

The Three Augustines of *Contra Academicos*

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In his 1972 article in *Harvard Theological Review*, John Heil initiated a new trend in the interpretation of Augustine's earliest extant work, *Contra Academicos*, by focusing more on Augustine's ethical concerns than on the content of his epistemology, as had usually been the focus of attention before.¹ Prior to Heil's article, Augustine's purpose had most often been taken to be simply "to refute the skeptics," and with that question quickly settled, interpreters proceeded to analyze and assess the strength of his arguments. Heil argued that Augustine was less disturbed by the content of skeptical arguments (i.e., their epistemological claims) than their effect on a person's mind and life (the ethical ramifications), and in making that argument he re-opened the question of Augustine's purpose in writing *c. Acad.*

Since the question of Augustine's purpose is now open for discussion, I wish to ask whether we would be right to speak of only one purpose or if, perhaps, Augustine had several. After all, the single work is divided into three books, and books 1 and 2 are very different from book 3 in that the former two consist mainly of discussions between Augustine's pupils, while the latter book is an extended discourse by Augustine himself. There are, moreover, two epistles addressed to Augustine's absent friend and former patron Romanianus appended to the beginning of books 1 and 2. These distinguishable parts of the work can be thought of as layers insofar as the work as a whole represents itself as a transcript of certain conversations held at Cassiciacum in November 386, while the epistles are cover letters for the transcripts addressed to Romanianus. To put it another way, the characters in the dialogues have no knowledge of the epistles, whereas in the epistles, Augustine makes reference to the people, events, and course of discussion portrayed in the dialogues.

¹ John Heil, "Augustine's Attack on Skepticism: The *Contra Academicos*," *Harvard Theological Review* 65, no. 1 (Jan 1972), 99–116.

In what follows, I will argue that Augustine plays three distinguishable but overlapping roles in *c. Acad.*, and that interpreters should speak of Augustine's purpose for this work with respect to one or another of these roles. First, there is Augustine the teacher of rhetoric and dialectic, whose tutelage of his pupils Trygetius and Licentius results in the dialogues (books 1 and 2) and lecture (book 3) recorded in the work known as *Contra Academicos*. Second, there is Augustine the friend and new Christian, who wishes to warn his friends, Romanianus and his son Licentius in particular, against the dangers inherent in overconfident dogmatism, on the one hand, and despairing skepticism, on the other hand, and to persuade them to continue to progress toward wisdom. Third, there is Augustine the seeker, who is just now at a critical turning point in his life and trying to sort out his own view of wisdom and knowledge, negotiating between what he finds persuasive in skeptical philosophy and what he believes himself to have found in the agreement between Christ's authority and Neoplatonic philosophy. Finally, I will use the analysis of Augustine's three roles in a critique of a recent article that interprets *c. Acad.* along familiar epistemological lines.

Approaching the Text

Augustine claims that *c. Acad.* is a record of actual conversations held between himself, his two students Licentius and Trygetius, together with his younger brother Navigius, and his friend Alypius during the fall of 386, when the group was vacationing at the villa of Cassiciacum. The first question we must settle if we are interested in understanding Augustine's purpose or purposes is that of historicity, not out of antiquarian interest, but because it relates to the matter of genre. If *c. Acad.* was written from scratch, as it were, then it may very well be no more than a philosophical tractate, the purpose of which is to refute the Academics. In that case, we can only speak of purpose at the level of Augustine-the-author, and we can limit

ourselves to evaluating the effectiveness of his arguments against varieties of skepticism ancient and modern, or in tracing the development of his thought. The setting, the epistles, and the speeches attributed to his students, in that case, all reflect and serve Augustine's purpose in writing it. If, on the other hand, the work is more-or-less what it passes itself off as being—a record of discussions between teacher, students, and friend over several days, forwarded to another friend for his edification—then we have warrant to inquire about different purposes in different layers of the text, as well as for the whole work.

John J. O'Meara provides a helpful summary of arguments for and against historicity in the introduction to his English translation of the work.² The argument for historicity is simply that Augustine consistently testifies that the dialogues derive from actual events, which includes claims in the text of *c. Acad.* itself.³ To maintain, as I will, that the work is substantially historical is not to say that it is “absolutely” historical, the position that O'Meara assails in his introduction. Augustine himself never makes that claim. In the *Retractationes*, he looks back upon *c. Acad.* at least partially as a written document, saying such things as “those two phrases ought to have been omitted, because the sense would have been complete without them” and “additional words should have been used, so that the passage would read thus ...” He says these things, however, with respect to the prefatory epistles, which are doubted by no one as being original compositions.⁴

On the subject of the *Retractationes*, it is noteworthy that, contrary to O'Meara's contention that the work is of little help on the question of historicity,⁵ whenever Augustine expresses a regret about wording in a dialogue, he regrets something the work attributes to him—not to

² Augustine *c. Acad.* (trans. O'Meara) 23–33.

³ Augustine *conf.* 9.4.7; *c. Acad.* 1.1.4, 9.25.

⁴ Augustine *retr.* 1.2, quoted in Augustine, *c. Acad.* (trans. Kavanagh) 223.

