

Cicero, Augustine, and the Philosophical Roots of the Cassiciacum Dialogues

For the past century the Cassiciacum dialogues of St. Augustine have been embroiled in a seemingly endless dispute about the author's orthodoxy at the time of their composition. Launched in 1888 by Boissier, the dispute hinges on the question of how much Augustine's "Neo-Platonic" convictions obfuscated or otherwise impaired his understanding of the Christian faith. The subsequent unfolding of this debate is familiar to anyone acquainted with Augustinian scholarship, as is the impressive array of scholars who have been its participants. And equally well-known are its consequences, ranging from a much finer appreciation of Augustine's thought on the one hand to some rather nasty accusations about his character on the other. But perhaps the most far-reaching effect of this focus on Augustine's Neo-Platonic roots has been the neglect of other sources in the Cassiciacum dialogues, sources which could significantly revise our conclusions if only they were treated seriously. In particular, the hunt for Plotinus' or Porphyry's footprints has all but overshadowed Augustine's indebtedness to another thinker praised in those same pages as the savior of Rome and the Latin father of philosophy: Marcus Tullius Cicero.

I. – CICERO

Given the fact that the Ciceronian tenor of the Cassiciacum dialogues has been widely acknowledged¹, it is astonishing that the subject has yet to be ade-

1. Cf. Maurice TESTARD, *Augustin et Cicéron* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1958); Pierre COURCELLE, *Recherches sur les Confessions* (Paris, 1950), pp. 255-6; Jean DOIGNON, *Dialogues Philosophiques: L'Ordre 4/2* (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 1997), pp. 31-34; and Ernest L. FORTIN, A.A., Book Review of Robert J. O'Connell's *St. Augustine's Early Theory of Man*, in Ernest L. Fortin: *Collected Essays*, Vol. 1 (NY: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1996), p. 311.

quately explored. The reason for this, in my opinion, springs from a particular assessment of Cicero's intellectual caliber. Cicero did not suffer gladly "puny philosophers" (*minuti philosophi*)², but ironically, it is precisely into this category which he has been placed. Since the nineteenth century Cicero has been dismissed as a second-rate thinker incapable of teaching Augustine anything other than rhetorical flourishes. In Theodor Mommsen's *The History of Rome* he is nothing more than a "phrase-maker, a journalist"³. In R.W. and A.J. Carlyle's *A History of Mediaeval Political Theory in the West* he is said to have made no "special contribution of his own" to philosophy, and is of interest only because his writings contain the opinions "generally current in his time"⁴. Rather than challenge this view, Augustinian scholars have by and large presupposed it as true and applied it to their reading of the Cassiciacum dialogues. In his French translation of Augustine's "philosophical dialogues" R. Jolivet calls Cicero a "vulgarizer... without great personal originality"⁵, while an English translation by Denis J. Kavanaugh marks Cicero as a "dilettante philosopher"⁶. Kavanaugh even goes out of his way to undermine the claim made in the *Contra Academicos* that Cicero "completed and perfected philosophy in the Latin language" (*in quo in latina lingua philosophia et inchoata est et perfecta*)⁷.

In striking contrast is the spirit of humility evident in Augustine. "By no means", he writes, "would I be so arrogant as to claim that I in any way follow Marcus Tullius in industry, vigilance, genius, or learning" (*mihi ullo pacto tantum adrogaverim ut Marcum Tullium aliqua ex parte sequar industria vigilantia ingenio doctrina*)⁸. Indeed, Augustine's lifelong interest in the work and thought of Rome's celebrated orator (one need only consider the effect that the *Hortensius* had on him when he was nineteen or his more than one hundred twenty references to Cicero in the *City of God*) casts a lingering doubt on the wisdom of dismissing Cicero's accomplishments prematurely.

2. *De senectute* 23.85. Augustine alludes to this intolerance of Cicero's in the *Contra Academicos* (3.8.17 & 3.18.41). Note: All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are mine.

3. Theodor MOMMSEN, *The History of Rome*, trans. by William P. DICKSON (London: R. Bentley, 1862), v. #22.

4. R.W. and A.J. CARLYLE, *A History of Mediaeval Political Theory in the West*, 2nd ed., Vol. I (Edinburgh and London: W. Blackwood & Sons, Ltd., 1927), p. 6.

5. *St. Augustine, Œuvres de Saint Augustin: IV. Dialogues Philosophiques*, trans. by R. JOLIVET (Paris: Desclée De Brouwer et Cie, 1948), Note Complémentaire No. 7, p. 208.

6. *St. Augustine, Answer to Skeptics*, trans. by Denis J. KAVANAGH (NY: Ludwig Schopp, 1948), p. 108, fn. no. 16.

7. *Ibid.*, 115, fn. no. 3 (*Contra Academicos* 1.3.8).

8. AUGUSTINE, *Contra Academicos* 3.16.36.

Modifying the Platonic Dialogue

A second look at Cicero's works reveals that Augustine's high opinion of the man is not unfounded. Cicero was faced with a daunting task: to introduce philosophy into Rome⁹. Since the Roman way of life posed obstacles different in some respects than those of Plato's Athens, Cicero knew that he could not simply translate Greek works into Latin and expect success. He thus developed a unique and manifold strategy, the seeming pedestrian character of which belies its hidden genius.

The first prong of Cicero's response is his mode of writing, a close imitation of the Platonic dialogue. Cicero was committed to the dialogue for the same three reasons as Plato¹⁰. First, a philosophical dialogue hides one's own opinion. With Plato, Cicero contends that true philosophy is only for the few¹¹. Turning to nature as the guide to life sounds appealing but is far more difficult than it sounds. Bad habits and conventions, the errors of which "we almost seem to have taken in with our nurse's milk" (*paene cum lacte nutricis errorem sxisse videamur*), cloud our judgment so that nature herself yields to opinion and truth to vanity¹². Powerful influences such as poetry worsen the problem while public opinion seals it¹³. The result is that philosophy is not only ignored, but because it attempts to return to nature's now-unfamiliar tutelage, it is forever suspected and hated by the many¹⁴. Philosophy should therefore be kept hidden from the masses, as it is likely to be misunderstood or abused by them¹⁵. "If their hearers were to go away depraved because they misinterpreted the philosophers' disputations", Cicero writes, "it would be better for the philosophers to keep silence than to harm those who heard them" (*si qui audierunt vitiosi essent discessuri quod perverse philosophorum disputationem interpretarentur, tacere praestaret philosophos quam iis qui se audissent nocere*)¹⁶. The philosophers, then, should not write at all, since "to write what one wants kept hidden is reckless" (*intemperantis enim arbitror esse scribere quod occultari velit*)¹⁷. That is, of course, unless one can devise a means of writing which hides one's opinion from the many while at the same time allows a small minority of philosophically able readers to uncover what has been hidden and to draw nourishment therefrom. Cicero contends that Pythagoras

9. Cf. CICERO, *Tusculanae Disputationes* 1.1.1; 2.2.4; *De natura deorum* 1.4.8; *Academica* 1.1.3.

10. *Tusc. disp.* 5.4.11.

11. *Ibid.*, 2.1.3.

12. *Ibid.*, 3.1.2,3.

13. *Ibid.*, 3.2.3. Poetry, however, must also be a part of the solution (cf. 2.11.26).

14. *Ibid.*, 3.1.1.

15. *Ibid.*, 5.2.6.

16. *De natura* 3.31.77.

17. *Academica* 1.1.2.

had devised such a way by hiding truths in songs and poems¹⁸ and, judging by his adoption of the dialogue form, he seems to think that Plato did too¹⁹.

The second and third reasons for preferring the dialogue are that it relieves others from error and that it seeks in every discussion the most probable truth. Cicero openly admires Socrates' "many-sided way of disputing" (*multiplex ratio disputandi*)²⁰ and his custom of arguing against the opposing viewpoint²¹ because both can quickly expose mistakes in any opinion. When captured in writing this method has the effect of not so much giving the reader the right answers as teaching him how to ask the right questions²². Such training is designed to help the gifted yet uninitiated student undergo a conversion towards philosophy and to its fine modes of reasoning²³.

To bring philosophy into the Roman citadel, however, Cicero found it necessary to modify the Platonic dialogue in several ways. Unlike Plato he could not, for example, presuppose an audience shaped by poetry and music. These twin arts present acute problems for the philosopher (since their powerful sway over men more often than not keeps them from philosophizing), but they also present opportunities. Rightly used, poetry and music can soften a man's soul to make it amenable to higher things²⁴. The Romans, however, had few such softening agents: they lacked a national epic (the *Aeneid* had not yet been written), had no love of poetry, and showed little openness to music²⁵. Their only "weakness", Cicero reports, was oratory²⁶. Consequently, Cicero resolves in his dialogues to render philosophy more attractive by endowing it with eloquence²⁷. This explains two additions he makes to the Platonic dialogue. The first, taken from Aristotle, consists of long speeches in which opposite sides of a question are discussed. Cicero likes this convention because it has the advantage of allowing "the greatest exercise in speaking" (*maxima*

18. *Tusc. disp.* 4.2.3. Cf also *De natura* 1.26.74, where it is remarked in passing that Pythagoras hid the truth.

