

BOOKS/LECTURES

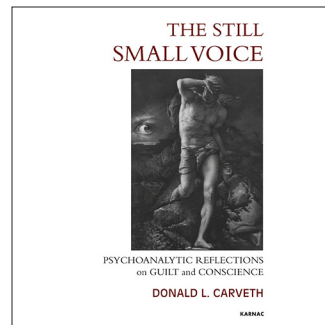
The Still Small Voice

by Donald Carveth

London: Karnac, 294 pp.

The Still Small Voice is a timely, moving, and important book that could play a significant role in reviving and reshaping contemporary psychoanalytic thinking on the subject of conscience. Donald Carveth, director of the Toronto Institute of Psychoanalysis, demonstrates that the tendency to equate the superego with conscience—a tendency that began with Freud—is actually a trite and dangerous misconception. Indeed, Carveth recommends that we approach conscience as a completely separate entity—one rooted in our capacity for empathy and sympathy, and in our earliest identifications with a nurturing mother, rather than with a punishing, castrating, and moralistic (Oedipal) father. This is a wise move, in my opinion. He also notes that the current climate of opinion, which stresses trauma, neglect, abuse, and even interpersonal relations—to the detriment of inner conflict—is not the optimal setting for sharing reflections like these.

The book is dedicated to the psychoanalytic sociologist Eli Sagan, who said that the Freudian theory of the superego is woefully inadequate, because it fails to acknowledge the pivotal role played by the mother in human development (Sagan, 1988). Carveth deepens and develops Sagan's critique, drawing on a wide range of sources, but above all, on Melanie Klein and various Christian theologians. In so doing, Carveth invites the reader to revisit and reframe Klein's understanding of human development,



the perils and problems of modernity, and of many biblical motifs and teachings, Jewish and Christian. And while this kind of psycho-theological reflection isn't everyone's cup of tea, even people who still cringe when they read this kind of material will find considerable food for thought in Carveth's meditations on evil, psychopathy, and the "death drive."

Carveth anticipates fierce resistance in analytic circles to his critique of the superego and his call for empowering conscience. While time will tell, Carveth has good grounds for wondering aloud about the long-term reception of his ideas. By shifting the search for the roots of conscience away from an Oedipal, father-centred, or *patri-centric* psychology toward a pre-Oedipal, mother-centred approach, and by introducing a theological dimension to the discussion, Carveth invites comparison with several other thinkers whose efforts to reshape analytic discourse were largely unsuccessful.

For example, Erich Fromm (1947), who trained as a sociologist before becoming an analyst, as did both Sagan and Carveth, differentiated between what he termed the authoritarian and the humanistic conscience. In a later work (1950), he deemed the former to be the superego (and the source of much neurotic suffering) and the latter as the source of sympathy, solidarity, and the courage to challenge the abuses of irrational authority and the conventional pieties and practices embraced by the conformist herd—in other words, conscience, properly speaking. Fromm, who championed Ferenczi vigorously long before his recent rehabilitation in psychoanalytic circles, was also a fierce critic of Freud's *patri-centric* bias and his disparaging view of women (1959)—a forerunner of Sagan's, in fact. Fromm's ideas about conscience, conformity, and spirituality were widely discussed and applied in the social sciences and humanities during the fifties, sixties, and early seventies, but they made very little headway among psychoanalytic clinicians (Burston, 1991). Indeed, Fromm paid for his blunt honesty on these matters by being dropped from the membership roles of the IPA by Ruth Eissler in 1954 (Burston, 1991; Friedman, 2013).

Erik Erikson, whom Carveth cites more frequently, was a more cautious and diplomatic dissenter who managed to stay within the fold, despite skirmishes with orthodox critics and detractors. Like Fromm, he rejected the ethical relativism that most of his colleagues embraced. But unlike Fromm, he did not ground his approach to ethics in a kind of humanist-existentialism, but in a theory of human development that stressed the responsibility of the elders toward the young, and the need for basic trust—a pre-Oedipal trait akin to Klein's depressive position. Like Fromm, Erikson would have heartily endorsed Carveth's contention that in order to recover or achieve greater mental health, we have to become more ethical people, that is, to

wrestle with ethical dilemmas. However, Erikson's star has faded, and very few analysts still discuss his work and ideas seriously (Burston, 2007).

Finally, Carveth's project here invites comparison with that of a neglected figure in Canadian psychiatry, Karl Stern. In *The Third Revolution* (1954), Stern argued that psychoanalysis and faith are completely compatible, appearances notwithstanding, and that the time had come to "baptize Freud," by incorporating his findings into the Catholic intellectual tradition. Stern said that psychoanalysis in the fifties was burdened by outdated positivist preconceptions rooted in nineteenth-century mechanistic materialism. However, Stern maintained that, practised in the proper spirit, even by non-believers, psychoanalysis is the very embodiment of Christian charity—a point made much later (though less persuasively) by Erikson (Burston, 2007).

In *The Flight from Woman*, Stern (1965) gently reproached Freud for the andro-centric bias implicit in his theory of libido and the superego, and dethroned the Oedipus complex, arguing that the infant's relationship to its mother is the most pivotal and formative relationship of all and the one with the greatest impact on adult mental health. He noted how identification with a nurturing mother promotes empathy, interpersonal attunement, and care—traits that are undervalued in our increasingly hyper-masculine society. The differences between Stern's perspective and that of Carveth are significant. Stern was inspired by the theistic personalism of Catholic thinkers like Jacques Maritain and Gabriel Marcel, while Carveth draws chiefly on Protestant sources—Kierkegaard, Tillich, Barth, and above all, Bonhoeffer. Stern embraced supernaturalism and belief in miracles as an integral part of faith, while Carveth rejects them categorically. Nevertheless, the underlying kinship is clear.

In any case, if history is any indication, Carveth's reflections on conscience and the limitations (and deformations) of the superego may indeed encounter considerable resistance. But who knows? Times change, and despite the manifold resistances these earlier theorists encountered, I would not like to predict a chilly reception for his book. Instead, I will keep my fingers crossed and hope that we've all come far enough to take that momentous step with Sagan and Carveth, and to differentiate, once and for all, between conscience and the superego.

Meanwhile, I have one (relatively minor) misgiving about Carveth's book, which may be mostly semantic. Fromm (1947) differentiated between authoritarian conscience and humanistic conscience, and later (1950) along similar lines, between authoritarian and humanistic religious sensibilities. The authoritarian outlook is rooted in unconscious forms of idolatry

and tends to smother conscience, replacing it with a punitive superego, while humanistic faith promotes optimal human development and care. Carveth briefly acknowledges Fromm's priority in this regard, but with respect to what Fromm called "humanistic religion," prefers to speak of a "secular" or "religionless" Christianity—one freed from the literalism that underlies supernaturalism and belief in miracles. In view of Carveth's background and overarching objectives, this is perfectly legitimate. But it may also be confusing, because in many Protestant circles, people who speak of Christianity "without religion" are often making a case for Christian exceptionalism, arguing, if only by implication, that Christianity is the *only* path to redemption, while other faiths are mere "religions." That being so, I prefer to describe the humanistic approach to faith as being genuinely religious, and the authoritarian approach as *pseudo-religious*. That way of addressing the issue makes allowance for religious sensibilities that are shorn of supernaturalism—secular Judaism, secular Christianity, secular Islam, and so on—without privileging, or even appearing to privilege, one faith tradition over any of the others.

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