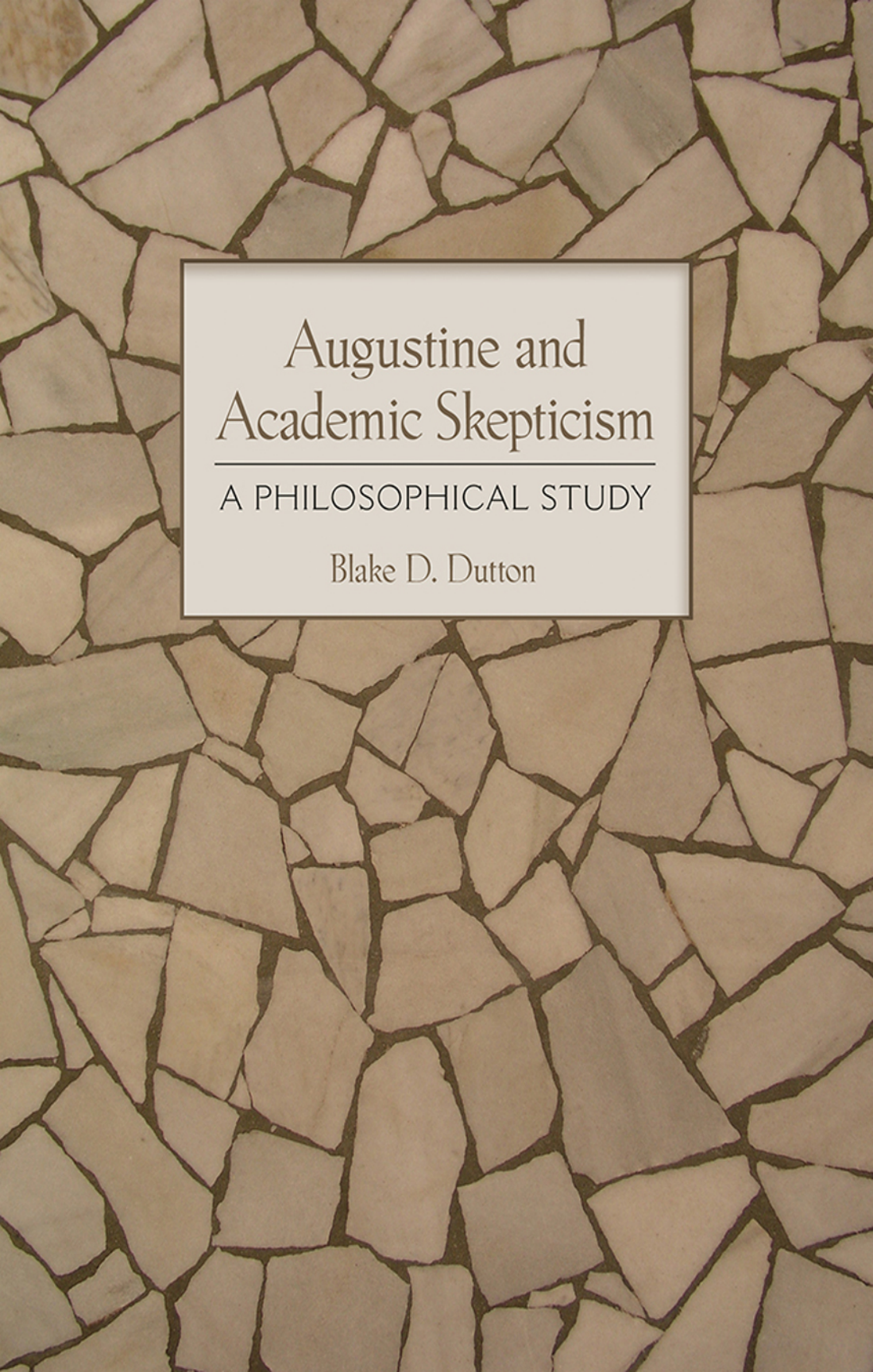
Augustine and Academic Skepticism
A PHILOSOPHICAL STUDY
Blake D. Dutton

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To Julian and Reid,
pueris optimis in historia puerorum

Contents

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Abbreviations

Aetius

Dox. Gr. = *Doxographi Graeci* [Opinions of the Greeks]

Alexander of Aphrodisias

De an. = *De anima* (*The Soul*)

Aristotle

Met. = *Metaphysica* (*Metaphysics*)

Augustine

CA = *Contra Academicos* (*Against the Academics*)

Conf. = *Confessiones* (*Confessions*)

De beat. vit. = *De beata vita* (*The Happy Life*)

De civ. Dei = *De civitate Dei* (*City of God*)

De div. quaes. = *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus* (*Eighty-Three Diverse Questions*)

De fid. et symb. = *De fide et symbolo* (*Faith and the Creed*)

De Gen. ad litt. = *De Genesi ad litteram* (*Literal Commentary on Genesis*)

De Gen. c. Man.= *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* (*Commentary on Genesis against the Manichees*)

De imm. an. = *De immortalitate animae* (*The Immortality of the Soul*)

De lib. arb. = *De libero arbitrio* (*Free Choice of the Will*)

De mag. = *De magistro* (*The Teacher*)

De mor. eccl. Cath. = *De moribus ecclesiae Catholicae* (*The Way of Life of the Catholic Church*)

De mus. = *De musica* (*Music*)

De ord. = *De ordine* (*Order*)

De quant. an. = *De quantitate animae* (*The Measure of the Soul*)

De Trin. = *De Trinitate* (*The Trinity*)

De util. cred. = *De utilitate credendi* (*The Advantage of Belief*)

De ver. rel. = *De vera religione* (*True Religion*)

Ench. = *Enchiridion de fide, spe, et caritate* (*Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Charity*)

Ep. = *Epistulae* (*Letters*)

Ret. = *Retractiones* (*Retractions*)

Sol. = *Soliloquia* (*Soliloquies*)

Cicero

Acad. = *Academica* (*Academics*)

De fin. = *De finibus bonorum et malorum* (*Moral Ends*)

De nat. deor. = *De natura deorum* (*The Nature of the Gods*)

De or. = *De oratore* (*The Orator*)

Tusc. disp. = *Tusculanae disputationes* (*Tusculan Disputations*)

Descartes

AT = *Oeuvres des Descartes*, ed. C. Adam and P. Tannery, rev. ed. (Paris: Vrin/C.N.R.S., 1964–76).

Med. = *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia* (*Meditations on First Philosophy*)

Diogenes Laertius

DL = *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*

Epicurus

Ep. ad Men. = *Epistula ad Menoeceum* (*Letter to Menoeceus*)

Eusebius

Praep. evang. = *Praeparatio evangelica* (*Preparation for the Gospel*)

Hume

Enq. = *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*

Treat. = *A Treatise of Human Nature*

Lactantius

Div. inst. = *Divinae institutiones* (*Divine Institutes*)

Lucretius

De rer. nat. = *De rerum natura* (*The Nature of Things*)

Pascal

Pens. = *Pensées* (*Thoughts*)

Philostratus

Vit. Ap. = *Vita Apollonii* (*Life of Apollonius of Tyana*)

Photius

Bib. = *Bibliotheca* (*Library*)

Plato

Apol. = *Apology*

Charm. = *Charmides*

Crit. = *Crito*

Hipp. Min. = *Hippias Minor*

Lach. = *Laches*

Men. = *Meno*

Phaed. = *Phaedo*

Prot. = *Protagoras*

Rep. = *Republic*

Plotinus

Enn. = *Enneads*

Plutarch

Adv. Col. = *Adversus Colotem* (*Against Colotes*)

De comm. not. = *De communibus notitias* (*Common Notions*)

De st. rep. = *De stoicorum repugnantiis* (*Contradictions of the Stoics*)

Presocratics

DK = H. Diels and W. Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Zurich: Weidmann, 1985).

Seneca

Ep. = *Ad Lucilium epistulae morales* (*Letters of Moral Instruction to Lucilius*)

Sextus Empiricus

M = *Adversus mathematicos* (*Against the Professors*)

PH = *Pyrrhoniae hypotyposes* (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*)

Suetonius

Vit. div. Vesp. = *Vita divi Vespasiani* (*Life of Divine Vespasian*)

Tacitus

Hist. = *Historiae* (*Histories*)

Xenophon

Mem. = *Memorabilia* (*Memorabilia*)

AUGUSTINE AND ACADEMIC SKEPTICISM

Introduction

As we have come to think of it since its revival in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, skepticism is an epistemological position that denies knowledge or its possibility to humans. This denial may be universal in scope—what we call "global skepticism"—or it may be restricted to some significant domain of inquiry—what we call "local skepticism." In either case, skepticism lies at or near the negative terminus of a continuum of positions we may take with respect to the prospects for knowledge. It is extreme epistemological pessimism.

Consider, for example, the following statement by Peter Unger, a prominent contemporary proponent of skepticism:

> The skepticism that I will defend is a negative thesis concerning what we know. I happily accept the fact that there is much that many of us correctly and reasonably believe, but much more than that is needed for us to know even a fair amount. Here I will not argue that nobody knows anything about anything, though that would be quite consistent with the skeptical thesis for which I will argue. The somewhat less radical thesis which I will defend is this one: every human being knows, at best, hardly anything to be so.[1]

1. Unger 1971, 198.

Although Unger does not go so far as to deny that anyone knows anything, he is of the view that if anyone does know anything, that knowledge is slight indeed. In making this claim, Unger is giving voice to the pessimism of the skeptic.

We can, however, imagine far worse. Unger tells us that he can "happily accept the fact that there is much that many of us correctly and reasonably believe." If he is right, this is reassuring. Perhaps correct and reasonable belief, though insufficient for knowledge, is all that we really need in order to get along in the world. Perhaps it is immodest to hope for more. But what if we cannot have even this much? What if it is not merely our prospects for knowledge that are dismal, but our prospects for correct and reasonable belief as well? That would be troubling.

More than one philosopher has suspected that this may be so. David Hume, for example, closes book 1 of his *Treatise of Human Nature* with the following lament:

> The intense view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another. . . . I am confounded with all these questions, and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, environed with the deepest darkness, and utterly deprived of the use of every member and faculty. (*Treat.* 1.4.7)

The pessimism of this lament is deep and its tone dark. Not only is Hume calling into question knowledge or its possibility, he is calling into question the reasonability of belief. If no belief is more probable or likely than any other, then no belief is rationally preferable to any other. All beliefs are equally reasonable or unreasonable as the case may be. This is hard to take, and we may forgive Hume his melancholy over these suspicions.

In view of this, it is appropriate to distinguish skepticism in its standard form from what we may call "radical skepticism." In its standard form, skepticism is any position that denies knowledge or its possibility to humans, whether globally or locally, and is compatible with the recognition of a variety of types and degrees of justification. What it excludes is the view that such justification as there may be is of the type or degree required for knowledge. Radical skepticism goes further. In addition to denying knowledge or its possibility to humans, it denies justification of any type or degree. It thus denies that any given belief is rationally preferable to any other belief and thus rejects reasonability as well as knowledge. Despite this difference, skepticism is at bottom

easy to identify. In whatever form it takes, it issues a fundamental challenge to our claims to knowledge. If it is radical enough, it issues a fundamental challenge to our claims to reasonability as well. As the history of philosophy bears out, these challenges are serious and are not put down easily. They are undoubtedly inconvenient for those who wish to get about the business of expounding truth, but philosophers ignore them at their peril.

Ancient Skepticism

As the skeptic is the first to remind us, matters are not always as straightforward as they may first appear. According to the characterization just given, skepticism is an epistemological position that denies knowledge or its possibility to humans. In its radical form, it may even deny reasonability as well. This is fine as far as it goes, and it reflects how we have come to think of skepticism in the modern world. But we should keep in mind that if what we are trying to understand is ancient skepticism in either of its main forms—Academic and Pyrrhonian—this characterization is of limited value and may well be misleading. Here it must be stressed that the ancient skeptics generally thought of their skepticism less in terms of a position to be defended and more in terms of a philosophical practice. Some among them assiduously disavowed holding any positions at all, including the position that humans do not or cannot have knowledge. Moreover, the philosophical practice in which they were engaged had as its effect, if not its goal, the withholding of assent on all matters. This is the well-known *epochē* of the skeptic, and it was thought, by the Pyrrhonians at least, to be accompanied by a state of tranquillity, known as *ataraxia*. What this means is that ancient skepticism is better approached as a philosophical practice that leads to the withholding of assent than as a definite epistemological position.

That this is the case can readily be seen if we look at how the ancient skeptics characterized what they were doing. Two passages will suffice. The first, from the Pyrrhonian tradition, contains Sextus's definition of skepticism, which he offers at the outset of his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*:

> Scepticism is the ability to set out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way at all, an ability by which, because of the equipollence in the opposed objects and accounts, we come first to the suspension of judgment and afterwards to tranquility. (*PH* 1.1.4)

Notice that there is no mention here of any position that defines skepticism. It is defined rather as an ability by which one brings into opposition things that appear and are thought of in such a way that they effectively

cancel each other out. The exercise of this ability leads to the withholding of assent, which in turn leads to a state of tranquillity. This is skepticism as practice rather than as doctrine. Our second passage, which comes from the Academic tradition, echoes this characterization. It is Cicero's report on Arcesilaus, the founder of the so-called Skeptical Academy:

> Arcesilaus denied that there was anything that could be known, including the one thing that Socrates left himself to know [namely, that he knew nothing]. He thought that everything lay hidden in obscurity and that nothing could be discerned or understood. For these reasons, he thought that we should not assert anything, affirm anything, or approve anything with assent, and that we should always check our rashness and guard against every lapse. . . . He acted consistently with this view. By arguing against the views of everyone, he led most away from their own. When equal reasons were found on opposite sides of the same issue, it was easier to withhold assent from each side. (*Acad.* 1.12.45)

This passage needs careful interpretation, and we will have occasion to return to it later.[2] For now, we need only note that, though it attributes a definite skeptical position to Arcesilaus, namely, that nothing can be known, it places equal emphasis on his call for universal *epochē* and his practice of arguing against the views of others in such a way as to bring about a balance in reasons for and against those views. It is thus understandable that Sextus, despite his criticisms of the Academic tradition, speaks favorably of Arcesilaus.[3] They are kindred spirits bound together by a common philosophical practice.

The Case for Augustine's Critique

It is in the light of these considerations that a compelling case can be made for examining the critique of skepticism that was fashioned by Augustine in the fourth and fifth centuries. Although there is no evidence that he knew anything of the Pyrrhonian tradition, Augustine was intimately familiar with the Academic tradition from his reading of Cicero, who served as

2. See the first section in chapter 1.

3. Sextus writes: "Arcesilaus, who we said was a champion and founder of the Middle Academy, certainly seems to me to have something in common with what the Pyrrhonists say—indeed, his persuasion and ours are virtually one and the same" (*PH* 1.33.232). Sextus goes on, however, to put Arcesilaus on the side of the dogmatists insofar as Arcesilaus, in contradistinction to the Pyrrhonians, deems giving assent to be genuinely bad and withholding assent to be genuinely good. For Sextus's review of the development of the Academy as a whole, see *PH* 1.33.220–35.

an important conduit through which Greek philosophy made its way into the Roman world. After some initial sympathy with this form of skepticism, he came to view it as pernicious and sought to lay it to rest. His main effort in this direction is *Against the Academics*, a Ciceronian-style dialogue written shortly after his conversion and during his brief period of retirement at Cassiciacum. This dialogue, together with a dozen or more discussions scattered throughout the rest of his corpus, constitutes the most sustained attack on skepticism to have survived from the ancient world. Its value, both historical and philosophical, is immense.

In many ways, Augustine's critique of skepticism is thoroughly modern. As we might predict, he focuses his fire on the claim that nothing can be known and sets forth diverse strategies to overturn it. Many of these strategies, including his appeal to the certitude of introspective awareness and his deployment of cogito-type arguments, would have a long future ahead of them and continue to have currency to this day. Indeed, contemporary readers will be surprised to find just how much there is in Augustine's critique that is familiar. Despite this, Augustine found Academic skepticism to be more than just a wrongheaded position with respect to the possibility of knowledge. Like many in the ancient world, he believed that the only philosophical practice worthy of being taken up is one that brings us to the wisdom in virtue of which we lead a good life, conceived as a life of happiness. In his eyes, Academic skepticism, when judged according to this standard, fails spectacularly. It does nothing to bring us to this wisdom and, in its advocacy of universal *epochē*, serves as an obstacle to our attaining it. The reward for taking it up is a life, not of wisdom and happiness, but of folly and misery.[4]

4. It has long been standard to see the primary aim of Augustine's critique of Academic skepticism as epistemological in character, namely, as being concerned with overturning the Academic denial of the possibility of knowledge and the Academic prohibition on assent. This interpretation, which has come to be known as the "Epistemological Interpretation," has been advocated by Kirwan 1989, 15–34; Boyer 1953, 153–67; Diggs 1949; Gilson 1929, 44–52; and Alfaric 1918, 415–28. Against this, more recent commentators have advocated what has come to be called the "Moral Interpretation," according to which Augustine's critique has an overriding moral or eudaimonistic aim to which the epistemological aim is subordinate. Such commentators include Topping 2012, 95–125; Harding 2006; Curley 1996, 1–18; Mosher 1981; Heil 1972; and Holte 1962, 74–109. The interpretation developed in this book is congruent with the Moral Interpretation, but it rejects the tendency among some of its advocates to minimize or dismiss the epistemological dimension of Augustine's critique. The most egregious of these are Heil (1972), who claims that Augustine was "well aware of the futility of confronting skepticism on its own terms," and that "rather than attacking the skeptic's reasoning, Augustine focuses on the skeptical aim, the achievement of a perfectly tranquil mental state" (110); and Topping (2012), who claims that "Augustine did not take philosophical skepticism seriously at all," and that he "devotes the last two books of [*Against the Academics*] to epistemology to win his student's trust" (110). For a discussion of Augustine's critique that returns focus to the epistemological aim, see Rist 1994, 41–91.

It is precisely because of this broadly practical concern on Augustine's part that his critique of skepticism is of such great interest. He rightly recognized the skepticism with which he was engaged to have profound consequences for life, and his critique of it is correspondingly wide ranging. Accordingly, if our concern with skepticism is confined merely to the challenge it issues to the possibility of knowledge, we will find much that is of interest in Augustine's critique, but we will also find much that is not. However, if our concern extends to the consequences of skepticism for life, we will surely find his critique to be of singular interest. It is arguable that no other writer, ancient or modern, has subjected this aspect of skepticism to such sustained and critical scrutiny. Because of this, whether it succeeds or fails, Augustine's critique deserves a prominent place in any study of the history of debates over skepticism and merits our careful philosophical consideration. It is the aim of this book to give it that place and to extend it that consideration.

Orientation and Plan

In the pages that follow, I engage in a good bit of interpretive work and historical reconstruction. This is necessary if we are to understand the development of Academic skepticism as a tradition and the nature of Augustine's concern with it. As important as this is, however, the orientation of this book is philosophical rather than interpretive or historical. This is to say that, in addition to giving a textually sensitive and historically informed reading of Augustine's critique of Academic skepticism, I aim to analyze and assess that critique precisely as a philosophical response to Academic skepticism. Five points of clarification regarding the orientation and plan of this book are in order.

Analytic Orientation

I devote the bulk of the book to the analysis of arguments—the arguments of the Academics and the arguments of Augustine—with a view to laying bare their logical structure and highlighting their underlying principles. At times, this necessitates that I give a more formal presentation of these arguments than is given in the texts in which they occur, but I always try to do so in a way that would be recognizable to both the Academics and Augustine. I thus aim at rigorous philosophical analysis without gross anachronism.

Evaluative Orientation

As an extension of the analysis I offer, I undertake an evaluation of the arguments under consideration with respect to their strength. This is not a matter of declaring either the Academics or Augustine a winner or loser on any point of dispute. The outcome of their debate is in many cases too murky for that. Instead, it is a matter of highlighting where, how, and to what extent the lines of criticism that Augustine develops have genuine philosophical merit, and where, how, and to what extent the Academics have the resources to defend themselves against those lines of criticism.

Nondevelopmental Orientation

Augustine's career as a writer lasted over thirty years, and his thinking on virtually every issue of importance underwent significant development during that time. A fully adequate understanding of his thought thus requires careful attention to how it evolved as his circumstances, concerns, and interlocutors changed. I accept this reality and do my best to be sensitive to it. However, because my analysis is primarily philosophical rather than interpretive or historical, my presentation of Augustine's thought is more synoptic than developmental.

Nontheological Orientation

While I acknowledge that Augustine was a profoundly Christian thinker whose theological commitments informed nearly every word that he penned, I treat those commitments only to the extent that they bear on his critique of Academic skepticism. Thus, while I give some play to Augustine's views on such topics as sin, grace, faith, and scripture as we go along, I do little justice to the richness of those views. Some readers will find even this much attention to theological matters to be off-putting, but the more common reaction will no doubt be that the book suffers from theological shallowness.

Plan

After an introductory chapter in which I set forth the background to Augustine's critique of Academic skepticism, the book unfolds in two parts. In part 1, I explore Augustine's attempt to discredit Academic skepticism as a

philosophical practice, with a focus on his charge that Academic skepticism is not conducive, and is indeed antithetical, to leading a good life. In part 2, I explore Augustine's attempt to vindicate the possibility of knowledge against the Academic denial of that possibility, with a focus on his enumeration of truths in each of the disciplines of philosophy that he claims to know and whose apprehensibility he believes the Academics cannot plausibly deny. I begin each part with a chapter on Academic skepticism that helps us understand what it is to which Augustine is responding. All remaining chapters focus on Augustine.

Chapter 1

Augustine and the Academics

By his own account Augustine was a precocious youth. Like other children he was given to mischief, but his talents were manifest early on. His education would thus become a high priority for his family. At considerable cost, they sent him first to the schools of Madauros and then, when he reached the age of eighteen, to Carthage to complete his training. The future was bright for such a young man, and Augustine, with the full weight of his family's expectations behind him, was determined to make the most of it.

While at Carthage, Augustine focused his studies on rhetoric, which was an obvious choice for a young man of his ambition and ability. In the midst of these studies, however, something dramatic and unexpected happened. He describes it in these words:

> In what was then the customary course of studies, I came upon a book written by a certain Cicero, whose tongue, if not his heart, nearly everyone admires. That book, which is called *Hortensius*, contains an exhortation to philosophy. It changed my affections. It redirected my prayers to your very self, Lord, and transformed my hopes and desires. Suddenly, all my vain hopes became worthless to me. With an incredible burning in my heart, I desired the immortality of wisdom and began to rise up so that I might return to you. (*Conf.* 3.4.7)

What Augustine describes here is fairly characterized as a conversion. As he takes pains to tell us, his early years were spent in superficial pursuits. He was initially more interested in games than in studies, and later, when he dedicated himself to those studies, it was for the sake of the praise and honor to be had from excelling in them. On reading *Hortensius*, this began to change. A desire for wisdom welled up within him, and the allure of worldly success began to fade. He was now intent on another path, even if he was not prepared to abandon the path he was already on.[1]

This new path was the path of philosophy. Speaking again of *Hortensius*, Augustine writes: "The only thing that pleased me in that exhortation was that I should love, pursue, hold, and firmly embrace, not this or that sect, but wisdom itself, whatever it may be" (*Conf.* 3.4.8). These were inspiring words. But for all the enthusiasm they generated, Augustine was put off by the fact that the philosophers, being pagan, made no mention of the name of Christ. Under the direction of his mother, Monica, he had been raised a Catholic Christian, and he could not fully embrace any tradition that did not recognize Christ in some fashion or another. It was natural, then, that his search would quickly lead him to an examination of the Church's scriptures. It was in them, rather than in the writings of Cicero, that he hoped to find the wisdom he was seeking.

What Augustine encountered was disappointing. The scriptures mystified him, and he judged them to be deficient in comparison with the great works of pagan literature with which he was familiar: "When I examined the scriptures, which I compared to the dignity of Cicero, they seemed unworthy to me. My pride recoiled from their style, and my insight did not penetrate

1. It is certainly possible that the simple story Augustine tells of the effect that *Hortensius* had on him masks a much more complicated reality, but it is worth noting that we find this same story, or a distillation of it, in one of his earliest works, *The Happy Life*: "When I was nineteen years old, I read that book of Cicero's, called *Hortensius*, at the school of rhetoric. I was inflamed by such a great love of philosophy that I considered dedicating myself to it immediately" (*De beat. vit.* 1.4). Note also that, in *Soliloquies*, Augustine credits *Hortensius* with ridding him of the desire for wealth: "As I am now thirty-three years old, it has been nearly fourteen years since I stopped desiring wealth. I have thought no more of it, if by chance it were offered to me, beyond its necessity for life and its usefulness for generosity. Indeed, a single book of Cicero's persuaded me that I should not seek wealth and that, if it should come my way, I should manage it wisely and cautiously" (*Sol.* 1.10.17). Testard (1958) carefully follows the testimony of *Confessions* and comes to the following conclusions: "*L'Hortensius* avait donc éveillé Augustin à la philosophie; ses grandes thèmes auraient rappelé au lecteur de souvenirs de sa foi chrétienne, mais les incertitudes de ce livre auraient déçu Augustin; la vérité du Christ lui manquait dans ces pages; l'étudiant 'aurait dû' dépasser l'*Hortensius* 'pour cet amour' du Christ! C'est ce dépassement qu'il va tenter dans un recours personnel à l'Évangile qui sera un échec" (39). For a discussion of the fragments of *Hortensius* as they appear throughout Augustine's corpus, see Hagendahl 1967, 486–97.

to their inner meaning" (*Conf.* 3.5.9). This proved to be of enormous consequence. Not only did it drive a wedge between Augustine and the faith with which he was raised, it also made him receptive to the influence of the Manichees, who dismissed much of the scriptural canon. As the Manichees held out the promise of delivering wisdom to those under their tutelage, Augustine cast his childhood faith aside and became a Hearer in their sect. His involvement was to last nearly a decade.[2]

This was not an altogether happy marriage, for it was not long before Augustine began to harbor doubts about Manichean teaching.[3] In particular, he could not reconcile the elaborate cosmology with which the Manichean scheme of liberation was bound up with what he took to be the demonstrated results of the science of his day. Much to his dismay, the group's leaders were unable to allay his doubts, and their highly touted spokesman, Faustus, for whom he had long waited, failed to do any better. Although possessed of considerable charm, Faustus was surprisingly unlettered, and his stock responses, however well delivered, did nothing to satisfy Augustine's restless mind. This was a serious blow. By the time he left Africa for Italy at the age of twenty-nine, Augustine's commitment to Manicheism was merely nominal, a matter of convenience rather than conviction.[4]

It is crucial that we appreciate the profound disappointment Augustine felt in the wake of these events. A journey that had begun with such lofty expectations now appeared to be ending in a wash. Contemplating the possibility that truth might forever lie beyond his reach, Augustine experienced a loss of confidence and found his philosophical sympathies to be shifting: "The thought arose in me that those philosophers who are called Academics were more prudent than the rest since they held that we should doubt everything and proposed that man cannot apprehend any truth" (*Conf.* 5.10.19). With the hope that had buoyed him for nearly a decade all but evaporated,

2. Augustine provides a lengthy discussion of his involvement with the Manichees in books 3 through 5 of *Confessions*. For a discussion of this period of Manichean involvement, see Lancel 2002, 29–57; O'Meara 2001, 67–96; Brown 1967, 46–60; and Courcelle 1950, 60–78. An accessible overview of Manicheism and Augustine's response to it can be found in Bonner 1986, 157–236.

3. On Augustine's doubts about Manicheism, as well as his interactions with Faustus, see *Conf.* 5.3.3–7.13.

4. This is not to suggest that Augustine made a clean break with the Manichees on leaving Africa. As he tells us in *Confessions*, he availed himself of the network of Manichees in Rome for lodging and care during an illness he suffered soon after arriving there. He also made use of this network in securing his appointment as a teacher of rhetoric in Milan. On this, see *Conf.* 5.9.16–13.23. Perhaps more important, in books 5 through 7 of *Confessions*, he writes extensively about how the materialism of the Manichees, as well as many of their objections to Catholic Christianity and its scriptures, continued to weigh on him well into his time in Milan.

Augustine now regarded the skepticism of the Academics as depressingly clear-sighted.

