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**"Seeking the Place of
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Seeking the Place of Conscience in Higher Education: Some Augustinian Insights

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Introduction

Here are the questions I wish to ponder in this essay: 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 there’s no shortage of books denouncing the state of higher education, few suggest that its recovery lies on the path to moral conscience – why is that? Perhaps because the word conscience, as Thomas F. Green suggests, still carries some negative baggage from its historic religious roots.² If not that, then the prevailing “moral pluralism” in the Academy has often undermined appeals to the individual conscience: as teachers reasonably assume, and students tend to expect, that conscience ought to remain a strictly private endeavor.

It need not be so. Properly defined, the term conscience can still inform the educational task, helping to mark the ends and the limits of that task. This article is one attempt to mark those ends and those limits. It does so through exploring the place of conscience in Augustine, a figure well-known for probing the limits of his conscience. Augustine’s efforts to identify and dramatize his conscience will spur reflection on the moral dimensions of higher education. This includes any obligations educators and students bear to reality, “the way things are,” and their role in “clearing up space” for individual consciences to develop and operate.

¹ This essay is adapted from an earlier article entitled “Seeking the Place of Conscience in Higher Education: An Augustinian View,” *Religions* 6 (2015), 286–298. It has been shortened and edited for clarity.

² Thomas F. Green, *Voices: The Educational Formation of Conscience* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1999), 21.

Moreover, through Augustine’s understanding of conscience we can begin to shed light on how we *become* moral agents. Augustine demonstrates that to teach with a view to moral conscience one must teach with an openness and receptivity to reality. This requires not only patience on the part of the teacher, but also acknowledgement that education is not something we *achieve* in our students – since students also play a personal role in their development – nor something we *control* by way of strategic engineering. Instead, education dances to the rhythms of grace. It can only be invited not achieved or controlled for, and part of the reason is that it centers on the work of moral conscience.

So, what do we mean by conscience and its work?

Putting Conscience in Its Place

For that matter, why speak of a “place of moral conscience”? Partly, this is to avoid some confusion about the term. For example, there is a tendency to separate *conscience* from *judgment*. The former is here conceived as independent of the latter and thought to speak authoritatively in the absence of reason. Such a view effectively circumvents the agent’s own involvement, relieving him or her of thinking responsibly about reality. Conscience is invested with an unmediated authority that permits only obedience in response to its dictates. Yet if conscience is speaking to me *now* in *this* context, I need to form an opinion of what that context *actually* is. I need to know “where I am” in the world I inhabit; and that will come only by engaging in the work of moral conscience.

In fact, this draws closer to an earlier notion of conscience. According to the theologian Oliver O’Donovan, the term conscience originates in the Greco-Roman context where it typically denotes agent’s *moral self-consciousness*, “especially that uneasy awareness that one has of oneself when one knows one has done something wrong.”³ This idea is echoed in

³ Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 114. For further exposition of this background see Richard Sorabji, *Moral Conscience through the Ages: Fifth Century BCE to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

the writings of St Paul, who may be credited with universalizing the scope of moral conscience.⁴ However, it is left to later thinkers such as Augustine to expand the work of conscience beyond the scope of self-awareness. Eventually, it acquires a discursive role in moral reasoning, establishing the sphere of human responsibility and judgment. O'Donovan writes:

Conscience 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

In its more developed form based on biblical and philosophical precedent, conscience embraces the wider operations of judgment and action. It is the act by which humans become reflective responsible agents, locating themselves as fully embedded in moral relations (the “place” of conscience) rather than as outside or above those relations.⁶

In turn, human agency starts to look like a process: not a state or a power we possess fully formed, but a condition we grow into and reclaim for ourselves. Thoughtless action is only action in an attenuated sense. To think and deliberate, to weigh and consider, all constitute part of the journey to recovering our agency. Of course, this recovery implies a degree of alienation, where we find ourselves at odds with or in tension with our conscience. Any thoughtful moral agent can attest to this experience. The moral life is not a life at our immediate disposal, it is not “one click away” from resolution and reward. In this respect, our conscience is not an endpoint but a beginning-point, providing our “entryway” into the life we are called to live. Basic to this life of moral judgment and action is our responsibility and accountability to “the way things are” – the truth, order, and even ugliness of the world.

⁴ Ernest Fortin, “The Political Implications of St. Augustine’s Theory of Conscience,” *Augustinian Studies* 1 (1970), 134–135.

⁵ Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005) 302.