19. If Piso's opinion reflects Cicero's, the same can also be said for Aristotle's art of writing (cf. *De finibus bonorum et malorum* 5.5.12).

20. *Tusc. disp.* 5.4.11.

21. *Ibid.*, 1.4.8.

22. Cf. *De natura*, 1.5.11, 1.6.14; *De fato*, 1.1.

23. Cicero, for example, tries to make his dialogues seem like they are taking place in the present, even to the extent of not using "he said" and "I said" (*De amic.*, 1.3). Part of his intention, no doubt, is to avoid any appearance of a narrator's mediation, thus heightening the onus put on the reader to discern the conversations' true meaning.

24. Cf. PLATO, *Republic* 392c – 401b.

25. *Tusc. Disp.*, 1.2.4.

26. *Ibid.*, 1.3.5.

27. *Ibid.*, 1.4.7. Such a strategy, it should be pointed out, is in keeping with the Platonic tradition. Plato's ideal city, for example, requires the services of Thrasymachus, i.e., of a rhetorician (*Republic* 5.450a, 6.498c). Rhetoric was seen by Plato as "the art by which philosophy could relate itself to the nonphilosophic life" (Ernest FORTIN, "The *Viri Novi* of Arnobius," *Collected Essays*, Vol. I, p. 187. Cf. Plato's *Phaedrus* 266b-c).

dicendi exercitatio)²⁸. The second, a cover letter dedicating the work to a particular friend, also gives Cicero a forum for his silver tongue, providing him the perfect opportunity to alleviate in a condensed yet eloquent manner Roman fears regarding philosophy and to pique their interest and admiration.

Cicero also uses time and setting differently than Plato. In a Platonic dialogue the date and location establish a context in which the ensuing conversation is to be understood. Whether a discussion takes place in private or in public, during a dinner or a religious festival, among friends or foes, or before or after a particular political upheaval, has an enormous bearing on the meaning of the interlocutors' statements. What is remarkable about the Platonic dialogues is the variety of their settings and situations: on a lonely road, at a drinking party, before a grand jury, etc. While Cicero also uses this technique (see his *De re publica*), his dialogues more often than not take place at his Tusculan villa in either of his two gymnasia (one named the *Academica* in honor of Plato and the other the *Lyceum* in honor of Aristotle). While the choice of gymnasium for a particular discussion is certainly not insignificant (given their names), the general setting remains somewhat puzzling. Why does Cicero prefer his dialogues take place at his villa? Part of the reason is no doubt historical, as Cicero did most of his philosophizing while in forced retirement from public life. But I would argue that the more profound reason again ties into his goal of yoking philosophy to Rome, which in this case means accommodating it to the Roman temperament. Unlike the Greeks, Romans had little patience for idlers: the Latin equivalent of a do-nothing like Socrates, walking around day after day bothering people, was unthinkable. To avoid this aversion Cicero promotes philosophy as an activity for the greatest kind of citizen – the statesman – when he is not taking on the burdens of rule. Philosophy is to be understood as the “most honorable delight of leisure” (*oti oblectationem hanc honestissimam*)²⁹ pursued only when it does not detract from one's public duties³⁰. The natural setting for this is the country villa, one of the few places where a noble Roman could withdraw from his mundane preoccupations³¹.

Most importantly, however, Cicero deals with Rome by using its own traditional-mindedness against itself. The Romans were even by ancient standards a traditional people, ever striving to remain faithful to the ways of their fathers and to celebrate their memory³². Such conservatism leaves little room for a way of life (especially one born on alien soil) which questions all beliefs and tries to discover the whole independently of the opinions of others, even of one's elders. Rather than attempt a direct assault on this reverence, Cicero

28. *Tusc. disp.*, 2.3.9; cf. *De divinatione* 2.1.4.

29. *Academica* 1.3.11.

30. *Ibid.*, 2.2.6.

31. It is in this same manner that Varro's choice of the bathhouse for a dialogue setting should be understood.

32. One need only think of the unwavering piety of Aeneas in contrast to the individualistic pride of Achilles to get a sense of the strength of Roman traditional-mindedness.

takes advantage of it, adding authority to his own writings³³ by making revered figures from the past and present characters in his dialogues. These characters, in turn, promote his teachings even if (which is almost always the case) their historical referents were ignorant of or hostile to philosophy. In the *Academica*, for example, Cicero has his contemporary, the formidable scholar Varro, defend the philosophy of the Old Academy, a role which even the dialogue admits would never take place in real life³⁴. Gaius Laelius and Publius Scipio, two distinguished Romans before Cicero's time, are similarly used in the *De senectute* and in the *De re publica*. In the latter, for instance, they are praised for "adding the foreign teaching of Socrates to the ways of their home and elders" (*ad domesticam maiorumque morem etiam hanc a Socrate adventiciam doctrinam adhibuerunt*)³⁵, though there is no reason to believe this ever happened.

But the most significant use of a historical personage is that of Marcus Cato the Elder, the Censor famous for his defense of traditional Roman morality and intolerance of foreign influence. Cato's rectitude was so pronounced that he harangued the Senate into destroying Carthage merely on account of its moral failings, while his distrust of Greek things so profound that in 155 B.C. he spoke out against an Athenian embassy of philosophers. In order to promote and preserve the Roman tradition this peasant by birth also wrote *The Origins*, an unpretentious though often legendary history of the republic. He was, in sum, the paragon of old Rome.

Cicero was poignantly aware of Cato's accomplishments: the founder of Cicero's philosophical school, Carneades, was one of the philosopher-ambassadors almost banished by Cato. It is thus all the more ironic that Cicero should make Cato a spokesman for philosophy. In Cicero's *De senectute* Cato appears in a scene reminiscent of the opening of Plato's *Republic* telling his friends that he "follows nature as the best leader and obeys her as a god" (*naturam optimam ducem tamquam deum sequimur eique paremus*)³⁶. His speeches during the course of the dialogue are remarkably polished for someone proud of his humble rustic background, a fact which Cicero explains by saying it is due to his well-known fondness for Greek books!³⁷ Cicero even makes use of Cato's literary precedents, piously beginning his own *De re publica* with Cato's custom of writing a history of the Roman people rather than Plato's "arbitrary" method of conjuring up an imaginary polis³⁸. Yet Cicero's account has a much different effect from Cato's. Detailing the cruelty and injustice of Roman rulers, it leaves its group of interlocutors more and more uncertain about their nation's perfection. As their doubts grow,

33. *De senectute* 1.3.

34. Pref., 1; cf. 1.2.4-8.

35. CICERO, *De re publica* 3.3.5.

36. *De sen.* 2.5, italics added.

37. *Ibid.*, 1.3. Cicero's description elsewhere of this well-known fact casts doubt on its being either well-known or a fact (cf. *Academica* 2.2.5).

38. *De re publicaa* 2.1.

references to Plato become less critical³⁹. Finally, Cato's project is silently abandoned and the Platonic point of departure which had initially been rejected is taken up⁴⁰. The rest of the dialogue is woven with scenes more or less taken openly from Plato's *Republic*⁴¹. One suspects that this was Cicero's intention all along, but since an initial denial of the Roman *civitas* as the perfect political model would be tantamount to treachery, he found himself compelled to take this circuitous path. In the end, however, he succeeds in demonstrating a conclusion of Plato's which would have initially struck a Roman as blasphemous: that *any* political entity is inherently unjust.

By his resourceful reinterpretation of Cato's legacy, Cicero is in fact positioning himself as the new Cato. Just as Cato sternly upheld morality, Cicero would vigorously uphold the science of virtue⁴². Just as Cato elucidated Roman history to excite patriotism, Cicero would elucidate Roman history to arouse interest in philosophy. Just as Cato tried to protect the city from Greek philosophy, Cicero would try to protect the city from the false forms of philosophy (as we shall soon see). And just as later generations looked to Cato as the destroyer of Carthage, all generations would look to Cicero as the savior of Rome. By his manipulation of the Roman tradition and his distortion of Cato's memory, Cicero rendered himself the new exemplum of Roman excellence⁴³.

And to those who object to this mendacious practice Cicero gives one utterly immodest reply. You are envious murmurers, he charges, since obviously you want to be immortalized in one of my dialogues as well and are jealous⁴⁴. After all, to be in a Ciceronian dialogue is to have your fame and glory increased⁴⁵.

The Return to True Philosophy

If Cicero's first challenge was the particular character of the Roman people, his second was the peculiar state of philosophy at the time he was writing. Cicero had competition: unlike Plato he had to contend with many well-deve-

39. Cf. 2.29, 2.30.

40. 2.39.

41. Cf. Cicero's *rep.* 3.13ff and 6.9ff to Plato's *rep.* 337a and 614d, respectively.

42. Both Cato and Cicero were extremely concerned with the moral formation of the youth (cf., for example, Augustine's remark in *Contra Academicos* 3.16.35). Cicero, however, had no intention of replicating Cato's austere Stoicism, as can be seen by his criticism of Cato's great-grandson, Marcus Porcius Cato (*Pro Murena* 30.63, 31.64, 35.74), but wished instead to engraft an equally noble yet more flexible code of conduct onto the Roman city.