That being said, the nature and degree of Augustine's Academic sympathies during this post-Manichean period are difficult to determine.[5] In *The Happy Life*, he reports: "After I had shaken off and escaped from the Manichees, and especially after I had crossed the sea [from Africa to Italy], the Academics for a long time steered my course amid the waves and against every wind" (*De beat. vit.* 1.4). Here Augustine tells us that, once he had given up on finding wisdom among the Manichees, the Academics came to exercise a dominant influence on his thought. They provided the most compelling understanding of and response to the uncertainty that confronted him on all sides. Nevertheless, it would be too much to conclude that Augustine ever became an Academic or identified himself as one. This is clear from two passages in which he discusses his post-Manichean period. The first is from *The Advantage of Belief.*

> When I left you [Honoratus] and crossed the sea [from Africa to Italy], I was already in doubt and hesitant about what I should retain and what I should abandon. From the time I heard Faustus, this doubt grew stronger every day. As you know, we were promised, as if from the heavens, that, on his arrival, he would explain everything that was disturbing us. Once I was settled in Italy, I held great argument and deliberation with myself, not about whether I would remain in the sect [Manicheism] into which I regretted having fallen, but about how we should find truth. My sighs, arising out of love for truth, were better known to you than to anyone else. Often, it seemed to me that truth could not be found, and great waves of my thought moved in favor of the Academics. Often again, when I considered as best I could how lively, keen, and penetrating the mind is, I would think that truth is not

5. Commentators are divided on this issue. On the strong side are King (1995), who asserts that Augustine "went through a period of being a skeptic" and thus had an "insider's knowledge of skepticism, though he never apprenticed himself to any skeptical school" (viii–ix); Chadwick (1991), who claims that Augustine "devoured the writings of the skeptical philosophers" and came to faith from a position of "radical skepticism" (xix); and Boyer (1953), who claims that "les arguments des académiciens, enflés par l'éloquence de Cicéron, l'enveloppent et le paralysent, à la façon des narcotiques qui, sans supprimer toute activité, rendent incapables de décision" (59). A softer line is taken by O'Meara (2001), who writes that, though Augustine was "quite disturbed by the arguments of the Academics," he was "not a convinced Academic" and that "his temperament did not take easily to skepticism" (102). That Augustine in any sense became a skeptic or went through a skeptical period is altogether denied by Mourant (1966), who argues that the "Academics provided Augustine with the necessary means to challenge the Manichean position, but despite their attraction they did not lead him to a position of philosophical doubt" (78).

> hidden. Perhaps the manner of seeking it is hidden, and this manner must be taken from some divine authority. (*De util. cred.* 8.20)

The second is from *Confessions*:

> I doubted and vacillated about everything in the manner that the Academics are taken to do. In that time of my doubt, I judged that I should not remain in that sect to which I now preferred certain philosophers and so decided to abandon the Manichees. Nevertheless, I absolutely refused to entrust the care of my languid soul to those same philosophers since they were without the saving name of Christ. I thus resolved that, for the time being, I would be a catechumen in the Catholic Church, which my parents had commended to me, until something certain by which I could guide my path revealed itself. (*Conf.* 5.14.25)

In the first of these passages, Augustine speaks movingly of the state of doubt and vacillation into which he fell as his faith in the Manichees dissipated. In such a state, it is natural that he would feel affinity with the Academics and be receptive to their teachings. However, he is explicit that this doubt and vacillation extended even to the question of whether truth can be known and that this made him as unwilling to give himself to the Academics as he was to anyone else. In the second of these passages, Augustine tells us that his long-standing reluctance to follow pagan philosophers—philosophers who did not know the name of Christ—remained in play at this time. As a consequence, instead of seeking refuge in the Academy, he chose, as if by default, to become a catechumen in the Catholic Church.[6] In light of these passages, it is thus clear that, while Augustine began to harbor deep Academic sympathies as his sojourn with the Manichees came to an end, it is best to think of his post-Manichean period as one of skeptical crisis in general rather than as one of Academic allegiance in particular.[7]

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6. As *Confessions* makes clear, Augustine made the decision to become a catechumen while in Milan. Largely through the influence of Ambrose, he initially became convinced that the teachings of the Church could be reasonably defended, but not that they were true: "The Catholic faith seemed to me not to have been defeated, but it did not yet seem to be victorious" (*Conf.* 5.14.24). Thus, while becoming a catechumen was an important step along the way to his conversion, it fell far short of a full embrace of the Catholic faith.

7. In addition to the considerations just discussed, we should note that Augustine claims that there were certain truths about which he never entertained doubt, even during this period of skeptical crisis: "I wanted to be made as certain of those things I did not see as I was that seven and three are ten, for I was not so mad as to think that not even this could be apprehended" (*Conf.* 6.4.6). Also: "Although sometimes strongly, sometimes weakly, I always believed in your existence and care for us, even if I did not know what to think about your substance or the way that leads—or leads back—to you" (*Conf.* 6.5.8). Finally: "The only thing that called me back from an even deeper whirlpool of carnal pleasures was the fear of death and your future judgment. Through the various opinions [I held], this fear never departed from my breast" (*Conf.* 6.16.26).

As is well known, Augustine's crisis turned out to be short-lived. Although he became a catechumen without a great deal of optimism, a number of factors—attendance at Ambrose's sermons, discovery of the books of the Platonists, and renewed study of scripture—over time convinced him not only that wisdom could be found, but that the path to finding it lay within the Church. Within three years of arriving in Italy, Augustine made a lifelong commitment to Catholic Christianity that carried with it the expectation that a vision of truth was just on the horizon.[8] Just prior to his baptism, he could report to his patron Romanianus: "I am seeking truth most intently; I am now beginning to find it; and I am confident that I will arrive at it in the highest degree" (*CA* 2.2.4). In time, of course, the exuberant optimism of the new convert would be tempered by a growing conviction of the recalcitrance of sinful habits and the moral and cognitive limitations they impose, but Augustine would never again despair of finding truth. To his mind, despair is fundamentally incompatible with the Christian life to which he had committed himself. That life, he never stopped believing, is one of hope that is grounded in faith.

All of this is of enormous importance if we are to understand why Augustine was exercised by Academic skepticism to the point that he felt the need to take up his pen against it so soon after his conversion. Although reflection on Academic arguments may not have been what caused him to despair of finding truth, such reflection had threatened to harden him in that despair and nearly derailed him in his search. As he tells us in *Retractions*, he thus felt it necessary to purge himself of the remaining influence of those

8. The story of this conversion is dramatically told in books 7 and 8 of *Confessions*, with book 7 focusing on the obstacles of intellect and book 8 on the obstacles of will. Interestingly, in the Cassiciacum dialogues, Augustine casts his conversion almost entirely as a conversion to philosophy. We see this, for example, in his call to Romanianus to take up the philosophical life: "Wake up. Wake up, I beg you. Believe me, you will be grateful that the gifts of this world have flattered you with almost none of the successes that take hold of the incautious. They tried to capture me while I was daily singing their praises, but a pain in my chest forced me to put aside my windy profession and to flee into the bosom of philosophy. Philosophy now nourishes and cares for me in that leisure for which we have hoped. It has freed me completely from the superstition [of Manicheism] into which I precipitously delivered you along with myself" (*CA* 1.1.4). Similar characterizations of his conversion can be found in *De beat. vit.* 1.4 and *De ord.* 1.2.3. This, together with other considerations, famously led Prosper Alfaric (1918), echoing the work of earlier scholars, to charge that Augustine's conversion in 386 CE was not, as he represents it in *Confessions*, a conversion to Catholic Christianity, but rather a conversion to philosophy or, more specifically, to Neoplatonism: "Moralement comme intellectuellement, c'est au Néoplatonisme qu'il s'est converti, plutôt qu'à l'Evangile" (399). This position, especially after the work of Boyer (1953) and Courcelle (1950), has long been considered untenable. See Boyer 1953, 115–34; Courcelle 1950, 175–226; and Alfaric 1918, 361–414.

arguments in order to make progress along the path to which he had newly committed himself:

> When I left behind the things that I had achieved, or wished to achieve, in my desire for this world and devoted myself to the leisure of the Christian life, the first thing I wrote, even before I was baptized, was *Against the Academics* or *The Academics*. I wrote this because the arguments of the Academics were troubling me and I wished to remove them from my mind by the strongest reasons I could give. Their arguments cause many people to despair of finding truth. Since everything is uncertain and hidden to them, they prohibit the wise man from assenting or giving his approval to anything at all as if it were clear and certain. (*Ret.* 1.1.1)

He says much the same in *Enchiridion*:

> I composed *Against the Academics* at the beginning of my conversion so that the things the Academics said in opposition [to the wise man giving his approval to anything] would not be an obstacle to us at the entrance [to the Christian life]. At any rate, despair of finding truth, which their arguments seem to strengthen, had to be removed. (*Ench.* 7.20)

If we go back to *Against the Academics*, we see that Augustine considered his efforts in this direction to have been a success:

> I give you the whole of what I have proposed in brief. Whatever human wisdom may be, I see that I have not yet perceived it. However, though I am thirty-three years old, I do not think that I should despair of ever attaining it. Having forsaken all the things that mortals deem to be good, I have proposed to dedicate myself to investigating it. The arguments of the Academics seriously deterred me from this enterprise, but I think that I am sufficiently fortified against them by this discussion. (*CA* 3.20.43)

This he repeats in his letter to Hermogenian:

> Whatever the case may be with respect to *Against the Academics*, I am not so pleased that I have, as you write, defeated the Academics—for you write this perhaps more lovingly than truthfully—as that I have freed myself from the odious snare by which I was held back from the breast of philosophy, which is the nourishment of the soul, out of despair of truth. (letter to Hermogenian, *Ep.* 1.1)

The motivation behind Augustine's concern to address Academic skepticism is thus clear. His own experience had shown him that Academic skepticism is a philosophy of despair that kills the hope of finding truth and inhibits people from taking up the search for it.[9] In particular, it cuts people off from the hope that the Christian life offers to all who will walk its path and that sustains them through its many challenges. Wishing to avail himself of this hope in its fullness, and wishing to help others do the same, Augustine, as a new convert, set out to lay the arguments of the Academics to rest in as decisive manner as he was able. The product of this endeavor—penned in the fall of 386 CE as his first postconversion literary production—was *Against the Academics*.

A Brief History of Academic Skepticism

Before we can evaluate Augustine's attempt to lay the arguments of the Academics to rest, we must get our bearings by sketching a rough account of Academic skepticism as a movement, an account that will be filled in over the course of the book.[10] We may start by noting that the Academics did not see their own stance of philosophical doubt as being novel, but as having a long and prestigious pedigree. Although tendentious and selective, this view of things was not without justification. Since the Ionians first began conducting systematic inquiries into the natural world, philosophers had been impressed

9. It is worth noting that Augustine, in his second dedication of *Against the Academics* to Romanianus, identifies despair of finding truth as the third of four reasons for the fact that philosophical knowledge is not more widespread than it is: "Knowledge comes rarely and to the few. This is either because of the many and varied troubles of this life, as you have experienced, Romanianus, or because of a certain stupor, laziness, or slowness of our dull minds, or because of the despair of finding truth, since the star of wisdom does not appear to our minds as easily as light does to our eyes, or—and this is the common error—because men, in the mistaken belief that they have found truth, if they search for it, do not do so diligently and are turned aside from the will to search" (*CA* 2.1.1). Later in the dedication, at *CA* 2.3.8, Augustine tells Romanianus that, if he suffers from despair, a reading of *Against the Academics* will cure him. It appears that Augustine, even late in his career, remained confident that this early work was effective for this purpose. Here, for example, is the judgment that he renders in *The Trinity*: "I wrote the three books [of *Against the Academics*] at the beginning of my conversion. The many arguments against the perception of truth that are found among the Academics will certainly not in the least trouble the man who is able and willing to read them and has understood what he has read" (*De Trin.* 15.12.21).

10. For an initial overview of the development of Academic skepticism, see Thorsrud 2010 and Lévy 2010. For a more comprehensive overview, see Thorsrud 2009, 36–101 and Hankinson 1995, 74–152. Four studies of the late (post-Carneadean) period of the Academy are particularly important: Brittain 2001; Barnes 1989; Tarrant 1985; and Glucker 1978. A good introduction to Cicero's philosophical work is Morford 2002, 34–97. The most comprehensive study of Cicero and his relation to the Academy is Lévy 1992.

by the difficulty of attaining knowledge, due to either the obscurity of truth or the weakness of our cognitive capacities.[11] In particular, thinkers from Heraclitus to Parmenides and from Democritus to Xenophanes had taught that the world was not as it appeared to be and warned that the reports of the senses were not to be uncritically accepted. Passages such as the following could be found in abundance in their writings:

A. In reality we know nothing about anything, but for each person opinion is a reshaping [of the soul atoms by the atoms entering from without]. (Democritus, DK 68B7; McKirahan 16.53)
B. Those who seek gold dig up much earth but find little. (Heraclitus, DK 22B22; McKirahan 10.40)
C. Nature loves to hide. (Heraclitus, DK 22B123; McKirahan 10.42)
D. No man has seen nor will anyone know the truth about the gods and all the things I speak of. For even if a person should in fact say what is absolutely the case, nevertheless he himself does not know, but belief is fashioned over all things. (Xenophanes, DK 21B34; McKirahan 7.19)
E. Concerning the gods I am unable to know either that they are or that they are not, or what their appearance is like. For many are the things that hinder knowledge: the obscurity of the matter and the shortness of human life. (Protagoras, DK 80B4; McKirahan 18.7)
F. I say that we do not know whether we know anything or not, or even what knowing and not knowing are, or whether anything is the case or not at all.[12] (Metrodorus of Chios, DK 70B1)

To the Academics, such passages revealed a fundamentally critical and non-dogmatic cast of mind among the earliest philosophers, and they eagerly exploited them to show that the dogmatism of the Stoics and Epicureans was both recent and exceptional. They thus portrayed their own skepticism as fully in line with the oldest and most authentic tradition of philosophical practice.[13]

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11. On this background, see Lee 2010 and Hankinson 1995, 31–51.

12. F is translated from the Latin given by Cicero in *Acad.* 2.23.73–74.

13. On this, see Cicero's rehearsal of the "skeptical" views of the Presocratics in *Acad.* 2.23.72–74. Cicero is here responding to Lucullus's charge, made in *Acad.* 2.5.13–15, that the Academic appeal to the Presocratics amounts to a partisan distortion of history. Plutarch records the opposite charge, leveled by the Epicurean philosopher Colotes, that Arcesilaus misleadingly recycled old ideas and presented them as new. See *Adv. Col.* 1121F–1122A. For a full discussion of this controversy, see Brittain and Palmer 2001.

Unsurprisingly, the figure that loomed largest in the Academic reconstruction of the philosophical past was Socrates. Like so many others of their day, the Academics regarded him as the philosopher par excellence and sought to claim his mantle for themselves. The Socrates they admired, however, was one made after their own image. He was Socrates Scepticus.[14] This Socrates was the tenacious opponent of all forms of dogmatism who challenged the views of his interlocutors and exposed their claims to wisdom as egotistic pretense. He was also the philosopher of uncommon intellectual humility who disavowed knowledge and preached that the wisdom available to humans consists solely in the recognition of one's own ignorance. It was this Socrates to whom the Academics appealed in establishing a noble lineage for themselves. And it was this Socrates to whom they appealed in claiming to have returned the Academy to its original source of inspiration.

Academic skepticism, however, began not with Socrates, but with Arcesilaus (316 BCE–241 BCE), the sixth head of the Academy, which had been established by Plato in 367 BCE. Although little is known about the Academy prior to his accession in 268 BCE, it appears that much of its work was focused on systematizing and developing Plato's positive teachings. The early Academy was thus marked by a dogmatizing tendency, and it is against this that Arcesilaus can be seen as charting a new course. As recounted by Cicero, this took the form of reviving the method of Socratic inquiry and employing it as the primary means of teaching within the Academy:

> Socrates' practice was not retained by his successors, but Arcesilaus called it back and established that those who wished to hear him would not question him about his views but would state their own. When they had done so, he would argue against them. Those who heard him would then defend their views as far as they were able. (*De fin.* 2.1.2)

And again:

> Arcesilaus, who studied under Polemo, was the first to appropriate from the various books of Plato and the conversations of Socrates the idea that there was nothing certain that could be perceived by the senses or the mind. They say that, having rejected the judgment of the senses and the mind, he exhibited exceptional charm in speaking and was the first to have instituted the practice—though this was

14. On the Academic reading of Socrates as a skeptic, see Bett 2006; Cooper 2004; Glucker 1997; Shields 1994; and Annas 1994. On readings of Socrates among the Hellenistic philosophers generally, see Long 1988.

> thoroughly Socratic in character—of not revealing his own views, but of arguing against the views expressed by others. (*De or.* 3.18.67)

Arcesilaus is here portrayed as a teacher who, like Socrates, spent his time and energy subjecting the views of others to scrutiny rather than providing instruction in doctrine or espousing a system of thought. This was no doubt motivated by a desire to sharpen the dialectical skills of his pupils by forcing them to state and defend their views in the face of difficult objections. But its aim was not purely pedagogical. In a passage we have already encountered, Cicero tells us that Arcesilaus advocated a particularly radical form of the Socratic disavowal of knowledge and, in accord with this, utilized a Socratic method of inquiry to induce a state of *epochē* in all who would engage with him:

> Arcesilaus denied that there was anything that could be known, including the one thing that Socrates left himself to know [namely, that he knew nothing]. He thought that everything lay hidden in obscurity and that nothing could be discerned or understood. For these reasons, he thought that we should not assert anything, affirm anything, or approve anything with assent and that we should always check our rashness and guard against every lapse. . . . He acted consistently with this view. By arguing against the views of everyone, he led most away from their own. When equal reasons were found on opposite sides of the same issue, it was easier to withhold assent from each side. (*Acad.* 1.12.45)

Arcesilaus thus went beyond Socrates in transforming a personal disavowal of knowledge into a general denial of its possibility and was so uncompromising on this point that he even pronounced the truth of the denial itself to be inapprehensible. Whether coherent or not, what we see here is a concern to oppose any and every dogmatic commitment, and it is in light of this concern that we must understand Arcesilaus's setting of *epochē* as the aim of philosophical inquiry. Simply put, *epochē* is the natural consequence of successful opposition to dogma. This is crucial, for it is precisely here, in the redirecting of philosophical inquiry to the end of *epochē*, that Arcesilaus set the Academy on the skeptical path it would follow for the better part of two centuries. It is precisely here that we find the birth of Academic skepticism.

For some time, then, the Academy would be known, not for its advocacy of any particular set of ideas, but for its opposition to the dogmatic schools that populated the philosophical landscape of the Hellenistic world. Chief among these was Stoicism, whose founder, Zeno of Citium (334 BCE–262

BCE), was roughly contemporary with Arcesilaus and a fellow student at the Academy under its fifth head, Crates. Ancient sources make much of the rivalry between Arcesilaus and Zeno,[15] and it appears that the latter's ideas, particularly on the possibility of knowledge, were the chief foil for Arcesilaus's dialectical skills. "It was with Zeno," Cicero reports, "that Arcesilaus began his entire struggle, not out of obstinacy or desire for victory—in my opinion at least—but because of the obscurity of the things that had brought Socrates to an admission of ignorance" (*Acad.* 1.12.44). As we know, this was to have profound consequences for the trajectory of both Academic skepticism and Stoicism. Like quarreling siblings unable to get along or disengage, the two traditions developed in dialectical relation with one another in such a way that neither can be well understood apart from the other.

That being said, the precise bearing that the mutual development of these traditions has for the interpretation of Academic skepticism is a matter of some debate. One line of interpretation—what has come to be known as the "Dialectical Interpretation"—would have us believe that Arcesilaus, having no dogmatic commitments of his own, could not have been committed to the arguments he deployed against the Stoics, including, most significantly, his arguments against the possibility of knowledge.[16] Built largely on premises drawn from the Stoics, these arguments were purely ad hominem in character and were intended solely to undermine Stoic views rather than to establish philosophical theses, skeptical or otherwise. Pushed far enough, the Dialectical Interpretation would even have us believe that Arcesilaus issued his call for universal *epochē*, not in his own voice, but in a purely dialectical fashion, and that he himself had no views on the advisability or inadvisability of assent. If this is correct, then we go wrong in ascribing to Arcesilaus a skeptical philosophy of any kind and should restrict ourselves to describing his philosophical practice.

There is no question that the Dialectical Interpretation has a great deal going for it. Not only does it make good sense of the presence of Stoic material in Academic arguments, but it absolves the Academics of the apparent inconsistency of arguing for any number of skeptical theses while at the same time opposing dogmatic commitments. Whatever its merits, however,

15. The most extended account of this rivalry is given by Numenius, as cited in Eusebius, *Praep. evang.* 14.732b–733d. See also Cicero, *Acad.* 2.24.76–78; Sextus Empiricus, *M* 7.150–58; and Lactantius, *Div. inst.* 3.4.1–6.1.

16. The locus classicus for the Dialectical Interpretation is Couissin 1983. For updated statements of the Dialectical Interpretation, see also Frede 1984, 1999a; and Striker 1981. Accounts of Academic skepticism that reject the Dialectical Interpretation can be found in Schofield 1999 and Hankinson 1995, 74–91.

the Dialectical Interpretation faces serious obstacles, not the least of which is that it does not square well with the presentation given in our most important sources of the Academics as offering their skeptical theses in their own voice.[17] More important, at least for our purposes, is the fact that we find in the Academic tradition the development of a skeptical philosophy that is of considerable interest in its own right and eminently worthy of study. This is so irrespective of the status we judge that philosophy to have had among those who proposed it. In no case, perhaps, is this more evident than with Carneades (214 BCE–129 BCE), the next great Academic after Arcesilaus and a figure of towering importance within the tradition.

Thought to be the most dialectically skilled of the Academics, Carneades is credited with having refined the attack on Stoic epistemology begun by Arcesilaus, especially as that epistemology had been reinvigorated by the Stoic logician Chrysippus (281 BCE–208 BCE). He is also credited with having expanded the field of attack by developing global arguments against the possibility of knowledge that highlight problems involved in establishing any criterion of truth whatsoever.[18] In all of this he is best seen as carrying on the work of Arcesilaus by pushing the skepticism of the Academy still further. Yet Carneades is also regarded as having inaugurated a new phase in the life of the Academy, so much so that ancient sources describe him as having founded the New Academy, with Plato having founded the Old Academy and Arcesilaus having founded the Middle Academy.[19] The decisive point of innovation seems to have been the introduction of persuasiveness (*pithanotēs / probabilitas*) as a practical criterion. According to the account given by his student, Clitomachus (187 BCE–110 BCE), Carneades followed Arcesilaus in deeming all things to be inapprehensible, but added that

17. In addition to Cicero, who by and large presents the Academics, including Arcesilaus, as offering arguments in their own voice, Sextus presents the Academics as negative dogmatists and on this basis distinguishes them from the Pyrrhonians. See *PH* 1.1.3 and 1.23.226. Note, however, that Sextus largely (though not completely) exempts Arcesilaus from this negative dogmatism. See *PH* 1.23.234. Of the ancient sources, Numenius comes the closest to presenting the Academics as practitioners of pure dialectic or, more negatively, as practitioners of pure eristic. See his survey of Academic skepticism in *Praep. evang.* 14.727b–39d. Despite this, Eusebius, in his preface to that survey, presents Arcesilaus as straightforwardly declaring (1) that we should suspend judgment on all things; (2) that all things are incomprehensible; (3) that the arguments on both sides of every question are of equal force; and (4) that both the senses and reason are untrustworthy. See *Praep. evang.* 14.726d.

18. On this, see Sextus, *M* 7.159–65. For discussion, see Hankinson 1995, 105–8.

19. Sextus, for example, writes: "There have been, so most people say, three Academies: one—the oldest—was Plato's; a second was the Middle Academy of Arcesilaus, Polemo's pupil; and the third was the New Academy of Carneades and Clitomachus. Some add a fourth, the Academy of Philo and Charmidas, and some reckon as a fifth the Academy of Antiochus" (*PH* 1.33.220). Eusebius gives a similar periodization, even quoting this last line of Sextus, in *Praep. evang.* 14.726a–d.

some things nevertheless appear true with sufficient force that they can be regarded as persuasive. Because what is persuasive remains inapprehensible, Carneades insisted that we must not give our assent to it, but he allowed that it is appropriate to give it a weaker form of endorsement—what he called "approval" (*approbatio*). What this weaker form of endorsement amounts to is not entirely clear, but two things can be said with confidence: approval provides a sufficient basis for action, and it does not involve taking that to which it is given as true.

Unfortunately, any reconstruction of the work of Carneades must be highly tentative. Like Arcesilaus before him, Carneades did not write anything, and reports about him by students and successors conflict on key points. Most notably, Metrodorus of Stratonicea (180 BCE–105 BCE) and Philo of Larissa (159 BCE–84 BCE) claimed—contra Clitomachus—that Carneades allowed that there are occasions on which it is permissible to engage in acts of assent. He only cautioned that such acts be coupled with the recognition that they yield opinion (*doxa/opinio*) rather than apprehension (*katalēpsis/comprehensio*).[20] If this is correct, then Carneades took a significant step toward mitigating the skepticism of Arcesilaus. While remaining a skeptic in other respects, he abandoned the radical demand for universal *epochē* that had inaugurated the skeptical phase of the Academy.

Whether correct or not, this was the interpretation that came to prevail. Although Clitomachus succeeded Carneades, Philo succeeded Clitomachus, and the Academy under his leadership came to embrace a decidedly mild form of skepticism. Following the innovations of Carneades, Philo embraced the doctrine of persuasiveness and ran with it. On his view, careful investigation could yield persuasiveness on all manner of philosophical issues, with the result that the skeptic could legitimately hold a rich stock of philosophical opinions. The consequence of this shift was that Academic skepticism and Stoicism began to converge. Academics absorbed Stoic views, and Stoics modified those views under Academic criticism. This happened to such an extent that Aenesidemus, a defector from the Academy and an important figure in the Pyrrhonian tradition, bitterly complained that "the Academics, especially the ones now, sometimes agree with Stoic opinions and, to tell the truth, appear to be just Stoics in conflict with Stoics" (quoted in Photius, *Bib.* 212; Inwood and Gerson III-25). To a skeptic in the mold of Arcesilaus, the late Academy would not have seemed a welcoming place.

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20. On this disagreement, see *Acad.* 2.24.78. Note that Cicero sides with Clitomachus in this controversy.

To make matters worse, Cicero reports that, late in his career, Philo underwent a conversion in the direction of dogmatism.[21] We have few details, but it appears that Philo ultimately relented on the one point on which he could still legitimately claim to be a skeptic. He abandoned the claim that all things are inapprehensible. His final position seems to have been a version of fallibilism, according to which apprehension does not require anything like the elimination of the possibility of error. Its conditions are far less stringent and are thus able to be satisfied. In addition, he seems to have claimed that this had been the position of the Academy all along, and that the arguments of his predecessors had merely been intended to show that the Stoics, by requiring the elimination of the possibility of error for apprehension, had set the bar too high. With this even more radical innovation the vestiges of skepticism within the Academy were all but erased. The institution itself was destroyed in the Mithridatic War, Philo spent his last years in Rome, and the next (nominal) head, Antiochus of Ascalon (130 BCE–68 BCE), openly rebelled against skepticism and advocated a highly Stoic, but somewhat syncretistic, system of thought under the guise of restoring the Old Academy of Plato. The stage was now set for the emergence of Middle Platonism.

Augustine's Academics

From his reading of Cicero, Augustine was familiar with much of the history we have just sketched, but his retelling of that history is highly idiosyncratic and largely unsupported by the texts that have come down to us. Even so, what Augustine has to say is of great interest. It reveals much about how he viewed the Academy and what he took the motives and aims of the Academics to have been. As we cannot fully assess his critique of Academic skepticism without putting it into this context, it is worth taking a brief look at Augustine's narrative of the history of the Academy.[22]

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21. On this, three passages from Cicero are crucial: *Acad.* 2.6.18, which describes Philo's novel teaching concerning apprehension; *Acad.* 1.4.13, which describes Philo's novel teaching concerning the history of the Academy; and *Acad.* 2.4.11–12, which describes the reaction that these novelties provoked among certain readers, including Antiochus, of his so-called Roman Books. On the phases of Philo's career, together with an exhaustive examination of all relevant source material, see Brittain 2001.

22. Augustine presents two narratives of the history of the Academy in *Against the Academics*. The first, which is given at *CA* 2.5.11–6.15, serves as a tutorial for the other participants in the dialogue and follows (more or less) Cicero's narrative. The second, which is given at *CA* 3.17.37–20.43, departs from Cicero's narrative and is meant to expose those beliefs and motivations of the Academics that, on Augustine's view, were not publicly revealed. It is this latter narrative with which we are here concerned. For commentary on this material, see Fuhrer 1997, 418–48; Glucker 1978, 315–22; and Holte 1962, 97–109. See also Augustine's letter to Dioscorus, *Ep.* 118.3.16–5.34 for a repetition, with elaboration, of this narrative.

We may begin with what is surely the most surprising claim that Augustine makes about the Academics, namely, that they were not skeptics at all, but were fully committed Platonists instead.[23] This is to say that, on Augustine's view, the Academics adopted skepticism as a public posture and that they privately adhered to the teachings of their master, Plato. Most significantly, they adhered to Plato's teaching that there are two worlds—the corporeal and sensible world, of which we may have only opinion; and the incorporeal and intelligible world, of which those whose souls have been suitably purified by the practice of philosophy may have knowledge. What stands behind the skepticism of the Academics, Augustine thinks, is Platonism.