⁵ Augustine *c. Acad.* (trans. O'Meara) 27.

Trygetius, Licentius, or Alypius. No mention is made of what the others said, and he even describes one of his own arguments as a reply to one of the debaters.⁶ Even if it be argued that the aged Augustine did not think of *c. Acad.* as a sacrosanct repository of historical facts but as a piece of literature, in which he wished he had expressed himself differently, it does not follow from his *wishing* that he had written it differently that he *did*, in fact, write it differently than actually took place. To this we can add that there is nothing in the work that lacks verisimilitude.

O'Meara's arguments against historicity do not stand up to scrutiny. In the first place, he contents himself with attacking an extreme, and consequently weak, form of the argument for historicity, which he repeatedly refers to as "absolute historicity," in which "every detail is historical and the dialogues are entirely trustworthy."⁷ Then, O'Meara makes unwarranted inferences such as "If Augustine allowed himself one change, he very likely allowed himself many,"⁸ which ultimately leads to his conclusion that the work is "not entirely fictional" and is at least "related to facts,"⁹ though "emphatically not to receive our trust."¹⁰ These conclusions are drawn from his observation that the dialogue form of *c. Acad.* has certain features in common with other written dialogues, that Augustine's speech ("running to some six thousand words without interruption"¹¹) lacks verisimilitude, and for that matter so does the role played

⁶ Augustine *retr.* 1.2.

⁷ Augustine *c. Acad.* (trans. O'Meara) 27. In O'Meara's defense, the authors whose works he addresses may have argued for just such an extreme view of historicity. I have not examined them for myself.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 32. Observe in the following how easy it is to turn O'Meara's arguments against the very position he is arguing for: consider the praise Alypius heaps on Augustine after all is settled in 3.20.44, culminating with "We have a leader who can bring us with God's guidance even to the hidden places of truth." I judge it to be unlikely that Augustine composed this effusive tribute to himself, so I believe it is likely historical. If Augustine allowed himself to convey any parts of the dialogue faithfully, he very likely allowed himself many. Therefore, *c. Acad.* is a faithful report of the facts and is emphatically to receive our trust.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

by the mice in *ord.* 1.3.6, 9, and in fact all of *ord.* 1.2.5–1.8.22—“And if this is invented, what confidence can we have in the historicity of the *Dialogues of Cassiciacum*?”¹²

The features of *c. Acad.* that O’Meara points out as being held in common with other written dialogues are, among other things, its being divided into books, discussing a typical range of topics, and making reference to preceding discussions. As I see it, the problems with this array of evidence are two. First, these features are too general to distinguish one genre from another. Second, none of the dialogues O’Meara cites possesses all, or even most, of these characteristics, which makes his claim that these elements are typical of the dialogue genre unlikely. To put it another way, O’Meara runs into the same trouble trying to identify the typical features of the dialogue genre that Licentius and Trygetius run into trying to define happiness and evil in book 1: in different ways, it is both too broad and not broad enough. The distinguishing feature of the dialogue genre is just that it is a dialogue, but it does not follow that because it shares this form in common with other pieces of literature that cast serious philosophy in a fictional setting that the events recounted in this particular dialogue are also fictional.

O’Meara seems to think that the setting, people, and events in a written dialogue are always fictional, but he does not give any evidence for that supposition. For my part, I would not at all expect a 6,000 word extemporaneous lecture (about 75 percent of the size of this essay) by Augustine to be extraordinary, although I confess to not having researched the matter. As for the incident with the mice in *ord.*, this only seems unusual if we look at it retrospectively with the assumption that Augustine wanted to talk or write about this subject,

¹² *Ibid.*, 31. In the passages of *ord.* that O’Meara refers to, Augustine is lying awake at night with his thoughts, when Licentius makes a sound that reveals that he, too, is awake, and in the process disturbs some mice. The two begin to talk about Licentius’ ardor to write poetry, which leads the lad to recall a verse from Terence about mice that provides a convenient prompt for their ensuing discussion about order.

or if we consider the probability of the sequence of events as a whole. If we examine the incident in temporal order, however, we see that there is nothing whatsoever unusual about what happens at each step: that Augustine and Licentius should both be lying awake at night, that mice should be present and making noise in a rustic Italian villa, and that the noise should prompt a discussion between the two. Considered in the abstract, the probability of the whole sequence of events as a unit might be low, but for that matter so is the probability of any actual series of events considered as a unit.¹³ Even though there undoubtedly are many fictional dialogues, this is not sufficient for us to conclude that any particular dialogue is fictional, including this one. We would need more evidence than O'Meara has offered before we could confidently conclude that this dialogue is fictional.

Having answered objections to approaching the text as though it be what it represents itself as being, a record of discussions between Augustine and his students and friends, we can turn to the main point of this essay: to show how Augustine's several purposes can be discerned in the several roles he performs in various layers of the text.

