

Conference Report

Seeking the Place of Conscience in Higher Education: An Augustinian View¹

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Abstract: This article explores the place of conscience in higher education. It begins by reconstructing the place of conscience in Augustine’s thought, drawing on Augustine’s reading of Genesis 3, the Psalms, and his own spiritual journey. Its basic aim is to clarify Augustine’s account of conscience as self-judgment, identifying the conditions under which self-judgment occurs. After identifying these conditions it addresses the question: does conscience still have a place in modern higher education? It acknowledges the real limitations and obstacles to moral education when pursued in the context of the modern research university. However, it also argues that moral education proceeds in stages, and that educators can anticipate and clear a way for the place of conscience—though not, of course, without reliance on the movement of grace.

Keywords: Augustine; *Confessiones*; conscience; education; Genesis 3; grace

1. Introduction

Does conscience have a place in liberal arts higher education? What kind of “place” does it refer to or designate, and why does it matter?

While several books denounce the decrepit moral state of modern higher education [1], few suggest that the road to recovery lies on the path to conscience—why? Perhaps because, as Thomas F. Green suggests, conscience continues to bear a negative connotation ([2], p. 21). Its association with religious

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indoctrination does not endear us to its function ([3], p. 24), while confusion constantly surrounds it as a concept in moral psychology. To this list, one might add that “moral pluralism” in the Academy tends to undermine any robust appeal to the role and significance of conscience, as teachers reasonably assume that conscience ought to remain a private endeavor.

It need not be so. Properly defined, conscience still has the potential to illuminate, helping to mark the ends and also the limits of higher education. This article is one attempt to mark those boundaries by discussing the “place” of conscience in the thought of St. Augustine. Augustine’s account of the place of conscience in moral-intellectual development spurs reflection on the moral purposes higher education serves, and demonstrates the obligations educators bear to reality, or “the way things are” (*ordo rerum*), requires clearing up a space for the individual conscience to operate.

In particular, Augustine’s account can shed light on the process by which human beings *become* agents in the morally relevant sense. It shows us that to teach with a view to the act of conscience requires teaching with an openness (or receptivity) to reality itself. This requires not only patience on the part of the teacher, but also acknowledgment that education is neither something we *achieve*—lest we undermine the agent’s participation in his or her own development—nor something we *control* by way of strategic engineering. In Augustine’s terms, education dances to the rhythms of grace. It can only be anticipated not achieved or controlled for—and that for the simple reason that it involves the work of conscience. What does this work entail, require, and point to?

To answer these questions we proceed from a brief history of conscience (Section 2) to Augustine’s account of conscience in theological and biblical terms (Sections 3–5). To conclude, this article draws together Augustine’s insights on conscience to discuss the place of conscience in higher education, locating it within the structure of humanistic education. It then raises, but does not answer, the far more ambitious (two-fold) question as to whether and to what extent conscience operates in the Academy, and what are the conditions for its retrieval and flourishing.

2. Putting Conscience in Its Place

Why speak of the *place* of conscience instead of just conscience? The answer lies in the confusion conjured up by the term conscience. For example, it is sometimes thought that conscience circumvents moral judgment. Conscience operates on this view independent of reason and judgment, foreclosing on the moral agent’s responsibility to reality. Such a view invests the conscience with an unmediated moral authority; it permits only obedience in response to its dictates. This abolishes the intermediary function conscience serves in the moral life, collapsing the moral life into brute moral intuition.

For the history behind this (later) development on the operations of conscience, we turn to Oliver O’Donovan [4,5]. O’Donovan begins by tracing conscience to its Greco-Roman context in which the term tended to denote simply *moral self-consciousness*: “especially that uneasy awareness that one has of oneself when one knows one has done something wrong” ([4], p. 114). Such awareness finds acute expression in the thinking of St. Paul, who, though refraining from elaborating its full operation, bequeaths to subsequent Christians a view of conscience as universal ([6], pp. 134–35). It is only when Christian thinkers begin developing Paul’s thoughts—in combination with earlier thoughts in Greco-Roman culture—that conscience attains a wider function than simply moral self-consciousness.