To explain how this curious state of affairs came about, Augustine points to what he considers to be the decisive event that caused the Academy to conceal its Platonism and adopt skepticism as an exoteric practice. This was the reaction of Arcesilaus to the novel teachings of Zeno of Citium. In book 3 of *Against the Academics*, he recounts this event as follows:

> Zeno became fond of his own view of the world, and especially his own view of the soul, for whose sake true philosophy is vigilant. He said that the soul is mortal, that there is nothing beyond the sensible world, and that nothing occurs in the world except by means of a body—for he thought that God Himself was fire. Since this evil was spreading widely, Arcesilaus, it seems to me, acted usefully and wisely in thoroughly concealing the view of the Academy, burying it like gold to be discovered at some future time. (*CA* 3.17.38)

On this recounting, while Zeno was still a member of the Academy, he began to advocate a form of materialism in metaphysics and empiricism in

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23. Although none of Cicero's extant writings present the Academics as esoteric Platonists, Augustine nevertheless appeals to Cicero in support of this thesis: "Whoever thinks that the Academics believed [that truth cannot be found] should listen to Cicero himself. He said that the Academics were in the habit of hiding their view and only revealed it to those who had lived with them up to old age. What that view might have been, God knows. In my judgment, it was Plato's" (*CA* 3.20.43). For what it is worth, Sextus offers some confirmation of Augustine's view, at least with respect to Arcesilaus: "And if one is to be convinced by what is said about [Arcesilaus], they say that he appeared superficially to be Pyrrhonist but in truth was a Dogmatist. Because he used to test his companions by his aporetic skill, to see if they were gifted enough to receive Platonic beliefs, he seemed to be aporetic; but to the gifted among his companions he would entrust Plato's views. Hence Aristo called him *Plato in front, Pyrrho behind, Diodorus in the middle* because he made use of dialectic in Diodorus' fashion but was an out-and-out Platonist" (*PH* 1.33.234). On the evidence for esoteric Platonism among the Academics, see Brittain 2001, 242–47; and Glucker 1978, 296–306. For a study of how the thesis of esoteric Platonism guided Augustine's reading of Cicero, particularly *The Nature of the Gods*, see Brittain (2011), who argues that Augustine dropped the thesis by 415 CE while writing *City of God*. See *De civ. Dei* 8.4–12 for Augustine's nonesoteric treatment of the development of Platonism.

epistemology that was in direct opposition to the teachings of Plato and, most egregiously, in direct opposition to the two-worlds doctrine. In particular, he began to teach that everything that exists—including God and the soul—is corporeal and sensible, and that nothing that exists—including God and the soul—is incorporeal and intelligible. When Zeno left the Academy and began to find a receptive audience for these ideas within the broader community of philosophers, the reaction of the Academy was swift. Arcesilaus took the extraordinary step of banning all public expression of Plato's teachings and permitted them to be revealed only to those who were fully prepared by training and discipline to receive them. In addition, he redirected the public work of the Academy to the negative task of undermining not only the teachings of Zeno, but those of anyone else of a similar cast of mind as well. Augustine explains:

> Arcesilaus, being a most clever and humane man, decided to unteach those he found to have been poorly taught rather than to teach those he judged unteachable. All the things that are attributed to the New Academy arose from this, since the members of the Old Academy had no need of them. (*CA* 3.17.38)

On Augustine's view, then, the skepticism of the Academy arose, not from any loss of commitment to Plato's teachings among its members, but as a strategy for stemming what the Academics saw as a rising tide of materialism and empiricism outside of its walls—a tide that was pushed along, not only by Zeno and his followers, but by Epicureans, Cynics, Cyrenaics, and others as well. It was in this degenerate philosophical environment, according to Augustine, that Arcesilaus, seeing there to be no prospect of advancing Plato's teachings, judged it best that they be withdrawn from public view and directed the energies of the Academy to combating its enemies. The weapons he chose for this combat were the weapons of skepticism, and it was in taking them up that Arcesilaus inaugurated the skeptical phase of the Academy.

In taking this line, Augustine is careful to emphasize that, though Arcesilaus and his successors in the Academy employed the weapons of skepticism with consummate skill and unflagging vigor, they did so in the hope that they might one day lay them down and bring Plato's teachings back into the open. Their skeptical practice was thus intended to slow and ultimately reverse the advance of materialism and empiricism within the larger community of philosophers to such a degree that those teachings might once again find fertile ground and take root. By the time of Philo, Augustine reports, they had almost succeeded, though Philo was unexpectedly forced to take

up arms against his pupil, Antiochus, who sought to import Stoicism into the Academy under the guise of returning it to its Platonic origins. After the work of Cicero, however, the time was finally ripe. Plato's teachings slowly began to spread, and they eventually found their full restoration centuries later in the writings of Plotinus. Augustine thus finishes his narrative with a celebration of this restoration and an exaltation of Plotinus as the new Plato. He writes:

> Not long after that time, when all the obstinacy and stubbornness had died down and the clouds of error had dispersed, the face of Plato, which is the most pure and bright in philosophy, appeared. This occurred especially in Plotinus. This Platonic philosopher is judged to be so like Plato that the two seem to have lived at the same time. So great is the time between them, however, that Plato should be thought to have come to life again in Plotinus. (*CA* 3.18.41)

There is much that Augustine leaves out of this part of the narrative—leaping as he does from Cicero to Plotinus—but the point he wishes to make is clear. What we see in the writings of Plotinus is the realization of a hope long harbored by the Academics that, through their work, Plato's teachings might be preserved for posterity and eventually reemerge preeminent among its rivals. Understood in this way, the work of the Academics was of benefit to the progress of philosophy. It made possible the preservation and eventual restoration of the one form of philosophy worthy of its name. Thus, despite the many and grave dangers of skepticism, the work of the Academics must be honored. It was work in the service of wisdom.

A Christian Addendum

Such, then, is Augustine's narrative of the history of the Academy, and it is surprisingly favorable to the Academics. Before bringing our review to a close, however, we would be remiss if we did not take note of comments concerning the significance of Christ to this history that Augustine appends to the end of his narrative. After proclaiming the triumph in his own day of Plato's philosophy,[24] he writes: "That philosophy is not a philosophy of this

24. Augustine writes: "With respect to erudition, teaching, and morals, by which the soul receives care, after many years and many controversies, there has nevertheless emerged, in my opinion, one system of fully true philosophy [*una verissimae philosophiae disciplina*]. This is because there have been extremely sharp and clever men who have taught in their disputations that Aristotle and Plato agreed with one another but did so in such a way that, to those who were ignorant and inattentive, they appeared to disagree" (*CA* 3.19.42). In a detailed study of the phrase "one system of fully true

world, which our Holy Scriptures most rightly detest, but a philosophy of that other, intelligible world" (*CA* 3.19.42). He then adds:

> That most subtle reasoning would never call back souls, blind by the multiform shadows of error and forgetful by the deepest filth of the body, to the intelligible world if God Most High, in his mercy for people, had not lowered and submitted the authority of the Divine Intellect to the human body. Stirred by the precepts of that Intellect, and also by his deeds, our souls are able to return to themselves and see their fatherland once more without any strife of disputation. (*CA* 3.19.42)

Augustine's point in these comments is that Plato's philosophy, the philosophy of the intelligible world, owes its firm establishment and unrivaled success to Christ. Given the depths of error and forgetfulness into which the human race had fallen, humans could not be called back to the intelligible world by appeal to reason, which was the only appeal that Plato could make. What was needed, he argues, was that the Divine Intellect become incarnate and issue the call by means of its own authority. This it did in the person of Christ, who stirred people to respond by precept and deed rather than by argument and disputation.[25] Making a similar point a few years later, in *True Religion*, Augustine goes so far as to speculate that, if the early followers of Plato could somehow live again and witness the masses of people who, under the influence of Christ's teachings, have renounced the world and turned toward God, "with the change of a few words and views, they would become Christians, as a great many of the more recent Platonists of our times have done" (*De ver. rel.* 4.7). From Augustine's perspective, then, the fact that Plato's teachings were given new voice in the writings of Plotinus and others is of no great consequence. This is because the wisdom to which Plato directed our attention was clearly revealed in Christ, who was its very

philosophy," Holte (1962) argues that it refers, not to Plato's philosophy or to Platonism generally, but rather to Christianity: "Mais avec l'Incarnation du Christ est apparue un autorité infallible, un norme d'après laquelle l'on peut juger tous les systèmes philosophiques. C'est pourquoi l'on a pu, sur sa base, ériger '*une* école de philosophie parfaitement vraie'" (107). Holte's analysis is attractive, but Augustine's assertion of agreement between Plato and Aristotle speaks against it.

25. Augustine repeats this point in his letter to Dioscorus: "The filth of sin and the love of the flesh has caused such great blindness in minds that even those monstrous opinions [of the Stoics and Epicureans] could consume the leisure of learned men in disputation. Given that this is the case, will you, Dioscorus, or anyone possessed of a mind that is awake, doubt that no better means for following truth could be provided to mankind than that a man should in some ineffable and wondrous way be assumed by Truth-Itself, bear his person on earth, and, by prescribing what is right and doing what is divine, persuade people to believe for their salvation what they could not understand through wisdom?" (letter to Dioscorus, *Ep.* 118.5.32).

embodiment. Although Augustine does not make it, the unmistakable inference is that the history he has just narrated, the history of the Academy, is of little significance in comparison with the history he has not narrated, the history of the Church.

Final Thoughts

In reflecting on this narrative it is clear enough that its construction was intended to be more than a disinterested recounting of the history of the Academy. It was intended to take its place within the larger critique of Academic skepticism, whose aim, as we have seen, was to effect liberation from the despair of finding truth to which Academic arguments against the possibility of knowledge may lead. Simply put, once it is revealed that the Academics were committed Platonists and that their arguments were advanced in opposition to the materialism and empiricism that had taken hold within the broader community of philosophers, their arguments will be far less likely to undercut hope that truth can be found. As a newly minted Catholic Christian who sought to nurture this very hope, Augustine likely saw in the construction of this narrative an important means by which he could free himself from the remaining influence that Academic arguments had over him. The construction of this narrative was thus anything but a disinterested enterprise.

Even so, this point should not be overplayed. For starters, Augustine recognized that the main thesis of his narrative—that the Academics were committed Platonists—was highly speculative and largely unsupported by the testimony of his sources. He thus writes, at the end of his narrative of the history of the Academy:

> At times, I have convinced myself that what I have said about the Academics is persuasive. But it is nothing to me if it turns out to be false. It is enough that I no longer judge that man cannot find truth. (*CA* 3.20.43)

He echoes this in his letter to Hermoginian:

> I ask you to consider the matter more carefully and write back. Do you approve of what, at the end of book 3 [of *Against the Academics*], I thought should be believed? Perhaps it should be held more as a suspicion than as a certainty, but I think the advantage of believing it outweighs its unbelievability. (letter to Hermogenian, *Ep.* 1.3)

More important, Augustine recognized that, whatever the intentions underlying them, the arguments that the Academics put forward had tremendous

force in their own right and therefore had to be answered directly. It is for this reason that he consistently chose to keep his narrative in the background and focus his efforts on refuting the Academics rather than explaining them. From our perspective, this is fortunate. If Augustine had contented himself merely with giving an account of the genesis of Academic skepticism—even one that was intended to diffuse its power—his critique would have been of little philosophical interest. It would not have dealt with the challenge that skepticism poses to the possibility of knowledge or with the viability of skepticism as a philosophical practice. Augustine, however, was much too engaged a philosopher for that. Thus, while his narrative of the history of the Academy and the broader development of Platonism provides important background for understanding his critique of Academic skepticism, that critique is ultimately philosophical in character.

Part I

Discrediting Academic Skepticism as a Philosophical Practice

Chapter 2

Socrates, the Academics, and the Good Life

As Augustine reports, when Marcus Varro, writing in the last years of the Roman Republic, set out to classify and discuss the various philosophical sects that had existed up to his day, he did so on the basis of the position each took on the nature of happiness or the good life. Varro's work, *De philosophia*, is no longer extant, but Augustine explains his reasons for taking this approach:

> Varro judges that nothing should be called a sect of philosophy that does not differ from others in what it takes to be the supreme good and the supreme evil. Indeed, the only purpose for which man takes up philosophy is to be happy. But what makes him happy is itself the supreme good. Hence, the only purpose for which man takes up philosophy is the supreme good. Therefore, nothing should be called a sect of philosophy that does not pursue the supreme good. (*De civ. Dei* 19.1.3)

What Augustine here reports about Varro nicely illustrates what has become a commonplace concerning the period of Hellenistic philosophy, the period in which Varro wrote. This is that writers of this period tended to take ethical concerns as central to philosophy. These were often concerns over moral

duty or obligation, but more typically, as in the case of Varro, they were concerns over the nature of the good life and its attainment.[1]

Like any commonplace, this one is potentially as misleading as it is helpful, and it is best to take it not as denying the speculative character of Hellenistic thought, but as asserting a general tendency among Hellenistic thinkers to subordinate the speculative to the practical. Take, for example, the opening lines of Epicurus's *Letter to Menoeceus*:

> Let no one delay the study of philosophy while young nor weary of it when old. For no one is either too young or too old for the health of the soul. He who says that the time for philosophy has not yet come or that it has passed is like someone who says that the time for happiness has not yet come or that it has passed. (*Ep. ad Men.* 122; Inwood and Gerson I-4)

The value of philosophy, Epicurus tells us, is ultimately practical. It is conducive to happiness and should be pursued for that end. This goes even for the most speculative areas of philosophy, such as physics, which is recommended for its aid in removing two of the chief obstacles to happiness: fear of death and fear of the gods. Epicurus was thus celebrated by his followers, not so much for the advances he made in atomic theory or cosmology, but for having discovered the way to happiness.

In view of this, it is natural to ask about the extent to which ancient skepticism, as a phenomenon of the Hellenistic world, was similarly practical in its orientation. Here we may have our doubts, especially if we focus on the slew of epistemological problems that were its stock-in-trade. However interesting these problems may be, they are often highly technical and their pursuit does not in any obvious way appear to be motivated by concerns about the good life. It may be, then, that ancient skepticism gives lie to our commonplace.

Be that as it may, we find in at least one of the two main skeptical traditions of the ancient world—the Pyrrhonian—an unambiguous assertion of the practical orientation of skepticism. Sextus Empiricus, our most important source for this tradition, puts it this way: "Up to now we say the aim of

1. A typical statement of this view is the following, from King's introduction (2001, xviii) to the Loeb edition of Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*: "Men's thoughts [in this age] were turned inward and they sought to obtain within themselves that peace and happiness which they could not find in the external world. It became the aim of philosophy to establish a moral standard rather than a theory of knowledge. It was this that made philosophy popular, and philosophers became preachers who taught the art of right living to those who desired a teaching which could satisfy their needs."

the Sceptic is tranquility in matters of opinion and moderation of feeling in matters forced upon us" (*PH* 1.12). He then elaborates, explaining that the disturbances with which we are afflicted often have their source in the dogmatic judgments we make, particularly those to the effect that this or that is good or that this or that is evil. Insofar as skeptical practice serves to eliminate such judgments, it acts as a purgative, relieving us from these disturbances and bringing about a state of tranquillity (*ataraxia*). It is in this way that skepticism, at least its Pyrrhonian variety, can be seen as taking its place alongside other Hellenistic schools as a practical program leading to the good life.[2]

In this book, however, we are concerned with the Academics, and what is true of the Pyrrhonians is not necessarily true of them. They present us with a more difficult case. Consider Sextus's observation about Arcesilaus, the founder of the skeptical Academy: "[Arcesilaus] says that the aim is suspension of judgment, which, we said, is accompanied by tranquility" (*PH* 1.33). Although he does not elaborate, Sextus's point seems to be that the philosophical practice of Arcesilaus had the suspension of judgment as its aim, but that it was the Pyrrhonians, and not Arcesilaus, who associated tranquillity with its realization. Consider also the complaint that Cicero gives to Cato, his spokesman for the Stoics: "Those philosophers are absurd . . . who have maintained, as the Academics are said to have maintained, that the final good and highest duty of the wise man is to resist appearances and steadfastly withhold assent from them" (*De fin.* 3.9.31). Cato's point is similar. The Academics took the ultimate good to be the suspension of judgment and did not, as the Pyrrhonians did, specify anything beyond it or associated with it as a good to be achieved. It is this that Cato finds to be absurd.

This may seem like a small point, but it is not. Insofar as the Academics did not specify anything beyond or associated with the suspension of judgment as a good at which their philosophical practice aimed, it may appear that that practice was unmotivated by ethical concerns. This, however, would be surprising. As we have already seen, the Academics saw themselves as having revived the practice of Socratic inquiry within the Academy, and that practice, as anyone familiar with Socrates knows, was deeply motivated by ethical concerns. In fact, it was the very manifestation of a certain ideal of the good life to which Socrates both adhered in his own person and beckoned his fellow Athenians. In view of this, it is reasonable to suppose that, if we are to find an ethical concern within Academic skepticism, we will do so by looking at the ideal of the good life that animated Socrates and exploring

2. On this, see the discussion in Cooper 2012, 276–304; Bett 2010; and Nussbaum 1994, 280–315.

the extent to which that ideal can be said to have animated the Academics as well.

Socrates and the Good Life

We may begin with a well-known and often-cited passage from *Apology* in which Socrates, after having just been convicted of the charges leveled against him by Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon, entertains the possibility of exile as a punishment:[3]

> Perhaps someone might say: But Socrates, if you leave us will you not be able to live quietly, without talking? Now this is the most difficult point on which to convince some of you. If I say that it is impossible for me to keep quiet because that means disobeying the god, you will not believe me and will think I am being ironical. On the other hand, if I say that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living for men, you will believe me even less. What I say is true, gentlemen, but it is not easy to convince you. (*Apol.* 37e–38a)

Given the chance to live in exile without the opportunity to examine others, Socrates refuses. To live in such a way would be to act in violation of the command of Apollo, who has charged him with the duty of examining his fellow Athenians. In addition, it would be to abandon the good life. As Socrates here makes clear, there is no better life than that spent conversing about such matters as virtue and testing the opinions of others as well as one's own. To forsake it is unimaginable. He would rather die than give it up.

What is striking about all this, and immensely important for our purposes, is the absence of any requirement of knowledge. As the rest of the dialogue makes clear, Socrates is confident that he has led a good life, and he goes to his death with the satisfaction of having done so. Yet he famously denies

3. Any reconstruction of Socrates as a philosopher is complicated by the fact that the three authors who knew him—Aristophanes, Xenophon, and Plato—paint very different and often-conflicting portraits. In addition, Plato, whose portrait of Socrates is most influential among present-day readers, uses the character of Socrates as a device for his own philosophical reflections in such a way that makes it exceedingly difficult to determine where Socrates ends and Plato begins. In what follows we will not attempt anything approximating a definitive account of Socrates as a philosopher. Rather, we will develop an account that is consonant with how the Academics viewed him and that is based primarily on *Apology* and other early dialogues of Plato. On the problems associated with the reconstruction of Socrates as a philosopher, see Brickhouse and Smith 2000, 11–52; and Guthrie 1971, 5–57. For a review of the history of the so-called Socratic Problem, see Dorion 2010.

having attained knowledge of the matters he has spent his life investigating. If this denial is genuine, and is not a piece of irony, the inescapable inference is that Socrates does not consider knowledge to be a condition of the good life—or at least not of the good life that is attainable by us.[4] That life is best characterized, not as one of continuous contemplation of truth attained, but as one of ceaseless inquiry into truth unattained. It is nothing other than the life of philosophy, conceived as the love of wisdom.

That this is Socrates' judgment is confirmed when, later in *Apology*, he raises the question of whether death is good or evil. Although he does not claim to know what death will bring, he considers the possibility that, once in Hades, he will have the opportunity to meet great figures of the past and there continue his life's work: "I could spend my time testing and examining people there, as I do here, as to who among them is wise, and who thinks he is, but is not" (*Apol.* 41b). If this is what death brings, Socrates concludes, it is something he welcomes rather than fears:

> What would one not give, gentlemen of the jury, for the opportunity to examine the man who led the great expedition against Troy, or Odysseus, or Sisyphus, and innumerable other men and women one could mention? It would be an extraordinary happiness to talk with them, to keep company with them and examine them. (*Apol.* 41b–c)

This last statement is particularly revealing. Although the people with whom he imagines conversing in Hades are no doubt a cut above his contemporaries, Socrates gives no indication that he expects to gain there the knowledge that

4. This qualification is necessary in light of the fact that, while Socrates considers himself to have lived a good life without having attained knowledge of virtue and related matters, he elsewhere suggests that this same knowledge is both necessary and sufficient for the good life. Consider, for example, the argument he offers Meno on behalf of the claim that virtue is a kind of knowledge: "Socrates: Therefore, in a word, all that the soul undertakes and endures, if directed by wisdom, ends in happiness, but if directed by ignorance it ends in the opposite. Meno: That is likely. Socrates: If then virtue is something in the soul and it must be beneficial, it must be knowledge, since all the qualities of the soul are in themselves neither beneficial nor harmful, but accompanied by wisdom or folly they become harmful or beneficial. This agreement shows that virtue, being beneficial, must be a kind of wisdom" (*Men.* 88c–d). We cannot resolve this problem here, but, as a gesture in that direction, we may attribute to Socrates a distinction between the ideally best life for a human, which is a life that is guided by knowledge of virtue and related matters, and the best life that a human may practically attain, which is a life that is dedicated to inquiry into virtue and related matters. In view of this distinction, we may take Socrates to be claiming, not to have lived the ideally best life for a human, but to have lived the best life that a human may practically attain. For a fully developed interpretation along these lines, see Cooper 2012, 48–60. For general discussion of the problem and its resolution, see Brickhouse and Smith 2000, 147–49; and Reeve 1989, 176–79. See also Kraut 2006 for an insightful discussion of the nature and value of the examined life as Socrates conceived it.

has eluded him here. The afterlife holds no more promise in this respect than the present life.[5] Yet Socrates proclaims that it would be "extraordinary happiness" to talk with these people. As this is the case, we see confirmed in this passage what was affirmed earlier. It is in the activity of inquiry itself that the good life is located, not in the knowledge that may or may not be the product of that activity.

That Socrates is correct in this judgment is far from clear. Although Socratic inquiry is directed at the acquisition of truth, particularly concerning virtue and related matters, it not only fails to deliver the goods, but more often than not induces deep perplexity in those who participate in it. Typical is Meno, who complains that Socrates' questions have done nothing but sow confusion in his mind:

> Socrates, before I even met you I used to hear that you are always in a state of perplexity and that you bring others to the same state, and now I think you are bewitching and beguiling me, simply putting me under a spell, so that I am quite perplexed. Indeed, if a joke is in order, you seem, in appearance and in every other way, to be like the broad torpedo fish, for it too makes anyone who comes close and touches it feel numb, and you seem to have had that kind of effect on me, for both my mind and my tongue are numb, and I have no answer to give you. (*Men.* 80a–b)

Conversing with Socrates about the nature of virtue, ultimately with an eye to determining whether it can be taught, Meno quickly finds his views undermined and is at a loss as to what to say or think. Instead of getting illumination from the inquiry, he is left bewildered. Like a torpedo fish who numbs its victims, Socrates has put Meno into a state of paralysis.[6]

It is easy to sympathize with Meno, and we may well judge the exercise that Socrates has put him through to be pointless. Here, however, it is important to realize that Meno has benefited from the exercise. Just after

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5. Contrast this with the expectation of knowledge after death that Socrates expresses in *Phaedo*: "It really has been shown to us that, if we are ever to have pure knowledge, we must escape from the body and observe things in themselves with the soul by itself. It seems likely that we shall, only then, when we are dead, attain that which we desire and of which we claim to be lovers, namely, wisdom, as our argument shows, not while we are alive, for it is impossible to attain any pure knowledge with the body" (*Phaed.* 66d–e). To account for this discrepancy it is reasonable to assume that we are hearing the voice of Plato here.

6. Note that this perplexity is not confined to Socrates' interlocutors. Socrates frequently professes to share in it as well. See, for example, *Hipp. Min.* 376c, *Lach.* 200e, and *Prot.* 361a–c. For a philosophically stimulating study of Socratic perplexity, see Matthews 1999.

his comparison of Socrates to a torpedo fish, he adds: "I have made many speeches about virtue before large audiences on a thousand occasions, very good speeches as I thought, but now I cannot even say what it is" (*Men.* 80b). This is quite an admission. Prior to his encounter with Socrates, Meno had unreflectively supposed that he knew what virtue was. So confident was he in this that he was willing to play the role of an expert, even to the point of giving speeches on the subject. Under pressure from Socrates' questions, he now sees that his confidence has run far ahead of his knowledge. He is coming to realize, however fleetingly, that he does not know what he thought he knew.

It is here that we see the value of Socratic inquiry. It may not yield knowledge of virtue and related matters, but, if practiced with sufficient diligence, it alerts us to confusion in our views and saves us from falling into egregious error. More important, it brings about a kind of wisdom that will forever be associated with Socrates. To understand the nature of this wisdom, we need only remind ourselves of Socrates' attempt to understand Apollo's pronouncement that he among all persons is wisest. Not thinking himself to be wise, and puzzled as to the meaning of the pronouncement, he set out to question those in Athens with reputations for wisdom: the politicians, poets, and artisans. In every case he was disappointed. He found those whom he questioned either to be wholly lacking in wisdom or, if they possessed any at all, to have grossly overestimated its scope. Not surprisingly, this practice made Socrates a controversial figure. Recalling his encounter with an unnamed public official, he reports its unwelcome consequence:

> I thought that he appeared wise to many people and especially to himself, but he was not. I then tried to show him that he thought himself wise, but that he was not. As a result he came to dislike me, and so did many of the bystanders. (*Apol.* 21c–d)

Although this activity made Socrates the target of much hostility, it also had its intended effect. It enabled him to understand why Apollo had singled him out. He continues:

> So I withdrew and thought to myself: "I am wiser than this man: it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know." (*Apol.* 21d)

Generalizing from this and other such encounters, Socrates came to believe that Apollo had identified him as wisest, not because he possessed knowledge

that others lacked, but because he alone recognized his ignorance. Summing up his newfound insight, he concludes:

> As a result of this investigation, men of Athens, I acquired much unpopularity, of a kind that is hard to deal with and is a heavy burden; many slanders came from these people and a reputation for wisdom, for in each case the bystanders thought that I myself possessed the wisdom that I proved that my interlocutor did not have. What is probable, gentlemen, is that in fact the god is wise and that his oracular response meant that human wisdom is worth little or nothing, and that when he says this man, Socrates, he is using my name as an example as if he said: "This man among you, mortals, is wisest who, like Socrates, understands that his wisdom is worthless." (*Apol.* 23a–b)

What Socrates seems finally to have concluded is that wisdom in its proper sense—what we might characterize as expert knowledge that is certain and stable—belongs to the gods alone, and that the human share in this wisdom is meager at best.[7] As those whom he questioned believed their own share to be significant and were thereby complacent in their opinions, they were in fact further from this wisdom than Socrates was. He harbored no such illusions and thereby dedicated his life to inquiry with a seriousness not found among his fellow Athenians.[8] It was because of this and this alone that he could justly be proclaimed the wisest among them.

In view of this, it is clear why Socrates counted himself as having led a good life. Although his ceaseless inquiry into virtue and related matters did not allow him to lay claim to the truth he sought, he nevertheless gained a kind of wisdom that few, if any, of his fellow citizens possessed. This wisdom is of a modest sort, falling well below what we might desire, but the more exalted kind may ultimately lie beyond our reach. It may, as Socrates suggests, belong to the gods alone. If he is correct in this suggestion, then his judgment is warranted. He has achieved the best a human can hope to

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7. On Socrates' view of knowledge, see Brickhouse and Smith 2000, 99–121; Woodruff 1990; and Reeve 1989, 37–53. For an exhaustive study, see Benson 2000.

8. Here we should note that, just as Socratic inquiry makes one aware of one's ignorance, so also awareness of one's ignorance motivates Socratic inquiry. This is something that Socrates makes clear in conversation with Critias, who asks Socrates to give his own account of temperance: "But Critias . . . you are talking to me as though I professed to know the answers to my own questions and as though I could agree with you if I really wished. This is not the case—rather, because of my own ignorance, I am continually investigating in your company whatever is put forward" (*Charm.* 165b–c).

achieve, and he has good reason to go to his death with the confidence of having lived well.