To affirm that there is a world *outside* the world of one’s conscience – one in a dynamic relationship with our deliberation and judgment – does not always fit well within the contemporary moral mindset. While this is not the place to enter into this discussion, which involves complex debates on the created order, natural law, and other normative and social dimensions, it is perhaps worth noting that in a Christian and Augustinian framework, the conscience collapsing into itself would be a hellish moral disaster. Not only would it displace the need for executing judgment – for there would be nothing to judge in any meaningful sense. It would also inhibit the possibility of community (re-)formation, including in and among those with different self-understandings.

Such a state would then leave us in a difficult spot. Armed with our different life experiences and opinions, we would be forced to jostle for space in a dilapidated moral discourse. Yet opinions must be opinions about something *out there*, just as experiences must be experiences that happened *out there*. That “out there” is the object of our collective conversation, illuminated in part by our opinions and experiences. It is only when our consciences are anchored in this “out there” that they become for us a meeting-place to engage and support each other, enabling us to grow into our individual and collective agencies.

But why should we bother with this engagement in the first place? What compels us to search out the place of moral conscience? It is here that we may draw on some Augustinian insights that will help to conceptualize the state of our common moral condition.

The Place of Conscience in Genesis 3⁷

In his account of the “Fall of humanity” in Genesis 3, Augustine uses the term “conscience” (*conscientia*) to designate the place of divine-human encounter. It is here that God deigns to meet Adam and Eve, while for

⁶ Oliver O'Donovan, *Common Objects of Love: Moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 13–15.

⁷ In this piece I draw on Augustine’s earliest commentary on Genesis, *De Genesis adversus Manichaeos* (“On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees”).

their part Adam and Eve choose to hide from God's presence. The story is well-known but worth a brief visitation.

Adam and Eve sin by disobeying God's commandment. They then hide themselves twice out of shame and of fear – the first in response to their newly exposed nakedness, the second in response to God's presence in the garden. God calls out to Adam and Eve with a question: "Where are you?" (*ubi es?*) (Gen. 3:9). Their replies set in motion the judgments to follow – but what is it that God is asking when he asks, "where are you"? For Augustine, this is not about the state of God's ignorance. God already knows what transpired in the garden. Instead, God's question is intended for our benefit. As Augustine comments on verse 9, "Adam is now questioned by God, not because God doesn't know where he is, but in order to oblige him to confess his sins."⁸

God invites Adam to return to his conscience, to stop hiding from the truth of what transpired in the previous verses. At one point earlier in this commentary on Genesis, Augustine singles out pride as the root of Adam's deception. "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?"⁹ In this appeal to conscience, what Augustine has in mind is Adam's decision *not* to respond to God's question *with the truth*. Instead, Adam hedges around the place of his conscience, hinting that *someone else* is to blame for his 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, "The woman gave it to me," but more fully: *The woman whom you gave to me* (Gen. 3:12).¹⁰

For Augustine, this response to God's question "where are you?" (and God's follow-up question, about the act's commission) amounts to more than Adam's evasion of blame, but is a displacement. First, it displaces

Adam's relation to the truth – as a creature below God but also subject to God's judgment. Second, it displaces or tries to displace God as judge – for that is the import of Adam's rejoinder according to Augustine, "The woman whom you gave to me..."

Adam can succeed with the former displacement (to a point), but he cannot succeed with the latter, usurping God's judgment. Instead, God's judgment holds his conscience in place; neither he nor Eve nor the serpent can remove it. In turning from God by forsaking his conscience, Adam becomes a moral exile in relation to the truth. He will wander the world in restless search for the truth (cue the journey of *Confessions*) as God continues to seek him in the form of question.

In this reading of Genesis, Augustine identifies "sin" not simply with disobedience but with deceptive rationalization – a perpetual evasion of God's question "where are you?" For just as God put this question to Adam and Eve,¹¹ so it remains a live question for their descendants today; thus we heed this question when we enter our conscience, and we ignore and suppress it when we flee from our conscience. In either case, it is a question that *does not come from us*. We do not raise it or impose it on ourselves. Confronting us from outside it moves us within, or it haunts us all the days that we deny or ignore it (which are many).

With this question in view, let us flesh out the sense in which Augustine invokes conscience as our place before God.

The Place of Conscience in the Self

As noted above in Augustine's reading of Genesis 3, God's question "where are you?" holds the conscience in place. Directed at our first parents Adam and Eve, it now echoes across the landscape of our shared moral life (for example, note God's question to Cain in Gen. 4:9, "Where is your brother, Abel?" and Cain's fateful response in 4:10, "I don't know... Am I my brother's keeper?"). As a question that precedes and shapes our agency in

¹⁰ Ibid., 2.17.25.

¹¹ In Augustine's Bible God's question is directed to Adam, not Eve, a point of some significance to Augustine, but not for the purpose of understanding the question.

⁸ Augustine, "On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees," *On Genesis*, trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 2002), 2.16.24.

