

Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics

AWAKENING TO LIFE: Augustine's Admonition to (would-be) Philosophers

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INTRODUCTION

From the earliest point in his post-conversion career, Augustine plumbed the origin and destiny of life. Far from a stable status he could readily rely on, life presented itself as a question that demanded his response. In this article, I explore the manner in which Augustine approaches life. Focusing on his first two dialogues, *De Academicis* (386)¹ and *De beata vita* (386),² I trace

¹ This work is more familiar to us as *Contra Academicos*, though this title apparently reflects a later emendation (see *retr.*, 1.1.1). The later title also implies a more polemical stance toward scepticism that contrasts with the content of the dialogue itself; as Augustine also indicates around AD 386 (in a letter to Hermogenianus, an early reader of *De Academicis*), his intention was never to “attack” the Academics, but to “imitate” their method of philosophy. Cf. *ep.*, 1.1. For the earlier title *De Academicis* see Conybeare, Catherine, *The Irrational Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

² The so-called Cassiciacum discourse includes four complete dialogues, and *De Academicis* and *De beata vita* are the first two in the series. On the narrative ordering of the dialogues, compare the contrasting interpretations in Cary, Phillip, “What Licentius Learned: A Narrative Reading of the Cassiciacum Dialogues,” in *Augustinian Studies* 29:1 (1998): 161-3,

Augustine's efforts to re-position his readers so that they stand before the question of life, and learn how to respond. This process Augustine calls "awakening" to life (*evigilare, excitare*).³ On the premise that human beings have fallen asleep to the question of life, Augustine labours to wake them up to it by inviting them to philosophise, submitting to the discipline of philosophy as a "way of life."⁴ The mechanics of this process are what this article seeks to divulge. After placing the above dialogues against their Ciceronian-Academic backdrop, I present Augustine's "cogito"⁵ argument as a mechanism for awakening (*b. vita*), and frame it within his attempt to transform would-be philosophers into lovers of wisdom (*Acad.*). I conclude that Augustine's early approach to life centres less on a quest to define it, and more on a quest to embody it (and the desire for it) as an access point to God.

I. PHILOSOPHY, PRIDE, AND SELF-DECEPTION

If the crucial process in awakening to life involves embodiment of desire, this in turn implies alienation between desire and the lover. To overcome this alienation, or more precisely self-deception, the lover must "come down" from the heights of vanity and pride, and re-enter his or her (dis)position as a traveller on the way. In this section, our goal is to situate this process against the philosophical backdrop of Academic scepticism, focussing in particular on Cicero's "mitigated scepticism."

and Kenyon, Eric, "The Order of the Cassiciacum Dialogues," in *Augustinian Studies* 42:2 (2011): 173-188.

³ The verbs *evigilare* and *excitare* appear at *Acad.* 1.1.3, and re-surface at different points during the Cassiciacum discourse. Correlative verbs such as *erigere* and *surgere* also feature in this period, and often mark a decisive turning point or development in the journey (e.g. *Acad.*, 1.9.24, *b. vita*, 1.4).

⁴ Hadot, Pierre, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995). For Hadot's thesis applied to Augustine see Stock, Brian, *Augustine's Inner Dialogue: The Philosophical Soliloquy in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁵ For the history behind use of the term "cogito" in Augustinian studies, see Bermon, Emmanuel, *Le Cogito dans la Pensée de Saint Augustin* (Paris: Vrin, 2001), pp. 9-30.

A Tale of Wayward Seafarers

Augustine's summons to "come down" from the heights of intellectual pride is first discovered in the early dialogue *De beata vita*. The focus centres on philosophy as a route to true happiness, and the question suspended over it is, why do human beings, who desire the happy life, so often fail to find what they seek?⁶

Not surprisingly, Augustine answers this by appealing to desire. As Jean-Luc Marion observes regarding the state of modern philosophy, practitioners have by and large "forsaken love, dismissed it without a concept and finally thrown it to the dark and worried margins of their sufficient reason—along with the repressed, the unsaid, and the unmentionable."⁷ So too Augustine, we may say, picks a bone with his contemporaries for failing not only to contemplate but even to feel the weight of love.⁸ Their chief epistemological problem is not "simple mistakeness" but a deep-seated "self-deception" that underwrites their approach.⁹

In his account of the main barrier between would-be philosophers and the happy life, Augustine tells the tale of three seafarers on a voyage of desire. His tale explores the different ways that desire can get derailed on account of an alteration in the seafarer's objective. The tale runs as follows. The first seafarer, after paddling a little distance from the shore, decides to call it quits and exult in his achievements (*superbia*). The second seafarer travels further into the open sea, but soon devotes himself to the acquisition of pleasure and fame (*cupiditas*); and third seafarer, though travelling a little further than the first two, falls victim to a fascination with celestial bodies (*curiositas*). Now whether or not Augustine's tale takes its cue from 1 John 2:15-16,¹⁰ as I suggest, its implications remain transparent on the importance of desire. But the greatest obstacle to face the

⁶ *b. vita*, 1.1.

⁷ Marion, Jean-Luc, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 1.

⁸ Cf. *conf.*, 13.9.10.

⁹ Mathewes, Charles T., 'Augustinian Anthropology: Interior Intimo Meo,' in *Journal of Religious Ethics* 27:2 (2009), p. 201.

¹⁰ For another account see Jackson, M. G. St. A., "Augustine All at Sea: An Interpretation of the Opening Paragraphs of *De beata vita*," in *Studia Patristica* 18.4 (1990): 71-77.

seafarers comes after these descriptions, in which Augustine presents his earliest account of the sin of human pride.