It begins to take on a discursive role in the moral reasoning process, establishing a new sphere for human responsibility and judgment. O'Donovan explains:

“[c]onscience in the Christian tradition has been a consistently *discursive* self-consciousness, a roomy mental space for reflection and deliberation, where every kind of information was at home, and above all information about the redemptive goodness of God. Conscience was memory in responsibility, the workshop of practical reason, a formal rather than an efficient or final cause. Insofar as it laid claim to authority, it was simply the believer's authority to reach decisions reflectively rather than accept decisions made for him by others—an authority conceived dialectically in response to that of the church to give moral counsel” ([5], p. 302).

Here, conscience funds the wider operations of human agency and judgment. It is the act by which human beings become reflective and responsible agents, locating their “moral placement” in a network of moral relations ([7], pp. 13–15). This view implies that agency is a process not a presupposition. Conscience is not a power we simply “have” as human beings—as in a faculty psychology—but is a process we must undergo to recover our freedom ([8], pp. 6–17; [9]). It further implies a prior alienation and ignorance of the moral life, in which the road to recovery lies on the abandoned path of conscience. Thus, it also intimates that the moral life is a journey. It is a journey on which each of us plays a role in determining our course, yet not without bearing obligations to reality as we encounter it.

In sum, conscience represents a beginning-point not an end-point. Better still, it is an *entryway* to the life we are called to live: the life of moral agency, accountability, and judgment, all of which implies responsibility to the reality of “the way things are” (*ordo rerum*).

In contrast to this “ancient” view of the intermediate place of conscience, O'Donovan argues that the modern view tends to displace judgment altogether. In fact it threatens to displace the moral agent as well, since it tends to overtake the agent's responsibility to deliberate towards action. The modern view of conscience as unmediated moral authority is typified, according to O'Donovan, by Bishop Butler's famous characterization. “[Conscience is that] superior principle...which distinguishes between the internal principles of (the) heart...which without being consulted, without being advised with, magisterially exerts itself...and which, if not forcibly stopped, naturally and always of course goes on to anticipate a higher and more effectual sentence” ([4], p. 118). By arguing that conscience dictates what ought (not) to be done, Butler depicts it as an “arbitrary tyrant” rather than helpmate to moral reasoning ([4], p. 118). Its authority no longer derives from the order of moral reality, that to which our agency is called to respond, but asserts its own authority to which the agent has no access—that access being impeded by the usurpation of judgment ([5], pp. 302–03).

By speaking of the *place* of conscience—to return to our original query—we underscore the role of conscience in pursuit of self-possession. To occupy the place of conscience is to re-possess moral self-consciousness: that is, the state preliminary to the act of judgment, action, and—for Augustine at least—confession to God. As such, conscience rings synonymous with agency, responsibility, basically anything that lifts humanity into the realm of the moral life. Perhaps the better metaphor to use is that of *illumination*, exposing an agent's responsibility to the reality of “the way things are”. In any event, the crucial insight to take forward in this discussion is that *agency implies a process*—though

not an automatic process. Instead it is more than possible and indeed, unfortunately, more than likely, that agents fail to “heed the call” that animates the moral life.

More on that anon. However, before we attend to an agent’s failure to heed the call, let us first attend to the nature of the call itself. To do so we turn attention to the thought of St. Augustine, particularly his account of the fall of humanity in Genesis. By uncovering for us the foundation on which the place of conscience rests, Augustine reveals the fundamental *question* at the center of the moral life—and by extension the fundamental question at the center of education.

3. The Place of Conscience in Genesis 3: Augustine’s Reading of the Fall

In Augustine’s account of humanity’s Fall in Genesis 3, conscience emerges as a (moral) place of divine encounter and self-judgment. Adam and Eve, through sin, have abandoned that place, opting to “hide” the truth (and hide *from* the truth) of their compromised position. The story, as Augustine reads it, reveals the evasion of moral self-consciousness by recounting humanity’s refusal to assume responsibility for its agency. By preferring to pass blame rather than step forward to confess, Adam and Eve lay the foundation for the habit of self-deception. And yet—a very important yet—despite laying such a foundation, Adam and Eve do not manage to displace conscience altogether. It continues to be “held in place”, though not by the ones who abandoned it, but by the God who deigns to address them—and humanity through them—with a simple, startling question.