The Academics and the Good Life

Just as Socrates engendered a great deal of animus as a consequence of his philosophical practice, so too did the Academics. By arguing against the views of their interlocutors while refusing to offer any of their own, they earned a reputation for contentiousness and were seen as engaging in a purely destructive enterprise. We thus have the testimony of Numenius of Apamea, a philosopher of the second century, who takes the Academics to task for turning the Academy away from the positive teachings of Plato. Here is what he has to say about Arcesilaus:

> He terrified and confused [others], and indeed took first prize for sophistical arguments and argumentative fraud, delighting in the charge, and priding himself marvelously on not knowing whether something is shameful or honorable, good or bad; but he would say whatever came into his head and then immediately reversing himself he would knock down that view in more ways than he had used to set it up. (quoted in *Praep. evang.* 14.6, 730c–d; Inwood and Gerson, III-2)

His judgment of Carneades is just as harsh:

> Indeed, Carneades used to advance and put forward contradictory claims and he brought to the conflict subtle twists of argument of various sorts; he would deny, affirm, and contradict both sides. Whenever he needed something impressive for his arguments, he would rise up, roaring like a rushing river over-flowing both its banks, and would come crashing down and sweep away his hearers with his tumultuous voice. (quoted in *Praep. evang.* 14.8, 737c; Inwood and Gerson, III-4)

What we are presented with here is a portrait of the Academics as heirs, not of Socrates, but of his rivals, the Sophists, or our worst caricature of them. On Numenius's view, their goal is victory rather than wisdom, and they take perverse delight in the befuddlement of others. They may be clever, but they are most certainly not philosophers.[9]

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9. This same view is expressed by Lucullus, Cicero's spokesman for Antiochus, who compares Arcesilaus to the notorious Tiberius Gracchus: "Is it not the case that, just as Tiberius Gracchus rose up and disturbed the peace of the best republic, so, when the most important teachings of philosophy had been established, Arcesilaus rose up and subverted the established philosophy? He hid behind the authority of those who had allegedly denied that anything could be known or perceived" (*Acad.* 2.5.15).

Sensitive to criticisms of this kind, defenders of the Academics countered that their practice of arguing against the views of their interlocutors without advancing any of their own was not a form of eristic that was exercised without regard for truth, but a means of testing for truth that had its motivation in the desire for its discovery. Cicero, in particular, is adamant on this point, as is clear from his description of Academic practice in the opening pages of *The Nature of the Gods*:

> The philosophical practice of arguing against every opinion and of judging nothing openly was initiated by Socrates, revived by Arcesilaus, and reinforced by Carneades. It has flourished down to our own day, though I understand that virtually no one is now carrying it on in Greece itself. In my estimation, this has come about, not by any fault of the Academy, but because of the sluggishness of men. For if it is a great challenge to understand any single discipline of philosophy, it is a much greater challenge to understand them all. Yet this is what is necessary for those who, in order to discover truth, have dedicated themselves to arguing for and against the views of all philosophers. (*De nat. deor.* 1.5.11)

In saying this, Cicero is not just speaking in the abstract. On his account, the desire to discover truth was what motivated Arcesilaus:

> Arcesilaus did not fight with Zeno in order to disparage him, but wished to find truth. (*Acad.* 2.24.76)

And also Carneades:

> Carneades advanced so many arguments against the Stoics that he aroused a desire in men of intelligence to investigate truth. (*De nat. deor.* 1.2.4)

In fact, it is what motivates all Academics, including himself:

> Since it is our practice to say what we think against every teaching, we cannot object when others speak in opposition to us. But we have an easy case to make, for we wish to find truth without any contention and search for it with the greatest care and zeal. All cognition is obstructed by a multitude of difficulties, and both the obscurity of things themselves and the weakness of our judgments are such that the earliest and most learned men with good reason despaired of their ability to find what they desired. Nevertheless, they did not give up, and we will not abandon our zeal for investigation out of exhaustion. Our arguments have no other aim than to draw out or express, as it

> were, truth or what approaches it as closely as possible. This we do by arguing both sides. (*Acad.* 2.3.7–8)

If Cicero is correct in this presentation, there is no question of the Academics being engaged in a purely destructive enterprise. Even in the face of great, perhaps insurmountable, obstacles, they press ahead in the search for truth without illusion and with unflagging zeal. They have as much claim to be inquirers as do any other philosophers.

It must be acknowledged that Cicero's remarks in these passages gloss over a great many questions, both philosophical and historical, that would need to be addressed in a full accounting of the Academics as inquirers. On the side of philosophy, there are questions about the coherence of saying, on the one hand, that the aim of Academic arguments is the induction of *epochē*, and, on the other hand, that the aim of those same arguments is the discovery of truth. On the side of history, there are questions about whether these remarks apply as much to the Academy under Arcesilaus and his immediate successors as to the post-Carneadean Academy in which Academics could weigh diverse opinions in an effort to determine which are most persuasive. Nevertheless, if we are willing to see the Academics as inquirers, then it makes good sense to see them as animated by much the same ideal of the good life that animated Socrates. Like Socrates, they were committed to a life of inquiry with no expectation of attaining knowledge. In fact, they were committed to a life of inquiry with every expectation of not attaining knowledge. In a straightforward sense of the expression, they were radical Socratics.

To better understand this Socratic character of Academic skepticism, we may consider that among the lessons the Academics drew from their reflection on Socrates was that no view is worthy of assent unless its truth has been certified through a rigorous process of testing. To give one's assent in the absence of such certification is to act rashly, risk error, and lapse into mere opinion. All these the Academics regarded as faults and considered it beneath the dignity of the wise person to be subject to them. Expressing typical Academic sentiments on this matter, Cicero writes:

> What is more shameful than rashness? What is so rash and so unworthy of the seriousness and constancy of the wise man than to maintain a falsehood or defend without hesitation something that, lacking sufficient examination, is not perceived or known? (*De nat. deor.* 1.1.1)

And again:

> In agreement with Zeno, Arcesilaus thinks that the wise man's greatest strength lies in being careful that he is not taken in and seeing to it that

> he is not mistaken, for nothing is more removed from our conception of the seriousness of the wise man than error, frivolity, or rashness. (*Acad.* 2.20.66)

As the second of these passages makes clear, the Academics were not alone in these sentiments. That the wise person should be free of rashness and related faults was part of a common Socratic patrimony and was a point on which the Academics found themselves in agreement with their Stoic rivals, who similarly saw themselves as heirs of Socrates.[10] Despite their agreement on this point, the Academics were at odds with the Stoics over a question of fundamental importance. This was the question of whether the wise person could be free of rashness and related faults while still engaging in acts of assent. The Stoics, maintaining that the wise person possesses a secure grasp of truth on the basis of which he or she exercises infallible judgment, argued that he or she could, but the Academics, denying the possibility of such a grasp, rejected this view and countered that the wise person would withhold all assent. Cicero summarizes the latter's reasoning in a simple syllogism, which he claims had the approval of Arcesilaus:

> If the wise man ever assents to anything, he will sometimes also hold an opinion. But he will never hold an opinion. Therefore, he will not assent to anything. (*Acad.* 2. 21.67)

In opposition to the Stoics, then, the Academics concluded that, because assent inevitably involves one in opinion, the wise person will abstain from it completely.[11] He or she will thus be a fully realized skeptic.

In arriving at this conclusion, the Academics may seem to have drifted far from Socrates, who was happy to unseat the views of his interlocutors but did not advocate anything as radical as the withholding of all assent.

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10. Note that Cicero has Varro, his spokesman for Antiochus, say this about Zeno: "Zeno removed error, rashness, ignorance, opinion, and suspicion—in a word, everything alien to firm and stable assent—from virtue and wisdom" (*Acad.* 1.11.42). Note also Cato's remark in book 3 of *Moral Ends*: "The Stoics judge assent to what is false to be more alien to us than all other things that are contrary to nature" (*De fin.* 3.5.18). On the Stoic debt to Socrates, see Brown 2006; Striker 1994; and Long 1988.

11. In his summary of Arcesilaus's debate with the Stoics, Sextus presents a more elaborate argument for this same conclusion, the last part of which is as follows: "So that if the wise person is among those who assent, the wise person will be among those who opine. But the wise person is not among those who opine (for according to them this goes with folly and is a cause of errors); therefore the wise person is not among those who assent" (*M* 7.157). We should note that the proponent of the Dialectical Interpretation will insist that this conclusion—that the wise person will withhold all assent—is put forward merely as a consequence for the Stoics. See Couissin 1983, 33–35, for precisely this line of interpretation.

Nevertheless, there is something undeniably Socratic about this conclusion. In envisioning the wise person as a fully realized skeptic, the Academics envisioned him or her, not as someone who has expert knowledge of practical or speculative matters, but as someone who has exposed the claims of others to knowledge as empty and who resists the temptation to make similar claims for him or herself. He or she conducts inquiry in order to discover truth, but, realizing his or her failure to have arrived at truth in a way that would allow him or her to lay claim to it, withholds assent and continues to inquire. For his part, Cicero assures us that this achievement of the wise person is anything but cheap and easy. He even confesses that he has himself fallen short in this regard:

> But just as I judge it most becoming to see truths, so it is most shameful to approve falsehoods in the place of truths. Nevertheless, I am not someone who never approves falsehoods, gives assent, or holds opinions, but we are investigating the wise man. Indeed, I am a great opinion holder. I am not wise. (*Acad.* 2.20.66)

The point of this confession is not to express modesty—something to which Cicero was little prone—but to emphasize that the attainment of wisdom, even of this Socratic kind, is as difficult as it is rare. As for Socrates, so for the Academics, it is the fruit of a life of inquiry that few are able to sustain, and it is from this fruit that the life of inquiry chiefly derives its value.

Three Cautionary Differences

In making the case that, in taking up the practice of Socratic inquiry, the Academics were animated by much the same ideal of the good life that animated Socrates, we must be careful not to overstate their alignment with Socrates. In many respects they were worlds away from Socrates, and we cannot simply assimilate their philosophical practice to his without misrepresenting both. To avoid this misrepresentation, it will thus be useful for us to take note of three (of many) differences between Socrates and his Academic heirs.

The first of these differences lies in the fact that the inquiry in which Socrates engaged was primarily ethical in focus. Despite the caricature drawn by Aristophanes, Socrates seems to have had little interest in questions of natural philosophy or any of the speculative areas of philosophy and considered them irrelevant to living well. In Cicero's famous words, "Socrates was the first to call philosophy down from the heavens, place it in cities, lead it also into homes, and compel it to investigate life and customs and good and

evil" (*Tusc. disp.* 5.4.10–11).[12] What is true of Socrates, however, is not true of the Academics. While they pursued questions of virtue and related matters as well, they also pursued questions outside this domain and were interested in all of the speculative areas of philosophy, including natural philosophy.[13] In this sense, their philosophical practice was far more expansive in its concerns than that of Socrates.

The second of these differences lies in the fact that, while Socrates carried on debates with the Sophists of his day, his philosophical conversations were by and large conducted with nonphilosophers. Included among these were prominent members of Athenian society, ordinary citizens, and, of course, any number of the youth of Athens with whom he was especially associated. This practice accorded perfectly with Socrates' view of himself as a citizen and benefactor of Athens. To his mind, the philosophical activity in which he engaged was the highest form of civic activity, and it was something that contributed to the greatness of the polis. In contrast, the Academics operated primarily in a world of quasi-institutional philosophy that had not yet emerged in Socrates' day. They were members of a school—the Academy—and they took as their primary interlocutors, not the citizenry of Athens, but members of rival schools. As a consequence, the debates in which they took part had a technical or even scholastic character that would have been foreign to Socrates.

The third and most important of these differences lies in the fact that, though Socrates enjoyed great success in challenging his interlocutors' claims

12. In *Academics*, Cicero has Varro, his spokesperson for Antiochus, say much the same thing: "It seems to me, and on this all agree, that Socrates was the first to call philosophy away from the things that nature itself has hidden and obscured—things that had occupied all philosophers before him—and to redirect it to common life so that it might investigate virtue and vice and good and evil generally. He thought that heavenly things were beyond our knowledge or, if they could be fully known, had no relevance to living well" (*Acad.* 1.4.15). We find similar characterizations in Plato (*Apol.* 19a–d); Xenophon (*Mem.* 1.1.11–16); and Aristotle (*Met.* 1.6: 987b). For Socrates' youthful interest in natural philosophy, see *Phaed.* 96a–99d.

13. For the Academic treatment of ethics, see Cicero's *Moral Ends*, which examines three rival ethical systems: Epicurean, Stoic, and that of Antiochus. See also *Acad.* 2.42.129–46.141 and *De fin.* 5.16–22 for the influential classification of ethical systems developed by Carneades. For the Academic treatment of natural philosophy, see *Acad.* 2.36.116–41.128. On the value of pursuing questions in natural philosophy, Cicero has this to say: "I do not think that such questions of physics should be put aside, for the consideration and contemplation of nature is a kind of natural food for our minds and intellects. We rise up, we seem to be borne aloft, we look down on human affairs, and, in reflecting on things above and in the heavens, we despise our own affairs as narrow and small. The very investigation of things that are most great, but also most hidden, brings satisfaction. But if something presents itself that seems truth-like, the mind is enveloped in a most human pleasure" (*Acad.* 2.41.127–28).

to know, he did not formulate any general arguments against the possibility of knowledge.[14] Thus, while we may be induced by reflection on the results of his practice to entertain doubts about the possibility of knowledge, especially if we think that knowledge involves the ability to sustain claims to know in the face of rigorous testing, we will be disappointed if we look to Socrates for what we normally take to be skeptical arguments. We will certainly be disappointed if we look to him for anything like Descartes's Malicious Demon Argument or Hume's Argument against Induction. On the other hand, if we look to the Academics, things are different. Just as their opponents paid considerable attention to general questions concerning the nature and possibility of knowledge, so too did they, and they developed a battery of arguments whose aim was to discredit putative sources of knowledge and challenge its very possibility. In doing so, they were engaged in an enterprise that, however great its interest to us, was of little interest to Socrates.

Taken together, these differences urge caution. Even if we are able to draw a straight line from the philosophical practice of Socrates to that of the Academics, the relation of the latter to the former is anything but simple. It is most certainly not one of mere replication. So, while it makes good sense to see a common ideal of the good life underlying these practices, we must at the same time acknowledge that the philosophical practice of Socrates underwent significant transformation in the hands of Arcesilaus and his successors. Whether and to what degree Socrates would have recognized his practice so transformed is an intriguing question, but it is a question about which we can only speculate.

Final Thoughts

In light of the above considerations, Academic skepticism, as a phenomenon of the Hellenistic period, is not nearly so anomalous as it may appear on initial inspection. Like other philosophers of this period, the Academics may be seen to be animated by an ideal of the good life that provided the fundamental impetus to their philosophical practice. This ideal did not originate with them, but with Socrates, from whom they traced their lineage. It was the ideal of a life dedicated to inquiry that leads to wisdom, not as expert knowledge of practical or speculative matters, but as awareness of ignorance.

14. The closest we get is the famous Paradox of Inquiry, which is articulated in *Meno* 80d–e. However, it is difficult to ascribe this paradox to Socrates: first, it is formulated by Meno; second, Socrates dismisses it as a debater's argument; and third, its function in the dialogue is to motivate the discussion of knowledge as recollection.

For the Academics, if not for Socrates, such awareness manifests itself in acts of withholding assent, which, perhaps more than anything else, mark the wise person out from others. Because of its embrace of this ideal, Academic skepticism can thus be seen as offering more than a mere challenge to the dogmatic assertions of its rivals. It can be seen as offering a way of life, Socratic in its inspiration, that lays claim to being the good life. As we will see in chapter 3, at least one philosopher of late antiquity was disturbed enough by this claim that he undertook a lengthy examination and refutation of it at the outset of his critique of Academic skepticism. That philosopher was Augustine of Hippo.

Chapter 3

Happiness, Wisdom, and the Insufficiency of Inquiry

At the close of chapter 2, we noted that Augustine was unimpressed with the Socratic ideal of the good life. This was the ideal of a life dedicated to inquiry that leads to wisdom, not as expert knowledge of practical or speculative matters, but rather as awareness of ignorance. In the case of the Academics, such wisdom manifests itself, not only in disavowals of knowledge, but also in acts of withholding assent. However, since Augustine could not conceive of wisdom except as a type of knowledge and saw the possession of this knowledge to be necessary to happiness, he rejected this ideal and argued that, even if the Academics could make good on their claim to be inquirers, insofar as their inquiry leads not to knowledge, but to *epochē*, they could make no claim to be either wise or happy.

This was a serious charge for Augustine to make. As it was widely held among the ancients that the rationale for undertaking a philosophical practice was that doing so would enable one to live well, it had the potential to discredit Academic skepticism at a fundamental level. It is thus not surprising that it was precisely on this front that Augustine formulated some of the most powerful objections of his entire critique. In what follows, we will examine these objections, beginning with the charge that the Academics are not happy and moving to the charge that the Academics are

not wise. What we will see is that, though many of Augustine's objections are sharply formulated and have a high degree of intuitive appeal, they are far from decisive.

A Pedagogical Exercise

The best place to commence our study is with an exercise that Augustine set for his students Licentius and Trygetius, while they were under his tutelage at Cassiciacum.[1] As recorded in book 1 of *Against the Academics*, Augustine begins by asking whether we should know truth. Taking the initiative, Trygetius immediately responds in the affirmative—of course we should know truth! Instead of congratulating him on the correctness of this answer, Augustine raises a doubt, asking whether knowledge is necessary for happiness. If it is not, he suggests, it may not be the case that we ought to know truth. Having raised this doubt, he then assigns his pupils a task. They are to resolve the question of whether knowledge is necessary for happiness. By implication, they are to determine whether the Academics are happy in their philosophical practice. By further implication, they are to determine whether the Socratic ideal that animates that practice is viable as an ideal of the good life.[2]

Licentius states his position first, asserting that knowledge is not necessary for happiness. As long as we are diligently searching for truth, he argues, that is all that is required. In opposition to this, Trygetius counters that knowledge is indeed necessary for happiness, but he is hesitant to proceed in defense of this position without some specification of the conception of happiness that is to operate in the debate. He asks Augustine to provide this before they begin.

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1. There is little in the way of useful philosophical analysis of this material in the literature. For a start, see Harding 2006; Curley 1996, 43–67; Rist 1994, 48–53; and Kirwan 1989, 17–20. For helpful discussion of this material in relation to Cicero's writings, particularly *Hortensius*, see Hagendahl 1967, 489–93, who argues that *Against the Academics*, book 1—the book in which this material is set forth—is written as an exhortation to philosophy that is modeled on *Hortensius*. See Schlapbach 2003, 1–25, for an introduction dealing with structure, sources, themes, characters, etc., of *Against the Academics*, book 1.

2. They are to do this *by implication* insofar as the Academics come in for little direct discussion in book 1 of *Against the Academics*. This occurs when Licentius cites Carneades and Cicero as authorities for his view that a person can be happy in the search for truth. See *CA* 1.3.7–9. As it is agreed that the issue under debate should be decided on the basis of reason rather than authority, there is no further discussion of the Academics in book 1. Note also that Licentius, in book 2, claims not to have read *Academics*. See *CA* 2.7.17.

Augustine obliges Trygetius by offering a brief and generic characterization of happiness. "What else do you think it is to live happily," he asks, "if not to live in accord with what is best in man?" (*CA* 1.2.5). This is standard fare. Many ancients—Platonists, Peripatetics, and Stoics among them—would accept this characterization, though they would each put their own spin on it. Moreover, they would each insist that what is best in humans is reason. Augustine follows suit:

> Who would doubt that what is best in man is nothing other than the part of the soul to whose rule it is appropriate that everything else in man submit? Now this part, so that you do not demand another definition, may be called "mind" or "reason." (*CA* 1.2.5)

Putting these statements together, we get that happiness, or the happy life, consists in living in accord with reason, the ruling part of the soul. And though Augustine does not here make it, the unmistakable inference is that it is the wise person who lives happily since it is the wise person who lives in accord with reason.[3] In view of this, the question of whether knowledge is necessary for happiness can be recast in at least two ways. It can be recast as the question of whether one can live in accord with reason in the absence of knowledge or as the question of whether one can be wise in the absence of knowledge. As we will see in the second half of this chapter, this latter recasting of the question will occupy a prominent place in the debate.

With these preliminaries out of the way, Licentius kicks things off by reaffirming his position and challenging Trygetius to explain why a person who diligently searches for truth is not happy in the search itself. Why, he asks, must he or she attain knowledge in order to be happy? To this challenge Trygetius formulates a set of objections, of which we will examine three here.[4] Each of these objections, though directed against Licentius, may easily be taken as directed against the Academics as well.

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3. This is made explicit in the following exchange between Augustine and Evodius from *Free Choice of the Will*: "Augustine: When reason, mind, or spirit rules the irrational motions of the soul, man is ruled by what the law that we have found to be eternal has ordained to rule. Evodius: I understand and I follow. Augustine: A man who is constituted and ordered in this way seems wise to you, does he not? Evodius: If he does not seem wise, I do not know any other who could" (*De lib. arb.* 1.8.18–9.19).

4. In *CA* 1.4.10, Trygetius puts forward a fourth objection to the effect that anyone who is searching for truth but does not find it is in error and therefore is neither wise nor happy. We will examine this objection in chapter 6.

The Imperfection Objection

The first of Trygetius's objections, which we may call the "Imperfection Objection," is exceedingly brief:

> We think that the happy man is the wise man—a man who is perfect in all things. But whoever is still searching is not perfect. Therefore, I completely fail to see how you assert that he is happy. (*CA* 1.3.7)

We may formulate this objection as follows:

(1) A person who is searching for truth is not perfect.
(2) A person who is not perfect is not happy.
∴ (3) A person who is searching for truth is not happy. (from 1 and 2)

Although brief, the objection is powerful. Trygetius follows Augustine in taking happiness to be the sole possession of the wise person and adds the specification that such a person is perfect. To his mind, since it is manifest that a person who is searching for truth is not perfect, a person who is searching for truth is not happy.

We might expect that Licentius, in responding to this objection, would straightaway attack (2). To make perfection a requirement for happiness seems much too stringent. It effectively nullifies the possibility of happiness for all but the most heroic among us. Even so, (2) had wide currency in the ancient world, and Licentius seems content to accept it. Instead, he focuses his attention on what he takes to be the assumptions underlying (1). We may state these assumptions, together with (1) as their conclusion, as follows:

(4) A person who is searching for truth has not acquired knowledge of the truth for which he or she is searching.
(5) A person who has not acquired knowledge of the truth for which he or she is searching has not reached the ultimate goal of human life.
(6) A person who has not reached the ultimate goal of human life is not perfect.
∴ (1) A person who is searching for truth is not perfect. (from 4, 5, and 6)

As is clear from his remarks, Licentius does not question (4) or (6). His problem is with (5):

> I admit that whoever has not arrived at his goal is not perfect. But I think that God alone—or perhaps the human soul, when it has left this body, its dark prison—knows truth. The goal of man, however, is

> to search perfectly for truth. We are searching for a perfect man, but for a man nevertheless. (*CA* 1.3.9)

In an echo of Socrates, Licentius here argues that knowledge belongs to God and possibly to the soul in its disembodied state, but that it is not possible for humans in this life.[5] Because of this, we cannot judge that a person has not reached the ultimate goal of human life merely because he or she has failed to acquire knowledge. In fact, if he or she is searching for truth with sufficient diligence, we must judge that he or she has indeed reached the ultimate goal of human life. This is because the ultimate goal of human life is nothing other than to search for truth. Contrary to (5), the acquisition of knowledge is not a requirement.

There is certainly a whiff of sophistry about this reply, but we would be wrong to dismiss it. To see why, we need only ask whether it is reasonable to take something that is impossible for humans to achieve as the ultimate goal of human life. If it is not, then we should only take the acquisition of knowledge to be a requirement for reaching the ultimate goal of human life if knowledge is possible for humans. This, however, is a contested matter. The Academics say that it is not, and Licentius follows them in this. Thus, unless Trygetius either explains why it is reasonable to take something that is impossible for humans to achieve as the ultimate goal of human life or provides grounds for thinking that knowledge is possible for humans, Licentius is within his rights in rejecting (5). Since Trygetius has done neither, the Imperfection Objection fails to undermine Licentius's position.

The Unsatisfied Desire Objection

Licentius has survived the first round with Trygetius, but his position is far from secure. In addition to asserting that knowledge is not necessary for happiness, he makes the stronger claim that the diligent search for truth is sufficient. It is this stronger claim that exposes him to the sec-

5. For Socrates' suggestion that it is the god who is wise and that the human share in wisdom is negligible, see *Apol.* 23a–b. In *Phaedo*, he goes well beyond what he says in *Apology*, expressing hope for a share in this wisdom after death: "It seems likely that we shall, only then, when we are dead, attain that which we desire and of which we claim to be lovers, namely, wisdom, as our argument shows, not while we live; for if it is impossible to attain any pure knowledge with the body, then one of two things is true: either we can never attain knowledge or we can do so after death" (*Phaed.* 66e–67a).

ond of Trygetius's objections—what we may call the "Unsatisfied Desire Objection."

Referring to a person who is searching for truth, Trygetius asks: "Since he cannot attain what he fervently desires, how can be happy?" (*CA* 1.3.9). This is a good question. A person who is searching for truth suffers from unsatisfied desire. He or she does not know the truth for which he or she is searching. What is worse, if truth is out of our reach, a person who is searching for it suffers from unsatisfiable desire. He or she cannot know the truth for which he or she is searching. We may formulate this objection as follows:

(7) A person who is searching for truth suffers from unsatisfied desire.
(8) A person who suffers from unsatisfied desire is not happy.
∴ (9) A person who is searching for truth is not happy. (from 7 and 8)

So formulated, the objection raises an obvious problem for Licentius, but he seems not to see it. He simply restates his claim that a person who is searching for truth with sufficient diligence has reached the ultimate goal of human life and then provides this bit of elaboration:

> To search perfectly for truth is itself human happiness. In doing so, we arrive at a goal beyond which we cannot advance. Whoever searches for truth less vigorously than he should does not arrive at the goal of man. But whoever devotes himself to this search inasmuch as a man can and should is happy, even if he does not find it. He does everything that he is by nature capable of doing. If he fails to find truth, nature did not give him the capacity to find it. Finally, since it is necessary that a man be either happy or unhappy, would it not be mad to say that someone is unhappy who spends his days and nights searching for truth inasmuch as he is able? Therefore, he will be happy. (*CA* 1.3.9)

Licentius's response is disappointing. It does not address the objection in any direct way and adds little to what we have already been told. The only novelty is the addition of the following argument at the end of the passage:

(10) Every person is either happy or unhappy.
(11) If a person spends his or her life searching for truth, then he or she is not unhappy.
∴ (12) If a person spends his or her life searching for truth, then he or she is happy. (from 10 and 11)

The argument is embarrassingly weak. (11), which is the crucial premise, is supported by nothing more than Licentius's assertion that it would be mad to regard a person who spends his or her life searching for truth as unhappy. But this is just bluster. It ignores the fact that Trygetius has just given him an excellent reason to regard such a person as unhappy—he or she suffers from unsatisfied desire. If Licentius is to counter the Unsatisfied Desire Objection, he must address himself to this reason.

Here there are two options. The first is to argue, against (8), that unsatisfied desire does not count against happiness. Although a person who is searching for truth does not possess all that he or she desires, he or she is happy nonetheless. The second is to argue, against (7), that a person who is searching for truth does not suffer from unsatisfied desire. Rather than desiring to know the truth for which he or she is searching, he or she simply desires to engage in the search itself. Licentius is not clear about which, if either, of these options he favors, but the better of the two is surely the former. Among other things, it does not require him to deny what we normally take to be the motivation of a person who is searching for truth, namely, the desire to know truth. Instead of exploring how he might develop this option here, however, we will do so once we have examined Augustine's reformulation of this same objection.

The Vain Labor Objection

The third and last of Trygetius's objections that we will consider is also the briefest. It is more an attempt at ridicule than a fully articulated objection, but the problem it raises is serious. After Licentius has once more affirmed that a person who is searching for truth—now characterized as a wise person—is happy in the search itself, Trygetius remarks: "I am astonished that your wise man exercises his labor in vain, as you assert" (*CA* 1.8.23). Nothing more need be said. To pursue an unattainable goal is to labor in vain, and this is neither a mark of wisdom nor a recipe for happiness. We may call this the "Vain Labor Objection" and formulate it as follows:

(13) If knowledge is impossible, then a person who is searching for truth labors in vain.
(14) A person who labors in vain is not wise.
(15) If knowledge is impossible, then a person who is searching for truth is not wise. (from 13 and 14)
(16) A person who is not wise is not happy.