On the cusp of finally entering the “harbour of philosophy” [*portus philosophiae*], the hinterland of the happy life, Augustine’s seafarers run up against a serious threat to their advancement, an obstacle Augustine depicts as “one immense mountain.”¹¹ The danger is only apparent to the discerning and wise, however, for the mountain shines brightly with an attractive, enticing light, beckoning wearied seafarers to take refuge on its slope. At this point Augustine ceases as impartial narrator to deliver a brief judgement on what the mountain represents. For seafarers it entices with its promise of refuge, the mountain elevates their standpoint, “quells” their desire [*satisfacere*], and encourages them to “heap scorn” on their companions below [*despicere*]. At the same time that the new arrivals take delight in this refuge, seasoned mountain climbers issue warnings on behalf of their companions. They point out to them a safer road, the “nearness of the land,” which offers wearied travellers a *locum securitatis*—though presumably one less attractive than the offer of the mountain. These images become significant later on in our analysis when we examine Augustine’s cogito and critique of the Academics.

Having voiced these concerns about the perilous mountain, Augustine issues a final judgement on the “vainglory” of the pursuit [*superbum studium inanissimae gloriae*]. His point is that pride offers a temporary elevation at the expense of one’s desire to seek and find the truth. Eclipsing this desire leads to a false form of transcendence that threatens the stability and possibility of philosophy; for without desire, philosophy ceases to have relevance to life.

To be clear, Augustine’s seafarers are no mere victims of the mountain, but implicated in the development of their affective (self-)deception. Their decision to seek refuge in this particular posture reflects a desire to avoid the prospect of committing any error. The sad irony of this desire, which turns its back to the journey, is that it guarantees self-deception at the fundamental level, the level of life itself. Before discussing how this happens, though, let us decode Augustine’s metaphor by attending to his criticism of the Academic method.

¹¹ *b. vita*, 1.3 (and following).

Cicero's Mitigated Scepticism

Although it could be argued that the mountain represents the pride of the Platonists,¹² the more likely object of Augustine's criticism is his focus in *De Academicis*, the New Academy.¹³ The Academics define philosophy as a dialectical process in which the goal is not to find the truth, but to embody the perfect search for it. The two pillars of Academic theory, both addressed in *De Academicis*, include the belief that human beings cannot apprehend the truth (*katalepsis*), and that acquiring wisdom requires suspension of intellectual assent (*epochē*).¹⁴ Insofar as these pillars stand in the way of finding the truth, Augustine rejects them as inconsistent with the ideals of Christian Platonism.

Even so, it is possible to overstate his rejection, at least as it pertains to his goals in *De Academicis* (not *Contra Academicos*!). As recent scholars have argued,¹⁵ a common error among commentators on *De Academicis* is their tendency to overplay its epistemological tension, while ignoring its moral framework. In particular, Augustine's decision to engage the Academics turns in part on a development in Cicero's "mitigated scepticism." This development commands attention for the simple but essential fact that Cicero alters the conditions in which philosophy is believed to operate, weakening Academic *epochē* to the point of dissolution.

Epistemologically, Cicero argues against the grain of Greek tradition that wisdom cannot be separated from apprehension of some truth. Engaging in pure

¹² For discussion of this possibility see Testard, Maurice, *Saint Augustin et Cicéron*, vol. 1 (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1958), pp. 167-8.

¹³ Cf. *Acad.*, 3.14.30, where the mountain of pride is identified as Academic *epochē*.

¹⁴ Kirwan, Christopher, *Augustine* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 16.

¹⁵ The literature discussing Cicero's influence on Augustine has blossomed. See Curley, Augustine J., *Augustine's Critique of Skepticism: A Study of "Contra Academicos"* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997); Foley, Michael P., "Cicero, Augustine, and the Philosophical Roots of the Cassiciacum Dialogues," *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 45 (1999): 51-77; Cary, Phillip, *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Harding, Brian, "Skepticism, Illumination and Christianity in Augustine's *Contra Academicos*," in *Augustinian Studies* 34.2 (2003): 197-212; Harding, "Epistemology and Eudaimonism in Augustine's *Contra Academicos*," *Augustinian Studies* 37:2 (2006): 247-71; Harding, *Augustine and Roman Virtue* (London: Continuum, 2008); and Topping, Ryan, *Happiness and Wisdom: Augustine's Early Theology of Education* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012).

dialectics as an end-in-itself yields nothing for the practitioner save an endless repetition. His departure from ancient scepticism has historical precedent. The Greek philosopher Carneades made a similar break with tradition in his attempt to answer the Stoic charge of immoral *apraxia*. The Stoics argued that defining wisdom as suspension of assent forces the Academic to lead a life of inactivity and moral detachment.¹⁶ Carneades accepted this basic premise, but then sought to clarify that the wise man, though he apprehends no truth, can still operate on certain impressions he deems to be “persuasive” [*to pithanon*]. In other words, Carneades distinguished between an apprehension of *the* truth, and an apprehension of more persuasive or more plausible truth-claims. Whatever Carneades intended by way of the content of *pithanon* (the matter is disputed),¹⁷ its evolution follows a clear trajectory toward an epistemic interpretation. By the time Cicero translates it into the Latin *veri simile* and *probabilis*,¹⁸ the concept means more than just a lucky guess. For Cicero, it means the wise man can know something “truth-like,” enabling him to reach an informed opinion. By holding that “the Academic method allows for progress towards the truth,”¹⁹ Cicero mitigated the stringent conditions in which the philosopher performs *epochē*, and introduced a degree of optimism to the process of seeking truth. Not only does this implicate how he models the Academic method; it also impacts Augustine’s reception of the Academic tradition.