Augustine the Teacher

In the events surrounding *c. Acad.*, Augustine is passing from one stage of his life to another: from the professional ambition that characterized his young adulthood to the love of spiritual matters that would mark his maturity. Still present at Cassiciacum is Augustine the court orator and teacher of rhetoric and dialectic, actively engaged in teaching his young pupils how

¹³ The probability of a series of six coin tosses producing the particular results H-T-T-H-T-H is low when considered as a set, but since it is necessary that an actual series of coin tosses produces *some* particular result set, we would have no reason to be surprised no matter what it might be—unless we attributed some special meaning to the results. This is essentially what O'Meara is doing when he says that the incident with the mice is improbable: attributing special meaning to it in light of what comes after in the dialogue. Since we are only entitled to be surprised if we attribute special meaning to the events, and since the special meaning is only evident in hindsight, to argue on that basis that the events are probably not historical is to beg the question. Any important series of events in history could be judged improbable (and thus unhistorical) on the same grounds.

to speak, reason, and argue well. Accordingly, we see a series of school exercises in definition, argument, appeals to authority and emotion, and so on. Augustine himself is still thinking largely in terms of persuasion and delivery rather than rigorous philosophical proof.

Augustine's years of oratorical training and practice have left their mark. In 3.7.16–8.17, for example, Augustine recounts a scenario envisioned by Cicero in which every philosophical school judges itself as first and the Academics as second. After all, each of the other schools judge each other to be wrong, whereas the Academics merely claim neutrality insofar as they do not know which school is right. Augustine now upsets the Academics' prized second-place finish by pointing out to the assembled judges that whereas he simply does not know which of the schools is wisest—though he takes it as a genuine possibility that one of them is—the Academics actually deny that the wise man himself knows anything, and so they only feign ignorance. As Augustine explains, it is not so much that they are unsure as to which is wise as they are sure that none of them is: “Can anybody fail to see who will win the palm? If my opponent admits my charge, I shall best him in glory. But if he blushes for shame and confesses that the wise man does know wisdom, then my opinion carries the day.” This shows how Augustine's thinking still takes place in a rhetorical rather than strictly philosophical mode, in which persuasion counts for more than proof.

The text of *c. Acad.* abounds with examples of Augustine's efforts to persuade using rhetoric. We could point to his lyrical flattery of Romanianus in the two epistles, or the way in which he demonstrates how to appeal to an audience's emotions when he provokes tears from Licentius simply by mentioning his father.¹⁴ In book 3, Augustine relies on *petitio principii* to

¹⁴ Augustine *c. Acad.* (trans. O'Meara) 2.7.18.

make his argument against Alypius by insisting that the wise man *knows* wisdom.¹⁵ Alypius senses the error, although he does not name it, but Augustine—who certainly understands the force of Alypius’ objections—overcomes his friend’s defenses by repeatedly insisting that he answer Augustine’s questions as Augustine has formulated them, without qualifying them.¹⁶ He argues *ad hominem* when he charges Alypius with practicing his rhetorical skill and trying to abuse the ignorance of his jury (Trygetius and Licentius) by dodging the issue at hand.¹⁷ Alypius replies by charging Augustine with the same thing! It is, however, clear to the reader that Alypius is right about which of the two is practicing rhetoric. Alypius’ objections and qualifications are relevant and faithful to the arguments of the Academics, but he is quickly overcome by his friend’s confident, even aggressive, rhetoric.

Augustine’s rhetorical and dialectical skills are on display throughout the work because he is employed to teach them to Trygetius and Licentius. Evidence that the discussions between Trygetius and Licentius are school exercises comes very early in the first book, and it is also a prominent theme in the other Cassiciacum dialogues. In his opening epistle to Romanianus, Augustine explains a little of Trygetius’ background: he had entered military service for a time in the hope that it would overcome his distaste for study. It must have worked, for he “is now with us again and is most eager and greedy for profound and serious enquiry.”¹⁸ The content of book 1, according to Augustine, is a transcription of the boys’ discussion, which Augustine initiated in order “to find out what ability they had for their age.”¹⁹ Accordingly, Augustine

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.3.5. Whether he does is exactly the question in dispute. The Academics maintained that the quality of wisdom does not consist in knowing something but in living in a certain way, namely in suspending judgment.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.4.9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.3.6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.1.4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

gathers the group one morning for this purpose and begins the discussion with a question.²⁰

Two things make it clear that this is an exercise in formal debate and not just a friendly philosophical discussion. One is the office of judge: Alypius, knowing that he will soon have to leave for the city, volunteers to fill it. Another is that not long into the boys' discussion, Trygetius makes a rash concession to Licentius, and, when he realizes his mistake, formally requests to take it back. Augustine, in a response that shows his pedagogical interest since he is neither participant nor judge in the debate, grants the request "all the more as you are still in need of formation and instruction."²¹

We see Augustine's coaching again at 1.4.10, when Trygetius argues Licentius into a corner and Augustine steps in to offer some tactical advice: "You must define what error is." When it comes time for the group to break for lunch, Augustine gives an analysis of the debate so far, pointing out the moments of strength and weakness in each student's arguments, drawing attention to Licentius' appeal to authority, and assessing their various attempts at definition.²² Finally, Augustine concludes book 1 by telling the students frankly that he had wanted to put them through an exercise to "make a test of your capacity and tastes."²³ Augustine says as much throughout book 2 as well: "this discussion has been undertaken to train you and incite you to cultivate your mind" (said to Licentius),²⁴ "[l]et us have done with these preliminary exercises in which we joined with these young people" (said to Alypius),²⁵ and elsewhere describing his arguments as "silly toys, with which I was trying to arouse your interest" (said

²⁰ Ibid., 1.2.5.