43. That is to say, he is the new Cato by his replacement rather than his imitation of the former exemplum. It is largely due to Cicero that the ideal of Roman excellence shifts from one of rigid moralism to a prudence informed by classical philosophy.

44. *Academica* 2.2.7.

45. *Ibid.*, 2.2.6.

loped and well-known schools of thought, some of them promoting themselves as the true heirs of the Socratic legacy. It was Cicero's conviction that these schools represented decadent or even spurious forms of philosophy, and it was therefore his task to distinguish them from the classical model of Plato, Xenophon, and Aristotle. Of these false contenders, two were especially prominent: the Stoics and the Epicureans.

The Stoic school, founded by Zeno two hundred years before, claimed to be a correction, not a rejection, of the philosophy begun by Socrates, though it departed from his teachings in a number of ways. First, the Stoa amplified the importance and dignity of virtue in a way that Socrates would never have done⁴⁶. In this respect they were like Glaucon in Plato's *Republic* demanding a high account of justice which could never be reasonably given⁴⁷. Second, the Stoic school effectively rejected the distinction between the sensible and the intelligible, denying that both the mind and its acts of knowing are incorporeal. Instead they posited that everything – the mind, the senses, and even the gods – consists of fire⁴⁸. Next, rather than reject the gods of the city, Stoics rationalized all mythological deities, explaining them as personifications of passions and virtues, departed humans, or forces of nature⁴⁹. As a Stoic character from one of Cicero's dialogues remarks: "We must revere and worship these gods under the names which custom has bestowed upon them" (*quoque eos nomine consuetudo nuncupaverit [hos deos] et venerari et colere debemus*)⁵⁰.

The Epicureans, on the other hand, made no claim to Socratic credentials: their founder in fact prided himself on having an original philosophy (though Cicero points out it is really a bastardized derivative of Democritus'). Like the Stoics, Epicureans hold that the real is the material, which consists of infinite atoms in a void⁵¹. The gods are in human form, with something that resembles a body (a *quasi corpus*)⁵², and if they are to be worshipped, it is on account of their excellence alone⁵³, for having no interest whatsoever in earthly matters⁵⁴, they are not likely to be moved by prayers. In fact, the gods engage in no kind of work, and are thus like the men whom Epicurus commends as happy. "We place the blessed life", says a character representing his views, "in security of soul and the absence of all duties" (*nos autem beatam vitam in animi securitate et in omnium vacatione munerum ponimus*)⁵⁵.

46. *Academica* 1.10.38,39.

47. PLATO, *Rep.* 2.366e-367a.

48. *Academica* 1.11.39-41.

49. *De natura* 2.23.60f.

50. *Ibid.*, 2.28.71.

51. *Ibid.*, 1.20.54.

52. *Ibid.*, 1.18.49.

53. *Ibid.*, 1.17.45.

54. *Ibid.*, 1.19.51.

55. *Ibid.*, 1.20.53.

Of these two, it is not difficult to see which is more antithetical to classical philosophy and more dangerous to the well-being of the *civitas*. Epicureanism carries with it not only an indifference to the pursuit of wisdom⁵⁶ but a bemused contempt of civic-mindedness⁵⁷. Cicero is right to insinuate that the Epicurean teaching on the idleness of the gods is merely a justification for humans to live as petty, selfish hedonists. Its whole theology is fatal to religion, as there is little incentive to worship a god unconcerned with you⁵⁸, and no reason to worship a god on account of his excellence when he is understood in such base terms⁵⁹. And because Epicureanism is fatal to religion, it is also fatal to the institution which religion serves: the city. Religion is instrumental in keeping citizens in line through its promises and threats, and moreover through its sacralizing (and hence perpetuating) the reigning political order. If religion is destroyed, chaos and injustice will abound⁶⁰. Epicureanism is thus a thin veneer for atheism and anarchy⁶¹.

Yet the depravity of the Epicurean school does not exonerate Stoics from criticism. To borrow a distinction from Socrates, the Stoic is too much of the gentleman and not enough of the philosopher. His materialist world view and willingness to revere the conventions of his homeland are at odds with both the philosopher's distinction between the mind's eye and the body's as well as his freedom from all *nomoi*. Yet if the Stoa are not fully philosophical, neither are they pernicious. Stoic conformity to all public manifestations of religion in no way undermines civic-mindedness or the status quo. From a philosophical perspective Stoicism is relatively tepid, but from a political perspective it is relatively harmless⁶².

Since the pursuit of wisdom is by its nature apolitical, Cicero was faced with the double task of distinguishing "the true and elegant philosophy" of Socrates (*illius verae elegantisque philosophiae*)⁶³ from the anti-political irresponsibility

56. Which can be seen by their holding Pleasure as the Highest Good (cf. *De fin.* 2.27.89).

57. *Ibid.*, 1.43.121.

58. *Ibid.*, 1.2.3; 1.41.115.

59. *Ibid.*, 1.41.116.

60. *De natura* 1.2.4.

61. *Ibid.*, 1.44.123,4.

62. All of this explains why Cicero rarely misses a chance to condemn the Epicureans (e.g. *Tusc. disp.* 2.3), but is deliberately silent about the Epicurean critiques of Stoicism which turn out to be true. A case in point is Velleius the Epicurean's criticism of Balbus the Stoic. When Velleius mocks Balbus for believing in doctrines fit only for ignorant old women (*De natura* 1.20.55), he is implying that Stoic teachings on fate and the like cannot stand on their own without the support of superstition. Cicero's spokesman in the dialogue, Gaius Cotta, responds by ruthlessly unmasking the contempt for virtue and wisdom underlying Epicurean thought (1.21.57-1.44.124), but he does not, significantly enough, touch this accusation. Cicero, however, would not say that Stoicism is *completely* harmless. As he implies in the *Pro Murena*, Stoic morality can deleteriously interfere with Roman tradition and the demands of merciful justice (30.63,31.64, 35.74).

63. *Tusc. disp.* 4.3.6.

of the Epicureans on the one hand and the political submissiveness of the Stoics on the other. Moreover, since philosophers such as Plato were careful to conduct their activities in a way that was minimally disruptive to political life (not out of any loyalty to the regime but from a sober recognition of the enormous evils which ensue from civil unrest), Cicero had to make these distinctions in an exceptionally delicate manner.

Cicero was able to keep this balance primarily by the recondite quality of his writings as described above, but secondarily by his public embrace of Academic skepticism. At first blush this choice is certainly a surprising one, given the New Academy's adamant refusal to affirm anything, especially the possibility of knowledge itself. It even robs Socrates of one of his most famous sayings – that he knows he knows nothing – by denying that he knows even that!⁶⁴ And since certainty is needed for action, the Academic skeptic's rejection of its possibility and his replacing it with the doctrine of probability seems politically irresponsible, liable as it is to induce widespread paralysis⁶⁵. Cicero's adoption of skepticism, however, had enormous practical value, liberating him from the blind loyalty to one's own which more often than not replaces genuine philosophizing. Cicero cites as the classic example of this phenomenon the disciples of Pythagoras who, when unable to prove one of their master's teachings, would simply respond, *Ipse dixit* – “He himself said so”⁶⁶. Unfortunately this tendency proliferated with the teaching of philosophy itself. Independent inquiry and objective scrutiny were substituted by the authority of school masters, and the schools themselves became dominated more by subrational feelings of fealty than the pure and detached desire to know. “I know not how”, Cicero writes, “but most men prefer to err and to defend with the utmost pugnacity the opinion which they have loved rather than to seek out without obstinacy what may be said most consistently” (*sed nescio quo modo plerique errare malunt eamque sententiam quam adamaverunt pugnacissime defendere quam sine pertinacia quid constantissime dicatur exquirere*)⁶⁷. This stubborn clinging to an opinion given to us by a master (most likely at a time when we were unable to make a mature judgment on our own⁶⁸) predominates in intellectually weaker camps – such as the Stoic and Epicurean – but affected even Platonists, the followers of the so-called Old Academy.

Skepticism thus has the advantage of freeing its practitioner from these feudal allegiances in order to seek out the truth⁶⁹. In doing so one is, ironically, closer to the spirit of Socrates, who never put forward anything

64. *Academica* 1.12.45.

65. *Ibid.*, 2.7.19; 2.12.37.

66. *De natura* 1.5.10.

67. *Academica* 2.3.9.

68. *Ibid.*, 2.3.8.