Morally, Cicero alters the conditions of philosophy by emphasising the importance of desire for the truth. According to Harald Thorsrud, “[t]he fundamental claim of mitigated scepticism is that we should adopt the most rationally convincing, probable view because it is most likely to be true, and because it is worth risking error in order to believe what is true.”²⁰ The idea of

¹⁶ For further discussion see Thorsrud, Harald, *Ancient Scepticism* (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2009), p. 75f; and Charles Brittain’s introduction to Cicero in *On Academic Scepticism* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2006), p. xxiii. Carneades’ legacy is discussed by Cicero at *Academica* 2.10.32.

¹⁷ Obdrzalek, Suzanne, “Living in Doubt: Carneades’ *Pithanon* Reconsidered,” in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 31 (2006): 243-79 (esp. n. 2); and Thorsrud, *Ancient Scepticism*, pp. 78-81.

¹⁸ Thorsrud, *Ancient Scepticism*, p. 88. Cf. *Acad.*, 2.7.16f for Augustine’s discussion of *veri simile*.

¹⁹ Thorsrud, *Ancient Scepticism*, p. 88.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

“risking error,” of course, is anathema to ancient scepticism, since to avoiding error achieves a posture of absolute suspension, which is wisdom itself. But for Cicero, the Academic method represents a mere means to wisdom, not wisdom itself. To confine love of wisdom to suspension of assent merely undermines philosophy’s *raison d’être* which is knowledge of the truth.²¹ In the *Academica*, Cicero “confesses” his own intellectual desire not only to *seek* the truth, but also to *find* it. “I am burning with the desire to discover the truth and my arguments express what I really think. How could I not desire to find the truth when I rejoice if I find something truth-like?”²² To Cicero, it is one thing withholding my assent, quite another suspending it and declaring myself wise.

In Augustine’s case, Cicero’s intuition about the nature of desire stands to confirm one’s genuine experience of seeking true wisdom. Attracted at one time to philosophical scepticism, Augustine knew enough not to trust it with the care of his soul since he recognised its ultimate endpoint was dissipation of desire, despair (*desperatio veri*).²³ Put another way, Cicero caused Augustine to “stand more upright” in the search for truth (*Hortensius*),²⁴ only to fail at offering him

²¹ Cicero’s definition of philosophy includes knowledge of some kind, as Augustine notes at *Acaad.* 1.6.16. According to Brian Harding, *Augustine and Roman Virtue*, p. 9, Cicero defines philosophy as a situated process that entails taking risks and forming opinions. Harding writes,

“[w]hence, at the time the initial choice for a philosophical life—and with it, adherence to a philosophical school—is made one is not in the position to know the truth, but only seeking the truth. The philosopher, therefore, does not begin with the purity of reason but rather begins immersed in the heteronomous cave of received opinions, not yet fully understood. Philosophy, as the search for *rerum humanarum divinarumque scientiam* insofar as it begins with opinions, including partially understood philosophical doctrines, is always already *fides quaerens intellectum*.”

²² Cicero, *Academica*, 2.20.65-6, trans. Charles Brittain.

²³ For the phrase *desperatio veri* see *conf.* 6.1.1, *ep.*, 1.3, *Acaad.*, 2.1.1, 2.3.8, and *retr.*, 1.1.1.

²⁴ Cf. *b. vita*, 1.4, where Augustine writes: *et ubi factus erectior, illam caliginem dispuli, mihi que persuasi docentibus potius quam iubentibus esse credendum* (‘and when I became more upright, having dispelled that fog, I was persuaded that I should yield to those who promised to teach me rather than command obedience’). Context indicates that ‘became more upright’ refers back to Cicero’s influence, which was wholly positive. See O’Connell, R.J., “On Augustine’s First Conversion: Factus Erectior (De Beata Vita 4),” *Augustinian Studies* 17 (1986): 15-29.

any hope that his search might be fulfilled (*Academica*).²⁵ The disjunction in Cicero's philosophy between seeking truth and finding truth stands in contrast to the unity of Matthew 7:7, a verse Augustine uses to anchor his epistemology.²⁶ Thus measured against the command of Christ to *seek and you shall find*, Cicero's philosophy extends the invitation to *ask, seek, knock*, but fails to extend the attendant promise of Christ to *receive, find, enter*. Since the promise supports the prospect of the venture's success, its absence in any philosophy eventually leads the soul to despair. Accordingly, Cicero's failure to give philosophy a sustainable basis implies the success of his philosophical exhortation to awaken true desire.²⁷ Unleashing the powerful current of love that drives the search for wisdom, Cicero caused Augustine to face the void of his desire for truth, and to recognise its fulfilment must be achieved by divine grace (i.e. illumination). In short, engaging scepticism yields one benefit at least: that the human heart learns to "face the question" that desire for truth implies. "Therefore, that divine element in you, whatever it may be...that element, I say, which has been lulled to sleep by the lethargy of this life, a hidden Providence has decided to awaken [*excitare*] by the various hard reverses you have suffered. Wake up! Wake up, I beg you! [*evigila, evigila oro te!*]."²⁸

To Seek and (not) Find Truth

If wisdom entails knowledge of truth, and truth and wisdom bring happiness, then no philosopher can attain wisdom and happiness by suspension of assent. However, the challenge lies not in "proving" this connection, but in awakening one's desire for truth as an indispensable good. To this end, Augustine "uses" scepticism as a convenient point of departure for inculcating proper awareness of one's desire for the truth. "Not even in joking would I dare to attack the Academics. After all, how would the authority of such great men fail to disturb me, if I did not believe that they stood for a far different view than is commonly

²⁵ For a similar account of Cicero's influence see Topping, *Happiness and Wisdom*, pp. 95-125.

²⁶ Cf. *Acad.*, 2.3.9.

²⁷ As Augustine confirms at *b. vita*, 1.4 and *conf.*, 3.4.7-8.