²¹ Ibid., 1.3.8.

²² Ibid., 1.9.24.

²³ Ibid., 1.9.25.

²⁴ Ibid., 2.7.17.

²⁵ Ibid., 2.9.22.

to Licentius).²⁶ In the second epistle to Romanianus, Augustine tells of the restraint he is putting on Licentius in order to ensure that he has “careful training in subjects that must be taken before, so that later he may proceed all the more vigorously and firmly.”²⁷ Lastly, in an exhortation to Licentius in book 3, Augustine explicitly speaks of the discussions as being “our school.”²⁸

The point of all this is that if we cooperate with the mimetic features of the text, we must say that Augustine’s purpose *in the events portrayed* is not primarily to refute the Academics but to encourage his students in the pursuit of philosophy even as he instructs them in the arts of rhetoric and dialectic.

Augustine the Friend

To say that Augustine’s purpose is to instruct his pupils, insofar as the text depicts him as present at the discussions and participating in them, is not to foreclose the question of his purpose as the editor of the combined books and author of the two epistles to Romanianus that form an integral part of the finished work. Furthermore, just because Augustine wants to demonstrate the effective use of rhetoric and dialectic for persuasion, that does not mean that he does not sincerely believe in the truth of his own arguments.

The first epistle opens with Augustine’s wish that Virtue could snatch Romanianus from the grasp of Fortune. Augustine wishes Romanianus to know true happiness, but if Romanianus were experiencing all the best that earthly life could offer, Augustine would not dare mention it to him. We learn, however, that recently everything has gone wrong for Romanianus.²⁹ It is ironic that the *misfortune* Romanianus has been experiencing may, in fact,

²⁶ Ibid., 2.11.26; cf. 2.13.29.

²⁷ Ibid., 2.3.8.

²⁸ Ibid., 3.4.7.

²⁹ Ibid., 1.1.2.

be divine providence: Virtue's way of plucking him from the grasp of Fortune and the material prosperity that would keep him from knowing true happiness, or indeed even recognizing his own unhappiness. Augustine sees the events leading up to his own conversion in similar terms. The misfortune of having chest trouble "compelled me to give up my profession of windy rhetoric and take refuge in the lap of philosophy."³⁰ So Augustine now writes his close friend to encourage him to see his circumstances in the same light, and to act: "Wake up! Wake up! I beg you." Augustine is sending the dialogue so that, of all things, Romanianus, the father, will be moved to imitate Licentius, the son, in the latter's enthusiastic pursuit of the philosophical life, "and so that I may incite you all the more eagerly to cling to [philosophy] and drink of her."³¹ This corresponds exactly with something Augustine says to Licentius at the very end of book 1, that he wants to send a record of the debate to Licentius' father so that reading it will make him yearn to pursue the same things.³²

In the second epistle, Augustine explains to Romanianus why a person who seeks wisdom may not end up finding her, and I believe the three potential obstacles to that goal that Augustine names are the overarching themes of the whole work. On the path to wisdom, a person might succumb to distraction, despair, or dogma.³³ Distraction is the danger facing Romanianus, as Augustine himself points out, due to his recent misfortunes, although as Augustine also made clear in the first epistle, good fortune is just as likely to distract, for philosophy requires one to forsake the pleasures of the body.³⁴

Despair and dogma are the two opposing dangers faced by the Academics, on the one hand, and the Stoics, on the other hand, and are represented by the arguments of Licentius

³⁰ Ibid., 1.1.3.

³¹ Ibid., 1.1.4.

³² Ibid., 1.9.25.

³³ Ibid., 2.1.1.

³⁴ Ibid., 3.9.19.

and Trygetius respectively in book 1. By removing the prospect of actually attaining wisdom, the arguments of the Academics may very well lead people to despair of even searching for it. Why forsake the pleasures of the body only to receive tortures of the mind with the Academics!³⁵ On the other hand, many people wrongly believe themselves to have already found the truth, and so they give up the search prematurely. Augustine names the Manichees as an example of this error.³⁶ These three dangers are overcome by the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and love that Augustine meditates on in the *Soliloquies*.³⁷ Faith leads a person to overcome distraction when he recognizes what he truly needs; hope keeps a person from despairing that he will never find what he seeks; and, love is necessary for a person to want to find wisdom rather than remain in the darkness of false dogma.

Like the first epistle, the second addresses Romanianus in a very personal way. Augustine is conscious of how much Romanianus has cared for him in the past,³⁸ and he wants to return the favor by leading Romanianus to Jesus Christ, who is himself the wisdom and virtue of God.³⁹ Augustine fears for Romanianus and wants him to be freed from the danger of not reaching the harbor of philosophy.⁴⁰ The danger does not lie in Romanianus' character, for he has shown that he is morally and intellectually vigorous,⁴¹ but Augustine is worried that his friend would either despair of finding the truth (out of a "too mean opinion of yourself") or remain with the Manichees, as though he had already found the truth among them.⁴² The ensuing dialogue, Augustine says, will protect him against the former danger, and Augustine intends to follow up in writing or in person to attend to the latter danger. Then comes a final

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 2.3.8.