∴ (17) If knowledge is not possible, then a person who is searching for truth is not happy. (from 15 and 16)

There is no denying the appeal of this objection. It certainly resonates with the frustration we feel at inquiry that does nothing to advance us to knowledge. Licentius, however, seems strangely blind to the problem. He responds by expressing incredulity at the suggestion that a person who is searching for truth labors in vain—even in the case in which the truth for which he or she is searching is unattainable. To his mind, the rewards of the search, while not including knowledge of truth, are many and wonderful:

> Since he gains such a great reward, how does he exercise his labor in vain? He is wise by the very fact that he searches, and he is happy by the very fact that he is wise. He frees his mind from all the coverings of the body inasmuch as he is able and gathers himself into himself. He does not permit himself to be torn apart by desires, but, always tranquil, turns to himself and God so that, even here, he fully enjoys reason. This, as we agreed earlier, is to be happy. Then, on the last day of his life, he is prepared to receive what he has desired. Having first enjoyed human happiness in full, he deservedly enjoys divine happiness. (*CA* 1.8.23)

There is much that is going on in this passage, but its aim is simple. It seeks to establish that the search for truth is not vain, even if that search does not lead to knowledge. This it does by appealing to the fact that a person is wise in virtue of the search itself and happy in virtue of wisdom. We may thus construe its core argument as follows:

(18) An activity in virtue of which a person is wise is an activity in virtue of which he or she is happy.
(19) An activity in virtue of which a person is happy is not vain.
(20) An activity in virtue of which a person is wise is not vain. (from 18 and 19)
(21) The search for truth, whether or not knowledge is possible, is an activity in virtue of which a person is wise.
∴ (22) The search for truth, whether or not knowledge is possible, is not vain. (from 20 and 21)

Those sympathetic to the Vain Labor Objection will surely find this response maddening, but it is a nice illustration of the maxim that one person's *modus ponens* is another person's *modus tollens*. Very roughly, Trygetius argues from the vanity of the search for unknowable truth to the denial that

it leads to wisdom or happiness, whereas Licentius argues from the wisdom and happiness to which the search leads to the denial of its vanity.[6] Now in cases such as this our judgment as to which is the better argument will largely depend on our antecedent commitments. And in this case in particular it will depend on how we regard Socratic wisdom, for it is only wisdom of this kind to which to the search for unknowable truth could plausibly lead. If we find this form of wisdom to be compelling, we will likely judge Licentius's response sufficient to rebut the charge of vanity. But if we do not find it compelling, we will likely judge that the charge sticks. This is telling. It shows us that the objection, though it may elicit cheers from those hostile to skepticism, has no force against those who view Socrates as a model of wisdom. It certainly has no force against the Academics and their sympathizers. To this extent, the Vain Labor Objection is ineffectual and Licentius's response is on target.

Augustine Resolves the Issue

After this last exchange, Augustine calls a halt to the debate. Curiously, he declares no winner and offers no verdict of his own, preferring instead to move on to other issues. However, when we turn to another dialogue of the Cassiciacum period—*The Happy Life*—we find Augustine reengaged with the issue and determined to resolve it. No longer content to play the role of pedagogue, he now takes the lead in the discussion. His intention in doing so is clear. He wishes to convict the Academics of unhappiness in their philosophical practice, discredit the Socratic ideal that animates them, and clear the way for his own account of the happy life.

As expected, Augustine rules in favor of Trygetius and against Licentius. Anyone who is searching for truth and has not acquired knowledge of it is

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6. We may put the objection and response in the forms of *modus ponens* and *modus tollens* respectively as follows:

The Vain Labor Objection (*modus ponens*)

(i) If the search for truth is vain, then it is not an activity in virtue of which a person is wise or happy.

(ii) The search for truth is vain.

∴ (iii) The search for truth is not an activity in virtue of which a person is wise or happy. (from i and ii)

Reply to the Vain Labor Objection (*modus tollens*)

(iv) If the search for truth is vain, then it is not an activity in virtue of which a person is wise or happy.

(v) The search for truth is an activity in virtue of which a person is wise and happy.

∴ (vi) The search for truth is not vain. (from iv and v)

unhappy. There are no exceptions. In particular, there is no exception to be made for the Academics. This Augustine seeks to establish by the following argument:

> If it is clear that whoever does not possess what he desires is not happy (which our reasoning has just established), and that no one searches for what he does not desire to discover, and that the Academics are always searching for truth, then the Academics desire to discover truth and thus desire to possess the discovery of truth. Moreover, since the Academics do not discover truth, it follows that they do not have what they desire and thus are not happy. Finally, since no one is wise unless he is happy, it follows that the Academic is not wise. (*De beat. vit.* 1.2.14)

We have seen this before. It is a restatement, with some addition and amplification, of the Unsatisfied Desire Objection, and it is now directed explicitly at the Academics. We may state this new version of the objection as follows:

(23) If a person searches for something, then he or she desires to possess that thing.
(24) The Academics search for truth.
(25) The Academics desire to possess truth. (from 23 and 24)
(26) The Academics do not possess truth.
(27) If a person does not possess what he or she desires to possess, then he or she is not happy.
∴ (28) The Academics are not happy (from 25, 26, and 27)

To this Augustine adds an additional premise:

(29) If a person is wise, then he or she is happy.

And from this he derives an additional conclusion:

∴ (30) The Academics are not wise. (from 28 and 29)

In sum, the Academics are neither happy nor wise.

Having advanced this new version of the Unsatisfied Desire Objection, Augustine turns to Licentius to see whether he would like to offer anything on behalf of the Academics. Perhaps intimidated by having to address his master, Licentius registers his protest but is unable to formulate anything serious. The best he can muster is to assure the group that Augustine's friend Alypius, who is absent from the discussion, will provide an adequate reply

when he returns and is able to join the discussion.[7] Unimpressed, Augustine responds by warning Licentius not to get his hopes up. Alypius will surely see the folly of resisting the objection:

> I have no doubt that if Alypius were here he would concede this little argument. For he would not think something so absurd as that a person who does not possess such a great good of the soul—a good that he most ardently desires to possess—would appear to be happy. Nor would he think that the Academics do not desire to discover truth or that someone who is not happy is wise. (*De beat. vit.* 1.2.15)

Speculation about Alypius aside, Augustine's point is important. If one is to defend the Academics against his version of the Unsatisfied Desire Objection, one must defend one or more of the following propositions:

(31) A person who does not possess what he or she desires to possess can be happy.
(32) The Academics do not desire to possess truth.
(33) A person who is not happy can be wise.

This seems right, and it is bad news for Licentius. Even if (31), (32), and (33) are not absurd, as Augustine maintains they are, it would take some ingenuity to defend any one of them. Each seems pretty clearly to be false, at least on initial inspection. Augustine's confidence that he has struck a blow against the Academics thus appears well justified. His objection is a powerful one, and it is understandable that Licentius is at a loss as to how to respond.

Licentius's Best Option

Even so, we may think that Licentius should fortify himself and take up the challenge. As defending (32) would require him to dismiss Academic claims of desire for truth as false, and as defending (33) would require him to lower

7. Alypius is Augustine's friend and former pupil from Thagaste and is the closest thing to Augustine's intellectual equal in the circle at Cassiciacum. In books 2 and 3 of *Against the Academics*, he takes up the task of defending the Academics and serves as Augustine's main interlocutor. He does not make an appearance in *The Happy Life*, the explanation being that he is out of town when the dialogue takes place. For a character sketch that Augustine draws of Alypius, see *Conf.* 6.7.11–10.16.

the value of wisdom by treating it as insufficient for happiness, his best option for doing so is to mount a defense of:

(31) A person who does not possess what he or she desires to possess can be happy.

As should be obvious, this option corresponds to the one we identified as best when discussing his response to Trygetius's version of the Unsatisfied Desire Objection.

For those who see happiness as lying in the satisfaction of desire, (31) will have the appearance of being false, but Licentius might counter this appearance by arguing that there are desires whose satisfaction or nonsatisfaction does not bear on happiness. These are desires for objects whose nonpossession is compatible with reaching of the ultimate goal of human life. If this is the case, he might argue, there is no reason to think, as a matter of principle, that a person cannot be happy who does not possess what he or she desires to possess. It need only be stipulated that what he or she desires but fails to possess is an object whose nonpossession is compatible with reaching the ultimate goal of human life. We may express the principle as follows:

(34) The nonsatisfaction of any desire for an object whose nonpossession is compatible with reaching the ultimate goal of human life is itself compatible with happiness.

This principle is potentially of tremendous benefit to Licentius. Most obviously, it speaks to the acceptability of (31), which is what he needs to establish. But it also allows him to construct, in conjunction with his claim that the ultimate goal of human life is to search for truth, a powerful counterargument in defense of the Academics against Augustine's version of the Unsatisfied Desire Objection. This argument runs as follows:

(34) The nonsatisfaction of any desire for an object whose nonpossession is compatible with reaching the ultimate goal of human life is itself compatible with happiness.
(35) The search for truth is the ultimate goal of human life.
(36) The nonsatisfaction of any desire for an object whose nonpossession is compatible with the search for truth is itself compatible with happiness. (from 34 and 35)
(37) The nonpossession of truth is compatible with the search for truth.

∴ (38) The nonsatisfaction of the desire for truth is compatible with happiness. (from 36 and 37)

With this counterargument in hand, Licentius may concede that the Academics suffer from unsatisfied desire for truth but deny that this militates against their happiness. Accordingly, he need not acquiesce in Augustine's verdict against the Academics without further debate. By invoking this counterargument he can inoculate them against the charge of unhappiness. This appears to be Licentius's best option. It is unfortunate that he does not exercise it.

A Problem with Licentius's Best Option

Although the above argument may be Licentius's best option for defending the Academics against the Unsatisfied Desire Objection, we may still suspect that it is deeply flawed. This is because it rests on a claim that seems not only false but possibly even incoherent. This is:

(35) The search for truth is the ultimate goal of human life.

The problem is easy to see. Since the search for truth is directed toward the knowledge of truth, either it is not a goal at all or it is a goal that is subordinate to the goal of knowing truth. And if it either is not a goal at all or is a goal that is subordinate to the goal of knowing truth, then it cannot be taken as the ultimate goal of human life. It thus appears that if the argument we have constructed for Licentius is to have any chance of success, some explanation must be given, first, as to why the search for truth should be considered a goal, and, second, as to why, if it is a goal, it should be considered an ultimate and not a subordinate goal. If no such explanation can be given, then we must either cast about for another option for Licentius or concede victory to Augustine.

A Stoic Solution to the Problem

In thinking about what such an explanation might look like, it will help to take a brief detour through Stoic ethical theory.[8] This is not because the Stoics would endorse the claim that the ultimate goal of life is to search

8. For an overview of Stoic ethics, see Schofield 2003; Sharples 1996, 100–113; and Long 1974, 179–209.

for truth. They most certainly would not. Rather, it is because Stoic ethical theory suggests a way of understanding this claim as coherent and reasonable. Insofar as it does, it provides a means of shoring up the argument we have constructed for Licentius in defense of the Academics against the Unsatisfied Desire Objection.

We may begin with the Stoic thesis that virtue is the only good and that vice is the only evil.[9] All else, whether wealth, health, and beauty on the positive side or poverty, sickness, and ugliness on the negative side, the Stoics classify as indifferent, having no moral status and making no contribution, positive or negative, to an individual's happiness. This does not entail that indifferent things have no value of any kind. The Stoics regard some as being in accord with our nature, and thus worthy of selection, and others as being discordant with our nature, and thus worthy of rejection. From a moral point of view, however, what matters is not our success in attaining or avoiding any of these indifferent things, but rather that we make our selections and rejections rightly. It is in this that Stoic virtue lies. It is the settled disposition to choose rightly with respect to indifferent things or to select what is in accord with our nature and reject what is discordant with it.[10]

Here we are confronted with a counterintuitive feature of Stoic ethics, but one that may help us make sense of the claim that the ultimate goal of human life is to search for truth. When we select a particular indifferent thing, say health, the acquisition of that thing would seem to be a goal for us. If a goal is simply any object of pursuit, this is impossible to deny. But the Stoics insist that a goal, properly speaking, cannot be something that fails to contribute to happiness. Because of this they also insist that the proper goal in selecting some indifferent thing is not the acquisition of that thing, but rather the activity of selecting itself. Cicero, through the voice of Cato, explains:

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9. In *Moral Ends*, Cicero has Cato, his spokesman for Stoicism, state the thesis as follows: "The Stoics firmly established that what is moral is the only good and that what is immoral is the only evil. They then maintained that there is some difference among those things that do not bear on living happily or unhappily such that some have positive value, others the contrary, and still others neither" (*De fin.* 3.15.50). We find much the same in Diogenes: "Of things that are, some, [the Stoics] say, are good, some are evil, and some are neither good nor evil (that is, morally indifferent). Goods comprise the virtues of prudence, justice, courage, temperance, and the rest; while the opposites of these are evils, namely, folly, injustice, and the rest. Neutral (neither good nor evil, that is) are all those things which neither benefit nor harm a man" (DL 7.101–2).

10. Cato puts the point as follows: "It remains that the highest good is to live in such a way that one applies knowledge of what happens by nature, selecting what is in accord with nature and rejecting what is contrary to nature—that is, to live consistently and harmoniously with nature" (*De fin.* 3.9.31).

> First, a point of confusion must here be removed so that no one thinks that there are two ultimate goods. If a man is given the task to aim a spear or an arrow straight at a target, his doing everything in his power to aim straight is analogous to the ultimate good as we understand it. In this illustration, he must do everything [in his power] to aim straight. Nevertheless, his doing everything [in his power] to accomplish this task is, as it were, the ultimate good—one that is analogous to the ultimate good in life as we understand it—but his striking the target is, as it were, something that he must select rather than seek. (*De fin.* 3.6.22)

Contrary to our expectations, the goal of the archer is not to hit the target. It is to do all that is in his or her power to shoot straight. If the archer has done this, he or she has attained the goal. There is nothing further to be sought, not even the hitting of the target. Similarly, the person who, from a stable disposition, has made the appropriate act of selection or rejection has reached the goal. There is nothing further to be sought, not even the attainment or avoidance of what has been selected or rejected.

The parallels with Licentius's position are striking. Just as the Stoic does not regard the attainment of anything that is indifferent as a condition of happiness, Licentius does not regard the attainment of knowledge as a condition of happiness. Moreover, just as the Stoic regards happiness as lying in virtue, the settled disposition of rightly choosing among indifferent things, Licentius regards it as lying, if not in virtue, then in something similar—perhaps describable as the settled disposition to search for truth. As with the Stoic archer, whose ultimate goal is to do all that is within his or her power to shoot straight, the ultimate goal for humans, according to Licentius, is to do all that is within one's power to know truth. The person who diligently carries out the search for truth attains this goal. Such a person is happy.

The question now before us is whether any of this is of help in rendering coherent and reasonable the claim that the ultimate goal of human life is to search for truth. The tentative answer is yes. The Stoic account provides a way of conceiving what appears to be a goal-directed activity as itself a goal that is not subordinate to any other goal. This is exactly what is needed. As we have seen, the key lies in the claim that virtue is the sole good. It is on this basis that the Stoics argue that, because virtue is fully expressed in certain activities irrespective of the fruit they bear, those activities are not subordinate to any further goal. This seems coherent and reasonable enough. And if it does, then the claim that the ultimate goal of human life is to search for truth, whether true or not, seems coherent and reasonable as well. By transposing the Stoic account, which seems an easy thing to do, one may count

Socratic wisdom as a virtue and then argue that, because such wisdom is fully expressed in the search for truth, the search for truth is not subordinate to any further goal. It is therefore an ultimate goal.

Problems with the Stoic Solution

Unfortunately, the aid that the Stoics have to offer Licentius on this matter is fraught with problems. To some extent this is because Stoic ethical theory is itself fraught with problems, and these would carry over if it were adopted and transposed in the way just sketched. We may, for example, judge that the activity of selection or rejection is manifestly a goal-directed activity, having the acquisition of what is selected or the avoidance of what is rejected as its goal, and that Stoic arguments to the contrary are just so much hand waving. We may also have serious qualms about believing that there is any virtue expressed in the pursuit or avoidance of objects that themselves have no bearing on happiness. If such objects in no way bear on happiness, the activity of selecting or rejecting them would seem to be without value or purpose.

These concerns were voiced early on by critics of the Stoics, who sought to show that Stoic ethical theory is fundamentally confused. Two texts express them forcefully and are worth quoting here. The first, from Plutarch, takes aim at the Stoic archer and places emphasis on the former concern:

> If someone were to say that an archer does everything in his power not for the sake of hitting the target but for the sake of doing everything in his power, one would suppose him to be speaking in a riddling and fantastic way. So it is with the idiots who insist that the end of aiming at things in accord with nature is not the getting but the taking and selecting of them, and that being healthy is not each man's end in his desire and pursuit of health, but on the contrary being healthy has reference to the desire and pursuit of being healthy. (*De comm. not.* 1070f–1071e; Long and Sedley 64C)

The second passage, from Alexander of Aphrodisias, reiterates Plutarch's point, but places emphasis on the latter concern:

> No other expertise selects something merely for the sake of selecting it, but it is with reference to the end that everything is selected. For the end consists in the use of the things selected and not in the selection of the materials. To put it generally, it is surely absurd [for the Stoics] to say that virtue applies only to selecting. For if getting the things

> selected is indifferent and does not contribute to the end, the selection would be utterly pointless. (*De an.* 2.164.3–9; Long and Sedley 64B)

These concerns are legitimate, and they would face Licentius were he to employ Stoic ethical theory in defense of the Academics. In fact, they would face Licentius with greater urgency than they face any Stoic.

To see why, consider that the Stoics, though they deny that any indifferent thing can be considered a good that bears on happiness, nevertheless assign value to at least some indifferent things insofar as they accord with our nature. They thus treat the notion of value as being broader than the notion of good, and it is because of this that they have a way of answering Alexander's charge that the selection of indifferent things is pointless. This, however, is not available to Licentius. Because the Academics consider it impossible for us to come into the possession of truth by knowing it, Licentius, as a defender of the Academics, cannot regard truth in the same way that the Stoics regard the class of indifferent things rightly selected. In particular, he cannot regard truth as being in accord with our nature and thus as having value of any kind. This is a problem. If Licentius cannot regard truth as being in accord with our nature and thus as having value of any kind, it is difficult to see how he can maintain that any virtue is expressed in the search for truth or that the search for truth is the ultimate goal of human life. It appears, then, that Stoic ethical theory may in the end have little to offer Licentius. If he were to employ it in defense of the Academics against the Unsatisfied Desire Objection, it would saddle him with problems that he would be less equipped to deal with than the Stoics themselves.

First Assessment

It is time now to take stock. We have seen Licentius defend the claim that a person can be happy in the search for truth in the absence of knowledge against three objections put forward by Trygetius. These are the Imperfection Objection, the Unsatisfied Desire Objection, and the Vain Labor Objection. Although his performance in this defense was admirable, we have also seen Augustine reformulate the second of these objections and score an easy victory over him. Because this victory was perhaps a little too easy, we did not let the matter drop, but explored what Licentius might say in response. In particular, we suggested that he might argue that there are desires whose satisfaction or nonsatisfaction does not bear on happiness—desires for objects whose nonpossession is compatible with reaching the ultimate goal of human life—and treat the desire for truth as one of these. This would then

allow him to concede that the Academics, insofar as they search for truth but do not come to a knowledge of it, suffer from unsatisfied desire and yet deny that they are unhappy on account of this fact. This we put forward as Licentius's best option for defending the Academics against the Augustine's version of the Unsatisfied Desire Objection.

In the end, the picture is murky. This is because the argument we have constructed for Licentius rests on a claim that is suspicious, namely, that the ultimate goal of human life is to search for truth. In order to show this claim to be coherent and reasonable, we have taken a detour through Stoic ethical theory and achieved promising results, but we have also seen that this theory has significant problems that limit its effectiveness for this purpose. Perhaps the best we can say is that, if we think it coherent and reasonable to suppose that the ultimate goal of human life is to search for truth, we may countenance the possibility that unsatisfied desire for truth does not militate against happiness and judge the Unsatisfied Desire Objection to fail. However, if we do not think it coherent or reasonable to suppose this, we will be little inclined to countenance this possibility and will likely judge Augustine to have been successful in his attempt to convict the Academics of unhappiness.

Denying Wisdom to the Academics

Having examined the debate over whether the Academics are happy in their philosophical practice, we may now turn to the closely related debate over whether the Academics are wise in their philosophical practice. As we might expect, Augustine thinks that they are not, and it is easy to see why. When, in *Against the Academics*, Trygetius presses him for a definition of "wisdom," he responds that it is "the knowledge of human and divine things" (*CA* 1.6.16). This definition needs a good bit of elaboration, but it clearly excludes anyone who disavows knowledge from the ranks of the wise. In particular, it excludes the Academics. That they are wise, Augustine thinks, is not a matter for serious consideration.

Nevertheless, things are not as simple as they first appear. When Trygetius seizes on this definition to use it against Licentius, Licentius raises questions about its adequacy but eventually accepts it.[11] Instead of seeing it as a threat,

11. Licentius's objection to the definition concerns what he considers its overly broad scope. On his view, it is defective insofar as it allows certain persons—most notably, practitioners of the arts of divination—to be considered wise who are clearly not. On this, see *CA* 1.6.17–8.23. See also Harding 2006, 251–63.

he regards it as picking out one of two distinct types of wisdom, the one that belongs to God. The other, which belongs properly to humans, must be defined differently. He explains:

> It seems to me that wisdom is not only knowledge of those human and divine things that pertain to the happy life, but also diligent inquiry into them. If you would like to divide this description, the first part, which includes knowledge, belongs to God, whereas the second part, which is confined to inquiry, belongs to man. Therefore, God is happy according to the former, whereas man is happy according to the latter. (*CA* 1.8.23)

This response presents a formidable challenge to Augustine. What Licentius is arguing, in effect, is that the inconsistency of wisdom with the absence of knowledge pertains to divine wisdom and not to human wisdom, which must be conceived in Socratic terms. As this is the case, the disavowal of knowledge among the Academics, who are searching for truth, cannot be taken as a basis for judging that they are not wise. To draw such a conclusion is to collapse the distinction between divine and human wisdom. It is to think that humans can be wise in the way that God is wise.

Augustine, of course, will have none of this. Not swayed by Licentius's distinction, he insists that the very idea of wisdom in the absence of knowledge—in effect, the very idea of Socratic wisdom—is absurd. This he does most powerfully in a lengthy exchange with Alypius, who takes over from Licentius the task of defending the Academics. After a discussion of the Academic doctrine of persuasiveness, the issue between them becomes whether it is persuasive that truth can be found.[12] Augustine seeks to demonstrate that it is by establishing that it is persuasive that the wise person knows wisdom and hence knows truth. Here we will look at three arguments he puts forward to do this. Each has the consequence that the Academics can make no claim to wisdom.

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12. Augustine frames the issue as follows: "In the meantime, the only point of dispute between the Academics and me is that it seems persuasive to them that truth cannot be found whereas it seems persuasive to me that it can" (*CA* 2. 9.23). He later reframes the issue in more specific terms: "The question between us is whether their arguments make it persuasive that we can perceive nothing and should assent to nothing. Now if you prevail, I will gladly concede defeat. But if I can demonstrate that it is much more persuasive that the wise man can arrive at truth and that we should not always withhold assent, there will be nothing to prevent you from coming over to my view" (*CA* 2.13.30). On this exchange with Alypius, see Mosher (1981), who argues that the primary aim of *Against the Academics* is to establish that it is persuasive that the wise person knows and assents to wisdom. See also Curley 1996, 97–105, for commentary.

First Attempt

In mounting his first challenge to Socratic wisdom Augustine begins by appealing to a common distinction. He asks Alypius to explain the difference between a wise person and a mere devotee of wisdom. In response to this request Alypius replies: "I maintain that the sole respect in which the wise man differs from the devotee is that the wise man possesses certain things for which the devotee has only a burning desire" (*CA* 3.3.5). Following up on Alypius's reply, Augustine suggests that what the wise person possesses and the devotee of wisdom desires is a certain kind of learning that is constitutive of wisdom. After securing Alypius's agreement with this suggestion, he then constructs the following argument to demonstrate that the wise person is not without knowledge, but rather knows truth:

> If, as you have subtly and truly said, the only difference between the devotee of wisdom and the wise man is that the former loves, whereas the latter has, the learning of wisdom, . . . and if no one who has learned nothing can have learning in his mind, and if anyone who knows nothing has learned nothing, and if no one can know what is false, then the wise man knows truth. You have already acknowledged that the wise man has the learning of wisdom in his mind. This is to acknowledge that the learning of wisdom is a possession of his mind. (*CA* 3.3.5)

We may formalize this argument as follows:

(39) If a person is wise, then he or she possesses the learning that is wisdom.
(40) If a person possesses the learning that is wisdom, then he or she has learned something.
(41) If a person has learned something, then he or she knows something.
(42) If a person knows something, then he or she knows truth.
∴ (43) If a person is wise, then he or she knows truth. (from 39–42)

(43) states in conditional form what Augustine states categorically—that the wise person knows truth—but this is of no consequence. The above well captures the intention of argument.

Whatever we may think of this argument, it clearly has ad hominem force against Alypius. Insofar as he has granted Augustine's contention that wisdom is a kind of learning, he has invited the conclusion that the wise person knows truth and will be hard pressed to deny it. Nevertheless, Alypius's concession is one that a more alert defender of Socratic wisdom would never make. Licentius, for example, might well invoke his distinction

between human and divine wisdom and object that the former is no kind of learning at all but rather the recognition of one's ignorance that both results from and motivates the diligent search for truth. He would thus reject (39) as false and would be free to reject (43) along with it. The Academics would no doubt do the same. It thus appears that, unless Augustine is able to prop up (39), his argument is impotent. It has no force against a proponent of the Socratic wisdom.

If presented with this criticism, Augustine would surely respond that the rejection of (39) comes at a high price. To deny that wisdom is a kind of learning is to abolish the basis of the distinction between the wise person and the devotee of wisdom. Ultimately, it is to abolish the very existence of the wise person. This is easy to show:

(44) If wisdom is not a kind of learning, then there is nothing to distinguish the wise person from the devotee of wisdom.
(45) If there is nothing to distinguish the wise person from the devotee of wisdom, then there is no such thing as a wise person.
∴ (46) If wisdom is not a kind of learning, then there is no such thing as a wise person. (from 44 and 45)

Presented with this consequence—the abolition of the wise person—the proponent of Socratic wisdom may wish to reconsider the rejection of (39) and follow Alypius in granting that wisdom is a kind of learning. If so, he or she will find it difficult to deny (43).

While provocative, this rejoinder will not save Augustine's argument. The reason is that the proponent of Socratic wisdom may happily collapse the distinction between the wise person and the devotee of wisdom and yet deny that this entails the abolition of the wise person. On Socrates' account, which Licentius echoes, the wise person aspires to attain a type of wisdom that belongs properly to the gods. The wise person is thus a devotee of divine wisdom. This does not mean that there is no such thing as a wise person. It just means that the wisdom by which the wise person is wise is something other than the divine wisdom of which he or she is a devotee. Such wisdom is Socratic, and it is gained precisely through the diligent search for truth. In view of this, the proponent of this form of wisdom is under no obligation to concede that the rejection of (39) leads to the abolition of the wise person. He or she may thereby reject (39) without apology and feel no pressure to accede to Augustine's conclusion that the wise person knows truth. Augustine's argument gets no traction against him or her.

Second Attempt

Fortunately for Augustine, this is not all that he has to say on the matter. A bit later in the exchange with Alypius he fashions a second argument to the same effect:

> The Academics maintained—or rather it seemed to them—that there could be a wise man and yet that knowledge could not befall man. Hence, they affirmed that the wise man knows nothing. It seems to you, however, that the wise man knows wisdom, which is certainly not to know nothing. At the same time, we agreed, as did all of the ancients and even the Academics themselves, that no one can know what is false. Hence, you must now maintain that wisdom is nothing or admit that reason does not recognize the kind of wise man that the Academics describe. When these matters have been put aside, you must agree to investigate whether man can arrive at the kind of wisdom that reason discloses. We should not, or cannot, rightly call anything else "wisdom." (*CA* 3.4.10)

This argument is slippery. It is difficult to formalize in a way that mirrors its structure as Augustine presents it. Here is one possible version—in the form of a conditional proof—that captures Augustine's intention to show that the Academic denial that truth can be known leads to an unpalatable disjunctive consequence: either there can be no wise person or wisdom is nothing at all:

(47) Wisdom is either something or nothing.
(48) If wisdom is something, then it is either truth or falsehood.
(49) Wisdom is either truth or falsehood or nothing. (from 47 and 48)
(50) If a person can be wise, then wisdom can be known.
(51) Falsehood cannot be known.
(52) If a person can be wise, then wisdom is not falsehood. (from 50 and 51)
(53) If a person can be wise, then wisdom is either truth or nothing. (from 49 and 52)
    (54) Truth cannot be known. (Assumption for Conditional Proof)
    (55) If a person can be wise, then wisdom is not truth. (from 50 and 54)
    (56) If a person can be wise, then wisdom is nothing. (from 53 and 55)
    (57) Either it is not the case that a person can be wise or wisdom is nothing. (from 56)

∴ (58) If truth cannot be known, then either it is not the case that a person can be wise or wisdom is nothing. (Conditional Proof, 54–57)

This second argument is more complicated than the first, but the defect from which it suffers is much the same and is just as easy to diagnose.[13] Like the first, the argument has ad hominem force against Alypius, who has conceded to Augustine that the wise person knows wisdom. But here again there is no reason to think that an alert proponent of Socratic wisdom would follow suit. Just as he or she would deny that the wisdom available to us is any kind of learning, he or she would deny that that wisdom can be known. To think otherwise is to misunderstand its nature. He or she would thus reject (50) and would thereby be released from any obligation to accept (58), which requires it. For this reason, Augustine's second argument to establish that the wise person knows truth gets no more traction against the proponent of Socratic wisdom than the first. Like the first, it rests on an assumption that such a proponent has no reason to grant.