²⁸ *Acad.* 1.1.3, trans. Peter King (all translations of *Acad.*, by King).

believed?"²⁹ This far different view Augustine ascribes to the New Academy is the claim that the Academy was the guard of Platonic wisdom.³⁰ This claim, though historically incorrect, reinforces Augustine's viewpoint that the Academics are not the enemy but the ally to "true philosophy."³¹ Their contribution centres specifically on the call to philosophy. The first half of Christ's command in Matthew 7:7, *ask, seek, knock*, permits Augustine to make use of or "imitate" the Academics in order to awaken would-be philosophers to their desire for wisdom. But why the roundabout strategy? Why not a direct appeal to Matthew 7:7, so as to reveal the true philosophy to be none other than Christ himself?

If only one could lead desire in such a direct manner! Augustine is too aware of the tendency to self-deception to present Christ as "answer" to a half-understood question. At Cassiciacum, he is committed to cultivating desire as precondition to hearing the question to which Christ gives the answer.³² His purpose in *De Academicis* is not to vanquish the Academics, but to set the stage for would-be philosophers to become true philosophers. What Cicero had begun to do with his mitigation of *epochē*, Augustine intends to drive to its ultimate conclusion by awakening true desire to face the void of uncertainty. In book I, he invites his students to embrace the life of philosophy by arising from their lethargic state to engage the Academics. As a preliminary step to their development, offering a "foretaste" of things to come,³³ their discussion introduces a tension between the posture of the Academics, and the prospect of ever finding what one sets out to seek. In simple terms, the debate circles around one particular question: can a philosopher genuinely seek the truth without believing that he will find it?³⁴

Much hangs on how we understand the qualifying term *genuinely*, but Augustine leaves little doubt as to its importance for his argument. In the preface

²⁹ *ep.*, 1.1, trans. Edmund Hill.

³⁰ Augustine derives this view from Porphyry and Cicero.

³¹ *Acad.*, 3.19.42.

³² Augustine makes this clear at several points, e.g. *Ibid.*, 1.9.25 and 2.7.17.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1.1.4.

³⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, 1.3.9 and *passim*.

to book I, addressed to Romanianus, Augustine stipulates that the true philosophy deigns to show the truth to its “true lovers” [*veris amatoribus*].³⁵ Also in his preface to book II, again addressed to Romanianus, Augustine singles out the Academics as a positive influence insofar as they have driven Romanianus to seek out the truth. “You [Romanianus] have often been angry at the Academicians: the more severely, in fact, the less knowledgeable you were about them; the more gladly, because you were led on by your *love of the truth*.”³⁶ Even so, Augustine explains to him that the process is incomplete, and that perceiving truth will not happen “unless you [Romanianus] give yourself over *completely* to philosophy.” The truth is no abstract proposition or impression, but a good that one must desire and seek in order to obtain. In the preface to book I, Augustine clarifies this point by appealing to the new (dis)position Romanianus inhabits. Something—or rather someone [*quis*]—has awakened his friend’s desires and set him on a course to “another happy life...one that alone is the happy life.”³⁷ This leads Augustine to make a plea on behalf of Romanianus that he seizes the opportunity divine providence has given him. “Therefore, that divine element in you, whatever it may be...that element, I say, which has been lulled to sleep by the lethargy of this life, a hidden Providence has decided to awaken by the various hard reverses you have suffered.”

“Wake up! Wake up, I beg you!” In invoking a “divine element” on the verge of awakening, Augustine appeals to not just reason but reason *with desire*. Coming alive to the only happiness that can satisfy his soul, Romanianus takes a crucial step to becoming a true philosopher thanks in part to his exposure to the Academic sceptics. Also thanks in part to this exposure, however, Romanianus must face the terrible void that haunts true desire: the prospect that such desire may never attain fulfilment. And yet here is exactly where Augustine wants Romanianus to be, and exactly where he wants his students to enter into as well. The Academics set in motion the pursuit of philosophy; now they pose a serious question as to whether it can succeed.

³⁵ Ibid., 1.1.2.

³⁶ Ibid., (emphasis added).

³⁷ *Acad.*, 1.1.2.

II. WHY TRUE PHILOSOPHERS PRAY

In this next section, we examine Augustine's attempt to awaken philosophers so that they begin to hear the question of life, and learn how to respond. How does life relate to concepts of truth, wisdom, and happiness? In as much as all three concepts are predicated of Christ, Christ who proclaims *I am the way, the truth, the life* (Jn. 14:6),³⁸ Augustine's focus on life opens the way to desire for life,³⁹ which can only be fully satisfied through truth, wisdom, and happiness.

Conceiving life as part of the quest and the question of philosophy, Augustine identifies an entry point or "way in"⁴⁰ to desire, whereby the soul is (dis)positioned to hear the voice of philosophy herself.⁴¹ That way in recalls the image of the *locum securitatis*, the nearness of the land, through which the soul escapes the mountain and enters the desired harbour. What is this "place" in *De beata vita*? It is the opposite of pride, the false ascent of the soul; and it can be understood only in relation to the descent of Life itself.

He who for us is life itself descended here and endured our death and slew it by the abundance of his life. In a thunderous voice he called us to return to him, at that secret place where he came forth to us.... Surely after the descent of life, you cannot fail to wish to ascend and live? But where will you ascend when you are "set on high and have put your mouth in heaven?" (Ps. 72:9). *Come down so that you can ascend*, and make your ascent to God. For it is by climbing up against God that you have fallen. Tell souls that they should "weep in the valley of tears." (Ps. 83:7). So take them with you to God, for by his Spirit you declare these things to them if you say it burning with the fire of love.⁴²

³⁸ Cf. *b. vita*, 4.34.