³⁷ Augustine *sol.* 1.6.12.

³⁸ Augustine *c. Acad.* (trans. O'Meara) 2.2.3.

³⁹ Ibid., 2.1.1.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 2.2.3.

⁴² Ibid., 2.3.8.

warning that foretells Augustine's own mediating position between skepticism and dogma: "Beware lest you think that you know anything except that only which you know, as you know that the sum of one, two, three, and four is ten. But at the same time beware lest you think that by philosophy you will not know truth, or that, at any rate, it cannot be known as clearly as in the instance cited."⁴³ Some things can be known, but only some things.

Licentius is the other person that Augustine expresses great concern about in *c. Acad.*, though neither as often nor as earnestly as he does for the boy's father. This may be because Augustine speaks to Licentius in public and in passing during the course of the group's discussions. It may also reflect the different levels of intimacy and responsibility Augustine has with Romanianus than with Licentius, and it may just be a matter of different degrees of danger that Augustine perceives Romanianus and Licentius to be in. For our purposes, the most important difference is that Augustine expresses his concern directly in the epistles—it is their *raison d'être*—whereas we have to discern the ways Augustine is solicitous of Licentius through various events in the narrative.

We see Augustine's concern for Licentius in 3.1.1, which begins the group's discussions on the day following the events of book 2. Augustine starts off with a summary of the debate between Trygetius and Licentius in book 1: whereas they all agree that seeking truth should be their highest aim, Trygetius believes that happiness consists in finding the truth, while Licentius maintains that happiness is obtained merely in the act of searching for it. Augustine then asks them to reflect on how they spent their free study time yesterday; Trygetius read Virgil, while Licentius spent his time writing poetry. It was, as a matter of fact, Licentius' consuming desire to write poetry that prompted Augustine to bring up this topic, he tells us. It

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 2.3.9.

is out of concern for Licentius that he brings it up because “[i]t is high time that philosophy should take and hold a greater part in his mind than poetry or any other subject.”⁴⁴

Returning from lunch, the others find Licentius busily writing poetry yet again!⁴⁵ His unquenched thirst for it, so Augustine says, might only be satisfied by tiring of it, and that may not happen until he masters it. Nevertheless, Augustine bids him get a drink and come back to school, “provided the *Hortensius* and philosophy still mean something to you.” In his most candid expression of concern for Licentius, Augustine then says that he almost regrets bringing up this subject and restraining Licentius from his first impulse (poetry) for fear that philosophy is now becoming a labyrinth for him. By this, I understand him to mean that he is afraid that Licentius is beginning to despair of finding the truth, and that his eagerness to write poetry rather than concentrate his mind on the search for truth is an expression of that.

It is unlikely that Augustine regrets bringing up the subject on the first day of their discussions (book 1), for at that point, Licentius already had a good working knowledge of Academic skepticism, at least enough to speak about Carneades and to invoke the authority of Cicero as its defender.⁴⁶ In the first epistle to Romanianus, Augustine tells him that Cicero’s *Hortensius* had seemed to win the boys over to philosophy. Even though only fragments of the *Hortensius* now remain to us, we know from *c. Acad.* 3.14.31 that it presented a digest of the Academic argument in the form, “If nothing is certain and the wise man must not have opinion merely, the wise man will never give assent,” and that Augustine expected the boys to be familiar with this form of the argument from *Hortensius*. I take it, then, that Augustine’s concern in 3.4.7 is that by introducing the boys to the Academics through *Hortensius*, he may have inadvertently caused Licentius to despair of finding the truth. That work has not had the

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.1.1.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.4.7.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.3.7.

powerful stimulating effect on Licentius that it once had on young Augustine. It is ironic that, for one who believes that happiness consists in seeking truth, Licentius is none too eager to continue doing it. Accordingly, we can infer that one of Augustine's purposes in the discussions themselves is to protect Licentius from this danger by refuting the Academics, at least to the satisfaction of Licentius.

Having seen this, we can now return to Augustine's second epistle in which he states his two fears concerning Romanianus, either that he would despair of finding the truth or believe himself to have already found it among the Manichees.⁴⁷ It is not clear from the text which danger is greater for Romanianus, or even if Augustine himself knows. Since the content of the dialogues, as distinct from the epistles, are oriented toward the students' intellectual and moral wellbeing, we cannot automatically infer that Augustine has the same concerns for Romanianus. There are hints that Augustine does not believe Romanianus to be attracted by the teaching of the Academics: he has often been angry with them, knows little about them, and is passionate for the truth. At the same time, Augustine's tone makes it sound as though Romanianus has begun to throw off his allegiance to the Manichees: when Augustine last saw him, Romanianus was "already doubting and seeking," and Augustine seems to be in doubt whether "any of the old superstition has returned to your mind."