Third Attempt

It is evident from his first two attempts at challenging Socratic wisdom that Augustine wishes to convict it of some form of incoherence or absurdity. But neither of the arguments he has put forward provides an entirely clear formulation of what he takes that incoherence or absurdity to be. This does not come until the end of his exchange with Alypius. Confident of victory, Augustine sums up what he believes he has succeeded in establishing:

> It is sufficient for me that it is no longer persuasive that the wise man knows nothing, lest the Academics be forced to say something utterly absurd, namely, that wisdom is nothing or that the wise man does not know wisdom. (*CA* 3.5.12)

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13. With only slight reformulation, we may arrive at a second possible version, one that captures Augustine's intention to reduce the Academic position that the wise person lacks knowledge to absurdity. The supposed absurdity is that wisdom is nothing at all. Here we need only supply an alternate ending to the above version of the proof, discharging after (56) instead of (57):

(57′) If truth cannot be known, then if a person can be wise, then wisdom is nothing. (Conditional Proof, 54–56)

∴ (58′) If truth cannot be known and a person can be wise, then wisdom is nothing. (from 57′)

Which of these versions best captures Augustine's intention is unclear. What is clear, however, is that he thinks that the Academics, in advocating the Socratic form of wisdom, suffer from a very basic confusion.

As Augustine sees it, the central problem is this. Insofar as they embrace Socratic wisdom and deny that the wise person knows truth, the Academics are forced to accept the following disjunction:

(59) Either wisdom is nothing or the wise person does not know wisdom.

As both disjuncts of this disjunction are absurd, Augustine alleges, the embrace of Socratic wisdom by the Academics inescapably implicates them in incoherence.

Oddly, there is nothing by way of argument to establish that the Academics are required to accept this disjunction. Perhaps Augustine thought it evident and felt no need to provide one.[14] This need not concern us, however, for the interesting issue is not whether they are required to accept this disjunction, but whether they are damaged by it if they are. And with respect to this issue, we may safely say that they are not. The reason is simple. The proponent of Socratic wisdom insists that the wisdom available to us is a matter, not of knowing a set of truths concerning human and divine matters, but of orienting one's life toward the knowledge of such truths and appreciating the severe limits of one's accomplishments in that enterprise. From his or her perspective, there is nothing in the least bit troublesome about denying that the wise person knows wisdom. Hence, there is nothing in the least bit troublesome about the second disjunct or the disjunction as a whole. It thus appears that, even if Augustine were to succeed in establishing that the Academics are required to accept this disjunction, he would fail to inflict any damage on them in doing so. In other words, he would do nothing to establish that the Academics, insofar as they embrace Socratic wisdom, are implicated in any incoherence or absurdity.

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14. Using the method of conditional proof, we may easily supply an argument that is fully consistent with what Augustine says throughout his exchange with Alypius:

(i) If the wise person knows wisdom, then either the wise person knows something or wisdom is nothing.
(ii) If the wise person knows nothing, then it is not the case that the wise person knows something.
(iii) The wise person knows nothing. (Assumption for Conditional Proof)
(iv) It is not the case that the wise person knows something. (from ii and iii)
(v) If the wise person knows wisdom, then wisdom is nothing. (from i and iv)
(vi) Either the wise person does not know wisdom or wisdom is nothing. (from v)
∴ (vii) If the wise person knows nothing, then either the wise person does not know wisdom or wisdom is nothing. (Conditional Proof, iii–vi)

Second Assessment

Throughout the entire exchange with Alypius Augustine's frustration with the Academics is palpable. To his mind, wisdom is a type of learning that is eternal and immutable. To be wise is to possess this learning in the same way that to be a grammarian is to possess the art of grammar. And just as it is nonsense to say of a grammarian that he or she knows nothing—for this would be either to deny that he or she possesses the art of grammar or to assert that the art of grammar is nothing—so too it is nonsense to say of a wise person that he or she knows nothing. Augustine cannot see his way past this point and finds it impossible to understand how anyone could deny it.[15]

Augustine's frustration is easy to understand, and we may well have sympathy with it. Nevertheless, there is no getting around the fact that his attempts to establish the absurdity of Socratic wisdom all fail. Insofar as they all rest on assumptions that proponents of that form of wisdom, including the Academics, would have no reason to grant, they all beg the question against proponents of that form of wisdom, including the Academics. So, whatever sympathy we may have with Augustine's frustration with the Academics on this matter, we must judge him to have been unsuccessful in his attempt to show that they are not wise in their philosophical practice.

Final Thoughts

Stepping back from the details of the many arguments we have examined, if we wish to assess Augustine's critique of Academic skepticism in more general terms, it is useful to return to the figure of Socrates. Among the many images we may conjure, the one of him in the agora conversing with his fellow Athenians about virtue and other matters of philosophical interest is the most defining. As we have already seen, Socrates considered this activity to be

15. In fact, he is so mystified by those who do that he accuses the Academics of deceit in their advocacy of Socratic wisdom. If they were honest, he charges, they would simply say that humans cannot be wise. Instead, their fear of driving people away from philosophy leads them to appropriate the term "wisdom" and divest it of all content: "Let us see who deters them from philosophy more. Is it someone who says: 'Listen, friend, philosophy is not called wisdom itself, but rather devotion to wisdom. If you give yourself to it, you will not be wise in this life, for wisdom belongs to God and cannot come to man. But when you have exercised and purified yourself sufficiently by such devotion, your mind will easily and fully enjoy it after this life, that is, when you cease to be a man'? Or is it someone who says: 'Come, mortal men, to philosophy. There is great benefit here. What is dearer to man than wisdom? Come, therefore, so that you may be wise and not know wisdom'? 'I will not say it like that,' the Academic says. This is to deceive, for nothing else will be found among you. It thus happens that, if you say this, they will flee from you as if you were mad. If you bring them to this by another means, you will make them mad" (*CA* 3.9.20).

constitutive of the good life, and he missed no opportunity to engage in it. Even so, for all the time and energy he devoted to it, he believed himself to have found very little in the way of truth—very little, at least, that he could claim with confidence to know. Instead of trying to hide this fact, he openly professed his ignorance and steadfastly refused to play the role of a teacher.

There is a sense, then, in which Socrates was a failure. He did not attain what he spent his life seeking to attain. This, however, is not how history has judged him. He is to many of us the very embodiment of what it is to be a philosopher. What this tells us is that many of us have, to one degree or another, bought into the Socratic ideal of the good life. This is to say that many of us have, to one degree or another, bought into the idea that it is not just the attainment of knowledge, but also the dedicated and honest pursuit of it, that is ennobling. And to the extent that we have done this, we see in Socrates a noble figure whose life we judge admirable and good, whatever his success or failure in the pursuit of knowledge may have been.

Similar comments may be made about Socratic wisdom. If we find the kind of activity in which Socrates engaged ennobling, it is only because we recognize in Socrates a kind of wisdom of which we approve and which is a product of that activity. Witness, for example, the musings of Pascal, who most certainly had Socrates in mind when he penned the following lines:

> Knowledge has two extremes that touch one another. The first is the purely natural ignorance in which all men find themselves at birth. The other is that at which the great minds arrive. Having run through all that men can know, they find that they know nothing and return to the same ignorance from which they had set out; but this is a knowing ignorance that is aware of itself. Those who stand between the two have left their natural ignorance behind but have not been able to reach the other. They have a slight bit of adequate knowledge, and they pretend to be wise. They disturb the world and judge all things poorly. (*Pens.*, frag. 83)

For those impressed by the myriad difficulties we confront in reaching firm conclusions about our most important questions, it is this *knowing ignorance* of which Pascal speaks that stands at the summit of philosophical achievement. This is nothing other than Socratic wisdom. None of this, of course, is decisive. But it should remind us that, as philosophers, we should seek a conception of both the good life and wisdom that takes into account the realities of the condition in which we find ourselves and the limitations that define us. When seen in this light Augustine's criticisms lose some of their intuitive appeal. They may even appear shallow and dismissive. We cannot so easily brush Socrates aside. What is more, to the extent that the Academics are the legitimate heirs of Socrates, we cannot so easily brush them aside either.

Chapter 4

The Inaction Objection

What is surely among the best known and most powerful objections to skepticism is that the life it envisions—a life without knowledge and, more fundamentally, a life without belief—is not possible. Without knowledge, it is alleged, we have nothing by which to guide our actions and will be aimless in our endeavors. And without belief, it is alleged, we are unable to act and will be reduced to a state of quiescent passivity. This objection, which has come to be known as the "Inaction Objection," is as old as skepticism itself, and it was leveled with great effect at the Academics by their Stoic opponents. It is thus to be expected that it would show up in the work of Augustine, who knew of it through the discussion it received from Cicero.[1] We first encounter it at the beginning of *Against the Academics* book 2, where Augustine presents a brief overview of Academic thought to his pupils Licentius and Trygetius. Discussing the Academic contention that the wise person, being a fully realized skeptic, refrains from all acts of assent, he observes:

1. A formulation of the objection that focuses on the absence of knowledge—more precisely, the absence of apprehension (*katalēpsis/comprehensio*)—is given by Lucullus at *Acad.* 2.10.31. A formulation of the objection that focuses on the absence of belief—more precisely, the absence of assent (*sunkatathesis/adsensio*)—is given by Lucullus at *Acad.* 2.10.38–39 and 2.19.61–62. For a discussion of these two forms of the objection, see Striker 1980. For a finer-grained discussion that distinguishes no fewer than six forms of the objection, see Vogt 2010.

> For this reason, much hostility arose against them, for it seemed to follow that someone who approved nothing would also do nothing. Hence, the Academics seemed to describe their wise man, who they believed approved nothing, as always sleeping and forsaking all his duties. (*CA* 2.5.12)

It should go without saying that, in presenting this objection, Augustine was doing more than reporting a historical fact about opposition to the Academics. Being convinced of the necessity of belief in all areas of life, even in cases where knowledge is unavailable, he fully endorsed the objection and saw it as decisive. It comes as no surprise, then, that he includes it among the charges he levels against the Academics in book 3: "I will throw with what strength I have a weapon that is now scratched and grimy but, if I am not mistaken, still quite powerful: someone who approves nothing does nothing" (*CA* 3.15.33). This had long since become standard fare, and Augustine's words indicate that he was aware of that fact. But we would be mistaken in concluding that he thereby made no contribution to the debate. Although his formulation of the Inaction Objection is boilerplate, Augustine put much thought into how the attempt on the part of the Academics to counter the objection could itself be countered. His originality thus lay, not in the way he pressed the objection, but in the strategy he developed for blocking the Academic response. It is this that will be of primary concern in this chapter.

In what follows, we will look briefly at the Academic response to the Inaction Objection, particularly as that response was fashioned by Carneades and adopted by those who came after him. Of particular interest will be the Academic appeal to persuasiveness as a means of explaining how the wise person may guide his or her actions in the absence of knowledge. We will then turn to Augustine's criticism of this response and explore his reasons for thinking it to be a failure. Interestingly, we will see that he did not consider persuasiveness to be unsuitable as a basis of action, but rather thought that the Academics, having disavowed all knowledge, were not entitled to appeal to it. In short, he thought that a key element of their response to the Inaction Objection was unavailable to them by virtue of their skepticism. Once we have examined all this, we will close the chapter by looking at a possible rejoinder to Augustine's criticism and examining the extent to which it is open to the Academics to make it.

The Academic Response: Some Preliminaries

In considering the Academic response to the Inaction Objection, it is best that we focus our attention on Carneades. Although Arcesilaus, the patriarch

of the movement, had earlier argued that action does not require assent and that the wise person may take what is reasonable (*eulogon*) as a guide for the conduct of his or her affairs, it was Carneades who formulated what became the quasi-official response to the objection, and it was this that garnered the lion's share of critical attention from the Academy's opponents, including Augustine. So while an adequate survey of how the debate over the Inaction Objection played out would take into account the response of Arcesilaus, it is the response of Carneades that will concern us here.[2]

Unfortunately, any reconstruction of Carneades' response to the Inaction Objection faces enormous difficulties. In addition to questions concerning whether he put this response forward in his own voice or as part of a dialectical strategy against his opponents, there is the more basic question of what to make of the conflicting versions attributed to him. One version, reported by Metrodorus and Philo, concedes that the wise person occasionally forms opinions, but differs from the dogmatist in recognizing their status as opinions. Another version, reported by Clitomachus, makes no such concession and depicts the wise person as purged of all opinion. Arguments can be made on both sides, and the evidence is far from conclusive.[3]

Instead of entering the fray on this issue, we will simply forge ahead, following the version reported by Clitomachus as if it were Carneades' own. We do this solely for pragmatic reasons. As this was the version that Cicero, following Clitomachus, attributed to Carneades, this was the version that Augustine, following Cicero, targeted for refutation. And since it is Augustine's critique that is our primary object of interest, we will do well to follow suit. What follows, then, is a sketch of Carneades' response to the Inaction Objection as it was reported by Clitomachus and endorsed by Cicero.

Carneades on Assent and Approval

In examining Carneades' response to the Inaction Objection, we may take as our point of departure a difficult passage in which Cicero claims

2. Two key texts for Arcesilaus's response to the Inaction Objection are Plutarch, *Adv. Col.* 1122a–f, and Sextus, *M* 7.158. Discussion of these and other texts may be found in Thorsrud 2009, 50–56; Hankinson 1995, 86–91; and Striker 1980.

3. We can see this division among the disputants in Cicero's *Academics*. Cicero champions Clitomachus's version and denies that Carneades allowed that the wise person sometimes holds opinions (see *Acad.* 2.24.78 and 2.34.108), while Catulus champions Metrodorus's and Philo's version and affirms that Carneades allowed that the wise person sometimes holds opinions (see *Acad.* 2.48.147). Catulus's case was presumably laid out in the now lost first book of the so-called *Academica Priora*. For the most extensive and carefully researched discussion of the split between Clitomachus and Metrodorus/Philo on this and related issues, see Brittain 2001, 73–128.

to be providing a near-verbatim summary of material from Clitomachus's *Withholding Assent*.[4] The passage, which explicates a crucial distinction that Carneades is said to have drawn, runs as follows:

> That the wise man withholds assent can be taken in two ways: in one way, when it is understood that he assents to nothing at all, and in another way, when it is understood that he refrains from responding with approval or disapproval to anything, so that he neither affirms nor denies anything. This being so, he withholds assent taken in the first way, so that he never assents to anything, but he retains assent taken in the second way, so that, by following persuasiveness whenever he encounters it or finds it lacking, he is able to respond with "yes" or "no." (*Acad.* 2.32.104)

On the basis of this passage, it appears that Carneades fashioned his response by making a distinction between two types of assent—or assent and approval—and claiming that the wise person withholds the former but does not withhold the latter.[5] He then argued that, because the wise person withholds the former, he or she is free from dogmatism, and, because the wise person does not withhold latter, he or she is not immobilized as the objection alleges.

To understand this distinction, we may begin with assent, which is the acceptance of something as true. As with everyone else, many things appear to be the case to the wise person—that the sun is shining, that two added to three equals five, and so on—but what differentiates him or her from others is that he or she holds back from accepting these things as actually being the case. In other words, he or she holds back from accepting them as true. It is in this sense that the wise person, in the words of our passage, "assents to nothing" and "never assents to anything." This is the *epochē* with which the skepticism of the Academics is so closely identified.

Turning now to approval, our passage provides little in the way of explanation, except to say that the consequences of withholding it would be extreme. In particular, we are told that a person who withholds it holds back, not only from accepting anything as true, but also from accepting anything in any way at all. As a consequence, he or she is unable to respond

4. According to Diogenes, Clitomachus wrote some four hundred works. None of them, including *Withholding Assent*, survive. See DL 4.67.

5. Cicero speaks of this distinction as one of "assenting" (*adsentiri*) versus "approving" (*adprobari*) or "following" (*sequi*). See *Acad.* 2.32.104. The use of these terms to mark the distinction, however, is not consistent through his writings. For a focused discussion of this distinction, see Bett 1990. See also Perin 2010; Obdrzalek 2006; and Frede 1984.

affirmatively or negatively to queries or engage in any kind of activity. What this suggests is that approval is a form of acceptance that is sufficiently robust as to allow the wise person to converse and to act, but is insufficiently robust as to implicate him or her in dogmatism. Admittedly, this is vague as a characterization, but the textual evidence allows for little more.[6] Perhaps the best we can say is that approval is simply the acceptance of something as suitable for the purpose of conversation or action without any commitment to its truth.

If this is correct as a way of cashing out the distinction between assent and approval, Carneades' strategy for dealing with the Inaction Objection is readily intelligible. By distinguishing between two types of assent—or assent and approval—he was able to deny that the abolition of belief leads to the abolition of action. He was thus able to dismiss the choice between dogmatism and inaction as false and argue that the wise person, purged of assent but armed with approval, can live in the world without belief. He or she can get along just fine as a skeptic.

Carneades on Persuasiveness

So far so good, but here we must raise a question. If there is nothing whose truth is apprehensible, on what basis may the wise person approve anything or accept anything as suitable for the purpose of conversation or action? If there is no such basis, then he or she may be able to converse and act, but he or she will do so in ways that are wholly arbitrary. In order to answer this question, Carneades put forward a second element of his response to the Inaction Objection, arguing that, while there is nothing whose truth is apprehensible, there are nevertheless many things that are persuasive, and

6. To what we have from Cicero, we should add the testimony of Sextus, who writes of the difference between Carneades and Clitomachus on the one hand and the Pyrrhonians on the other: "Even if both Academics and Sceptics say that they go along with certain things, the difference even here between the two philosophies is clear. For 'go along with' is used in different senses. It means not resisting but simply following without strong inclination or adherence (as a boy is said to go along with his chaperon). And it sometimes means assenting to something by choice and, as it were, sympathy (as a dissolute man goes along with someone who urges extravagant living). Hence, since Carneades and Clitomachus say that they go along with things and that some things are persuasive in the sense of having a strong wish with a strong inclination, whereas we say so in the sense of simply yielding without adherence, in this respect too we differ from them" (*PH* 1.33.229–230). The text is difficult to interpret, but the point seems to be that the Pyrrhonians go along with certain impressions in the sense of offering no resistance to them, whereas the Academics, Carneades and Clitomachus, go along with certain impressions in the sense of actively accepting them as the basis of conversation and action. (The translation given by Annas and Barnes has been slightly altered: "plausible" has been changed to "persuasive.")

that it is precisely to such things that the wise person may give his or her approval. In doing so, he or she may avoid arbitrariness and act in ways that are directed.[7]

Unfortunately, the precise meaning of "persuasive" (*pithanon/probabile*) as Carneades understood it is subject to much dispute,[8] but we may get an idea of what is involved by reflecting on an example that Cicero gives of a wise person who wishes to take a boat from Bauli to Puteoli. According to Cicero, though this person cannot know that he will reach his destination without incident, if he were to set sail "in a seaworthy vessel, with a good helmsman and in tranquil weather such as this, it would seem persuasive to him that he will arrive there safely" (*Acad.* 2.31.100). Since Cicero then tells us that such a person "is not sculpted out of stone or hewn from oak, but has a mind and body and is moved to think and perceive in such a way that many things appear true to him" (*Acad.* 2.31.101), his point seems to be that, given the favorable circumstances of his journey, it will appear true to this person that he will reach his destination safely. In view of this, we may say that persuasiveness is an entirely simple and ordinary notion. It is fundamentally a matter of something appearing true.[9]

While this is fine as an initial characterization, it is not yet adequate. This is because, among things that appear true, there is variation—some

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7. It is important to note that Carneades' appeal to persuasiveness was made in terms of a theory of impressions (*phantasiai/visa*) in general and the persuasive impression (*pithanē phantasia/visum probabile*) in particular. However, as setting forth that theory here will needlessly complicate the discussion, we will present the appeal without reference to that theory. We will take up the theory of impressions in chapter 7 when we examine the debate between Stoics and Academics over the possibility of apprehension. For helpful discussion of the Carneadean doctrine of persuasiveness, see Obdrzalek 2006; Hankinson 1995, 108–13; Allen 1994; Bett 1989.

8. The main issue under dispute is whether Carneades and the Academics following him took "persuasiveness" (*pithanotēs/probabilitas*) to have the connotation of likelihood or probability, so that, in saying that something is *pithanē/probabile*, they were saying that that thing is in some sense likely or probable. The majority view—that they did not take it to have this connotation—is well represented in Hankinson 1995, 108–13; Bett 1989; and Striker 1980. The minority view—that they did take it to have this connotation—is well represented in Obdrzalek 2006 and Thorsrud 2002. Brittain argues that this disagreement goes back to Clitomachus and Metrodorus/Philo, with the former denying the connotation and the latter affirming it. See Brittain 2001, 94–128.

9. We get confirmation of this from Sextus, who writes of Carneades' identification of a persuasive impression as one that appears true: "As regards its state in relation to the person having the impressions, one of them is apparently true and the other is not apparently true. Of these, the apparently true one is called by the Academics 'reflection' and 'persuasiveness' and 'persuasive impression,' while the not apparently true one is named 'non-reflection' and 'not persuasive' and 'unpersuasive impression,' for neither what immediately appears false, nor what is true but does not appear so, is of a nature to persuade us" (*M* 7.16). (Bett's translation has been slightly altered: "appearance" has been changed to "impression"; "persuasive appearance" has been changed to "persuasive impression"; and "unpersuasive appearance" has been changed to "unpersuasive impression.")

do so strongly, with clarity and distinctness, while others do so weakly, with confusion and indistinctness—and it seems that Carneades, instead of counting everything that appears true as persuasive, reserved the appellation for those things that do so strongly, with clarity and distinctness. Alluding to this reservation, Cicero writes that the Academics acknowledge that "there are many things that are persuasive," and adds that, "though they are not apprehended, *since they have a certain clear and distinct appearance*, the wise man may regulate his life by them" (*De nat. deor.* 1.5.12, emphasis added). It thus appears that, on Carneades' view, persuasiveness is a matter not just of appearing true, but of appearing true strongly, with clarity and distinctness. It is to things that appear in this way that the wise person gives his or her approval, and it is by things that appear in this way that he or she guides his or her actions.

Additional Requirements for Approval

We have now set forth the heart of Carneades' response to the Inaction Objection, but there is a final element of that response of which we must take note before moving on. This is that the wise person requires of what he or she approves, not only that it be persuasive, but also that its persuasiveness not be undermined by anything contrary to it. Cicero reports this additional requirement in the following:

> The wise man will use anything that appears persuasive, if nothing offers itself that is contrary to that persuasiveness, and he will govern the entire plan of his life in this way. (*Acad.* 2.31.99)

And a bit later:

> Whatever strikes the wise man in such a way that its impression is persuasive and unimpeded by anything will move him. (*Acad.* 2.31.101)

And a bit later still:

> The wise man does not approve all impressions of this kind, but only those that are not impeded by anything. (*Acad.* 2.32.104)

To put the point in modern parlance, Carneades held that the wise person requires of what he or she approves, not only that it be persuasive, but also that it cohere with other things that are persuasive. This is to say that he or she requires that its persuasiveness be sustained when considered against the totality of what he or she finds persuasive.

Sextus, who is worth quoting here, is more expansive.[10] On his telling, Carneades argued that the wise person may examine what presents itself for approval, not only with respect to its persuasiveness and its coherence with other things that are persuasive, but also with respect to the conditions, perceptual or otherwise, under which both it and those other things present themselves.[11] He or she may thus raise or lower the requirements for approval as circumstances warrant. Sextus explains by analogy to the testimony of witnesses:

> For this reason, just as in everyday life, when we are investigating a small matter we question one witness, when it is a greater matter, several witnesses, and when it is an even more essential matter we examine each of the witnesses on the basis of mutual agreement among the others, so, Carneades and his circle say, on random matters we use just the persuasive impression as criterion, on more important matters we use the one that is not turned away, and on matters that contribute to happiness the one that is explored all round. (*M* 7.184)[12]

Although Sextus differs in important details from Cicero, they are in agreement that, on Carneades' view, the wise person does, or at least may, require of what he or she approves more than mere persuasiveness. He or she does, or at least may, require that it cohere with other things that are persuasive and even that it and those other things appear under favorable conditions, perceptual or otherwise. This is of tremendous importance, for it means that the wise person may undertake significant investigation of what presents itself for approval and may thus exercise a high degree of rational discrimination in his or her acts of approval. As it is hardly better to be indiscriminate with respect to approval than to be a dogmatist, especially if the dogmatist is discriminate with respect to assent, this is as it should be.

A Quick Review

We may now make a quick review of what we have seen so far. Our sources report that, in responding to the Inaction Objection, Carneades

10. See Sextus's lengthy discussion of Carneades in *M* 7.159–99.

11. Sextus illustrates with the example of a certain person appearing to be Socrates. We may check this appearance, first, by examining whether each of his features—his height, weight, face, hair, voice, dress, gait, etc.—is in line with him being Socrates, and, second, by taking into account the distance he is from us, the quality of the light in which we see him, the presence or absence of obstacles to our sight, the acuity of our vision, etc. On this, see *M* 7.176–83. For discussion, see Bett 1989.

12. Bett's translation has been slightly altered: "appearance" has been changed to "impression."

did three things. First, he drew a distinction between assent and approval and claimed that, by forgoing the former and retaining the latter, the wise person is able to converse and act without being implicated in dogmatism. Second, he argued that, while there is nothing whose truth is apprehensible, there are many things that are persuasive and that it is to these that the wise person gives his or her approval. Third, he argued that the wise person does, or at least may, require more of what presents itself for approval than mere persuasiveness. He or she does, or at least may, require that it cohere with other things that are persuasive and even that it and those other things appear under favorable conditions, perceptual or otherwise. On Carneades' view, then, there is no need for knowledge or even belief in order to live in the world. Whether we admit it or not, we all get by without knowledge, and the wise person gets by without belief as well.

Augustine on Carneades

Recognizing the importance of this response to defending the viability of Academic skepticism, Augustine devotes a sizable portion of *Against the Academics* book 2 to its examination and refutation.[13] Although he takes it up in order to knock it down, he provides a fair summary of the position, at least as he knew of it from Cicero. Just after introducing the formulation of the Inaction Objection we cited above, he writes:

> It is here that they introduced what is persuasive, which they also called "truthlike," and they asserted that the wise man would in no way neglect his duties, since he has something to follow. (*CA* 2.5.12)

Then, a bit later, he explains the Academic notion of persuasiveness as follows:

> The Academics call what can summon us to act without assent "persuasive" or "truthlike." I say "without assent" insofar as we do not hold what we do to be true or judge that we know it, but we do it nevertheless. For example, if someone were to ask whether, since it was so calm and clear last night, we would have a similarly bright sun today, I believe we would deny that we know this to be the case. Nevertheless, we would say that it seems to be the case. (*CA* 2.11.26)

13. Little has been written about this material. For a start, see the extended summary, together with commentary, in Curley 1996, 79–95. See also the line-by-line analysis in Fuhrer 1997, 174–232.

All of this is familiar from Cicero, but there is a point that bears mention. This is that Augustine pairs the term "persuasive" (*probabile*) with the term "truthlike" (*veri simile*) and takes them to be interchangeable. This he does on the authority of Cicero, who similarly pairs them, and it allows him to challenge the legitimacy of appealing to persuasiveness by challenging the legitimacy of appealing to truthlikeness.[14] This point is worth emphasizing. Because Augustine's challenge to the Academic appeal to persuasiveness is indirect, by way of a challenge to the appeal to truthlikeness, it may appear not to address itself to the substance of the Academic response, and we may be tempted to dismiss it as irrelevant as a result. This would be a mistake, but it requires work to see why. Before we do that work, however, let us look at the criticism he mounts against the Academic response.

The Objection from Truthlikeness

We may begin our exploration of Augustine's criticism of the Academic response to the Inaction Objection with a question that he poses to Licentius, who, at this point in the dialogue, is still arguing in defense of the Academics.[15] After Licentius has pronounced the views of the Academics persuasive, Augustine reminds him that what they call "persuasive" they also call "truthlike." When Licentius acknowledges that this is the case, and adds that the views of the Academics are truthlike as well, Augustine poses the following question:

> If someone, on seeing your brother, asserted that he is like your father, and this same man did not know your father, he would seem crazy and foolish, would he not? (*CA* 2.7.16)

The question is disarmingly simple, but it strikes hard. We would assume of anyone who asserts the likeness of one person to another that he or she

14. Cicero makes the identification clearest in the following: "In fact, the person whom you adduce as a wise man also follows many things that are persuasive [*probabilia*]—things that are not apprehended, perceived, or assented to, but that are truthlike [*similia veri*]. If he did not approve them, his entire life would be destroyed" (*Acad.* 2.31.99). Cicero also has Lucullus report on the Academics: "They maintain . . . that something is persuasive [*probabile*] and, as it were, truthlike [*veri simile*], which they employ as a guide in action, as well as in investigation and disputation" (*Acad.* 2.10. 32). See also *Acad.* 2.3.7 and 2.20.66, for Cicero's claim that Academics, including himself, desire to discover what is truthlike and delight in doing so. For a detailed analysis of Cicero's use of the terms "*probabile*" and "*veri simile*," both in *Academics* and other writings, see Glucker 1995. Glucker argues that, just as "*pithanē*" is the Greek term that stands behind the Latin "*probabile*," "*eikos*" is the Greek term that stands behind the Latin "*veri simile*."