69. *Ibid.*, 2.3.8; cf. 2.8.60.

positive of his own⁷⁰, and of Plato, who in his writings *never* affirmed anything⁷¹. The philosophy of the New Academy is therefore not only “the least arrogant and the most consistent and elegant” (*minime arrogans maximeque et constans et elegans*)⁷², but the most reasonable because it does not behoove the philosopher to reach any hasty conclusions⁷³. Further, far from being dangerous by encouraging inaction, the doctrine of probability is politically salubrious, ameliorating man’s proclivity to fanaticism by robbing him of the absolute certainty from which fanaticism springs, all the while keeping a remnant of assent so that he is still enabled to act⁷⁴. What is more, the Academic’s refusal to affirm a particular dogma frees him from the suspicion of seditiousness and even wins him praise from Stoic and Epicurean alike⁷⁵. All of this has the important effect of allowing him to avoid the two extremes embodied in the Stoic and Epicurean schools. As can be seen by the example of Gaius Cotta – Cicero’s spokesman in the *De natura deorum*, who as a high priest vigorously defends traditional Roman religion while as an Academic radically questions anything not demonstrated by reason – the skeptic can doubt the opinions of the city with all of the vigor that befits the philosopher without rashly undermining the laws and customs to which its citizens cling⁷⁶.

Cicero’s Impact

Cicero’s efforts were not in vain. As he immodestly predicted, the Roman who could successfully imitate Plato and Aristotle would be widely read and greatly praised⁷⁷. True, his countrymen did not become philosophical overnight; in fact they did not, by and large, become philosophical at all. If later generations read Cicero, it was either to advance their careers by becoming eloquent or to be inspired by his patriotic words and deeds. Yet – and this was Cicero’s intention all along – it was these less-than-philosophical motives which kept his writings in circulation and subsequently allowed the very rarest of reader to pick them up and discern their true import. One such reader was a North African teen living hundreds of years later in a remote backwash of the Empire. He was forced to read the *Hortensius* by his instructors because it would help hone his rhetorical skills, but the talented youth saw something in it which they did not: a call to happiness through the love of wisdom. The real

70. *Ibid.*, 1.4.16. Cf. *De natura* 1.5.11, where Cicero writes that Socrates and the founders of the New Academy never judged anything openly.

71. *Ibid.*, 1.12.46.

72. *De div.*, 2.1.1.

73. *De natura*, 1.1.1.

74. *Academica*, 2.3.8.

75. *Ibid.*, Frg. 20 Mueller.

76. 3.2.5,6.

77. *Academica* 1.3.10.

success of Cicero, then, is that even centuries after his death he was able to introduce certain sons of a martial and thick-headed race to the beauty of Lady Truth and to the life of courting her passionately.

II. – AUGUSTINE

When it came to fashioning his own dialogues, Augustine followed the example of what had proved so effective on him. With their cover letters, choice of setting, and use of long concluding speeches, the Cassiciacum dialogues bear an unmistakably Ciceronian (as opposed to Platonic) character. Augustine indirectly admits the connection when in the *Confessions* he recounts a disagreement with his friend Alypius. As a sort of assistant editor, Alypius had wanted to omit the name of Jesus Christ from the dialogues so that they would be redolent of the lofty “cedars of the gymnasium” (*gymnasiorum cedros*)⁷⁸. Augustine obviously grasped the allusion to the two gymnasia on Cicero’s estate, and opted instead for what he called the “Church’s wholesome herbs” (*salubres herbas ecclesiasticas*). The name of Christ remained, though it did not entirely extinguish the fragrance of cedar.

In any case, to carry the metaphor further, we may say that Augustine’s pupils came to Cassiciacum already redolent of Ciceronian cedar, as each of them had read the *Hortensius* prior to or shortly after his arrival⁷⁹. Augustine notes that their reaction to it was not unlike his own when he read it at roughly the same age⁸⁰: it won them over to philosophy.

Missing Links: The Antiphonal Referents of the Cassiciacum Dialogues

Furthermore – and this has not, as far as I can tell, been acknowledged before – Augustine’s dialogues are not only stylistically similar to Cicero’s, but act as responses to a specific number of his works. Augustine’s *Contra Academicos* is an obvious reaction to Cicero’s *Academica*; his *De beata vita* is a response to Cicero’s *De finibus* and the *Tusculanae disputationes*, which treat of the *summum bonum*⁸¹ and the art of “living blessedly” (*ad beate vivendum*)⁸², respectively⁸³; and his *De ordine*, which deals with the question of

78. 9.2.4.

79. AUGUSTINE, *Contra Academicos* 1.1.4.

80. *Conf.* 3.4.

81. Cf. *De fin.* 3.1.1.

82. *De div.* 2.1.2.

83. It should be noted that Cicero saw these two dialogues as related, one being the foundation for the other (cf. *De div.* 2.1.2).

providence, is a response to the *De natura deorum*, *De divinatione*, and *De fato*, a trilogy of Cicero's dealing with the same question⁸⁴.

That both Cicero and Augustine intended their works to be read in the order as they have just been given makes the parity all the clearer. Even the fact that the two sequential sets do not match up perfectly betrays a deliberate design on Augustine's part. Augustine's *Soliloquium*, for example, follows upon his three counterpoints to Cicero but is not meant to be a response to any particular writing. This is appropriate, since the *Soliloquium* is unheralded in both title and content, the mark of a new approach to philosophy and a transitional foreshadowing of Augustine's unique contributions⁸⁵.

Equally if not more significant is the fact that Augustine offers no antiphon of his own to Cicero's inaugural dialogue, the *Hortensius*. Cicero intended this writing, which deals with the conflict between rhetoric and philosophy, to be the starting point and foundation for the philosophical quest⁸⁶. That Augustine lets the dialogue stand unrefuted suggests that it has succeeded on both counts. Moreover, it is clear that Augustine wants the *Hortensius* to have the same function for his dialogues as they do for Cicero's. Augustine's not failing to mention at the beginning of the *Contra Academicos* that his pupils' only preparation was their reading of the *Hortensius* more than hints at its propaedeutic value, while the recurrence of the *Hortensius* in the Cassiciacum dialogues attests to the foundational role it plays throughout⁸⁷. The very work which initiated Augustine's own conversion to the truth is now, both explicitly and implicitly, held up to initiate the same conversion in others⁸⁸.

Against Cicero's Academics

At the beginning of my conversion I wrote three books so that the things which block us at the gate, so to speak, might not be an obstacle to us (*unde tria confeci volumina initio conversionis meae, ne impedimento nobis essent quae tamquam in ostio contradicebant*)⁸⁹.

84. That Cicero expected these three works to be read as a trilogy can be seen from *De div.* 2.1.2.

85. The word *soliloquium* is a neologism coined by Augustine, while the content of the work, a conversation between Augustine and a mysterious interlocutor whom he calls Reason, is an unprecedented variation on the well-established genre of the philosophical dialogue.

86. Cf. *De div.* 2.1.2; *De fin.* 1.1.2.

87. Cf. *Contra Academicos* 1.2.5 (*Hort.* frg. 36 Muller), 1.3.7 (*Hort.* frg. 101 Muller), 1.3.8 (*Hort.* frg. 60), 3.14.31 (*Hort.* frg. 100 Muller); *De beata vita* 1.4 (*Hort.* frg. 9 Muller), 2.10 (*Hort.* frg. 36 & 39), 3.22, 4.26 (*Hort.* frg. 76); *De ordine* 2.8.25 (*Hort.* frg. 23 & 24), 2.9.26 (*Hort.* frg. 115 Grilli); *Soliloquium* 1.1.3 (*Hort.* frg. 74 BK), 1.10.17.

88. *Conf.* 3.4.7ff. Cf. Maurice TESTARD, "Cicero," in *Augustinus-Lexikon*, ed. Cornelius Mayer, Vol. 1 (Basel: Schwabe & Co., 1994), pp. 916-918.

89. AUGUSTINE, *Enchiridion* 7.20.

Augustine's desire to have the Cassiciacum dialogues help remove stumbling-blocks which obstruct faith's assent could not be more perfectly discerned than in the composition of the *Contra Academicos* and in its placement as the first to be read. As Augustine explains in his address to Romanianus, there are two hindrances to finding the truth: the despair of ever finding it, and the presumption that one has found it⁹⁰. Just as Cicero's *Academica*, with its rejection of philosophical dogmatism, is written to redress the latter, Augustine's *Contra Academicos* is written to redress the former⁹¹. Ironically however, Augustine identifies as the culprit behind the despair in finding truth the very school which Cicero advocates as useful in restoring the search for it⁹².

The *Contra Academicos* thus constitutes a dismantling of Cicero's infamous adherence to the New Academy. The real critique, however, occurs only in the final book, presumably because it is so shocking and unexpected that it takes over two books to prepare his companions – and his readers – for the truth. The three other interlocutors in the dialogue (Augustine's two pupils, Licentius and Trygetius, and Alypius) have conflicting assessments of the Academics⁹³, but all share one thing in common: they all take the arguments and writings of the Academics seriously. So that they may take *him* seriously, Augustine must undermine confidence in their own opinions and build a consensus from which he can launch his own view. The opening debate between Licentius and Trygetius is inconclusive, but it serves the function of establishing the importance of searching for truth⁹⁴ and of making the two youths eager to persist. The discussions Augustine has first with Licentius and then with Trygetius add to this eagerness a willingness to listen to two more experienced debaters (since each of them gets a quick thrashing when in the ring with their tutor) and thus sets the stage for the more impressive showdown between Augustine and Alypius. When Augustine and Alypius do begin their disputation, Augustine tries to reveal what the Academics are really teaching, but since Alypius is totally uncomprehending, Augustine is forced to begin again, this time with a more conventional refutation of the Academy's most famous pillars. It is only after Alypius is shown the absurdity of the things he so admired that he becomes sufficiently receptive to Augustine's astonishing hypothesis.