On this question hangs a great deal, or at least we plan to argue. Augustine, it is true, does not seem to take much interest in it; but what he says lends support to our account of the place of conscience. The relevant details of the Genesis 3 story may be summed up as follows: Adam and Eve are tempted by the serpent to disobey God, and do in fact disobey God to their exposure and loss of innocence. Upon hearing God walking *in the cool of the day* (Genesis 3:8, RSV), Adam and Eve hide in fear of God and (perhaps) fear of punishment, and God responds to their apparent absence by speaking out loud a question: *Where are you?* (Genesis 3:9).

In commenting on this part, and in view of Manichean literalism, Augustine clarifies what God’s question does *not* in fact betray. It does not betray divine ignorance or anything of the sort. To insist on this reading is not only blasphemous to God; it also repeats the very error that God’s question seeks to highlight. By interpreting God’s question in a flat-footed way, perhaps attempting to heap ridicule on the bumbling God of the Old Testament, the reader merely showcases his own ignorance and blindness to sin, failing to perceive that God’s question is not intended for God’s benefit *but for ours*. It extends to us, that is an invitation to confess—in other words, to step forward and re-occupy the place of conscience. “Adam is now questioned by God”, Augustine writes, “not because God doesn’t know where he is, but in order to oblige him to confess his sin” ([10], 2.16.24).

Further on, Augustine diagnoses Adam and Eve as suffering the sin of pride. It is pride not only in their outright disobedience, but pride in trying to cover up that disobedience with excuses. Despite God’s invitation to confess their disobedience, Adam and Eve fail to “own up” to their complicity in sin, and end up abandoning the meeting-place of God and humanity. “What else is pride, after all, but leaving the inner sanctum of conscience [*deserto secretario conscientiae*] and wishing to be seen outwardly as what in fact one is not?” ([10], 2.5.6). The scene that perfectly captures this abandonment in Genesis is

not the outright disobedience of Adam and Eve, but their subsequent denial of any blame in the matter even to the point of accusing God for sin.

Next, as is the way with pride, [Adam] doesn't plead guilty to being the woman's accomplice, but instead puts all the blame for his own fault on the woman; and in this way, with a subtlety seeming to spring from the cunning the poor wretch had conceived, he wanted to lay his sinning at the door of God himself. He didn't just say, you see, "The woman gave it to me", but more fully: *The woman whom you gave to me* (Gen. 3:12; [10], 2.17.25).

For Augustine, Adam's response amounts to more than evasion of blame, but constitutes a subtle effort to displace God as judge. It represents the failure of self-judgment and abandonment of conscience, which works to obscure humanity's place beneath the judgment-seat of God.

Had Adam and Eve been successful in seizing God's place, the possibility of returning to truth would no longer remain. Responsibility *to* truth would cease to exist, effecting the displacement of conscience as a witness. Thus, Adam and Eve would ever remain in their deception and (willful) ignorance, having recourse to no authority outside their own volition. Of course, Augustine thinks that no such scheme can be successful. It is one thing to abandon conscience as an act of defiant will, another to abolish conscience whose witness depends on truth. Truth, or rather God, upholds the place of conscience, as God refuses to allow the self-destruction of his creation. Such is the implication of God's question *Where are you?* that humanity remains haunted by its ceaseless wandering state, yet in that haunting retains a trace of a prior invitation.

This suggests that to re-occupy the abandoned place of conscience, one must re-hear without delusion the question *Where are you?* It posits a kind of origin-tale of the human intellectual endeavor: that in inheriting a displacement in the manner of their own existence, humans face questions about their origin, nature and destiny that continually elude their investigations into the truth of the world. Driven to ask questions about the world they inhabit, they forget that it is a world that *they* inhabit, and inhabit uneasily, leaving them devoid of self-knowledge and openness to truth ([11], 4.1). However, the claim to which the Genesis story alludes, and Augustine captures, is that God has not abandoned his creation without question. The hope remains that God's question, and myriad questions leading up to it, can entice humanity to re-enter the place we call conscience.