³⁹ Cf. *lib. arbit.*, 3.7.21, where Augustine argues: *Quanto enim amplius esse amaveris, tanto amplius vitam aeternam desiderabi* ("The more you love to be, the more you will desire eternal life," trans. King). Hence the beginning of Augustine's blending of ontology and morality.

⁴⁰ Following the lead of Simon Harrison on the cogito, *Augustine's Way into the Will: The Theological and Philosophical Significance of "De libero arbitrio"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁴¹ Cf. *Acad.* 2.3.7.

⁴² *conf.*, 4.12.19, trans. Henry Chadwick (my emphasis).

How does Christ inform the manner in which the soul awakens to life? By showing us the way to life through desire and descent, the humility without which no lover can become a true philosopher.

The Cogito as Invitation

Though it takes time to unfold in *De Academicis*, Augustine's argument against the Academics appears straightaway in *De beata vita*. The first blow Augustine delivers comes in the form of "the cogito," the famous argument concerning the self-evidence of the soul's self-existence.⁴³ In *De beata vita*, the cogito debuts with zero fanfare and comment. The untrained eye could be excused for overlooking or ignoring it. But that is partly the point. The cogito does not punctuate the end to an argument; it is the starting point or access point to making an argument. Unlike the self-certitude established by Descartes' cogito, Augustine's cogito positions the "thinking soul" to clothe itself in humility.⁴⁴ How his cogito leads to humility will soon become clear. To set the scene first: building on discussions in *De Academicis* (whether book I or III is insignificant), Augustine now invites his entire party to take part in the exchange. This party includes his mother Monica, and his brother Navigius; and it is Navigius that Augustine's cogito is meant to assist. What assistance does it offer? To answer this, we call attention back to the admonition of veteran seafarers not to ascend the mountain of pride, but enter the place of security.

That *admonitio* conveys a hint about the perils of pride that informs Augustine's deployment of his "self-evident" argument. In response to the Academic method of suspending assent (*epochē*), Augustine presents an opportunity to affirm the self-evident as a means to both escaping pride and entering philosophy. The process unfolds as follows. After pondering Augustine's first question concerning the constituents of human nature (*Manifestum vobis videtur ex anima et corpore nos esse compositos?*),⁴⁵ Navigius

⁴³ Stock, *Augustine's Inner Dialogue*, pp. 62-120.

⁴⁴ Here is not the place to discuss the differences between Descartes and Augustine, but a balanced and insightful account can be found in Harrison, *Augustine's Way into the Will*, pp. 131-150.

⁴⁵ *b. vita*, 2.7.

indicates that he is uncertain, and decides to withhold his assent. The dilemma that this causes has less to do with the topic, but more to do with the *motive* behind Navigius' response. Does Navigius really not know the answer to this question? Or is his ignorance merely the product of a self-imposed principle, an unflinching commitment, say, to avoid error in pursuit of (Academic) "wisdom?"

If the latter, Navigius' "ignorance" poses a serious challenge to Augustine—at least insofar as Augustine has committed to his development. The precondition for advancing toward the harbour of philosophy involves a desire not only to *seek* the truth, but also to *find* it. Without that desire to seek and find the truth the basic integrity of "the love of wisdom" dissolves straightaway. Accordingly, Augustine's deployment of a self-evident argument aims to maximise the opportunity for *everyone* to philosophise. As Catherine Conybeare argues,⁴⁶ Augustine's motive in this exchange stems from a prior pedagogical principle that he models on the moral lesson of Christ's incarnate life.⁴⁷ Because of Christ, philosophy's door has swung wide open. It no longer remains the province of a select few individuals, "gentlemanly" patrons and so forth, for divine wisdom has revealed itself in the form of a servant, enabling even the uneducated (like Monica)⁴⁸ to take part in its possession. Correspondingly, Christ's incarnation translates the purpose of the cogito into an argument designed to facilitate one's entry to philosophy. As an argument *against* the Academics it is logically unrelenting; but as an argument *for* the would-be philosopher it is simple and compelling. And so, Augustine invites Navigius to affirm the self-evident: "Do you at least know that you are alive?" [*Scisne...saltem te vivere?*].⁴⁹ Maybe human nature is a difficult subject, but surely you cannot fail to know the fact that you exist!

Navigius, though, unfortunately *can* fail to know it, since it remains *in his power* either to affirm or deny it.⁵⁰ His existence may well be a self-evident truth,

⁴⁶ Conybeare, *Irrational Augustine*, p. 77 and *passim*.

⁴⁷ Cf. *ep.*, 11.4 and *v. relig.*, 24.45.

⁴⁸ For the role of Monica in *De beata vita*, as well as her larger significance for Augustine's development, see Conybeare, *Irrational Augustine*, pp. 63-138; and McWilliam, Joanne, "The Cassiciacum Autobiography," *Studia Patristica* 18.4 (1990): 14-43.

⁴⁹ *b. vita*, 2.7.

⁵⁰ I am indebted in this paragraph to Harrison's account of the cogito.

but nothing says the self-evident cannot fail to be noticed. On the contrary, the self-evident invites someone to affirm it. It does not on its own lead to an appropriate self-awareness; at best it merely offers one the opportunity to achieve it. This point is crucial. The limits of the cogito's influence as a self-evident argument stems from the fact that genuine knowledge must be arrived at through desire. To know truth, for Augustine, one must be *willing* to know it.⁵¹ Without this there is no knowledge, no truth, no dialogue.⁵² Not even the self-evident can evade this precondition; at most it calls attention to an obvious (or not so obvious) truth. And if this is so, then the self-evident serves to establish something else: namely Navigius' status in relation to philosophy. In the name of absolute scepticism Navigius can reject the self-evident, and doing so betrays his *unwillingness* to take part in the philosophical life. It exposes him as a fraud as it pertains to desire for truth, and excuses Augustine from engaging him over questions of the happy life.