And what is that hypothesis? It is that the Academics were not Academics. That is to say, what the Academics taught and wrote (and made them so famous) is not what they secretly believed. They were esoteric communicators, "hiding their opinion from the sluggish and revealing it to the alert" (*ad oc-*

90. *Contra Academicos* 2.3.8.

91. *Ibid.*

92. *Ibid.*, 2.1.1. Augustine's own antidote to presumption will be given in his treatise, *On True Religion*, also addressed to Romanianus.

93. The impassioned and romantic Licentius is fond of the Academic portrayal of happiness as the endless quest for truth; the pious and dutiful Trygetius is suspicious of the Academic teaching on the impossibility of attaining knowledge; and the subtle and intelligent attorney, Alypius, is impressed by Academic arguments against perception and assent.

94. 1.9.25.

cultandam tardioribus et ad significandum vigilantioribus sententiam suam)⁹⁵. Augustine initiates his investigation of this double-tiered art of expression by examining an argument from the *Academica* which was widely held to be sound in its logic, namely, that because the Academic is judged second wisest by all of his competitors, he is right to judge himself first⁹⁶. Augustine asks his listeners to assume that Cicero is not joking when he says this and to look at it closely. The result is that far from proving the skeptic's superiority, the argument comes off as proof of his enormous folly. This realization emboldens us to doubt a host of other Academic doctrines. From the lofty seclusion of Plato's school we see the contradictions in their teachings that nothing can be known, that understanding⁹⁷ and perception⁹⁸ are impossible, and that assent can only be given to something as probable⁹⁹. On this latter point Augustine brings his string of criticisms to an intense crescendo with a direct address to Cicero, asking him how *he*, "all of whose writings have been diligently directed to the education and inculcation of the youth regarding life and morals" (*de adulescentium moribus vitaeque tractamus, cui educandae atque instituendae omnes illae litterae tuae vigilaverunt*)¹⁰⁰, could ever defend the doctrine of probability. Augustine satirically muses on whether Cicero would consider adultery probably wrong, whether the adulterer would be unsure as to whether he committed it because he can't trust his senses, whether the judge would find him probably guilty, and whether the defeated defense attorney would try to convince his client that he merely dreamt that he was convicted.

Augustine contends that because Cicero was no imbecile he certainly saw the consequences of the probability doctrine (not to mention the rest of the Academic positions) very clearly and "with the utmost alacrity and prudence" (*sollertissime prudentissimeque*)¹⁰¹. This, of course, begs the question why Cicero would ever promote their teachings in the first place. At this point Augustine shifts from what he knows about Academic teaching to what he thinks is the ultimate motivation behind it¹⁰². He speculates that the unpopularity and danger of the teachings held by Plato – especially his distinction between the sensible and intelligible¹⁰³ – prompted his disciples to hide true Platonism from unworthy and profane minds. One of these minds belonged to Zeno, the founder of the Stoic school. Zeno was denied the

95. *Ibid.*, 2.10.24.

96. *Academica* frg. 20 Mueller; cf. *Contra Academicos* 3.7.15,16.

97. *Contra Academicos* 3.9.18-21.

98. *Contra Academicos* 3.10.22-15.33.

99. *Ibid.*, 3.16.35,36.

100. *Ibid.*, 3.16.35.

101. *Ibid.*, 3.16.36.

102. *Ibid.*, 3.17.37. Cf. 3.20.45, when Augustine invites the boys, disappointed by Alypius' agreement with Augustine, to read the *Academics* themselves. It is uncertain from the text whether Augustine is referring to their writings in general or to Cicero's work by that name

103. *Ibid.*, 3.17.37.

“virtually sacrosanct Platonic decrees” (*Platonica illa velut sacrosancta decreta*)¹⁰⁴ on account of his inability to understand incorporeal reality; his ensuing philosophy, a particularly virulent materialism in which even the gods consist of matter, attests to this utter failure of comprehension. Responding to these increasingly popular theories, Arcesilas, a fellow student with Zeno and the founder of what would be the New Academy, concealed the complete doctrine of Plato but in such a way that it could be discovered by posterity¹⁰⁵. He and his followers recognized how prone the vast majority of the population is to materialism, and how dangerous this condition is for both the philosopher and the demos. Consequently, the Academics chose to erode popular confidence in materialist philosophies rather than attempt the risky job of educating the masses to think outside of the spatio-temporal box.

Cicero, who “throughout his entire life could not tolerate the weakening or contaminating of anything he loved” (*se vivo impatiens labefactari vel contaminari quidquid amavisset*)¹⁰⁶, proudly and prudently carried on this tradition. Since, as it is stated in the *Academica*, the school is wont to conceal its teachings, one should not be surprised to find a similar strategy in Cicero’s own writing¹⁰⁷. In other words, to return to Augustine’s point of departure, Cicero is joking after all, playfully putting forth opinions which throw the less astute (and hence less worthy) readers off the scent of a truth which they cannot understand and which is therefore likely to harm them; at the same time, those who are worthy can find the limpid stream “from Platonic springs” (*Platonis fontibus*)¹⁰⁸ carefully hidden in the text and drink it to the lees.

Augustine’s treatment of the Academics in general and of “the Tullian authority” (*auctoritate illa Tulliana*)¹⁰⁹ in particular is thus a sympathetic one. Yet the very fact that Augustine so blatantly unmasks the esoteric mechanism by which those teachings were safeguarded (thereby rendering future duplications of it far less effective), shows not only that he is not an esoteric writer, but that he is ultimately anti-esoteric. Such a reaction does not appear to come from a rejection of classical philosophy’s “elitist” assumptions. Like the Academics, Augustine drew a sharp line between the very rare kind of man who could understand reality as incorporeal and the vast majority who could not¹¹⁰. But there is one event separating Augustine and the Academics which might explain the difference: the Incarnation. God’s humbling Himself and taking the form of man allows the carnal multitude for the first time “to return to themselves and to look upon their fatherland, without the contests of disputation” (*redire in semetipsas et respiscere patriam etiam sine disputa-*

104. *Ibid.*, 3.17.38.

105. *Ibid.*

106. *Ibid.*, 3.18.41.

107. 2.18.60; cf. *Academica* frg. 21 Mueller.

108. *Contra Academicos* 3.18.40.

109. *Ibid.*, 2.10.24.

110. Cf. *De ordine* 1.1.1.

tionum concertatione)¹¹¹. The divine Word becoming human flesh does not eliminate the fallen world's hatred of the light, and thus a very careful reserve in expressing the truth is still necessary. But it does place a certain onus on the believer to bear witness to the truth, and hence to avoid incurring any suspicion that the doctrine which he is preaching is in any way concocted. For a Christian to use a medium which relies heavily on noble lies would do exactly that. Esotericism after the Incarnation is thus not only superfluous for the Christian, but counterproductive. This, in any case, appears to be Augustine's view, and would explain his adamant refusal to lie about even the smallest details. In his dialogues, for example, Augustine goes out of his way to stress their historical accuracy¹¹², a marked departure from Cicero's unapologetic licenses.

The title, *Contra Academicos*, thus has a double-edged connotation. Augustine is against both the public proclamations of the Academics which undermine the quest for truth and the kind of writing that fuelled their fabrication. Accordingly, he replaces the former with a hope of attaining truth and the latter with an economic (as opposed to esoteric) mode of communication. Augustine is not, however, against the Academics' private convictions about the care which must be given in teaching the truth, or against their insights into intelligible reality. On the contrary: Augustine dares to consider these facets a suitable preparation for the Christian faith, which likewise teaches of a kingdom not of this world¹¹³. It is from this preparation that Augustine can now introduce his reader to a more explicit consideration of that faith.

On The Truly Blessed Life

Not insignificantly, Augustine's shortest dialogue is a response to two of Cicero's longest. The single book of the *De beata vita* stands in sharp contrast to the five each of the *De finibus bonorum et malorum* and the *Tusculanae disputationes*, a disparity one is tempted to read as indicative of the difficulty in persuading pagans to recognize the *summum bonum* and to live the good life. In any case, Augustine's second dialogue is the next logical step after liberation from doubt and a transformation of Cicero's portrayal of happiness.

At first blush the *De beata vita* appears to be no different from the *De finibus* or the *Tusculanae disputationes*. Its opening twin images, for example – fleeing to the bosom of philosophy and sailing to its haven after being tossed

111. *Contra Academicos* 3.19.42.

112. *Contra Academicos* 1.14, 2.6.17, 2.9.22; *De beata vita* 2.15, 3.18; *De ordine* 1.2.5. Augustine even goes to great lengths to explain how conversations that took place in darkness were recorded (*Contra Academicos* 3.20.44; *De ordine* 1.8.26), or how conversations were cut short when there was no possibility of recording them (*Contra Academicos* 1.5.15). Cf. Goulven MADEC, *RÉAug.*, 32, 1986, pp. 207-31; P. COURCELLE, "Les Premières Confessions de saint Augustin," *RÉL*, 22, 1945, pp. 155-174.