That at least is one way to interpret Genesis 3. As an overarching or implicit framework for conceiving the human quest, it reveals that such a quest has been generated by a question—and not a question that we have raised or imposed on ourselves, but a question that confronts us from outside our own existence. In re-entering the sphere of conscience in response to this question, we enter upon the beginnings of our creaturely confession.

4. Augustine's Innovations on Conscience

It is unlucky that in the otherwise comprehensive encyclopedia *Augustine through the Ages* (Eerdmans: 1999), the editors opted not to include an entry for the term *conscientia*. It is unlucky not least because, on the witness of not a few scholars, Augustine writes a formative chapter in the history of conscience [12,13]. We already observed this at work in his account of Genesis 3. There, conscience corresponds to the act of self-judgment (or its failure), thus explaining the poor judgment Adam and Eve

exercise in God's presence. It also shows that God's judgment ultimately prevails over this misjudgment, thus preserving the possibility of future repentance by not allowing human sin to have the final word.

God's question *Where are you?* holds the conscience in place. It is a question we might interpret as suspended over humanity, haunting its every enquiry, animating its every step, and enticing it ever further into the open air of truth. As Abraham Heschel comments in his aptly titled book, *God in Search of Man*: "It is a call that goes out again and again. It is a small voice, not uttered in words, not conveyed in categories of the mind, but ineffable and mysterious, as ineffable and mysterious as the glory that fills the whole world. It is wrapped in silence; concealed and subdued, yet it is as if all things were the frozen echo of the question: *Where art thou?*" ([14], p. 137).

For Augustine, conscience constitutes that inward self-awareness through which the soul is called and challenged by the authority of truth. Having set out the place of conscience in the (post-lapsarian) human condition, we turn to its larger significance within Augustine's intellectual framework, and in particular its operations in relation to God and truth.

In his exposition of Psalm 5, Augustine integrates the work of conscience into the journey of the soul's desire for truth, wisdom, and happiness. We ought to trust no one on our journey to truth but God, he argues, for God alone "sees" us and guides us to himself. Hence, "for that reason we must take flight within, to our conscience, the place where God sees" ([15], 5.11). In taking flight within we are turning to the heart; this is the inner chamber in which we call out to God, and where God is able to hear us "by the majesty of his presence" ([15], 5.2). His idea is that conscience is not a faculty we possess, but a place we must *run to* in recollecting the self. The process of re-collecting the moral self before God, moreover, includes re-inhabiting the place of conscience so that God can enter us—so that God may speak to us *in and through* conscience.

Thus, Augustine holds that "[i]t is in turning to reflect upon the mind's *conscientia* that we meet with God so as to share with God a true judgment about ourselves" ([12], p. 195). Conscience provides a "home" not just for us but for God, and serves as a primary medium through which God communicates with us ([15], 30(4).8). At this point, it should be clarified that God's presence within conscience does not preclude the act of human judgment, but rather reinforces it. As Manfred Svensson rightly argues in his account of the Augustinian conscience, Augustine's integration of conscience into his account of illumination does not entail an ontologist theory of divinely imparted knowledge. "[H]is insistence on conscience as *vox Dei*...by no means excludes the idea that conscience is a part of the process of moral reasoning... Augustine's conception of conscience is not a form of inner illumination that confers moral certainty apart from reason, sense and emotion, but rather an act of judgment integrates these faculties and activities in the search for a good life" ([13], p. 51).

Even so, Augustine further innovates on the meaning of conscience when he suggests that *who we meet in conscience* is none other than Christ himself ([12], pp. 195–98). This arises from his attempt to combine Platonic and Christian elements—in what manner and to what effect is widely disputed—to fund his theory of human knowledge as "divine illumination" [16]. Here is not the place to weigh in on this theory's claims, except to note that at its core lies an emphasis on creaturely dependence, and concurrently on the movement or "intervention" of divine grace to secure true self-knowledge apart from deception. In short, illumination involves turning the soul "inside out" so that it stands before the light of truth naked and unfurled. The authority that summons forward the soul through conscience is the same authority that summoned creatures into existence *ex nihilo*, and that continued to summon creatures

even after their disobedience: in short, the Word of God and true Teacher of all, Jesus Christ (John 1:1; Matthew 23:9–10). For Augustine this is more than pious sentiment or religious ornament, but addresses the intimate penetration of human darkness by divine light. God communicates to us not simply through a question. Supremely, we might say, he became the question *for us* in Christ.