In sum, by inviting Navigius to affirm the self-evident, Augustine encourages him to "come down" and embody true desire, thus resisting the magnetic pull of the mountain of Academic *epochē*. Locating himself *in* the dialogue as opposed to above it, Navigius embodies Augustine's insight into the folly of ancient scepticism which he divulges in book III of *De Academicis*: "I think a man is in error not only when he follows the false path, but also when he's not following the true one."⁵³ For Augustine, it is chiefly through our desire for fullness of life (which implies or demands desire for truth, wisdom, and happiness) that scepticism finally fails us as a workable philosophy. If the cogito paves the way for us to enter this desire, how does Augustine awaken it in *De beata vita*?

⁵¹ See whole discussion in Harrison, *Augustine's Way into the Will*, pp. 63-80.

⁵² As Harrison puts it (in connection with the cogito in *lib. arbit*): 'To one side no questions, no answers, no dialogue, no wisdom, no friendship, no happiness; to the other at least the desire for these things...The threat, and indeed the challenge, for Augustine, of scepticism lies in its capacity to induce *desperatio veri*, the despair of finding the truth'. Harrison, *Augustine's Way into the Will*, pp. 113-4.

⁵³ *Acad.*, 3.15.34.

The Weight of Desire's Demand

Before turning to address this question with *De Academicis*, we examine an argument in *De beata vita* that sheds light on the answer. As the dialogue slowly advances with an account of the happy life, Augustine pauses to remind his students just how far they have to travel. "For if I try to feed you against your wills [*invitos*] or when you aren't hungry, I will be working in vain; it would be better then to pray for you, so that you desire [*desideretis*] courses of this kind rather than those of the body only."⁵⁴ Not wishing to rush into things before students have the appetite, Augustine explains that though they tarry on a number of ancillary themes, their digressions serve to benefit their awakening to life. This includes their prior dialogue with the Academics in *De Academicis*, which Augustine plans now to revisit for the benefit of readers.

Specifically, Augustine argues against the Academic claim that wisdom consists in seeking truth, not in finding truth. His counter-claim is that desire which does not seek *in order to* find fails to qualify as a true desire influenced by truth. His argument thus boils down to a claim about desire, which invariably blurs the distinction between logic and experience. Not surprisingly, some commentators find his argument unconvincing on grounds that to seek an object does not preclude leading a happy life. Augustine's argument, it is claimed, equates the mere presence of "strong desires" with a state of being unfulfilled and thus unhappy.⁵⁵ In order to assess the matter let us turn to the argument. Note here Augustine's interest in the relation between seeking and finding, which he frames in terms of the invitation and promise of Matthew 7:7.

If it is clear that someone is not happy who does not possess what he wants—a point reason proved earlier—and no one searches for something without desiring to find it, and they [Academics] are always searching for the truth, then it follows that they desire to find it: therefore they desire to possess the discovery of truth. But by not finding it, it follows that they do not possess what they desire; and from this it follows also that they are not happy. But no one

⁵⁴ *b. vita*, 2.10.

⁵⁵ Kirwan, Christopher, *Augustine* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 18ff.

is wise who is not happy; therefore the Academics are not wise.⁵⁶

The first line contains the premise to which Kirwan objects: happiness entails not just seeking but finding the thing sought. It is possible, however, that one can seek an object and enjoy a happy life. Thus it does not follow that the Academics are mistaken. It seems as if Augustine could agree with Kirwan to a point. The Academics divorce happiness from knowledge of the truth, and this allows them to practise philosophy without falling to despair. The question, though, is not whether one can assume this intellectual posture—clearly one can. The question is whether this posture properly conforms itself to the truth. In Augustine’s view, to desire truth *in the genuine sense* is to desire its possession as essential to happiness. Desire that seeks the truth, but does not wish to find it, fails to be shaped *by* the truth it claims to have sought.⁵⁷ Of course, one can argue that the truth does not matter, or that happiness depends on more than just knowledge of truth. But in the case of the Academics, Augustine’s main objection stands: the Academics are disingenuous about the nature of true desire.

As it happens, Augustine’s students will respond to this argument in a way that illustrates his point about the burden of weighty desire. Whereas Licentius resists the argument in the name of his scepticism (which he defended in *Acad.* 1), Trygetius finds confirmation in the argument’s reasoning, proclaiming: “I am glad that for so long I have remained hostile to those [Academics]. For I do not know by what nature impelling or, to speak more truly, by God that I, not knowing in what way that they may be refuted, nevertheless greatly resisted them.”⁵⁸ Like Romanianus having woken up by the work of a hidden Providence, Trygetius acknowledges the divine origins of his desire to find the truth, which served as a kind of bulwark against the enticing Academics. His is a

⁵⁶ *b. vita*, 2.14.

⁵⁷ For the deficiency in Kirwan’s argument here see Harding, “Epistemology and Eudaimonism,” pp. 249-50, n. 7. A similar argument to Kirwan’s is developed by O’Daly, Gerard, “The Response to Skepticism and the Mechanisms of Cognition,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, trans. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 160f. For critique of O’Daly, following similar lines to our argument above, see Topping, *Happiness and Wisdom*, pp. 119-20.

⁵⁸ *b. vita*, 2.14.

weighty desire awake to the truth; and it enables him to hear the question of life in the life of philosophy.