113. Cf. *Contra Academicos* 3.19.42 and Colossians 2.8. Cf. also *Contra Academicos* 3.17.37, where Augustine speaks of Plato's teaching on the sensible and intelligible worlds.

by a great storm – are taken directly from the *Tusculanae disputationes*.¹¹⁴ While Augustine's version is no less enthusiastic in its praise of philosophy, it does however hint at a different assessment of this most excellent guide of life¹¹⁵. Augustine speaks not only of the port of philosophy, but of the dry land beyond it where one encounters Christian sages such as Theodorus and St. Ambrose. Like Cicero Augustine cherishes philosophy for granting the soul safe harbor from the tempests of misfortune, but unlike him he also lauds philosophy as the dock for an even grander destination: the *terra firma* of divine revelation. The introduction to the *De beata vita* begins with praising philosophy, but ends by alluding to the dialogue's religious content¹¹⁶.

Indeed, Augustine's artful borrowing-yet-departing from the *Tusculanae disputationes* pervades more than just the introduction. The dialogue proper begins with a definition of man as consisting of body and soul and a subsequent examination of the "food" for each. The food of the soul, it is concluded, is the knowledge and understanding of things¹¹⁷. Here Augustine's progression, which duplicates that of the *Tusculanae disputationes*' third book¹¹⁸, also yields an identical consideration of *frugalitas*¹¹⁹. Augustine initiates this discussion to whet his guests' appetite for some soul-food he would like to serve them: a colloquium on happiness. The course consists of many ingredients taken from Book Five of the *Tusculanae disputationes*, such as that the wise man is always happy¹²⁰, his soul is perfect¹²¹, his bodily wants¹²² or the caprices of chance¹²³ do not undermine his peace of mind, and that he is strong and unafraid of death or pain¹²⁴. But as every chef knows, identical ingredients can be prepared in very different ways. Augustine's focus on the soul's desires and on the objects of those desires is unlike Cicero's focus on the soul's tranquillity or the lack thereof. So too is Augustine's dwelling on the nature of misery (*miseria*) a shift from Cicero's interest in distress (*aegritudo*) even though, as Cicero states, they end up being the same thing¹²⁵. And, of course, the clever put-

114. *Tusc. disp.* 5.2.5; cf. *De beata vita* 1.1-5.

115. The phrase is from the *Tusculanae Disputationes* 5.2.5.

116. *De beata vita* 1.5.

117. *Ibid.*, 2.8.

118. *Tusc. disp.* 3.1.1-3.6.

119. *Tusc. Disp.* 3.8.16-18; cf. *De beata vita* 2.8.

120. *Tusc. disp.* 5.15.43, 16.48; *De beata vita* 2.14.

121. *Tusc. disp.* 5.13.37,38; *De beata vita* 4.25.

122. *Tusc. disp.* 5.32.90-36.105; *De beata vita* 4.25.

123. *Tusc. disp.* 5.26.73; 5.37.106-40.118; *De beata vita* 4.25.

124. *Tusc. Disp* 5.6.16; 27.77-79. *De beata vita* 4.25. Cf. also *Tusc. disp.* 3.7.14 for the wise man's strength, all of Book One for his indifference to death, and all of Book Two for his indifference to pain.

125. *Tusc. disp.* 3.13.27.

down of the Academics which Augustine serves as a dessert diverges widely from Cicero's professed loyalties¹²⁶.

The finished product is a stunning demonstration of how happiness consists of possessing God in one's soul. Augustine starts with the soul's desires and deduces that the soul will remain ever needy and hence ever miserable until it takes hold of something immutable, immortal, and impervious to misfortune. God, then, is the natural object of man's deepest yearnings, and is "possessed" by the man whose soul is perfectly full. Augustine returns to Cicero's treatment of *frugalitas*, this time offering his own reflection on the words *modestia* (moderation) and *temperantia* (temperance), which according to Cicero are synonymous with the former¹²⁷. *Modus* (measure) and *temperies* (proper mixture) – the roots of these terms – denote a perfect proportion and thus, when applied to the soul, connote its neither having eaten too much nor too little. But perfect measure comes only from wisdom, since wisdom is perfect measure¹²⁸. For the soul to be happy, then, it must possess wisdom, which divine authority tells us is none other than God Himself. Since God the Father is the Supreme Measure (*summum modum*) ordering the universe and is known only through His Son the Truth in the Spirit of Enjoyment, the happy life consists of the soul possessing the Triune God. (Thus, by his use of the *Tusculanae disputationes*, Augustine also answers the central question of the *De finibus*¹²⁹). The *De beata vita* culminates, appropriately enough, with an Ambrosian hymn to the Trinity¹³⁰, while Augustine's feasting-companions leave with joy in their hearts and an ardent desire to know God in faith, hope, and love.

To satisfactorily answer the question of the highest good and human happiness, Augustine has had to step outside the limits of reason alone. This of course marks a strong departure from the *De finibus* and the *Tusculanae disputationes*, but interestingly enough, it also helps highlight their "irrational" shortcomings. What is odd about the *Tusculanae disputationes*, for example, is its preponderantly Stoic portrayal of the happy life. Even Cicero admits that he is relying on "the snares of the Stoics" (*laqueis Stoicorum*) more than usual and

126. *De beata vita* 2.14.

127. *Ibid.*, 4.31; cf. CICERO, *Pro Deiotaro* 9.26.

128. *De beata vita* 4.33.

129. That question is:

What is the End, the Last, the Ultimate, by which all standards for living well and acting righteously are to be referred? What does nature follow as the highest of all desirable things, and what does she flee as the lowest of all evils? (*quid sit finis, quid extremum, quid ultimum quo sint omnia bene vivendi recteque faciendi consilia referenda; quid sequatur natura ut summum ex rebus expetendis, quid fugiat ut extremum malorum?*) (1.4.11). The *De beata vita* answers that the highest good is the possession of God or wisdom (2.11) and that conversely, the greatest evil is folly (4.18) or neediness (*egestas*) (2.11).

130. *De beata vita* 4.35; Ambrose, *Hymnus* 2.32.

would not mind escaping them¹³¹. The peculiarity is compounded by the fact that in order to prove his most important point, namely, that the virtuous man is happy even on the rack, Cicero must not only abandon an objection he himself had made in the *De finibus*¹³², but he must betray a basic Academic tenet by appealing to the “*Iipse dixit*” feelings of philosophical loyalty he so despised¹³³. He even deviates from the notion of happiness by concluding that a philosopher who lacks wisdom is *not* miserable and does not even lament being without what he most vehemently wants¹³⁴. Cicero’s recourse to these assertions is understandable given his desire to make philosophy attractive to the average reader. If it is discovered that philosophy cannot bring happiness when one needs its consolation the most, there is little incentive to give up everything else for its sake. As if responding to a suspicious investor, Cicero exaggerates the philosopher’s bliss, using whatever arguments he can find – even those of the Stoics. The true lover of philosophy obviously needs no such encouragement, but such a man is, as has been stressed elsewhere, extremely difficult to find. For the rest of his readership Cicero feels compelled to promise that philosophy will provide nothing less than constant happiness¹³⁵.

Augustine, on the other hand, has no hesitation in taking Cicero’s definitions to their logical conclusion and stating that as long as we do not possess wisdom, we are not only foolish but utterly miserable¹³⁶. He is able to put the matter so openly precisely because he is under no urgency to promise a quick delivery of perfect happiness; in fact the unlikelihood of this happening makes the Christian teaching on eternal beatitude in the next life all the more appealing. Whereas Cicero must treat philosophy as a medicine of the soul which can only be administered by oneself in this life¹³⁷, Augustine can portray wisdom as the food of the soul served by God¹³⁸ in small portions now and in perfect portions later¹³⁹.

Augustine’s dual answer to the *De finibus* and the *Tusculanae disputationes* thus recapitulates the dynamic found in his treatment of the *Academica*: meeting philosophy on the common platform of nature, unveiling some of the

131. *Tusc. disp.* 5.27.76.

132. 5.28.83-86.

133. *Tusc. disp.* 5.26.73; 5.40.119. The “argument” is that if even Epicurus, whom all decent men condemn, teaches that the wise man is happy on the rack, how much more ought the disciples of the noble Plato teach the same.

134. *Ibid.*, 3.28.68,69.

135. *Ibid.*, 5.8.22.

136. *De beata vita* 4.35. Since philosophy is defined as the love, rather than the possession, of wisdom, one is forced to conclude that the philosopher is not happy.

137. *Tusc. disp.* 3.3.6.

138. Cf. *De beata vita* (3.17), where Augustine asserts that it is God, not he, who is preparing the meals.

139. Not having to demonstrate happiness in this life also gives Augustine, incidentally, the ability to sidestep the seemingly endless controversy about the virtuous man’s happiness under torture.

philosopher's secrets, and then grafting on a higher order of teaching. Also, Augustine is able to introduce materials that are preparatory to his next dialogue. With the *De beata vita*'s discussion of measure (*modus*) and God, Augustine lays the groundwork for Cassiciacum's third and final response to the gymnasia.