Correspondingly, it must be acknowledged how dark the darkness is: how difficult it is to re-occupy the obscured place of conscience. In a passage probing the power and extent of self-deception (*Confessions*, 10), a diagnosis that could double as a commentary on Genesis 3, Augustine highlights the conflicting motives of the soul in relation to truth, singling out its unwillingness to stand corrected by the truth. It may be read to address the difficulties any educator faces in attempting to bring students into contact with the human condition. Augustine asks:

But why is it that “truth engenders hatred”? Why does your man who preaches what is true become to them an enemy (Galatians 4:16) when they love the happy life which is simply joy grounded in truth? The answer must be this: their love for truth takes the form that they love something else and want this object of their love to be the truth; and because they do not wish to be deceived, they do not wish to be persuaded that they are mistaken. And so they hate the truth for the sake of the object which they love instead of the truth. They love truth for the light it sheds, and hate it when it shows them up as being wrong (John 3:20; 5:35)... Yes indeed: the human mind, so blind and languid, shamefully and dishonourably wishes to hide, and yet does not wish anything to be concealed from itself. But it is repaid on the principle that while the human mind lies open to the truth, truth remains hidden from it. ([17], 10.22.34).

Human beings on this account face a problem indeed: they are a “bundle” of conflicting loves which resist true judgments ([18], p. 256). Here love of truth rubs up against love of happiness, and both of these are deflected and deformed by yet another love—the wish not to be deceived. The desire not to be deceived or persuaded one is wrong—as Adam and Eve in the Garden—distils a common obstacle to educational formation. It is the result of several factors that hardens the heart, but for Augustine, it can be reduced to one desire in particular: inordinate self-love, pride.

On this view, individuals not willing to occupy the place of conscience, hiding from “the question” at the center of existence (or at least “fallen” existence), have instead elected themselves as the arbiters of truth, rejecting the very condition for the possibility of judgment. In evacuating the place of conscience they adopt a different posture, one that screens out unsettling facts and questions about themselves, but which in turn impairs their judgment by inflating their vantage point—and from so lofty a position they are unable to perceive the truth. Their problem has less to do with their capacity to reason, and more with the desires that mal-form their perceptions.

All this being admitted, and the place of conscience remains. God has not withheld from us the question *Where are you?* Therein lies our hope for the renewal of conscience, not only in religious but in educational terms as well—though of course, such a distinction would be lost on Augustine (see below). As long as we are wandering, and no matter where we are heading, there is “‘still a little light’. May they walk, may they indeed walk, ‘so that the darkness does not capture them’ (John 12:35)” ([17], 10.22.33).

5. Augustine's Journey to Conscience

It has been shown that Augustine locates the activity of conscience at the center of the divine-human encounter in Genesis. In re-occupying the place of conscience humanity “opens up” to truth, becoming receptive of and susceptible to the question of existence. It is not for the sake of conscience that one re-occupies conscience. Such is the result of some contact with truth—an illumination made possible by the activity of grace—yet which also requires something *from us* as well, namely a desire or willingness desire to know. Dialectic is one mode by which this process unfolds. But dialectic alone cannot generate self-awareness, nor can it engineer or control its development. It can only invite human beings into the place of conscience, putting to them some question that captures their interest. Those questions extend invitations to embark on a quest, to submit to the end that one dimly perceives and wants (if they do). In contrast, by avoiding God's invitation to communicate, Adam and Eve followed pride to an ultimate displacement. They no longer “hear the question” as a summons and a commandment, but instead became too proud to place themselves within it.

It should be noted that Augustine's dichotomy between “pride” and “humility”—the evasion or embrace of conscience, as we interpreted it above—should be taken as two extremes demarcating the boundaries of the moral life. It is not, for this reason, strictly applicable to individual people, even Adam and Eve, as one is never *either* full of pride *or* full of humility (at least in this life), but a bundle of conflicting loves gives ground to each one. Pride and humility have a foot in each of us.