Even if we cannot know where Romanianus' philosophical affections lay at the time of Augustine's writing—or even whether Augustine himself knew—it is clear that Augustine wants Romanianus to see his present unfavorable circumstances as an opportune time to dedicate himself fully to philosophy,⁴⁸ in imitation of his son.⁴⁹ The irony is that the dialogues depict Licentius as being in danger of wandering off the path of philosophy. In fact, *c. Acad.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.3.8.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.1.4.

ends by highlighting Augustine's uncertainty about whether he has effectively persuaded the boys: they are disappointed when Alypius, who represents the Academic position in book 3, finally has nothing to reply to Augustine.⁵⁰ What is more, Augustine's last sentence of the work, in which he writes as the narrator, contains the following comment: "[A]nd so we came to the end—whether or not it was really secure, I do not know."

When I remember that the only reason Augustine gives for hiring a stenographer to record the discussions is so that they could be sent to Romanianus, I am led to ask how Augustine intends Romanianus to take this closing summary, especially given Augustine's statement in the second epistle that Romanianus himself would easily be convinced by Augustine's arguments. I would like to suggest that Augustine hopes Romanianus will be moved to dedicate himself to philosophy, following Licentius' example initially, but in turn serving as a fatherly example for his son. Romanianus' inclination toward dogmatism will be a salve to Licentius' proneness to despair, and vice versa. Licentius is, in fact, following Romanianus' *bad* example by professing to love philosophy but allowing himself to be distracted by other matters such as poetry. Who better than Romanianus in his present circumstances to teach the boy that happiness that depends on fortune is not true happiness at all? Even the poetry that Licentius now loves so much will not always satisfy him.

Augustine cares deeply for his friends and wants to see them flourish by dedicating themselves to philosophy, for a person's supreme good is found in the life of the mind.⁵¹ In 3.5.12, Augustine states that his interest in the Academics is limited to a single question, whether the wise man knows wisdom. In 3.14.30, he says the same again, this time adding that he wants to "cross over that barrier which confronts those who are beginning philosophy."

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.20.45.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 3.12.27.

Augustine hopes he will be able to say the same about Romanianus and Licentius that he says about Alypius:

Here, then, is the third blessing which has come upon me, and I cannot find words to express how highly I value it. I find my most intimate friend agreeing with me ... on religion itself—a point which is the clearest sign of a true friend; for friendship has been rightly and with just reverence defined as “agreement on things human and divine combined with goodwill and love.”⁵²

Augustine the Seeker

The third of Augustine’s roles that I want to point out in *c. Acad.* lies in his own search for truth. I am conceiving of this role not in terms of the events of his life but in relation to the content of his epistemology: what does it mean in *c. Acad.* to search for truth? Because Augustine’s epistemology is the most interesting aspect of the work and so has already received thorough scrutiny, I will relate my own understanding of Augustine’s thought against a rather spare description of the background debate between the Academics and Stoics.⁵³

Augustine’s interest in the teachings of the Academics is that they should not keep his friends from seeking—and finding—truth, which they very nearly did to him.⁵⁴ To make his case he tries to persuade them that the wise man must know wisdom, which would contradict the Academics’ claim that the wise man knows nothing.⁵⁵ The conclusion that the wise man knows nothing is derived from their belief that a person should not assent to anything, which, in turn, originated as a response to certain Stoic teachings.

It had been a commonplace in philosophical thought that a wise person should eschew mere belief, or opinion, in favor of knowledge. The worst error that a wise person could

⁵² *Ibid.*, 3.6.13.

⁵³ Augustine summarizes the debate in 2.5.11–6.15, and it is treated in much more detail in Cicero’s *Acad.* Background on the two heads of the Academy that Augustine most interacts with can be found in Diog. Laert. 4.6.28–45 (Arcesilaus) and 4.9.62–6 (Carneades).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.20.43.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.4.10.

commit would be to assent to a falsehood. Given that, Zeno the Stoic asserted that to be wise, a person should only assent to impressions that could be apprehended or grasped, which is to say impressions that were stamped in such a way that they could not have originated from something false. Apprehensible impressions were thought of as being self-evidently true and assent to them infallible, thus constituting knowledge.

The Academics agreed up to this point but parted ways with the Stoics by further asserting that such self-evident impressions were nowhere to be found. They sought to demonstrate this by giving examples of false impressions that were indistinguishable from true ones, such as one twin being taken for another. There is nothing that a person can infallibly know to be true, they maintained. On the basis of that claim, given that a wise person ought not to assent to that which he does not know infallibly, it follows that a genuinely wise person actually assents to nothing. Further, since knowledge requires assent, the wise man knows nothing. As Academic philosophy continued to develop, they added that a person who withholds assent may nevertheless act on the basis of what is probable, or like-truth. This allowed them to avoid the objection that action implies assent.

If we were to translate the terms of this debate into the language of epistemology today, we would say that the Academics were arguing for internalism with respect to justification, while the Stoics were arguing for externalism with respect to knowledge. That is, the Stoics were concerned with ontology, with impressions as ways of knowing about the external reality of the object of thought. They could be said to lay emphasis on the “true” term in the venerable definition of knowledge as “justified true belief,” and they maintained that the truth of the belief is infallible if its source is an apprehensible impression.