God's Blessed Rage for Order

Whereas Augustine's first two dialogues are concerned with more manageable topics, the *De ordine* aspires to nothing less than a knowledge of the whole, or at least of whatever it is which makes the whole whole. The magnitude of the undertaking is apparent from the first line:

To follow and hold the order of things proper to each, and then indeed to see or explain the whole by which this world is held together and ruled – that, Zenobius, is extremely rare and difficult for men to do (*Ordinem rerum, Zenobi, consequi ac tenere cuique proprium tum vero universitatis, quo cohercetur hic mundus et regitur, vel videre vel pandere difficillimum hominibus atque rarissimum est*)¹⁴⁰.

Augustine, however, will seek this elusive quarry because he is convinced it is the only way to understand providence, the ultimate goal of the work. Such a decision is puzzling given that Cicero's corresponding trilogy of dialogues – the *De natura deorum*, *De divinatione*, and *De fato* – is nowhere near as ambitious but just as concerned with providence¹⁴¹. The reason for each author's interest most likely explains the difference. The notion of providence is important to Cicero because if it is rejected, there will be no incentive to pray to the gods, and the nation's moral fiber will decay¹⁴². On the other hand, a fatalistic providence undermines free will, which would also have disastrous moral consequences. Cicero must therefore steer a middle course between these two extremes yet without compromising the love of wisdom. His solution in these dialogues is to be somewhat of a surgeon, removing certain beliefs from the body politic (such as Stoic notions of the gods as great balls of fire or Epicurean portrayals of them as lazy humanoids in the sky), while delicately trying to keep his incisive remarks from extending to traditional Roman religion (which is clearly more vulnerable to criticism). Since his goal is limited to saving the old religion for civil use while freeing the reader from philosophically-sloppy conclusions, Cicero is content to cast strong doubt on any attempt to definitively answer the question and to leave it at that.

140. 1.1.1.

141. All three are in fact united by this common focus. Knowing the nature of the gods enables one to discern their providential role in human affairs (*De natura* 1.1.2). This, in turn, discloses the possibility of divination, for if the gods affect human history, the future can be predicted. Finally, divination and providence infer that the world is controlled by fate. All of this Cicero is able to consider without setting his sights on the whole or, for that matter, on order.

142. *De natura* 1.2.3,4.

Though no less responsible, Augustine is motivated by a different set of priorities. While Cicero wishes to moderate religion in the service of the city¹⁴³, Augustine wishes to promote religion in the service of God. And while Cicero seeks to avoid two conflicting dangers to the healthy republic (openly despising the gods on the one hand and believing old women's superstitions on the other¹⁴⁴), Augustine seeks to avoid two conflicting threats to genuine piety (the opinion that God cannot conquer evil and the opinion that He causes it¹⁴⁵). In short, Augustine's concern for the mystical body rather than the political accounts for his operating on such a grand scale. The order which binds all things together might be enormously difficult to find and even more difficult to communicate, but it remains among the things most sought after by men of high character for one simple reason: it solves the plaguing riddle of how God can be said to care for human affairs in the midst of evil's salient sway. If this riddle is not answered properly, either of the two impious opinions cited above will reign. Much is at stake, and so much must be done.

And much is done. The dialogue begins in complete darkness with a discussion on order in which Licentius, now over his infatuation with the Academics, defends order's reign. In the course of the conversation he shrewdly avoids a flawed rung in the Stoic defense of providence repeated in the *De natura deorum*¹⁴⁶, but because of his ignorance of the *De fato*¹⁴⁷ and the *De divinatione*¹⁴⁸ (which Augustine obliquely points out to him¹⁴⁹) he ultimately betrays a naïve understanding of order. His shortcoming, however, does not stop him from reaching the cardinal insight that the whole is enclosed in order¹⁵⁰, or from defending his definition of order from Trygetius' interrogations¹⁵¹.

When Book Two begins, Licentius is again compelled to defend his definition, this time against Augustine. The disputation progresses through various

143. Cf. *De natura* 1.1.1, where Cicero begins by stating that the question concerning the gods is important for the *moderation* of religion (*ad moderandam religionem necessaria*), and then later implies that the loss of religion is more to be lamented for its social and political consequences than for any potential insult to the gods (1.2.4). For a serious examination of Cicero's "impiety," see Frederick J. CROSSON, "Cicero and Augustine," 1994 Bradley Lecture, Boston College, unpublished; also, CROSSON, "Structure and Meaning in St. Augustine's *Confessions*," in *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, Vol. LXIII (Washington, DC: ACPA, 1990).

144. *De div.* 1.4.7.

145. *De ordine* 1.1.1.

146. *Ibid.*, 1.5.12; cf. *De natura* 2.14.37; 2.53.133.

147. *De ordine* 1.5.14; cf. *De fato* 14.32,33.

148. *De ordine* 1.6.15. Cf. 1.3.9; cf. *De div.* 2.25.59.

149. *De ordine* 1.6.15.

150. *Ibid.*, 1.7.19.

151. *Ibid.*, 1.10.28.

topics, such as what “to be with God” and “to be moved” mean¹⁵², until Alypius is brought in to replace Licentius¹⁵³. It is Trygetius, however, who makes a distinction which greatly delights Augustine, namely, that things which are disordered still fall within a greater order when seen in their larger context¹⁵⁴. But when the question of reconciling God’s justice with evil’s genesis is introduced, the discussion on order grows hopelessly disordered¹⁵⁵. Almost half way through Book Two Augustine thus shifts to a consideration of a liberal education¹⁵⁶. The rest of the dialogue from this point on is essentially a monologue covering the kind of students fit for this study, the content of their study, and – on account of a detailed consideration of measure (*modus*) – an enunciation of the soul’s knowledge of itself and God. By the time his lecture is finished, night has descended, the interlocutors are again “filled with joy and great hope” (*laetisque omnibus et multum sperantibus*)¹⁵⁷ and a single lamp is lit to guide their way back to the house.

Despite the numerous twists in plot (not all of which, for brevity’s sake, have been recounted here), the lesson of the dialogue is rather straightforward. The congruence of God’s omnipotence and evil’s existence is understood only by the rare soul that knows itself¹⁵⁸, or to borrow a phrase from Augustine, that knows its own knowing (*scit scire*)¹⁵⁹. The reason for this lies in the fact that God – and the order by which He is known – are somehow outside of space and time. Therefore, to begin to understand either, one must first understand a reality totally distinct from the spatio-temporal world. Knowing one’s own knowing enables one to do precisely this, since every act of knowing, being only partially conditioned by space and time, is in some way a participation in the eternal. This is why Augustine is so insistent in the cover letter about the importance of self-knowledge and why the dialogue’s seemingly unrelated topics actually share one thing in common: they all concern the intellectual conversion whereby one comes to know what it is to know¹⁶⁰. Self-knowledge is the key to solving the riddle of the dialogue, not because it provides the answer, but because it provides the wherewithal to understand the answer¹⁶¹.

152. *Ibid.*, 2.2.4ff.

153. *Ibid.*, 2.3.8ff.

154. *Ibid.*, 2.4.11.

155. *Ibid.*, 2.7.22-24.

156. *Ibid.*, 2.7.24. The consideration, incidentally, is reminiscent of a passage in Cicero’s *De re publica* (3.1-4).

157. *Ibid.*, 2.20.54.

158. *Ibid.*, 1.1.3; 1.2.3.

159. *Ibid.*, 2.13.38.

160. For example, the discussions on movement (2.1.3-2.2.4 & 2.6.18,19), being with God (2.2.4-7 & 2.7.20), and folly (2.3.8-2.4.11) all try to stimulate in the reader crucial components of intellectual conversion.

161. Such is the thesis of Michael P. Steppat’s perceptive *Die Schola von Cassiciacum: Augustins “De ordine”* (Frankfurt: Bock und Herchen Verlag, 1980). Cf. Jean DOIGNON,

If the lesson is straightforward, however, the appropriation of it is quite the opposite. As Augustine makes abundantly clear, knowing thyself or God's order is no easy matter¹⁶². Thus, to assist the reader in wrestling with the angel of intelligible reality, Augustine has left several helpful clues in the text. The footprints begin with the cover letter itself, wherein Augustine promises Zenobius (to whom the dialogue is dedicated) that he will attain all of the precious kinds of knowledge listed above if "he places himself in and co-fits himself to the very order" of the work (*praesertim si te in ipsum ordinem, de quo ad te scribo, meliora eligens inserere atque coaptare volueris*)¹⁶³. The word "co-fit" (*coaptare*) is unusual, appearing only one other time, in a passage where Augustine mentions the catastrophe of poorly-educated or feeble-minded men trying to comprehend "the whole harmony and co-fittingness of things" (*universam rerum coaptationem atque concentum*)¹⁶⁴. Juxtaposing the two statements, Augustine seems to be suggesting that grasping the interconnectedness of being can be achieved by grasping the interconnectedness of his work. As if to confirm this hunch, Augustine leaves a telling example, again in the cover letter. In his description of the soul's coming to know itself, he uses the image of the circle, in which its radii, no matter how innumerable or long, all converge to the center¹⁶⁵. The image is instructive enough as it stands, but is further demonstrated in a delightfully subtle way: the passage appears in the central paragraph of the cover letter, with the word "center" appearing in the exact middle.