Moreover, this mixture can make for occasionally contradictory responses. Humility may prevail in response to *this* object, yet fail to transfer over to another (perhaps more worthy) object, all in a seamless sequence from one object to the other. The problem has little to do with a failure to “employ” humility—as if humility, and the virtues in general, could be selected willy-nilly. Neither does it stem from some prior failure to “teach values”—a phrase Green condemns as the modern educator's “grand delusion”. In the first case, it is incorrect to treat virtues as shelf items from which students can simply draw whenever opportunity demands. Humility is not the product of individual making. It is begotten *within us* through encounter with truth (or beauty, wisdom, *etc.*). In the second case, it is incorrect and misleading to advocate that educators “teach values” as part of their curriculum. Such moralizing discourse reinforces the assumption that values are items that we choose to possess. Lost from view in this assumption that *individuals* have values, however, is that *things* have value independent of our estimation. Encountering those “valuables” (or “goods”, in traditional terms) constitutes the real agenda of moral education. “The transformation in our vocabulary of value”, Green writes, “is not simply a different way of talking. It represents a different way of seeing things, a different way of being. It creates an entirely different kind of world” ([2], p. 125). As pointed out decades ago by philosopher George Grant (channeling Nietzsche and Heidegger), our modern emphasis on “values” betrays a technological culture that cannot countenance, let alone contemplate, the truth of “the way things are” ([19], pp. 40–43). If reality is “of God” as creation and gift, to receive it as such requires acknowledging its source. That implies humility, an openness to receive *what is*.

In short, Augustinian humility requires *attention to reality*. One is humbled not by exerting a will to be humble, but by allowing reality to penetrate to the soul's inmost depths: that is, to conscience. This is part and parcel of the Christian Platonist tradition. It sets the stage for understanding the educational

endeavor as something we neither will nor control in any immediate sense, but which we nevertheless can contribute to as communicators of the question.

Simone Weil, another Christian Platonist, brilliantly captures this point in distinguishing between the exercise of attention and will: “We have to try to cure our faults by attention and not by will...What could be more stupid than to tighten up our muscles and set our jaws about virtue, or poetry, or the solution of a problem. Attention is something quite different” ([20], pp. 116–17). Indeed, the former corresponds to the sin of pride and lack of grace, whereas the latter “presupposes faith and love” and is even a form of prayer. Such a distinction further clarifies two episodes in Augustine’s journey that usefully highlight the place of conscience in humanity’s intellectual development.

The first episode marks the beginning of Augustine’s journey to God. In the midst of a tumultuous period full of conflicting desires and emotions, Augustine recalls his powerful encounter with a specific author and book: Cicero’s *Hortensius*. Praising Cicero in *De beata vita* (386) and over a decade later in *Confessiones* (397–401), Augustine confesses he was ignorant at what actually was taking place, yet recalls the indisputable presence of a desire to seek wisdom. In *De beata vita*, that desire is combined with a suggestive phrase, *factus erectior*, to indicate what precisely his awakening consisted in: “And after I had been made more upright [*factus erectior*], I scattered that fog and was convinced that I should yield to those who teach rather than who command obedience” ([21], 1.4).

R. J. O’Connell convincingly argues that the phrase *factus erectior* is best taken in a positive sense as relating back to Cicero [22]. In setting Cicero forth as a catalyst to re-formation, the passage suggests that Cicero’s impact on Augustine at the time led our author to *take responsibility for the act of rational judgment*. *Erectior* derives from *erigere*, which can be taken in two senses: negatively, as an arrogation of lofty self-esteem, and positively, as an occupation with loftier thoughts. The latter better accords with Cicero’s positive influence, and the emphasis Augustine places on seeking out “those who teach”. The phrase in fact corresponds with Augustine’s later account of Genesis 2, where God is said to have made Adam “upright” [*erectus*] to the image of God ([10], 1.27.28). That alone is highly suggestive given Cicero is a pagan, implying Augustine was truly open to discovering wisdom “wherever found”. The greater point is that Augustine did not work for this experience, did not expect it to happen, and did not get help from his educators very much ([23]). Instead the entire episode seems to force the recognition—as is his aim throughout *Confessiones*, admittedly—that “education” unfolds in circumstances not wholly under our control. There is nothing we can do to engineer a meaningful outcome. Conscience, if it takes place, takes place without our will.