⁹ Ibid., 2.5.6.

the world, its rejection means rejecting our very selves before God. But God, it appears, is quite persistent in the asking, pursuing us with it under many different guises. “It is a call that goes out again and again” writes Abraham Heschel in *God in Search of Man*. “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, it is as if all things were the frozen echo of the question: *Where art thou?*”¹²

In Augustine, conscience designates our place before God. It is our inward self-awareness of being called from outside, summoned to step forward and give account of our location. This summons is not satisfied in a single response. In his exposition of Psalm 5, Augustine integrates conscience into the journey of the soul’s desire for truth, wisdom, and happiness. Only God can be trusted on our journey to truth, for God alone is the one who “sees” us in our conscience. “[F]or that reason we must take flight within, to our conscience, the place where God sees”¹³ he writes. In taking flight within we are turning to the heart – this is the inner chamber where we call out to God, and where God is able to hear us “by the majesty of his presence.”¹⁴ Here conscience is not simply a moral faculty we possess, but a place we must return to in order to re-collect the self. In re-collecting or gathering the self before God (through confession) we make room in our consciences for God to reside; that is, we become *addressable* to God, allowing God to address us in the place of our conscience.

In so doing we participate in God’s truth and God’s judgment. As Ryan Topping explains, “[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.”¹⁵ In serving as a “home” both for us and for God, conscience serves us as a medium for God’s self-communication. This communication does not preclude the need for personal judgment – it does not override us. Instead, it constitutes and reinforces our judgment by inviting us to

inhabit where we are already, God’s question “where are you?” In God’s voice we find the freedom for repentance and confession; the freedom to unite with and cleave to the truth. It is not that God tells us what to think and to do (or does the thinking and doing for us) but God enables us to be, know, and will as we ought. “[Augustine’s] 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 the good life.”¹⁶

Augustine goes further in his understanding of conscience, suggesting that *who we meet* in our consciences is Christ. The Word that summons us to inhabit our conscience is the same Word that summoned us into existence *ex nihilo*; only this time, it meets us in the poverty of our condition, as almost-nothings hiding from the light of the truth. But even this Word can be resisted and ignored – a point of deep reflection for Augustine in *Confessions*. Here he is in book 10 at the end of his story. When it comes to any encounter with the truth in our conscience, it is not a simple matter of bald pride or base humility. “But why is it that truth engenders hatred?” Augustine wonders. “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?” He reasons as follows:

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

¹⁴ Ibid., 5.2.

¹⁵ Ryan N.S. Topping, *Happiness and Wisdom: Augustine’s Early Theology of Education* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of American Press, 2012) 195.

¹⁶ Manfred Svensson, “Augustine on Moral Conscience,” *Heythrop Journal* 54 (2013), 51.

¹² Abraham Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (London: Souvenir Press, 2009), 137.

¹³ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, 1-32, trans. Maria Boulding (New York: New City Press, 2000), 5.11.

principle that while the human mind lies open to the truth, truth remains hidden from it.¹⁷

It appears that human beings face a problem indeed, and it goes beyond their typical sins of snobbishness and selfishness. Their lives are entangled in many kinds and forms of love. They are walking “bundles of love”¹⁸ that conflict and confuse, deform and deceive, entice and entrap. Even worse, these loves are all loves they *ought* to have – love of truth, which inclines them not to want to be deceived (and thus, they avoid confession); love of happiness, which inclines them not to want to confront despair. These loves do not simply wait around to be filled. No human walks around full of indeterminate desires, attached to nothing.

Rather, these loves are always filled by something – they are always after something, attached to something, animated by something. “Every kind of love has its own energy,” Augustine writes, “and in the soul of a lover love cannot be idle; it must lead somewhere.”¹⁹ In education no less than in mundane affairs, we do well to remember our entangled condition “in love.” Our encounter with the truth is rarely a simple moral calculus. We are not “blank slates” primed for dramatic re-construction. Re-entering conscience is a continual process, a matter of engagement with the questions that matter. If our loves stand in the way of this re-entry and engagement, that is a problem that education can only do so much about. And yet, what it can do is begin to raise the question: and that is where I end this little reflection on conscience.