If indeed there is an isomorphism between the text and the reality it signifies, a statement appearing later which calls the *De ordine* a "chain of written words" (*scriptorum quasi vinculo*)¹⁶⁶ is more than just a casual comparison: it is a blueprint. A closer examination of the first half of the dialogue provides evidence for this claim. Recurring motifs – such as mice, the leaves, the changing use of "to move" (*moveor*), or the "whither" and "whence" of various questions – look forward and backward in such a way that they constitute links between the separate segments of the dialogue. This interlocking gradualism is not unlike the liberal education which Augustine advocates in the second half of Book Two and which is described, it should be noted, as reason's being drawn by "a certain natural chain into the society" of the rational (*naturali quodam vinculo in eorum societate adstringebatur*)¹⁶⁷.

Dialogues Philosophiques: L'Ordre, 4/2 (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1997), pp. 332,333, 373.

162. Cf. *De ordine* 1.1.1, 2.11.30.

163. *Ibid.*, 1.2.4.

164. *Ibid.*, 1.1.2.

165. *Ibid.*, 1.2.3.

166. *Ibid.*, 1.9.27. Cf. 1.5.13, where Augustine describes the less studious being as "drawn – as if by chains of questions – into the society of discussants" (*cum disserentium societati quasi vinculis interrogationum coartuntur*).

167. *Ibid.*, 2.12.35.

Recognizing these patterns in the text is certainly not the only way to appropriate the intellectual conversion Augustine is advocating. The progression from reading the sensible world to reading to the soul to reading – albeit remotely – God Himself is stated clearly enough throughout. But what the silent pedagogy adds is another step which can only aid in this difficult conversion, wherein sharpening our minds on the knotty parts of the text enables us to unravel the same problems found in that of the world. Thus, the more proficiently we can co-fit ourselves to the dialogue’s recurring schemes, the better we will discern first the patterns of the universe and then *the* pattern by which the universe is made one.

Not surprisingly, shades of this pedagogy are present in Cicero as well. Augustine’s example of the circle’s center is taken directly from the *Tusculanae disputationes* (which also appears in the middle of the paragraph¹⁶⁸), while the use of a self-referential frame is at least hinted at by Cicero’s joke that the *De fato* was prevented by *chance* from turning out the way he had intended¹⁶⁹. Moreover, Augustine’s insistence that understanding incorporeal reality is the key to solving the problems of providence takes its precedent from Cicero. In almost the same passage from the *Tusculanae disputationes* Cicero speaks of how, because of our proclivity to the carnal, only men of the greatest character can “call the mind away from the senses and remove thought from habit” (*sevocare mentem a sensibus et cogitationem ab consuetudine abducere*)¹⁷⁰. In the *De natura deorum* Balbus, the Stoic representative, states that “nothing is more difficult than removing the mind’s insight from the eye’s habit” (*nihil est difficilius a consuetudine oculorum aciem mentis abducere*)¹⁷¹ and, as if to confirm the statement ironically, proceeds to describe divine nature as material. (Cotta, the Academic spokesman, gently points out the contradiction later on.)¹⁷² And when in the *De fato* Cicero is criticizing Epicurus for his failed attempt to reconcile free will and fate, he hints that the solution could easily be had were it conceived in terms of the intelligible rather than the sensible¹⁷³.

CONCLUSION

Augustine understood, as we no longer do, the genius of Cicero and the hidden treasures in his work. His respect was such that even unmasking Cicero’s

168. *Ibid.*, 1.17.41.

169. 1.1. Unfortunately the mutilated state of Cicero’s trilogy as we have it prevents a more thorough comparison.

170. 1.16.38.

171. *De natura* 2.17.45.

172. *Ibid.*, 3.8.20.

173. *De fato* 11.23. One final example of the traces of Cicero in the *De ordine* is Augustine’s introduction of order in terms of a mental reaction (1.3.8). Cf. *De div.* 2.22.49.

secrets was done in order *not* to offend the authority of this “most learned man” (*doctissimum*)¹⁷⁴. A sure sign of this respect are the manifold ways in which Augustine imitates Cicero, from the replication of his techniques in all of their subtlety to the constant if quiet response to particular dialogues. But imitating need not mean aping. Augustine altered Cicero’s dialogue so that an esoteric control of the truth would yield to an economic reserve in its expression. The Augustinian dialogue keeps intact the facility for concealment and arousing the perspicacious, yet it in a way that involves no noble lies. In its place stand truths derived from divine revelation and a vantage point from which the philosopher’s *trompes-l’oeil* can be openly examined. Moreover, assent to Christian doctrine allows, paradoxically, an even more ambitious exploration of nature to be made¹⁷⁵. The name of Christ, that source of contention between Augustine and Alypius, occurs in only three separate places of the Cassiciacum dialogues¹⁷⁶ and to all appearances is a very minor alteration; yet its significance – when viewed along with its effects – is so great as to constitute a transformation rather than a modification of the philosophical dialogue.

Indeed, just as Cicero, with his manipulation of Cato’s histories, establishes himself as the new Cato, Augustine, with his transformation of the Ciceronian dialogue, unwittingly becomes the new Cicero. Just as Cicero uses oratory to introduce philosophy into the Republic, Augustine uses oratory to introduce Christianity into the Empire. And just as Cicero was hailed as the savior of Rome, Augustine would live to be called the second founder of Christianity¹⁷⁷.

Finally, the correlation between the two sets of dialogues we have examined could shed light on what is the true nature of Augustine’s earliest writings. Rather than suggest a naïve neo-Platonism or a defective embrace of the Christian faith, the Cassiciacum dialogues are perhaps best seen as a Christian response to classical Latin philosophy which, by appropriating the serious turn to nature and the method of dialectical disputation, is even capable of beating the philosopher at his own game. Such a view would not deny the enormous importance of Plotinus in Augustine’s thought and would even set into sharper relief the precise nature of his influence. In fact, acknowledging Augustine’s extraordinary synthesis of the metaphysics of Plotinus with the philosophy of Cicero¹⁷⁸ could be the decisive first step in putting to rest a century of learned dispute.

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174. *Contra Academicos* 3.7.14.

175. One salient example is Augustine’s forays into the human mind, which surpass even Plotinus’.

176. *De ordine* 1.8.21; 1.10.29; 1.11.32.

177. JEROME, *Ep.* 141. Cf. POSSIDIUS, *Vita* 7 (*PL* 32. col. 39).

178. Cf. Ernest FORTIN, Book Review of Robert J. O’Connell’s *St. Augustine’s Early Theory of Man*, in *Ernest L. Fortin: Collected Essays*, Vol. 1 (NY: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1996), p. 311.

ABSTRACT : To fully understand St. Augustine's Cassiciacum dialogues, one must understand how they relate to the philosophical works of Marcus Tullius Cicero. Contrary to recent opinion, Cicero was a serious philosopher whose modification of the Platonic dialogue and public embrace of Academic skepticism successfully introduced the quest for wisdom into Roman life. No one was more acutely aware of this fact than Augustine, which explains why his first works after his conversion were designed to respond to (and in some ways to usurp) the Ciceronian legacy. Specifically, Augustine's *Contra Academicos* is a response to Cicero's *Academica* ; and his *De ordine* is a response to Cicero's *De finibus* and *Tusculanae disputationes* ; and his *De ordine* is a response to Cicero's trilogy on providence, the *De natura deorum*, *De divinatione*, and *De fato*. Recognizing the connection between these works sheds new light on the meaning and importance of the Cassiciacum dialogues.

RÉSUMÉ : Pour apprécier les dialogues de Cassiciacum, il est important de comprendre leurs rapports avec l'œuvre philosophique de Cicéron. Contrairement à ce que certains ont pu penser, pour Cicéron, l'activité philosophique est capitale. Les modifications qu'il fait subir au dialogue platonicien et son adhésion ouverte au scepticisme académique ont aidé à introduire la recherche de la sagesse dans la vie romaine. Saint Augustin, plus que tout autre, était conscient de ce fait, ce qui explique pourquoi les premières œuvres qui ont suivi sa conversion avaient pour but de répondre (et, d'une certaine façon, d'usurper) l'héritage cicéronien. Plus spécifiquement, son *Contra Academicos* est une réponse à l'*Academica* de Cicéron. Son *De beata vita* est une réponse au *De finibus* et aux *Tusculanae disputationes*. Et son *De ordine* est une réponse à la trilogie cicéronienne sur la providence, les *De natura deorum*, *De divinatione* et *De fato*. La reconnaissance de ces rapports jette un jour nouveau sur le sens et l'importance des dialogues de Cassiciacum.