The second episode immediately follows the account of the first episode, and does so for a reason. Effective as Cicero is in evoking desire, Cicero does not resolve Augustine’s condition overnight. Cicero positions him to find out he *has* a condition, and one in need of addressing; but this judgment does not arrive right away for Augustine, but is worked out in dialectical tension with his longing for wisdom. In discovering his love *for* wisdom, though, Augustine does begin to step out from hiding. He enters upon the journey he was always already on, returning step by step to the abandoned place of conscience. In doing so he lets light shine on his desires and attachments: both the objects he should desire and the ones he should not, intensifying his self-judgment in response to the truth. The difference this makes can be seen by way of contrast with his subsequent attempt to “find wisdom” in the pages of Holy Scripture.

This episode starkly contrasts with the Cicero-encounter by emphasizing the lingering effects of pride on Augustine. It is partly because Cicero’s book did not mention “the name of Christ” ([17], 3.4.8) that

Augustine seeks wisdom in the pages of Scripture. What he finds in those pages fails to impress him. Nothing very sophisticated rhetorically or philosophically, and certainly no match for Cicero's flowing prose. Promptly Augustine turns away from it disappointed and offended. The Bible, he feels, is simply beneath him, the irony of which he comes to recognize and develop in the passage. The Bible defies pretentiousness through its consistently humble idiom. Therein lies its power and wisdom and strength—access to which is barred to those lofty-minded *philosophes*, such as Augustine thought he was, but which appeals to those seekers who are humble, receptive, and patient with the disclosure of whatever God intends. “I was not in any state to be able to enter into that”, writes Augustine, “or to bow my head to climb its steps...My inflated conceit shunned the Bible's restraint, and my gaze never penetrated to its inwardness...I disdained to be a little beginner. Puffed up with pride, I considered myself a mature adult” ([17], 3.5.9).

And to the extent he regarded himself as above the divine revelation, Augustine could not entertain the questions it communicated. Of course, not every “failure” to encounter the question boils down to a failure to submit oneself to illumination. It may be that a certain work fails to capture a student (or certain students), or suffers under mitigating circumstances that render its question silent. Insofar as history confirms the value of a book—or in case of religious belief, its divine inspiration—the struggle to comprehend and to contemplate its contents cannot always be qualified by appeal to circumstance. In the end, truth demanded full acknowledgment of those motivations, desires, ambitions, *et cetera*, which ultimately prevented Augustine from inhabiting the place of conscience. Thus, it is in the case of higher education, we might say, where the curriculum is an invitation to take up and (re-)read.

6. Conclusions

Augustine offers us an account of conscience as the act of self-judgment. Lured into the open by a question of some kind, the soul begins to “stand up” to take responsibility for its judgment. The Latin root for education according to Green is *educio*: a “leading forth” into knowledge, as opposed to merely transmitting it. The Romans described the process a few different ways, sometimes using verbs such as *instruere* (“insert”) or *instituere* (“to place in order to remain upright”) ([2], p. 43). Education on this view is not detached but self-involving. It requires something from us as active participants—for we are the ones summoned (invited even) to respond to the question.

If that is so, what is the place of conscience in higher education? How does Augustine help us think about its role and limitations? We bear in mind Augustine's ignorance of the institution called “the modern research university”. Widespread distribution of the good of education was not thinkable in his age, even as it is difficult to achieve in ours; and that is to leave aside the larger question of God, or religious consciousness, so crucial to his philosophy and so contested in ours.

That said, the Augustinian conscience helps to clarify certain goals. One goal that defines (or ought to define) modern education is the act of self-judgment in pursuit of the truth. Not that education seeks self-judgment as an object itself, but self-judgment *follows as a consequence* of seeking (or waiting on) truth. To make room for conscience is to make room for self-judgment; and self-judgment is only possible where truth is acknowledged. Education, therefore, which is committed to the pursuit of truth, likewise can be said to have a place for the activity of conscience.