Hearing the Question

Turning now to book III of *De Academicis*, we offer up a new account of how the dialogue unfolds by attending to the process of hearing the question. Our first task is to explore how the dialogue unfolds as more than just an argument, but a call to be present. In the first pages of book III, Augustine attempts the following feat. Interrogating his opponent's view on what the wise man knows, he strives to bring his opponent into a state of self-awareness. Alypius, Augustine's "opponent" stands to defend the Academics; but what Augustine really wants to know is what *Alypius himself thinks*, a task requiring Alypius to come down from his lofty heights. For Augustine, Alypius' capacity to "hear the question" of life turns on where he stands in relation to the harbour of philosophy. Does he long to *know* truth, *possess* wisdom, *experience* true happiness? And if he does—if he *genuinely* does—he is prepared to take a risk.

In book III it is Alypius, Augustine's friend and fellow traveller, who attempts to defend the sceptics against Augustine's full critique. After exchanging a few words about their commitment to finding truth—an important precondition, I have argued⁵⁹—Augustine draws a distinction between the philosopher and wise man,⁶⁰ and asks Alypius to identify what constitutes the difference. Initially Alypius defines the difference in terms of lack and possession. The wise man, he argues, "definitely has the possession of some things that the devotee [of wisdom] is only eager to have."⁶¹ However, when pressed to divulge the content of this possession, Alypius has to own up to a potential contradiction. If the wise man possesses nothing, as the Academics argue, and the philosopher possesses nothing, for he is still seeking wisdom, in what sense the distinction remains is decidedly unclear. What makes the wise man wise except wisdom itself? And

⁵⁹ *Acad.*, 3.1.1.

⁶⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, 3.3.5f.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 3.3.5.

wisdom is surely something, not nothing, points out Augustine; so how does Alypius defend the difference between the wise man and philosopher?

In response to this, Alypius shifts the focus to the wise man himself. Rather than offer his opinion on what *seems to him* to be the case, he speaks in terms of what *seems to the wise man* with regard to his possession.⁶² Alypius perceives well enough the possible tension; now he tries to evade it by speaking in impersonal terms. Augustine will have none of it. In response, he implores Alypius not to hide behind the wise man,⁶³ but to step forward with his opinion on the question at hand. “I’m not asking what it seems to you that *seems* to the wise man, but instead whether it seems to *you* that the wise man *knows* wisdom. You can, I take it, either affirm or deny it here and now.”⁶⁴ Having previously pledged his commitment to pursuing the truth, Alypius must now prove himself a willing participant. Two options lie before him. Either he decides not to participate in the conversation—to give up being a philosopher; or he “deign[s] [*digneris*] to answer the question I put to you, rather than the one you put to yourself.”⁶⁵

Augustine’s use of the verb *dignere* is important. It encapsulates the moral dimension we have so far been exploring. In *De Academicis*, Augustine uses it to describe philosophy’s decision to reveal the one true God to true lovers of wisdom. “Philosophy promises that it will display the true and hidden God, and now and again deigns to show us [*ostentare dignatur*] a glimpse of Him through the bright clouds [*per lucidas nubes*], as it were.”⁶⁶ To believe in this promise is to believe in philosophy, expressing full hope that truth *can* be found. The verb *dignere* appears elsewhere to describe the incarnation,⁶⁷ which in turn explains Augustine’s tendency to personify philosophy. Divine wisdom, the Son of God (1 Cor. 1:24), has come to assist the philosopher’s quest, revealing to him the

⁶² *Acad.*, 3.3.5f.

⁶³ A possible background to this is Cicero’s focus in the *Academica*: “But just as I judge this, seeing truths, to be the best thing, so approving falsehoods in the place of truth is the worst. Not that I am someone who never approves anything false, never assents, and never holds an opinion; but we are investigating the wise person.” Cicero, *Academica*, 2.20.66, trans. Brittain.

⁶⁴ *Acad.*, 3.4.9.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.4.9.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.1.3.

⁶⁷ Cf. *ord.*, 2.5.16.

true God as if through “bright clouds.”⁶⁸ The movement here is *downward* in the direction of desire; and this illumines the true import of Augustine’s comment to Alypius. To repeat our claim: Alypius, too, must “come down” to partake in philosophy, or else risk missing the voice of philosophy that beckons him forth. The mountain lures would-be philosophers away from love of wisdom. Augustine invites Alypius to be present to the question.

A Plea for Illumination: Who Can Show us Truth?

Morally speaking, Augustine’s invitation to answer the question is a command to take responsibility for the things that we know. It is also an invitation to acknowledge our ignorance, and to step forward as true philosophers on the way to the truth. In book III, Alypius is tempted not to acknowledge his ignorance, but to circle around the question as a dispassionate observer. His approach threatens to upend the journey of desire through abandoning the way of life that he shares with Augustine. In order to halt the dissolution of desire into pride, then, Augustine calls Alypius to account for what *he* thinks about wisdom. To the extent Alypius realizes the uncertainty of his position—to the extent that he incorporates uncertainty into self-awareness—his status in the dialogue turns from “would-be philosopher,” to a lover needy and desperate for some kind of illumination. Accordingly, the decisive turning point in book III *De Academicis* occurs when Alypius finally yields himself to a prayer for divine assistance. To develop the scriptural backdrop to this oft-neglected prayer, we turn to Augustine’s self-accounting in *Confessiones* IX in order to reveal his earlier mindset whilst on *otium* at Cassiciacum.

In book IX, Augustine is reflecting on his own healing process by commenting on the obstacles that stood in his path. Interleaving his commentary with the ten verses of Psalm 4, he confesses that Manichaeism had prevented his love of wisdom from guiding and informing his pursuit of the truth. On the relation between Manicheans and desire for wisdom, in particular, he prays that God releases them to “hunger” once again:

⁶⁸ Cf. *Gen. c. Man.*, 2.4.5, where *nubes* are associated with Scripture and Christ’s flesh.