The Academics, by contrast, claimed that the truth could never be known *as such*; after all, an erroneous impression may seem as real as a true one. As a result, they laid emphasis on the subject of thought, the person thinking. In response to the charge that their position would require total inaction, their concept of like-truth, which amounts to *justified* belief, furnishes a basis for action. The Academics thought they could avoid being charged with error by simply not asserting anything about metaphysical reality.

It is important to understand that when speaking about the wise man, Augustine, in keeping with the practice of both the Academics and the Stoics, is referring to an ideal figure, not a particular real person.⁵⁶ The question of whether a wise man can ever be found in reality is only considered briefly because it does not relate to the dispute with the Academics.⁵⁷ Prior to that, the argument centers on a hypothetical wise man who simply is, for the sake of argument, agreed to be wise. Though Augustine does not make this explicit, he proceeds by trying to answer the implied question of what distinguishes the wise man from an ordinary person.

Augustine approaches this question by postulating two possibilities: the wise man knows wisdom or the wise man knows nothing. Augustine's fear is that his friends will follow the Academics in maintaining that the wise person knows nothing. The problem is that if even the wise person knows nothing, why should anyone else persist in trying to find wisdom? The wise man in that case is essentially no different than anyone else, and the search for truth may be called off. This explains why it is so important for Augustine to persuade his friends that the wise man knows wisdom. If the wise man knows wisdom, then it is possible that wisdom can be

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.3.5. Augustine claims not to be wise in 3.10.23 and 3.20.43, Alypius in 3.4.8. Cicero's dialogue with Lucullus similarly concerns a hypothetical wise person, and Cicero denies being wise (*Acad.* 2.66).

⁵⁷ For example, in 3.4.10, 14.31.

found, which implies that it is not fruitless to seek for it and that a person should assent to it if he finds it.⁵⁸

The wise man cannot know nothing, because some things can be known even by a man such as Augustine, who professes not to be wise. I believe that Augustine himself gives us a fine summary of his position at the end of his second epistle to Romanianus, when he warns Romanianus not to think he knows anything except what is rationally known (one plus two plus three plus four equals ten), and yet not to despair that philosophy is able to give him such knowledge.

As can be seen in that exhortation, Augustine appropriates elements from both the Academics and the Stoics in his epistemology. He agrees with both the Academics and the Stoics that Zeno was right in saying that assent should only be given to apprehensible impressions.⁵⁹ He thinks that the necessary truths of reason can be assented to and known, but our beliefs about almost everything else are corrigible. Impressions of corporeal things are mediated to the mind by the senses, and it is such sensory impressions that are liable to being false even though they seem to be true, such as in the case of a dreaming or insane person.⁶⁰ A person should not, therefore, assent to metaphysical propositions on the basis of sensory impressions, but need only assent to how things seem to him.⁶¹ Even if he agrees with the Academics that we cannot know whether sensory impressions truly communicate facts about the external world, how these sensory impressions *seem* to a person is apprehensible, and thus can be known.

⁵⁸ I entirely agree with O'Meara's pithy statement of Augustine's position as "One can assent to truth, if it is found; But it is found in Christ; Therefore one can assent to truth." John J. O'Meara, "Neo-Platonism in the Conversion of St. Augustine," *Dominican Studies* 3 (1950): 339, quoted in Curley, *Critique*, 11.

⁵⁹ Augustine c. *Acad.* (trans. O'Meara) 3.9.21.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.11.25.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 3.11.26.

In addition to knowledge about how things seem to oneself, however, rational truths can also be apprehended. Augustine gives a number of examples in book 3. The truth of a disjunction, for example, can be known, even if one does not know which of the disjuncts be true. For this reason, it can be known that Zeno's definition is either true or false; the disjunction is true regardless of whether Zeno's definition itself is.

If even ordinary people know some things, it follows that the wise man cannot know nothing, and that he differs from ordinary people in that he knows Wisdom itself. The Academics have thus been refuted, at least to the satisfaction of Augustine's audience, and his friends are safe from the threat of despair. A person should be a seeker of wisdom, not stopping short of the certainty that belongs to rational truths, and Augustine is such a seeker himself, as he says in the final paragraphs: "I have renounced everything else that men regard as good, and have proposed to dedicate myself to the search for wisdom," relying upon the authority of Christ and the understanding he expects to gain from the Neoplatonists.⁶²

A Critique of Bolyard's External-World Skepticism Interpretation

With this understanding of Augustine's concerns as teacher, friend, and seeker, we are in a better position to evaluate other interpretations of Augustine's purpose and argument in *c. Acad.* Let us consider Charles Bolyard's recent article, which stands in a long tradition of interpretation that focuses on Augustine's epistemological argument. Bolyard reminds us that "it must be remembered to whom Augustine's dialogue is addressed," by which he means Academic philosophers.⁶³ Since, on his view, Augustine (1) is writing for a philosophical audience, (2) has the goal of decisively refuting the Academics, and (3) is familiar himself with

⁶² *Ibid.*, 3.20.43.