There is more to say. Self-judgment is *self-judgment*, implying there is something to judge (*i.e.*, reality, truth). Self-judgment is also *self-judgment*, implying a form of freedom. Not the “freedom” that assumes no responsibility to “the way things are”, but the freedom *to make* judgments based on a given reality. Personal experience plays a role here as an entryway to discussion, helping us to uncover the question(s) we need to ask. Experience does not contain everything we want to say or have to say, but neither can it be discounted as a “way in” to conscience. In short, Augustine holds that to educate with a view to conscience, one must teach with a view to students as *agents in the world*, as individuals summoned on the journey of the moral life.

One must teach with a view to the *human condition*, therefore, the truth of which unfolds on the journey of the moral life. Higher education has a role to play on this journey to truth; but educators should neither seek to control its development, nor assume that *only* higher education (or liberal arts) can draw out the truth. As Gilbert Meilaender points out in a recent essay on higher education:

The liberal arts should help us to understand the truth about our lives—which means, in part, the truth of our contingency and neediness, and, ultimately, our dependence on the divine. An openness to what transcends us is what the “leisure” that is study of the liberal arts should, at its best, cultivate. It seeks not power but wisdom, not to change the world but to know it in truth. And to know the world truly is to know it as creation, as a gift that invites our gratitude more than our mastery ([24], pp. 107–08).

Meilaender proceeds by questioning the assumption that a liberal arts education is the only or even the best way to form moral agents. At its best, it may do this for some but not others; and should we not be grateful that it is not the *only* means?

Perhaps we should. For as has long been argued the “modern research university”, as a reflection of the “modern age” of which it partakes (and, of course, contributes to), is increasingly inhospitable to the place of individual conscience. In elevating knowledge *production* over knowledge *transmission* (or virtuous formation), the university has ceased to entertain the question of existence, eroding the foundational element of the humanistic disciplines.

Twenty years ago, Mark Schwehn in *Exiles from Eden* raised precisely this worry with modern higher education. Schwehn pointed out that modern educators, in their very use of terms “production” and “transmission” ([25], p. 14), betray commitment to a technocratic culture bent on *making* truth not *knowing* it—and certainly not *acknowledging* or *contemplating* its giftedness. Implicit to this shift in how we think about knowledge, Schwehn argued, lurks an intellectual perspective drawn from the legacy of Max Weber ([25], pp. 3–21). The resultant “Weberian ethos” conditions administrators and educators to view knowledge as “mastering” a subject of increasing specialization.

This “Weberian ethos” also has its corresponding virtues, some of which stand in direct contrast to the Augustinian tradition. “[O]n Weber’s account, the process of knowledge formation, if conducted rationally, really does favor and cultivate the emergence of a particular personality type. And this personality does exhibit virtues—clarity, but not charity; honesty, but not friendliness; devotion to the calling, but not loyalty to particular and local communities of learning” ([25], p. 18). According to Schwehn, this observation ought to undercut the illusion (still present in much talk of “secularism”) that education not only can but *must* remain “morally neutral”. If that were possible the university would be a very different place (or *no*-place). Any ethos implies its own set of privileged norms and virtues, and

honest reflection on the habits educators endorse and promote—the “ideal” academic, say—reveals moral judgments they have made or allowed others to make for them.

If our argument about the place of conscience in education proves persuasive, then it follows that to “make room” for conscience in higher education, educators must remain open to the possibility of illumination. Or to put this in the idiom of the Genesis 3, educators must strain to hear the “question of existence” neither by forcing an encounter with its total obligation, nor by stifling the possibility of such an encounter in the long run (or short). Instead, as part of their resistance to the corrosive effects of Weberian rationalism, they must keep alive the questions that call forth our humanity, and that allow for the possibility of (re-)receiving our humanity afresh.

The educator who teaches with a view to conscience, then, has at least a haunting sense that there is something to be found. They believe that there is something that has already been found, perhaps, and that nothing we produce can suffice to contain it, nor prevent it from calling out to us through the authority of conscience. “You, Lord, are my judge...you, Lord, know everything about the human person; for you made humanity” ([17], 10.5.7).

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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