The Place of Conscience in Education

Two scenes from the early part of Augustine’s *Confessions* provide useful illustrations of the content of this piece. They both occur after Augustine arrives at Carthage for his “higher education.” The first episode marks the beginning of Augustine’s journey to the truth (book 3). 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. Looking back at this encounter in *Confessions* and an earlier work (*De beata vita*, “On the Happy Life”), Augustine confesses that at the time he did not know what has happened, but that he felt an irresistible desire for the wisdom Cicero invoked. In *De beata vita* Augustine says that he “was made more upright” [*factus erectior*].²⁰ This phrase, elusive in its meaning at first, gestures to how profoundly Cicero impacted his youth. Finally, Augustine began to *take responsibility for his reason*. The Latin *erector* derives from the verb *erigere*, which can be taken in a negative way, “I was made more arrogant,” or in a positive and likely rendering, “I was made to have loftier thoughts.” In fact, the latter accords with Augustine’s commentary on Genesis. There he notes that Adam was created to stand “upright” [*erectus*] in reason, being made according to the image and likeness of God. So also here, it would appear that reading Cicero’s *Hortensius* helped Augustine stand more upright as Adam once did, that is, before Adam turned away from the truth. Moreover, that Augustine identifies Cicero as the catalyst – Cicero the pagan, whose *Hortensius* had not been assigned to him for its content – further indicates that education does not always go to plan, and that’s a good thing. In heeding the *Hortensius* to take possession of his judgment, Augustine drew one step closer to the place of his conscience.

After this episode Augustine turns his attention to the Scriptures, another book in which he hoped to find the wisdom he desired. The juxtaposition of this episode with his *Hortensius*-encounter serves to highlight just how fickle and fragile he was; for, having set side Cicero’s eloquence for his content, he would fail to do the same in reading the book with Christ’s name in it. Instead, he found it littered with inelegant phrases, crude imagery, and stories whose “wisdom” did not seem to shine forth. If he had read Genesis 3 at the time of this encounter, he would have laughed at the ignorance on display in God’s question. He would likely not have read it as invitation to *him* – because, as he explains looking back in *Confessions*, he was not in a position to receive it as such. “I was not in any state to be

¹⁹ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms, 121–150*, trans. Maria Boulding (New York: New City Press, 2000), 121.1.

²⁰ *De beata vita* 1.4. For this exposition I rely on R.J. O’Connell, “On Augustine’s First Conversion: Factus Erectior (De Beata Vita 4),” *Augustinian Studies* 17 (1986), 15–29.

¹⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 10.22–34.

¹⁸ The phrase is borrowed from Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008), 256.

able to enter into that [mystery] or to bow 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 beginning. Puffed up with pride, I considered myself a mature adult."²¹ But this was not the consequence of becoming "more upright." Or rather, perhaps it *was* a consequence of that, but only because he sought after the wisdom of the philosophers, who beckoned him to rise before he learned how to kneel. In any case, Augustine traces the failure in this instance no to any deficiency in the scriptural witness, but to a reader who had yet to become addressable to it: who had yet to "put on" the Lord Jesus Christ in humility. What does this mean, then, for the place of conscience in higher education?

Not every "failure" to become addressable to a book (or idea, theory, narrative, etc.) is a failure of moral virtue or the cause of a deformed desire. Sometimes it is simply a lack of attention, poor setup or delivery, or some other extenuating circumstance. The goal of education is not always strictly moral, nor must morality always feature in every assignment and conversation. In fact, Thomas Green would have us do away with notions that our aim is to "teach values" as a part of the curriculum.²² This "grand delusion" as he calls it both trivializes the virtues – which often appear in check-box form on a list of learning objectives – and further conveys the (Nietzschean) assumption that we create the values we teach – rather than, say, find and encounter them "out there." Had the wisdom Augustine sought been his own to create, we would likely not be speaking of the virtue of humility.

In any case, what remains for the educational task is not to engineer values or virtues in students, but to place them before the questions that invite them to respond: questions that enable them to locate "where they are." A central part of this process involves the act of self-judgment. To be drawn out of *himself* by an object of desire (wisdom) set Augustine on the path to standing upright in reason. This upright posture was not a fully formed state, nor was it his end-goal sought through philosophy. Instead, his self-possession came about in another: that is, it came about through desire *for*

another, namely wisdom. This is crucial for teaching with a view to moral conscience. Nothing will more stifle a student's entry into conscience than a heavy-handed moralism masquerading as a lesson. There may be times for moralizing on specific topics and issues (Augustine had his moments, and then some), but if the hope is that students might respond *with themselves*, in the presence of moral certainty this becomes more unlikely. Instead, we are invited to approach one another as *fellow agents* in a world that we encounter together. We are responsible and accountable to the same moral reality, even if we also come to it with different points of access. In conscience, we meet each other as before the same question, a question that is prior to our entry into conscience. To teach and to learn with a view to this question is to entertain a sense that there is something "out there" – a truth (*veritas*) that draws us into community (*unitas*) with each other, as we wait on and long for (*caritas*) the clarity of its judgment. "You, Lord, are my judge... you, Lord, know everything about the human person; for you made humanity."²³

²¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, 3.5-9.

²² Green, *Voices*, 125.

²³ Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.5-7.