15. For further discussion of the argument examined in this section, see Curley 1996, 83–91; and Kirwan 1989, 20–22.

is acquainted with or somehow familiar with that other person. And if we were to learn that he or she is not, we would think him or her to be suffering from a very basic sort of confusion. If this is the case, Augustine argues, we must find the Academics guilty of the same sort of confusion, for their appeal to persuasiveness—or rather to truthlikeness—seems to be no different. He explains:

> This shows that we should laugh at your Academics as well. They say that, though they do not know what is true, they follow what is truthlike in this life. (*CA* 2.7.19)

The point is this. To the extent that the Academics deny that the truth of anything is apprehensible, they cannot judge anything to be truthlike. To do so in the absence of some knowledge of truth is illegitimate. And since they cannot judge anything to be truthlike, they cannot judge anything to be persuasive, which is the same. Thus, the very thing that they cite as a guide for action is unavailable to them, and they are left with no explanation as to how a wise person may act. The Inaction Objection therefore remains in force against them.

In formalizing this objection, which we may call the "Objection from Truthlikeness," we may begin by establishing that the wise person cannot judge anything to be truthlike:

(1) The wise person can judge something to be truthlike only if he or she has knowledge of truth.
(2) The wise person has no knowledge of truth.
∴ (3) The wise person cannot judge anything to be truthlike. (from 1 and 2)

We may then establish that the wise person cannot judge anything to be persuasive:

(4) The wise person can judge something to be persuasive only if he or she can judge that thing to be truthlike.
∴ (5) The wise person cannot judge anything to be persuasive. (from 3 and 4)

As should be clear, this objection is potentially devastating to the Academics, and it is difficult to see how they could respond to it. (1) has a high degree of intuitive appeal. (2) is taken from the Academics themselves. (3) follows from (1) and (2). (4) holds on the interchangeability of "persuasiveness" and

"truthlikeness." And (5) follows from (3) and (4). Everything thus appears to be in order. In the absence of some knowledge of truth, the wise person cannot judge anything to be persuasive and hence cannot take persuasiveness as a basis of action. More generally, because the Academics deny the apprehensibility of truth, their appeal to persuasiveness as a means of responding to the Inaction Objection is illegitimate.

A Concern about the Objection from Truthlikeness

Despite its prima facie success, we may worry that the Objection from Truthlikeness does not address the substance of the Academic response. In particular, we may worry that, by attempting to discredit the appeal to persuasiveness by way of discrediting the appeal to truthlikeness, Augustine is unfairly capitalizing on an incidental and unfortunate piece of terminology and is thereby doing little more than scoring rhetorical points. In this connection, it is interesting to note that Augustine faced a worry of precisely this sort from his students, who, at various points in the dialogue, sought to shift the focus of the discussion from "truthlikeness," which has obvious connotations of likeness to truth, to "persuasiveness," which has no such obvious connotations. Citing the stature of Cicero as a master of the Latin language, Augustine was nothing but dismissive in response: "What do you think? Was Cicero, whose words these are, so deficient in Latin that he imposed inappropriate names on the things of which he was thinking?" (*CA* 2.11.26). As Cicero can hardly be accused of linguistic incompetence, the point is well taken.

Even so, our worry remains. To determine how well-founded it is, it is best that we return to the sense of "persuasiveness" we specified earlier and investigate whether the act of judging something to be persuasive in this sense involves an act of judging that thing to be in some way or another like truth. If it does, we may judge that Augustine's criticism is substantive rather than merely rhetorical. More important, we may credit him with having identified a potential incoherence in the Academic response to the Inaction Objection. This is the incoherence of judging something to be persuasive while at the same time disavowing all knowledge of truth. If it does not, we will have to dismiss his criticism as lacking in philosophical interest.

An Exercise in Translation

The issue we have before us now is whether the act of judging something to be persuasive involves one in an act of judging that thing to be like truth.

Our approach to resolving this issue will be analytic. We will perform a small number of translations of the claim that something is persuasive and see whether this leads to a judgment of likeness to truth. If it does, we will have resolved the issue in the affirmative. For the sake of simplicity, we will take persuasiveness simply as a matter of appearing true. Once we have completed the exercise, we will see whether the results stand when we take it fully as a matter of appearing true strongly, with clarity and distinctness. Accordingly, we begin with the following:

(6) *P* is persuasive.

Taking persuasiveness simply as a matter of appearing true, we may translate this as directly as follows:

(7) *P* appears true.

As this is not a judgment of likeness to truth, we do not yet have what we are seeking, but it would seem that it is but a single short step to reach such a judgment. This is because what appears true must be like what is true in some respect or another. And since the most obvious way in which this is so is with respect to how it appears, we may take this step by translating (7) as follows:

(8) *P* is like what is true with respect to how it appears.

With this we have what we are seeking—a judgment of likeness to truth—and our issue seems rather quickly to have been settled. To judge something to be persuasive is to judge it to be like truth. It is to judge it to be like what is true with respect to how it appears.

This, however, is premature, and we should be cautious in thinking that the issue can be settled so easily. To see why, we need only keep in mind that, just as what is false may appear true, what is true may appear false, and we do not wish to say that what is persuasive is like what is true with respect to how it appears when what is true appears false. Some refinement of (8) is therefore in order. Otherwise, we are stuck with the possibility that what appears true is like what appears false with respect to how it appears.

To make the necessary refinement, it may help if we turn back to *Against the Academics*, specifically to a passage in which Licentius first defects from the Academic cause. Agreeing with Augustine that "nothing seems more absurd than for someone who does not know what is

true to say that he follows what is truthlike," he then adds the following by way of explanation:

> Since I do not deny that I know some truth, when I am asked whether we can infer from these mild skies that there will be no rain tomorrow, I correctly respond that it is truthlike. I know that this tree cannot become silver in an instant, and I say without immodesty that I know many such things and see that they are like those things I call truthlike. (*CA* 2.12.27)

This response is cryptic. Licentius is saying that what he takes to be truthlike or persuasive—that there will be no rain tomorrow—is like something he knows to be true—that this tree cannot become silver in an instant—but it is not at all clear in what way he takes them to be alike. He cannot mean that they are alike in content, for in this they differ considerably. Nor can he mean that they are alike in truth-value, for the truth-value of the former is unknown and may even be false. What he must have in mind, then, is something along the lines of what we have just suggested, namely, that they are alike with respect to how they appear. Notice, however, that this does not constitute an endorsement of (8). It is actually an endorsement of something slightly different, which we may formulate as follows:

(8′) *P* is like what is known to be true with respect to how it appears.

The change is slight—a change from *what is true* to *what is known to be true*—but it is significant. Something is known to be true only insofar as its truth is evident, and the truth of something is not evident if that thing appears false. Hence, to stipulate that something is known to be true is, at least in part, to stipulate that it does not appear false. This is precisely what is needed to avoid the problem we have identified with (8). By specifying that *P* is like what is known to be true with respect to how it appears, (8′) does not open up the possibility that what is persuasive is like what is true with respect to how it appears when what is true appears false. In other words, it does not open up the possibility that what appears true is like what appears false with respect to how it appears. It is on account of this that (8′) is preferable to (8) as a translation of (7) and ultimately as a translation of (6). And since it, like (8), is a judgment of likeness to truth, it may serve as the proper terminus of our exercise in translation.

The Crux of the Matter

It is now clear that, if we accept (8′) as a translation of (6), we will accept the Objection from Truthlikeness as well directed. We will see in the Academic

judgment of persuasiveness a latent judgment of likeness to truth and will demand of the Academics an account of how such a judgment is consistent with their disavowal of knowledge. However, if we do not accept (8′), we may remain in doubt as to the relevance of this criticism and make no such demand of the Academics. Everything thus hinges on (8′). It is therefore worth trying to get clear on the intuition that lies behind it.

We may begin again with Licentius's example of something that is known to be true—that this tree cannot become silver in an instant. If this is a genuine item of knowledge, we may say of it that its truth is evident, which is just to say that its truth is plain to see, directly before one's gaze, and so on. But we may also say that it appears true or, more strongly, that it is a paradigm case of appearing true. Nothing, it would seem, appears true more than something whose truth is evident. Now if this is the case, we may say of something whose truth is not evident—that there will be no rain tomorrow, for example—that it appears true only insofar as it is like this with respect to how it appears. This is how a paradigm case works.

To better see the point, imagine that a friend makes a promise that, despite its difficulty, you confidently accept as sincere. Later, when another friend calls that promise into question, you are no longer so confident. Not knowing what to think, you finally say: "Well, her promise certainly *appeared* sincere." Now imagine that you are pressed to explain what you mean by this. As a first response, you might say that sincere promises appear in a certain way and that her promise appeared in a way that is like that. But then, when it is pointed out that a sincere promise may appear insincere, you might say, as a second response, that the sincerity of certain promises is evident and that her promise appeared in a way that is like the way those promises appear. If you were to do this, you would be seeking to explain your characterization of the way your friend's promise appeared by appealing to the way certain other promises appear, and you would be taking those other promises as paradigm cases of appearing sincere. This, it seems, is what Licentius is doing by referencing the tree that cannot become silver in an instant. He is simply taking it as a paradigm case of appearing true.

We may thus summarize the intuition as follows. To say that something is persuasive is to say that it appears true, and to say that something appears true is to judge it against a paradigm case. In particular, it is to judge it against the case of something whose truth is evident or that is known to be true. To deny that anything is known to be true, then, is to deny the paradigm case and, as a consequence, to deny our ability to judge anything to be persuasive. This, as Augustine wishes us to see, is precisely the problem faced by the Academics. By denying the apprehensibility of truth, they deny our ability to take

anything as persuasive along with it and are left without a response to the Inaction Objection. The objection thereby remains in force against them.

Do the Results Stand?

Having completed our exercise in translation, we now turn to the question of whether its results stand if we take persuasiveness, not simply as a matter of appearing true, but fully as a matter of appearing true strongly, with clarity and distinctness. Fortunately, little need be said about this, for it seems obvious that, if anything, the judgment of likeness to truth is made stronger with this addition. This is because, if what appears true appears in a way that is like the way what is known to be true appears, then surely what appears true strongly, with clarity and distinctness, appears in a way that is very much like the way what is known to be true appears. In other words, it is very much like what is known to be true with respect to how it appears. In view of this, it is clear that the results of our exercise in translation not only stand, but are in fact strengthened, when we take persuasiveness, not simply as a matter of appearing true, but fully as a matter of appearing true strongly, with clarity and distinctness.

A Rejoinder on Behalf of the Academics

When fleshed out along these lines, Augustine's Objection from Truthlikeness is of great interest, and it is unfortunate that there were no Academics on hand to offer a rejoinder. We are thus left to speculate as to how they might have responded had they been in a position to do so. Such speculation is perilous, but it seems safe to say that the Academics would have rejected any analysis of what it is for something to be persuasive along the lines of what we have provided in our exercise in translation. Most certainly, they would have balked at the suggestion that to judge something persuasive is to judge it to be like what is known to be true. We can thus imagine them to have offered an alternate line of translation that does not terminate in any judgment of likeness to truth. As this would be sufficient to counter the objection, it is worth exploring what such an alternate line of translation might look like.

In order to do this, we may begin again with the claim that something is persuasive,

(6) *P* is persuasive,

and proceed as before by translating it as follows:

(7) *P* appears true.

In thinking about where to go from here, it may be helpful to remind ourselves that persuasiveness, so considered, is subjective in character. Something is persuasive insofar as it appears true, and something appears true only in relation to a subject.[16] With this in mind, we may imagine the Academics taking this subjectivity one step further and treating judgments of persuasiveness as nothing more than reports of how one is inclined with respect to what appears. In particular, we may imagine them treating judgments of persuasiveness as nothing more than reports of one's inclination to accept what appears as true. If they would be willing to do this, and this is a big *if*, they could replace both (8) and (8′) as translations of (7) with the following:

(8″) I am inclined to assent to *P*.

The advantage of (8″) for the Academics is obvious. As it neither requires nor is susceptible to analysis in terms of likeness to what is true—let alone to what is known to be true—it provides a ready means for them to escape Augustine's criticism.

In view of the availability of (8″) as a substitute for both (8) and (8′), the Academics have the resources to defend their response to the Inaction Objection from the Objection from Truthlikeness. By exploiting the subjective nature of persuasiveness, they may develop an alternate line of translation and reject the crucial assumption on which the objection rests, namely, that a judgment of likeness to truth is latent in a judgment of persuasiveness. This, as it were, puts the ball back in Augustine's court. Unless he can provide a good reason to reject such an alternate line of translation in favor of one along the lines of what we originally provided, the force of his objection will be greatly diminished. It will rest entirely on Cicero's use of the term "truthlike" and will lack any deep philosophical motivation. This does not mean that it will be negligible—we would still want some accounting of the use of the term "truthlike"—but it does mean that it will be insufficient to put the Academic response to the Inaction Objection into jeopardy.

A Problem with the Rejoinder

Despite the promise that this rejoinder holds for blocking the Objection from Truthlikeness, we must take note of a problem with the alternate line

16. This does not mean that the entire basis of the wise person's action is purely subjective in character. Recall from the discussion earlier in this chapter that the wise person does, or at least may, require of that to which he or she gives approval that it cohere with other things that are persuasive and even that it and those other things appear under favorable conditions, perceptual or otherwise.

of translation before moving on. The problem is simple and basic. To reduce judgments of persuasiveness to reports of one's inclination to accept what appears as true quite possibly runs counter to the ideal of the wise person that is central to Academic skepticism. At the very least, it introduces into the life of the wise person an ineliminable conflict that militates against his or her happiness.

To see why this is, we need recall that at the heart of the Academic reply to the Inaction Objection stands the claim that, in the absence of knowledge, the wise person is able to govern his or her life without any taint of dogmatism by giving approval to what is persuasive and withholding it from what is not. On the alternate line of translation, this means that the wise person will give approval to that to which he or she is inclined to give assent and withhold it from that to which he or she is not so inclined. This sounds paradoxical, but the real problem is that inclination to assent now becomes a requirement for conversation and action.

This may not seem to be much of a problem, but it is. As inclination to assent runs counter to the state of *epochē* that the wise person is vigilant to maintain, it entails that the wise person faces the conflict of being pulled in two different directions at once—toward and away from assent. Moreover, this is a conflict that can never be eliminated, for inclination to assent cannot be eradicated without at the same time undercutting the very basis for conversation and action, and resistance to assent cannot be eradicated without abandoning the very ideal of wisdom that defines the wise person. If they were to accept the alternate line of translation, then, the Academics would forever doom their wise person to a life of psychic unrest. This is the price they would pay for adopting this line of translation.

One might object, of course, that the ideal of wisdom as the Academics conceived it is a heroic one, incorporating struggle against assent within it, so that psychic unrest in the life of the wise person is a price they would be willing to pay. Cicero, after all, writes of Carneades in just such heroic terms: "I believe Clitomachus, who writes that Carneades accomplished a kind of Herculean labor in having driven out assent, that is, opinion and rashness, from our minds, as if it were a wild and savage beast" (*Acad.* 2.34.108). Here, however, we should notice that the heroism of Carneades is said to have consisted, not in a lifelong struggle against assent, but in having successfully driven it out. What this means is not entirely clear, but it certainly suggests that significant struggle against the inclination to assent is not part of the life of the wise person as the Academics conceive him or her. To the extent that the alternate line of translation implies that it is, that line of translation is not available to the Academics without problems.

A Brief Assessment

It is now time to make a brief assessment of Augustine's criticism of the Academic response to the Inaction Objection, and we may begin by granting that, at the very least, it has a great deal of ad hominem force. Cicero uses the term "truthlike" as an equivalent to "persuasive" and so invites exactly the kind of objection that we see in the Objection from Truthlikeness. As Augustine can hardly be faulted for taking Cicero up on the invitation, his objection is entirely fair. This, however, is not of great interest or importance. What we wish to know is whether this objection speaks to the substance of the Academic position, and the fact that Augustine is able to exploit an opening that Cicero gives him does not tell us much about that. It was because of this that we pushed further by taking up the question of whether there is a judgment of likeness to truth that is latent in the judgment of something to be persuasive. If there is, we reasoned, then Augustine's criticism is not merely ad hominem, but is substantive in a way that may not initially be apparent.

In pursuing this question, we undertook a short series of translations of the claim that something is persuasive. What we found is that this claim can be construed as a claim that the thing is like what is known to be true with respect to how it appears. And as this is a judgment of likeness to truth, we attained the result for which we were looking. Results, however, can be preordained, and it was for this reason that we sought to lay bare the intuition behind this analysis. Taking our cue from a cryptic remark made by Licentius, we identified this as the intuition that what is known to be true functions as a paradigm case of appearing true and that what is not known to be true must be judged to appear true, and hence persuasive, in relation to what is known to be true.

This is a powerful intuition, and Augustine must be given credit for developing it, but it does not settle the matter. The Academics may respond by putting forward an alternate line of translation that does not terminate in any judgment of likeness to truth, and we have explored what such an alternate line might look like. On this line of translation, for something to be persuasive is simply for one to be inclined to assent to it. Judgments of persuasiveness thus become nothing more than reports of one's own inclinations to assent. Now if such an analysis is acceptable, Augustine's criticism can easily be met, but there is at least some reason to think that it may not be. In addition to pushing the subjective nature of persuasiveness to an extreme, the alternate line of translation creates problems insofar as it introduces into the life of the wise person an ineliminable conflict that militates against his or her happiness. So while the Academics have resources for dealing with

Augustine's criticism, those resources cannot be deployed without considerable costs.

Final Thoughts

As with so much else at issue between Augustine and the Academics, we are left with no clear winners and losers in the debate over the Inaction Objection. The Academics have what looks to be a powerful response to that objection, and Augustine has what looks to be a powerful objection to that response. Even so, it does appear that Augustine has succeeded in placing a burden on the Academics. This is the burden of explaining why judgments of persuasiveness do not involve latent judgments of likeness to truth or, if they do involve such judgments, why the Academics are entitled to make them while at the same time disavowing all knowledge of truth. As should be clear from our discussion, this is not an easy burden to meet, especially given the understanding of persuasiveness as a matter of appearing true strongly, with clarity and distinctness. Thus, to the extent that Augustine has succeeded in placing this burden on the Academics, we must judge that this aspect of his critique, while far from decisive, gets real traction against them.

Chapter 5

Inquiry and Belief on Authority

With his entry into the life of the Church at the age of thirty-three, Augustine believed that he had come into possession of the truth he had long been seeking. Broadly speaking, this was the truth concerning God and spiritual things. As gratifying as this must have been, however, it did not put an end to his intense intellectual striving. Instead, it initiated a form of inquiry that we know by the motto "Faith seeking understanding." As the motto suggests, this form of inquiry has as its aim, not so much the discovery of new truth, as the rational apprehension of truth that is already believed. More precisely, it is a form of inquiry that has as its aim the rational apprehension of truth that is already believed on authority, for authority, according to Augustine, is the proper source of those beliefs whose truth we have not yet certified by reason. Thus, in his advocacy of faith seeking understanding, Augustine came to be one of the great advocates of belief on authority as a legitimate basis of inquiry within philosophy.

That Augustine came to be such an advocate quite naturally put him at odds with the Academics. Like Socrates before them, the Academics were no respecters of authority and treated the pronouncements of putative experts as claims to be tested rather than as dogmas to be accepted. Because of this, they did not accord belief on authority any role within inquiry and most certainly would have rejected the idea that it could serve as a legitimate basis

of inquiry. As a critic of the Academics, Augustine was aware of this, and it gave him yet another reason to oppose them. Most significantly, he charged that it is precisely on account of their dismissal of belief on authority that Academic inquiry, at least when it is taken up with questions concerning God and spiritual things, is fruitless. In the case of these questions, he argued, belief on authority is not only a legitimate basis of inquiry, but a necessary basis as well. Given that Augustine took the highest aim of philosophical inquiry to be the rational apprehension of truths concerning God and spiritual things, this charge was as fundamental as any he could make.

In what follows, we will look at the disagreement between Augustine and the Academics over inquiry and the role of belief on authority within it. This examination will be divided into two main parts. In the first part, we will examine Augustine's advocacy of faith seeking understanding as a form of inquiry that is built on belief on authority as its foundation. We will then look at his charge that Academic inquiry, at least when it is taken up with questions of God and spiritual things, is fruitless because of its rejection of belief on authority and reflect on the broader significance of this charge in relation to his assessment of the Academics as inquirers. In the second part, we will turn to three problems that the Academics identified with belief on authority, all of which are found in the writings of Cicero and which were therefore known to Augustine. After examining these problems, we will turn to Augustine's attempt to resolve the most important of them, which we may call the "Problem of Recognizing Authority," and assess its effectiveness. In this it will be clear that Augustine's ability to resolve this problem is crucial to both the prosecution of his case against the Academics and his successful advocacy of faith seeking understanding as a form of inquiry.

Belief on Authority: From Manichee to Catholic

Augustine's views concerning the foundational role of authority within inquiry were not developed solely, or even primarily, in opposition to the Academics. Rather, they were developed in opposition to the Manichees, who, as Augustine presents them, denigrated the Church's demand that its teachings be accepted on authority and promised to guide their adherents by appeal to reason alone.[1] As a young man, this promise was attractive to Augustine, and he cites it as the chief cause of his early preference for Manicheism over Catholic Christianity:

1. On Augustine's involvement with the Manichees, see the literature cited in chapter 1, note 2.

> You know, Honoratus, that the only reason we fell in with such men was their promise to put fearsome authority aside and, by simple and unadulterated reason, lead those willing to listen to them to God and free them from error. What else compelled me to reject the religion that my parents instilled in me as a boy and, for nearly nine years, to follow those men and listen to them diligently? What else than their claim that, whereas we had been terrified by superstition and ordered to put belief before reason, they would ask us to believe nothing whose truth had not first been discussed and explained? (*De util. cred.* 1.2)

As anyone familiar with his story knows, Augustine eventually came to believe that the Manichees could not deliver on this promise and that their teachings could not withstand rational scrutiny. His disappointing encounter with Faustus was merely the final confirmation of this belief. More important, having settled in Milan, where he encountered the formidable Ambrose, he reconsidered the Church's demand that its teachings be accepted on authority and concluded that the Manichees' denigration of this demand was unjustified and even hypocritical:

> From this time on, I preferred Catholic teaching. I thought it more modest and honest to be told to believe what was not demonstrated—whether because it could be demonstrated, but perhaps not to everyone, or because it could not be demonstrated at all—than, with a rash promise of knowledge, to have credulity ridiculed and then to be ordered to believe so many fantastic and absurd things that could not be demonstrated. (*Conf.* 6.5.7)

None of this meant that Augustine was immediately willing to accede to the Church's demand, but his sympathy with it increased steadily over time. By his own account, what was decisive was a growing realization of the pervasiveness of belief on authority within our lives and the necessary role that such belief plays in our ability to function productively:

> Little by little, Lord, with your most gentle and merciful hand drawing and calming my heart, you persuaded me to consider innumerable things that I believed but that I had not seen and had occurred when I was not present—so many events of human history, so many features of places and cities I had not seen, so many things told to me by friends, doctors, and various other men. Unless we believed such things, we would do nothing at all in this life. (*Conf.* 6.5.7)

The observation Augustine records here may seem pedestrian, but it is not. If we are to live anything but the most circumscribed of lives, we must be willing to believe on authority. If we are not, our view of the world will be exceedingly narrow and our ability to pursue goals will be unacceptably constrained. It was in the light of this observation that Augustine came to believe that, in demanding that its teachings be believed on authority, the Church was demanding nothing extraordinary or unreasonable. It was merely asking its members to do in the domain of religion what they were already doing in other domains of their lives. Thus, when he finally acceded to this demand and became a Catholic Christian, Augustine did so in the firm belief that he was acting well within the bounds of what reason permits. This was so, despite the fact that his reason could not yet certify all that he now believed.

Augustine's Model of Inquiry: Faith Seeking Understanding

Having acceded to the Church's demand to believe on authority, Augustine did not thereby cease to engage in inquiry, but the nature of that inquiry changed. It was now an activity grounded in faith, and its aim was not so much the discovery of new truth, but the rational apprehension of truth already believed.[2] If we are to understand this form of inquiry, it is best that we start with an actual case of it. Perhaps the clearest occurs in *Free Choice of the Will*, an early dialogue between Augustine and his friend Evodius concerning human freedom and moral responsibility. The general problem that launches the inquiry is this. It appears that, if souls have their origin in God as a cause, then God is responsible for the sins those souls commit. Since such responsibility is incompatible with God being good, it thus appears that, if souls have their origin in God as a cause, we must deny that God is good. As a consequence, we seem to be faced with a most difficult choice. We must either deny that souls have their origin in God as a cause or deny that God is good. To Catholic Christians such as Augustine and Evodius, both denials are unacceptable. Both are contrary to their faith.[3]

Troubled by this problem, but not wanting to abandon his faith, Evodius seeks Augustine's aid in finding a solution. In response, Augustine confesses

2. On Augustine's view of the role of faith in coming to a rational apprehension of truth, see the classic treatment by Gilson 1929, 31–43. See also Kretzmann 1989, especially for a discussion of Augustine's letter to Consentius, *Ep.* 120, which constitutes a short treatise on faith and reason. Rist 2001; and Nash 1969, 24–38 are also helpful.

3. On the formulation of this problem, see *De lib. arb.* 1.2.4.

that he had been troubled by this problem at one time as well and that this had helped push him away from the Church and into the arms of the Manichees. He thus agrees to assist Evodius and offers the following words of encouragement:

> God will be present, and he will make us understand what we have believed. We are well aware that we hold to the path beneficially prescribed to us by the prophet, who says: "Unless you believe, you will not understand" (Is 7:9). (*De lib. arb.* 1.2.4)

He then adds the following by way of admonishment: "Be strong in spirit and believe as you believe. There is no better belief, even if the reason for its truth is hidden. It is the truest beginning of piety to think what is best of God" (*De lib. arb.* 1.2.5). Having so prefaced the discussion, Augustine leads Evodius through a lengthy inquiry that ranges over questions from the nature of evil and its origin to the scope of the temporal law and its relation to the eternal law. In the end, he resolves the problem by locating the source of sin in the free choice of the human will. Doing so, he argues, absolves God of all responsibility for sin and allows us to affirm that souls have their origin in God as a cause without denying that God is good. The most difficult choice can in this way be avoided.

In looking at this exchange, we are not so much concerned with the particular problem under discussion as with the nature of the inquiry to which it gives rise. Here there are three things to notice. The first is that Evodius is seeking Augustine's assistance in order to gain an understanding of something he already believes on authority. Like Augustine, he is fully committed to the Catholic teaching that souls have their origin in God as a cause, yet he is deeply puzzled by an apparent implication of this, namely, that God is responsible for the sin that souls commit. This puzzlement is diagnosed as arising from deficient understanding, and it is this that the inquiry is intended to correct. We thus have Augustine's words of encouragement. They are meant to assure Evodius that progress can be made in this direction.

The second thing to notice is that, however puzzled Evodius may be by this problem, there is no suggestion that he should entertain doubts about what he believes on account of it. Lest there be any temptation to do so, Augustine admonishes him to "be strong in spirit and believe as you believe." This is curious. The problem that Evodius raises is serious, and an honest inquirer may take this as a sign that something is amiss in the set of beliefs that generate it. This is certainly how the Academics would have taken it. They may even have encouraged Evodius to suspend his beliefs as a consequence. Augustine, however, does not see it this way. In his view, to believe

such things as that souls have their origin in God as a cause and that God is good is conducive to piety. Because of this, he thinks it would be impious for Evodius to suspend his beliefs until such time as he sorts through the puzzles associated with them.

The third thing to notice is that Augustine, in the course of encouraging and admonishing Evodius, cites the scriptural dictum "Unless you believe, you will not understand." In citing this dictum, he makes it clear that belief on authority is the necessary basis for fruitful inquiry into God and spiritual things and that, if Evodius were to suspend his beliefs, he would thereby forfeit the possibility of gaining the very understanding for which the two of them are undertaking the inquiry. Thus, when Augustine and Evodius set out on a new inquiry at the beginning of book 2, he takes the occasion to press this point one more time:

> We cannot deny what we laid down at the beginning of our earlier discussion. Unless it is one thing to believe and another to understand, and unless we must first believe the great and divine thing we wish to understand, the prophet will have spoken in vain when he said: "Unless you believe, you will not understand" (Is 7:9). (*De lib. arb.* 2.2.6)

It is here that we see the core of faith seeking understanding as Augustine conceives it. While inquiry of this kind is assuredly an exercise of reason, it is an exercise that has its basis in belief on authority. More broadly, it is an exercise that is grounded in and guided by faith. Apart from such grounding and guidance, Augustine contends, reason has no sure path to understanding truth concerning God and spiritual things.