But now the goods I sought were no longer in the external realm, nor did I seek for them with bodily eyes in the light of this sun. In desiring to find their delight in externals, they [Manichees] easily become empty and expend their energies on “the things which are seen and temporal” (2 Cor. 4:18). With starting minds they can only lick the images of these things. Would that they were wearied by hunger and would say, “Who will show us good?” [*quis nobis ostendet bona*; Ps. 4:6].⁶⁹

In praying the prayer, “Who will show us good?” the Psalmist embodies a posture of desire that in effect commands God to come to his relief.⁷⁰ According to Augustine, should the Manicheans ever embody a similar posture, they would soon discover their true status as lovers on the way; those who are tired of circling around the life of philosophy. *Quis nobis ostendet bona?*⁷¹

In similar fashion, though adapted to the context of Academic scepticism, Augustine guides Alypius to pray a prayer on behalf of his own awakening that embodies precisely the posture that receives illumination. In book III Alypius declares:

The likeness and “image” (so to speak) of the Academicians should be seen in Proteus. It’s said that Proteus was typically captured by some means that barely captured him, and his pursuers never were sure they really had him except by the indication of some divine spirit [*numine*]. May that divine spirit be present, and may he deign to show [*dignetur demonstrare*] us the truth that is of such importance to us! Then I’ll admit that the Academicians have been overcome, even if they don’t agree, although I think they will.⁷²

⁶⁹ *conf.*, 9.4.10, trans. Chadwick.

⁷⁰ Compare Simone Weil: “it is God alone who comes down and possesses the soul, but desire alone draws God down. He only comes to those who ask him to come; and he cannot refuse to come to those who implore him long, often and ardently.” Weil, Simone, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies,” in *Waiting on God*, trans. Emma Crawford (London: Fontana Books, 1950), p. 71.

⁷¹ In passing, we observe Augustine’s different take on Psalm 4:6 in *Enarrationes in Psalmos*. There he reads it as a sarcastic barb, issued by the Manicheans, that ridicules God’s “governance” of a chaotic, disordered creation. This may be the better interpretation; cf. O’Donovan, Oliver, *Self, World, and Time: Ethics as Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), p. 44.

⁷² *Acad.*, 3.5.11.

In its context, Alypius' "prayer" does not present itself as such, but expresses exasperation with the Academic method. Even so, Augustine runs with it. He is only too eager to affirm Alypius' response; thus he shows why this confession, "who can show the truth to us?" [*quis verum possit ostendere*], effectively brings an end to the Academic thesis.⁷³ In simple terms, Augustine argues that by admitting he desires truth, Alypius affirms his willingness to assent to truth as well. If truth should present itself, or "a divine spirit deign to show us [it]," Alypius confirms that he would abandon the Academic method out of desire to *find* the truth he seeks with Augustine.

Not only this, Augustine indicates that by invoking the name of Proteus, calling him "an image of the truth" one discovers by a "divine spirit," Alypius recognises the human need for divine spiritual assistance, which corresponds to the Holy Spirit's work in illuminating the truth of Christ. Though none of this is made explicit in *De Academicis*, and amounts to no more than inference, one cannot deny Augustine's interest in the religious aspect of Alypius' response, which he assumes to be a deep concord in their respective aspirations. "My closest friend agrees with me not only about the issue of plausibility in human life, but also about religion itself."⁷⁴

Indeed, it can be argued that their exchange finds proximate fulfilment in Alypius' joining Augustine on the road to wisdom and happiness. Augustine writes: "This agreement is the clearest indication of a true friend, if friendship has been correctly and properly defined as *agreement on human and divine matters combined with charity and good will*."⁷⁵ The embodiment of love of wisdom imposes a limit on *epochē*, and frees the two to dismantle scepticism and affirm the true philosophy. To this end, Augustine concludes book III with an appeal to the Divine Intellect (Son of God) that awakens true lovers to their desire's destination. "Our souls, awakened [*excitatae*] not only by its precepts but also by its deeds, could return to themselves and regain their homeland without the strife of disputation."⁷⁶ Whatever else remains unfinished with the pursuit of true

⁷³ Ibid., 3.6.13.

⁷⁴ *Acad.*, 3.6.13.

⁷⁵ *Acad.*, 3.6.13 (King's emphasis), citing Cicero, *De Amicitia* 6.20.

⁷⁶ *Acad.*, 3.19.42.

wisdom, Augustine is pleased enough to have beside him another true philosopher, one who is more than ready to pray for divine assistance.

CONCLUSION

Though admittedly a cursory sketch of Augustine's argument in *De Academicis*, this analysis has revealed the main moral foundation on which Augustine builds an early case against scepticism, and for philosophy. As an early instance of Augustine developing a programme of Christian philosophy, *De Academicis* institutes a training ground for the creation of true lovers who are willing to confront the questions that philosophy, that is Christ, deigns to put. As this article argues, the key movement Augustine highlights and instantiates in *De Academicis* derives its impetus (or inspiration) from the descent of Life itself.⁷⁷ In this way, Christ's incarnation pervades the *form* of Augustine's reasoning whilst it dances upon the periphery of his language and argument. For Augustine, the main task of any worthwhile philosophy is to facilitate the soul's awakening to the question of life. That question, though it embodies a variety of forms in a variety of contexts, first invites us to take a step forward as lovers on the way: and to allow this love to carry us onward to truth, wisdom, and the happy life.

⁷⁷ For a similar development of Christ's significance applied to *De ordine*, see Conybeare, Catherine, "The Duty of a Teacher: Liminality and *disciplina* in Augustine's *De Ordine*," in *Augustine and the Disciplines: From Cassiciacum to Confessions*, eds. Karla Pollmann and Mark Vessey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 49-66.