moral conviction or in an instinctive aversion to having blood on their hands. The gut reaction of the latter objectors provides as much of a conscientious objection against doing military service and fighting even a justified war as the principled opposition of the former objectors if acting contrary to their objections causes the same amount of suffering. On the

other hand, people who take there to be powerful reasons never to kill humans, but have no particular aversion to doing so, say, because they lack empathy, like psychopaths, cannot muster any strong conscientious objection.

But, again, whether these conscientious objections are successful and suffice to grant exemption from doing military service depends on whether there are enough citizens who are willing to do it in the objectors' stead. To prevent there being too many conscientious objectors, it may be necessary to require that those who are exempted perform some other socially beneficial service instead. And to single out those whose conscience provides them with stronger conscientious objections, these other socially beneficial services may have to be quite burdensome, so burdensome that in conjunction with the social stigma that is likely to attach to 'dodging' military service, it would make comparatively few willing to opt for it. On the other hand, it should also be kept in mind that it could have a demoralizing effect on other recruits if a significant number of their companions are manifestly reluctant to do their duty. Nonetheless, the more unpalatable a compulsory duty is, and the more essential it is for society that a large number of citizens discharge it, the harder society must make it to be exempted.

But since modern weaponry tends to render it unnecessary to have large numbers of soldiers and also makes it costly and time-consuming to train large numbers of recruits in the use of them, it has in general become easier to be exempted from military service and, indeed, in many countries conscription has been abolished.

However, as long as conscription persists, granting conscientious objectors exemption is a favour that fortunate circumstances, such as the ones mentioned, make feasible. It is not anything that they could justifiably demand or to which they have a right which is correlated with an obligation on the part of others to grant. Certainly, it could happen that people earn a moral right to be exempt from discharging duties they have undertaken. For instance, after having undertaken duties some might be so seriously injured that if they had to continue carrying out their duties, they would die or be disabled for life and, thus, have their rights to life and limb infringed. These people have a moral right to be exempted, unless the stakes are extraordinarily high, for example, that numerous lives could be saved if they fulfil their duties, as may happen, e.g. in times of war. But in these conditions their objections to be exempt are not conscientious.

6. Conclusions

The deliverances of conscience that could give rise to conscientious objections are heartfelt, particular moral convictions that concern our own behaviour specifically. They need not be based on any reasons, let alone acceptable ones. For the fact that conscientious objections to some regulations express heartfelt convictions that it is morally permissible not to comply with the regulation provides a moral reason to respect the conviction because failing to do so is likely to cause objectors considerable suffering. This reference to suffering is what explains the feeling that conscientious objections appeal to something in the mind of objectors. Conscientious objections cannot be successful and justify exemption of objectors from complying with the regulation if the suffering caused by forcing compliance is outweighed by the suffering produced by exempting objectors from compliance. To prevent this, it is in cases of professional duties as a rule necessary to find equally capable substitutes for exempted objectors. By viewing assessments of conscientious objections in terms of balancing quantities of suffering against each other, the present account has the virtue of making such assessments as simple as they could reasonably be thought to be.

People are strongly recommended to choose professions that involve a minimum of duties to perform acts that strike them as so morally dubious that they feel it is hard to put up with executing them. For they cannot justifiably demand to be relieved of having to discharge such disagreeable duties. Being relieved is a favour or act of generosity which is made possible by such fortuitous circumstances as there being a sufficient number of equally competent colleagues who are willing to step in for them, and this condition is likely to be satisfied only if the objectors' moral convictions appear reasonable to many.

If a duty is not voluntarily shouldered but mandatory or compulsory, as the duty to do military service not infrequently is, it is also possible to be granted exemption as a favour if there is a sufficient number of people who are willing to do military service. To keep the numbers of conscientious objectors down, it is likely to be necessary to require that they undertake to execute some other socially beneficial service instead.