⁶³ Charles Bolyard, "Augustine, Epicurus, and External World Skepticism," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44, no. 2 (April 2006): 158.

their argumentative tropes, Bolyard argues that Augustine makes use of an “Epicurean Realist Interpretation” of sensory impressions as seen in his famous quasi-earth and quasi-sky passage in 3.11.24. He must have done so, Bolyard believes, if we are to judge his efforts to refute external world skepticism successful in that passage. Augustine’s argument is supposed to be that sensory impressions are caused by real external images, regardless of whether those images correspond in some way to the external objects they seem to represent. Therefore, sense impressions are themselves real *external* things, not just subjective but apprehensible impressions, and prove the existence of an external world.

It is an innovative analysis, and Bolyard has documented some interesting parallels in thought and wording between Augustine’s argument in *c. Acad.* and the discussion of Epicureanism in Cicero’s *De Natura Deorum* 1.25.69–71.⁶⁴ Against his interpretation, however, we can first point out that even though Augustine’s arguments are directed against the teachings of the Academics, they are not the ones addressed in the dialogues, apart from instances of rhetorical apostrophe. We have seen, rather, that in the dialogues themselves, Augustine addresses himself to his students, and in the epistles, to his friend Romanianus. Second, Augustine is concerned to make it clear that when he makes claims about the external world—and insofar as he relies on sense perception to give him information about the world—he is not taking a stance on metaphysics, about the metaphysical truth or falsity of his claims.⁶⁵

To the person who challenges him to prove that the external world exists, Augustine replies by offering a definition: “world” is whatever it is that he perceives with his senses, *regardless* of whether it in any way relates to an external world. His world is, at a minimum, the world of *seeming* sense impressions and rational thought. Having defined that his sense

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 163–5.

⁶⁵ Augustine *c. Acad.* (trans. O’Meara) 3.11.24.

impressions themselves constitute his world, if someone continues to argue that the sense impressions Augustine adduces do not prove the existence of an external world, then such a person is only bickering about words. This is the same argument Augustine makes about wild olive leaves in 3.11.26: he is not interested in debating whether they are bitter *per se*; he knows and cares only that they are bitter to him. He is unwilling to assent to a claim about whether they are intrinsically bitter. In 3.13.29, he gives his prescription for dealing with someone who bickers about words: if it is from inexperience, the person should be taught; if from malice, ignored; and, if the person persists, he should be rebuked and then left to his fate. Who would be so impertinent as to suggest that someone should stop savoring a delightful flavor on the chance that it could all be a dream!⁶⁶

Pace Bolyard, Augustine's response to the external-world skeptic is precisely not to refute him but rather to demarcate clearly what issues he is and is not interested in discussing. His response is rhetorical rather than philosophical. Augustine has effectively left the external-world skeptic unanswered, but this does not matter if the people Augustine wants to persuade are not inclined toward external-world skepticism. From the text of *c. Acad.*, we have no reason to believe that any of them were. It is easier to see this when we recognize that Augustine addresses himself to his students and friends and that he argues in a rhetorical mode, not only to demonstrate how to persuade, but to effect persuasion in them, out of concern for their moral and intellectual wellbeing.

Conclusion

I have tried to show that persuasion is more important than proof to Augustine's purpose in *c. Acad.*, and it is directed toward his friends, whom he would see devote themselves to

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.11.26.

philosophy. At the same time, he wants to shore up his own unique epistemological position that lies somewhere between the Academics and Stoics. All this takes place as part of, or in conjunction with, his teaching activity. The increasing recognition among scholars that Augustine's interest in this work is primarily ethical, and only secondarily epistemological, is a move in the right direction. Now we just need to remember that he is primarily concerned about the particular lives of those closest to him. That should remedy the common perception of the work that Brian Harding describes so aptly:

Augustine's *Contra Academicos* is a strange work. Some of this strangeness stems from the fact that for a book that is putatively "Against the Academic [Skeptics]" it, by many accounts, does not do a good job of refuting them. Indeed, Augustine skips or ignores some prominent Academic arguments found in the texts of Cicero—i.e. the Sorities arguments and the Liar paradox—and spends his time arguing points that the skeptic might be perfectly willing to grant him.⁶⁷

The reason for this apparent strangeness, I believe, is that interpreters have wrongly treated the work as one side in a dialogue between Augustine and the Academics, when in fact, it is a dialogue between him and his students and friends. I hope the point does not seem, if I may be permitted the pun, academic.

Recognizing Augustine's ethical and personal concern for his friends as his primary motivation does not preempt the admittedly more interesting questions about the effectiveness or implications of his arguments, the content of his epistemology, or the relationship between epistemology and ethics. Instead it will allow interpreters better to weigh and apply the evidence from this work itself as they develop their own arguments—better distinguishing Augustine's aims and uses of his arguments from their own.

⁶⁷ Brian Harding, "Epistemology and Eudaimonism in Augustine's *Contra Academicos*," *Augustinian Studies* 37, no. 2 (2006): 247.

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