The Case for Belief on Authority

It is understandable that Augustine's views on inquiry would hold considerable appeal to those wishing to integrate philosophy within the larger life of faith, but we may wonder about the justification he has for them. In particular, we may wonder about the justification he has for thinking that fruitful inquiry concerning God and spiritual things may proceed on the basis of belief on authority alone. To see this justification, we may begin with a passage from *Confessions* in which Augustine recounts the hesitation he felt in accepting the teachings of the Church even as he was increasingly becoming sympathetic to them under the influence of Ambrose at Milan:

> I wanted to be made as certain of those things that I did not see as I was that seven and three are ten, for I was not so mad as to think that

> not even this could be apprehended. But I wanted to have the same certainty with respect to other things, whether they were bodily things, which were not present to my senses, or spiritual things, of which I did not know how to think except after the fashion of bodies. If I had believed, I could have been healed. I could have then directed the more purified sight of my mind to your truth, which remains always and fails in nothing. However, just as it often happens that a man who has experienced a bad doctor is afraid to entrust himself to a good one, so it was with the health of my soul, which could not be healed except by believing. Out of fear of believing something false, I refused to be cured and resisted your hand, which has prepared the medicines of faith, administered them to the maladies of the world, and endowed them with such great authority. (*Conf.* 6.4.6)

In this review of his preconversion hesitation, Augustine identifies the chief obstacle to his acceptance of the teachings of the Church as a demand for rational certainty. Without first having the truth of those teachings made evident, he refused to believe. As he came to realize later, this demand was self-defeating, for such certainty would not be possible if his soul was not healed, and his soul would not be healed if he was unwilling to believe. What this demand for rational certainty amounted to, then, was a demand that his soul be healed as a condition of taking the medicine that would heal it. It was a demand that got the order of things exactly backward.[4]

To better understand this, we must remember that Augustine came to view the human condition as deeply fallen on account of sin. In this condition, it is not only the will's power to intend good that is diminished, but the mind's power to apprehend truth as well.[5] In particular, the mind has become so weakened on account of sin that, in the face of the flood of sensations and images that confront it, it has difficulty conceiving of God and spiritual

4. Putting the point in slightly different terms, Augustine elsewhere writes: "To wish to see truth in order to purify the mind is certainly perverse and ridiculous. This is because we purify the mind in order to see truth" (*De util. cred.* 16.34).

5. Augustine calls these two features of the human condition "ignorance" (*ignorantia*) and "difficulty" (*difficultas*) and treats them as consequences and causes of sin: "It is a most just punishment for sin that man lose what he was unwilling to use well, when, without any difficulty, he could have used it well had he been so willing. This is to say that a man who knows what is right, but does not do it, loses the knowledge of what is right, and a man who is able to do what is right, but does not will it, loses the ability to do it, even when he wills it. Indeed, every sinful soul suffers a twofold punishment: ignorance and difficulty. Because of ignorance, we are dishonored by error; because of difficulty, we are afflicted with torment" (*De lib. arb.* 3.18.52). For an overview of Augustine's views on sin and its consequences, see Mann 2001, 40–48; Rist 1994, 104–40; and Kirwan 1989, 129–50.

things in anything but corporeal terms and becomes subject to a multitude of errors as a result. These range from the crude idolatry of the pagan masses to the refined materialism of the Stoic philosophers.[6] Despite this, Augustine did not consider this condition to be irremediable. God, he tells us, has revealed enough about himself and spiritual things that we may come into possession of truth and dispel the errors to which we are prone. In addition, God has revealed enough about the work he has done on our behalf and the expectations he has for us that, by the aid of his grace, we may set ourselves on a path of remediation. As we advance along this path, our minds are purified in such a way that we may come to an understanding of what we believe. Of the many passages in Augustine's corpus that speak of this, four are worth quoting here. The first is from *The Way of Life of the Catholic Church*:

> How do we follow God, whom we do not see? Or how do we, who are not only men but fools, see him? Although he is seen by the mind and not by the eyes, what mind can be found that, covered by a cloud of ignorance, is able to take in that light or even make the attempt? Therefore, we must have recourse to the teachings of those who were probably wise. (*De mor. eccl. Cath.* 1.7.11)

The second is from *True Religion*:

> The basis of following this religion is the history and prophecy of the temporal dispensation of divine providence on behalf of the salvation of the human race, reforming and restoring it to eternal life. When this history and prophecy is believed, a way of life in conformity with divine teachings will purify the mind and make it fit for perceiving spiritual things. These things are neither past nor future, but remain always the same and are susceptible to no change. (*De ver. rel.* 7.13)

The third is from *Faith and the Creed*:

> Stated in the few words of the creed, this is the faith that is given to new Christians to hold. These few words are known to the faithful so that, by believing them, they may be subject to God, and by being

6. Among philosophers, Augustine explains, it was only the Platonists who were able to penetrate the fog of sensation and images so as to apprehend immaterial reality, but they were deficient in their understanding of this reality and remained wedded to pagan religious practices. Thus, even the best of the philosophers were unable to overcome the debilitating consequences of our fallen condition. On this criticism of Plato, see *De ver. rel.* 2.2–5.8. For a wide-ranging discussion of the failure of the philosophers, including the Platonists, to provide proper guidance with respect to religion, see books 8 through 10 of *City of God*.

> subject to God, they may live rightly, and by living rightly, they may purify their hearts, and by purifying their hearts, they may understand what they believe. (*De fid. et symb.* 10.25)

The fourth is from *Enchiridion*:

> When the mind has been imbued with the beginning of faith, *which works through love* (Gal 5:6), it tends by living well to arrive at that sight whereby those who are holy and perfect in heart know ineffable beauty, the full vision of which constitutes supreme happiness. (*Ench.* 1.5)

Taken together, these passages give us the primary justification underlying Augustine's view of the necessity of belief on authority for inquiry concerning God and spiritual things. Simply stated, though we are not presently in a position to attain a rational apprehension of truth concerning God and spiritual things, by believing what God has revealed, particularly as it is proclaimed by the Church, we may free ourselves from error and undertake a way of life that is in conformity with his commands. In this we are purged of sin and made fit for the apprehension of the truth concerning God and spiritual things at which our inquiry aims. All, however, depends on our willingness to believe on authority. Without it, we will wander about in darkness.

Augustine on the Academics as Inquirers

As it became Augustine's settled view that belief on authority is not only a legitimate, but a necessary, basis of inquiry concerning God and spiritual things, it is not in the least surprising that he would take a dim view of Academic inquiry and its rejection of belief on authority. This is borne out in a passage from *The Advantage of Belief* in which he differentiates two praiseworthy types of person with respect to religion and three blameworthy types of person with respect to the same. The passage begins with the two praiseworthy types:

> There are two praiseworthy types of person in religion. One consists of those who have already found truth, and we must judge them to be most blessed. The other consists of those who inquire into it zealously and correctly. Thus, the first are already in possession of truth, while the others are on the path by which they will surely arrive at it. (*De util. cred.* 11.25)

Although Augustine is speaking quite generally here, it is clear that he has in mind two types of Catholic Christian. Those of the first type, whom

we may call "blessed Catholics," have attained such knowledge of God and spiritual things as to make them blessed, whereas those of the second type, whom we may call "inquiring Catholics," have not attained such knowledge, but are engaged in a form of inquiry that will bring them to it. In Augustine's words, they are "on the path by which they will surely arrive at it."[7]

Having differentiated these praiseworthy types of person with respect to religion, the passage continues with the three blameworthy types:

> There are three other types of person. These deserve our disapproval and condemnation. The first consists of those who are opinionated, that is, those who think they know what they do not know. The second consists of those who do not think they know what they do not know, but who do not seek truth in a way that allows them to find it. The third consists of those who neither think they know nor desire to seek truth. (*De util. cred.* 11.25)

The three types of person we are presented with here are all blameworthy with respect to religion, but each for a different reason. Persons of the first type, whom we may identify as Manichees, falsely believe that they know what they do not know. Persons of the second type, whom we may identify as Academics, do not believe that they know what they do not know, but do not engage in a form of inquiry that will bring them to knowledge of God and spiritual things. And persons of the third type, whose identity is uncertain, also do not believe that they know what they do not know, but do not have a desire to know and thus do not engage in inquiry at all.

Among the things we learn from this passage is that Augustine sees inquiring Catholics and Academics to be alike in three significant respects insofar as (a) neither believe that they know God and spiritual things; (b) both desire to know God and spiritual things; and (c) both engage in inquiry in order to know God and spiritual things. However, it is also clear that Augustine sees there to be one significant respect in which they differ. This is that the form of inquiry in which inquiring Catholics engage leads to knowledge of God and spiritual things, whereas the form of inquiry in which Academics engage does not. As the passage continues, we are given the explanation as to why this is so:

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7. It is important to note that Augustine came to retract the view that humans in this life could attain knowledge of God and spiritual things of such a kind that would make them blessed: "If anyone is thought to be or to have been wholly blessed in this life, this does not seem true to me—not because truth that is discerned by the mind rather than believed by faith cannot at all be found in this life, but because, whatever it is, it is insufficient to make us wholly blessed" (*Ret.* 1.14.2).

> We find that persons of the first praiseworthy type—those who are blessed—believe truth itself, whereas persons of the second praiseworthy type—those who are zealous lovers of truth—believe authority. The belief of both types of person is laudable. Persons of the first blameworthy type—those who think that they know what they do not know—are guilty of the fault of credulity. Persons of the remaining two blameworthy types—those who seek truth but despair of finding it, and those who do not seek it at all—believe nothing. (*De util. cred.* 11.25)

Here we are told that inquiring Catholics, not knowing God and spiritual things, believe on authority. This distinguishes them from blessed Catholics, who know God and spiritual things and have no need of authority, but it also distinguishes them from Academics. Like inquiring Catholics, Academics also do not know God and spiritual things, but unlike inquiring Catholics, they refuse to believe on authority. In fact, they refuse to believe anything at all.

Although he is not explicit, it is clear that Augustine takes this second difference between inquiring Catholics and Academics to be explanatory of the first. This is to say that he takes the fact that inquiring Catholics believe on authority, whereas Academics do not, as explanatory of the fact that the form of inquiry in which inquiring Catholics engage leads to knowledge of God and spiritual things, whereas the form of inquiry in which Academics engage does not. This is in line with what he tells us earlier in *The Advantage of Belief*, in what may be his starkest statement of the necessity of belief on authority:

> We cannot rightly enter into true religion without the weighty command of authority. We must believe those things that, if we conduct ourselves well and are worthy, we may later perceive and understand. (*De util.* 9.21)

Although these words are directed against the Manichees, who similarly scorn belief on authority, the point they make pertains equally to the Academics. Fruitful inquiry with respect to God and spiritual things has its basis in belief on authority. In Augustine's judgment, it is precisely because the Academics reject this basis that their inquiry into God and spiritual things is fruitless.

How to Understand Augustine's Charge

Even if we are in agreement with all that Augustine has to say about inquiry, we must still acknowledge that the charge he levels against the Academics is more than a little odd. As we have just seen, he charges that Academic inquiry,

at least when it is taken up with questions concerning God and spiritual things, is fruitless on account of the fact that it proceeds in the absence of belief on authority. However, all the authorities that Augustine deems to be proper in these matters—Christ, the Church, and the scriptures—were inaccessible to the Academics for obvious reasons of temporal order. What this means is that, from Augustine's perspective, even if the Academics had been open to belief on authority within inquiry, it would have done them little good.

In light of this, it may be best to understand Augustine's charge as directed, not so much at the Academics proper, but at those who inquire into questions concerning God and spiritual things in the manner of the Academics, irrespective of whether they identify themselves as Academics. This could even include Augustine himself during the time of his Academic sympathies. This, as we have seen, was a time in which he yearned for knowledge of God and spiritual things, but was resistant to the Church's demand that he believe on authority. Seen in this way, Augustine's charge is primarily concerned with Academic inquiry, especially as it was taken up with questions concerning God and spiritual things, and only secondarily concerned with those with whom that inquiry originated. As such, his charge may not be as odd as it first appears.

Three Problems with Belief on Authority

Now that we have laid out Augustine's views on inquiry, his underlying justification for those views, and the charge he levels against the Academics, it is time to let the Academics speak for themselves. Here we will focus on three problems they raised in connection with belief on authority within inquiry. As each is found in Cicero's writings, these problems were known to Augustine.

The Problem of Lack of Authority

The first problem the Academics raised in connection with belief on authority within inquiry is that there may simply be no authorities in philosophy whom we may follow. Here it is instructive to recall the case of Socrates. When Crito urges Socrates to cooperate with his plan to bribe the guards on the ground that people will otherwise think that he values money over friendship, Socrates scolds him for his concern with the judgment of the crowd. The only judgment with which Crito should be concerned, he insists, is the judgment of the wise, for it is their judgment and their judgment alone that can benefit us:

> And certainly with actions just and unjust, shameful and beautiful, good and bad, about which we are now deliberating, should we follow the opinion of the many and fear it, or that of the one, if there is one who has knowledge of these things and before whom we feel fear and shame more than before all the others? (*Crit.* 47c–d)

The answer, as we might expect, is that we should follow the opinion of the one. But notice the qualification. We should follow the opinion of the one *if there is one who has knowledge of these things*. In using the conditional, Socrates expresses hesitation in affirming that there is such a person, and this is exactly what we should expect in light of his long experience of examining those reputed to be wise and finding them wanting in every case.[8] One of the lessons to be learned from this experience is that genuine authority—authority based on expert knowledge—is difficult to come by and may well be an illusion. This, at least, seems to be the lesson that the Academics drew from it. Taking their lead from Socrates, they placed all claims to authority under suspicion.

To justify this suspicion, the Academics could do more than point to the results of the kind of cross-examination that Socrates engaged in and they themselves took up. They could also point to the widespread disagreement among the learned on virtually every matter of philosophical significance. This, in fact, was their favorite tactic, for it is only natural to wonder whether something on which putative experts are unable to reach even a semblance of agreement is genuinely understood by any of them. Accordingly, when Cicero opens *The Nature of the Gods*, he begins in good Academic fashion by highlighting the intractable disagreement that exists among philosophers of the leading schools with respect to the gods:

> There are many matters in philosophy that have not yet been sufficiently explicated, but the question concerning the nature of the gods is, as you well know, Brutus, particularly difficult and obscure. This question is the noblest that the mind may consider and is necessary for the guidance of religion. The opinions of the learned on this question are so diverse and conflicting that we have good reason to think that ignorance is the cause and origin of philosophy and that the Academics have wisely withheld assent from such uncertain matters. (*De nat. deor.* 1.1.1)

8. Perhaps more tellingly, when Meno asks Socrates whether it is really the case that he does not know what virtue is, Socrates responds: "Not only that, my friend, but also that, as I believe, I have never yet met anyone else who did know" (*Men.* 71c).

Cicero's ultimate point in this passage is that the Academics are right to suspend judgment on questions concerning the gods, but there is an important point about authority here as well. If, as Cicero suggests, disagreement among the learned with respect to the gods is indicative of human ignorance, then claims to authority on the part of the learned with respect to the gods must be rejected. In the absence of knowledge, all such claims are baseless.

Clearly, this argument is far from decisive and limited in scope. For one thing, the inference it makes from disagreement to ignorance is subject to challenge, and for another, there are many areas of human inquiry in which there is broad consensus among experts on matters of importance. Consider, for example, the longstanding consensus among astronomers that planetary orbits are elliptical or the long-standing consensus among historians that Athens was defeated in the Peloponnesian War. Not everything is mired in controversy in the way in which the Academics attempt to make it seem. Even so, this argument does have undeniable force when it is made—as Cicero does here—with respect to matters of philosophy. Despite the efforts of so many individuals over so many centuries, there is precious little about which philosophers have reached consensus—and this is a fact that itself calls out for explanation. Cicero has given us one, and it is an entirely reasonable one at that.

The Problem of Recognizing Authority

The second problem the Academics raised in connection with belief on authority within inquiry builds on the first. To see it, let us suppose that no inference from the widespread disagreement among putative experts to ignorance can be made and that one or a few among their cacophonous voices is indeed authoritative. The person seeking to be guided by such authority will still not be helped, for there are serious questions as to whether he or she will be able to recognize that authority so as to have recourse to it. In a passage in which he takes the dogmatists to task for their reliance on authority, Cicero explains:

> First, others are held bound before they are able to judge what is best. Next, they make judgments about unknown things in the most infirm period of their lives under the influence of a friend or in the grip of a single speech given by someone they have heard for the first time. They cling as if to a rock to whatever teaching they are carried in the tempest. As to their claim to believe without reservation the man whom they judge to be wise, I would give it my approval if only the

> unrefined and untutored were able to make this judgment, for it seems to require a wise man to determine who is wise. Even on the assumption that they have this ability, they could make such a judgment only after hearing all sides and learning the views of others. They, however, have made it after a single hearing and have placed themselves under the authority of one person. (*Acad.* 2.3.8–9)

There is much going on in this passage, but the basic point is one that has often been made by those who are distrustful of authority as a source of belief. This is that the beliefs we hold on authority tend to be formed before we are in a position to make any meaningful assessment of their truth. This is certainly the case with religious beliefs, which tend to be formed in childhood, but it is by no means limited to these. In view of this, if the beliefs we hold on the basis of authority turn out to be true, it is simply a matter of luck and does not in any way reflect well on us as rational beings.

One might, of course, object that this criticism is misguided, for in holding beliefs on the basis of authority we are making a judgment not so much about the credibility of what is being proposed as about the credibility of the person who is proposing it instead. And if we are able to determine that that person is credible, then it is perfectly rational for us to substitute his or her judgment for our own and accept what he or she is proposing as true. The idea that we must be in a position to assess the truth of what is being proposed for ourselves in order to be rational in accepting it is therefore to be rejected. It is much too restrictive.

For his part, Cicero is willing to concede this point, but he adds a caveat that takes us to the heart of the problem and is worth quoting once more: "I would give it my approval if only the unrefined and untutored were able to make this judgment, for it seems to require a wise man to determine who is wise." The problem, as Cicero points out, is that, if we are to have recourse to authority, we must be able to recognize who is and who is not an authority. However, if we are to recognize who is and who is not an authority, we must ourselves be authorities. Hence, the very people who are in need of recourse to authority—those who are not themselves authorities—are unable to recognize authority and hence are unable to have recourse to authority. This problem, which we may call the "Problem of Recognizing Authority," may be formalized as follows:

(1) If S needs recourse to authority with respect to x, then S is not an authority with respect to x.
(2) If S is not an authority with respect to x, then S cannot recognize authority with respect to x.

(3) If S cannot recognize authority with respect to *x*, then S cannot have recourse to authority with respect to *x*.

∴ (4) If S is in need of recourse to authority with respect to *x*, then S cannot have recourse to authority with respect to *x*. (from 1, 2, and 3)

As (2) is the crucial premise of this argument, it is worth exploring to see what may be said on its behalf.

The idea behind (2) is easy to illustrate. Imagine, for example, that I wish to find out whether you are an authority with respect to a simple matter such as state capitals. The most direct way I might do this is to ask you to name them state by state. If this is to work, however, I must know the state capitals myself. If I do not, I will be unable to judge your answers and will thus be unable to judge whether you are an authority. Hence, if I wish to find out whether you are an authority with respect to state capitals, I must be an authority with respect to them myself. If I am not, I cannot recognize you as an authority.

Although this example nicely illustrates the idea behind (2), it might be objected that it is far too simplistic. Among other things, it ignores the fact that I might consult another authority—an atlas, a travel guide, or an encyclopedia—in order to judge your answers and thus do not need to know the state capitals myself in order to test whether you are an authority. This is certainly true, but there are questions we may then raise as to how I can identify those sources as authoritative and whether I must have knowledge somewhere down the line in order to do so. Instead of pursuing those questions, let us complicate the scenario just a bit to bring it closer to the kind of situation Cicero has in mind. Let us imagine that, when I consult the atlas, the encyclopedia, and the travel guide, I get conflicting information about state capitals. How then will I find out whether you are an authority? More important, how then will I identify which, if any, of these sources are authoritative? At this point I might look to what I consider to be even more authoritative sources. However, if I continue to get conflicting information, I really seem to be stuck. In such a situation it would seem that, unless I knew the state capitals myself, I could not identify which, if any, of the sources I consult is authoritative and could not, as a consequence, judge whether you are an authority.

Admittedly, this is all a bit far-fetched, but that is only because state capitals are a routine factual matter about which knowledge is easily generated and accessed. It would thus be surprising to find disagreement with respect to them in sources such as atlases, travel guides, and encyclopedias. But questions of philosophy are quite different. They are extraordinarily difficult to settle—if they can be settled at all—and there is vehement

disagreement over them among those who are widely considered to be its leading lights. Given that this is the case, even if one or a few of these lights were to possess knowledge with respect to such questions and thus have a legitimate claim to authority, it is difficult to see how, in the absence of having similar knowledge oneself, one could with any reliability identify who that authority is. It thus appears that, within the domain of philosophy at least, (2) has a high degree of plausibility and that the Problem of Recognizing Authority is real.

The Problem of Dubious Benefit

The third problem the Academics raised in connection with belief on authority within inquiry is that, even if there are certain people who are genuine authorities, and even if such people can be recognized, belief on the basis of authority is of dubious benefit for becoming wise. In order to see why, we must consider again the type of inquiry that the Academics practiced. In its more purely Socratic form, it might involve asking one's interlocutor to defend his or her views against the most vigorous objections one can mount against it, or, in the absence of an interlocutor, it might involve developing a set of arguments on behalf of a certain view and then developing another set of equally powerful arguments against it. Now there is no doubt that such a practice can easily degenerate into an exercise in cleverness, but the Academics presented themselves as genuine inquirers and defended their practice as the best method for seeking truth. The idea here seems to be that, as the only legitimate basis for evaluating a philosophical thesis is the reasons that can be given for and against it, inquiry must proceed by way of a free and full airing of these reasons. For the Academics, this meant that the reasons for a given thesis had always to be met with reasons against it, and from this there arose the practice of arguing on either side of every issue.

As we saw in chapter 4, none of this meant that an Academic, especially from the time of Carneades on, could not come to prefer some views to others. On any given issue, he or she might find the reasons in favor of a certain view to be more compelling than those in favor of the alternatives and might thus regard that view as persuasive. But the Academics were also reticent about expressing these preferences in the midst of philosophical discussion. Defending his own reticence in this regard, Cicero explains:

> Those who seek to know what I think on each matter are needlessly curious, for it is not so much the force of authority, as the force of reason, which we should seek in a debate. Indeed, the authority of

> those who profess to teach is often a hindrance to those who wish to learn. They cease to exercise their own judgment and take as settled what they see to be the judgment of the teacher whom they approve. (*De nat. deor.* 1.5.10)

The point here is that, as inquiry proceeds by way of a consideration of reasons and not by appeal to authority, we should be circumspect in expressing whatever views we may endorse. This is particularly the case when we are acting in the capacity of a teacher, for students may be tempted to rely on our perceived authority rather than engage in an independent consideration of reasons. If they do, they will have failed to enter into genuine inquiry and we will have failed them as teachers.

What this tells us is that, for the Academics, even if we could come into possession of truth by having it imparted to us by authority, this would be of dubious benefit. Any benefit gained by coming into possession of truth in this way would be offset by the fact that, in relying on authority, we short-circuit the process by which we develop the habits of mind in which our excellence lies. This is why Socrates was the ideal teacher. Although he had no truth to impart or doctrine to expound, he championed the value of the examined life and, by his own example, showed his fellow Athenians how this was to be lived. From the Academic perspective, then, if we wish to become wise, we should seek a teacher such as Socrates rather than an authority to whom we must submit. It is the former rather than the latter who shows us the way to wisdom.

Conclusion

Taken together, these problems are formidable. What they show is that, if Augustine is to defend his position that belief on authority is foundational to inquiry and that Academic inquiry is to be faulted for its rejection of such belief, he will not have an easy time of it. However legitimate and necessary it may be to believe on authority with respect to matters of practical interest, the practice seems wholly unjustified with respect to matters of philosophical interest. So, at least, does it appear in light of the three problems that the Academics have put forward.

Augustine's Response

As Augustine was intimately familiar with Cicero's work, he was aware of each of the problems we have just examined. In this section, we will look at his attempt to resolve the problem to which he gave the most explicit and

extensive attention. This is the Problem of Recognizing Authority. Here we should keep in mind that, in addressing this problem, Augustine was primarily addressing the Manichees, for it was primarily against them, and not against the Academics, that he sought to vindicate the Church's demand that its teachings be believed on its authority. Even so, his remarks on this matter constitute a direct response to the problem as it was set forth by Cicero, and it is in this spirit that we will take them.

Augustine and the Problem of Recognizing Authority

In *The Advantage of Belief*, Augustine argues that those who do not possess knowledge of God and spiritual things will go wrong in religion if they attempt to direct their own lives. He concludes from this that it is best for such people to place their lives under the direction of those who do possess such knowledge: "If it is better for everyone not to sin than to sin, then fools would certainly live better if they could be servants of the wise" (*De util. cred.* 12.27). As he immediately points out, however, this is not as straightforward as it may seem, for it is difficult to see how those who do not possess knowledge of God and spiritual things are able to recognize those who do:

> The fool lacks wisdom. Therefore, he does not know wisdom. He cannot see it with his eyes. He cannot see it and fail to possess it. Nor can he possess it and be a fool. Therefore, he does not know wisdom and, being a fool, cannot recognize it anywhere. Therefore, no one, as long as he is a fool, can with certain knowledge find a wise man he may obey and so be freed from the great evil of his foolishness. (*De util. cred.* 13.28)

The problem Augustine articulates here should be familiar. It is the Problem of Recognizing Authority. According to this version of the problem, those who do not possess knowledge of God and spiritual things would seem unable to place their lives under the direction of those who do because they would seem unable to recognize who those people are. They would thus seem unable to do the very thing that is necessary if they are to avoid going wrong in religion. This is the price of their ignorance.

In fashioning a response to this problem, Augustine begins by telling us that, "since we are inquiring about religion, God alone can resolve this great difficulty" (*De util. cred.* 13.29). This, he goes on to assure us, is precisely what God has done. Not only has he provided that there be at least some genuine authorities for us to follow in religion—these include persons, such as the biblical prophets and Christ, but also the Church and its scriptures—but he

has provided that there be at least some means by which we may recognize these authorities as well. What these means are Augustine specifies several lines later:

> If we put aside reason, which, as I have often said, is extremely difficult for fools to understand in its purity, this authority moves us in two ways: partly by miracles and partly by the great number of its followers. (*De util. cred.* 16.34)

On Augustine's view, then, God has solved the Problem of Recognizing Authority. In addition to providing that there be genuine authorities for us to follow in religion, he has provided that there be miracles and popular acclaim as means by which even those of us who do not possess knowledge of God and spiritual things may recognize these authorities. To see how this solution works and to assess its viability, we may examine each of these means individually.

Miracles and the Recognition of Authority

In citing miracles as a means of recognizing authority, Augustine no doubt has in mind those of the biblical prophets, who verified their authority as messengers of God by means of them. The changing of Moses's staff before Pharaoh is just one such example.[9] First and foremost, however, he is thinking of the miracles of Christ, who likewise vouchsafed his authority by their means. In a passage from *The Advantage of Belief*, he explains:

> In bringing medicine to heal our corrupt way of life, Christ, by his miracles, acquired authority. By his authority, he merited faith; by faith, he drew together a multitude; by a multitude, he established a tradition; and by tradition, he strengthened religion. Neither the absurd novelties of heretics who act deceitfully nor the ancient error of nations who violently oppose it will destroy this religion in any part. (*De util. cred.* 14.32)

As Augustine conceives it, Christ established his authority and showed himself deserving of faith by his miracles. As a consequence, there arose a community of believers around him that continued on in his absence and remains to this day. That community proclaims his message to the world and endures strong in the face of all error, heresy, and opposition. Its authority derives wholly from Christ's authority, which stands as its foundation.

9. For this story, see Ex 7:8–13.

Now it is clear that, if we accept this scheme, we will judge it unnecessary to be an authority with respect to God and spiritual things in order to recognize Christ's authority in these matters. His miracles will suffice to assure us of that authority. Without seeing the truth of Christ's teachings for ourselves, we will be confident that, if we take them to heart, they will guide us rightly. Moreover, if we are philosophers, we will rejoice in having come into the possession of the truth concerning God and spiritual things, but we will nevertheless seek a rational apprehension of that same truth. We will thus engage in the project of faith seeking understanding.

Skeptical Problems

While this appeal to Christ's miracles may provide what appears to be an easy solution to the Problem of Recognizing Authority, it most certainly would not have satisfied the Academics. Although they did not address the possibility of miracles as signs of authority, they surely would have responded that, not being witnesses to Christ's miracles, we must accept their occurrence on the basis of testimonial reports whose reliability is questionable at best.[10] This was the line that Hume was later to take. Arguing that the evidentiary value of such reports, coming as they do from "ignorant and barbarous nations," is dismally low and could never match, let alone exceed, the evidence against miracles arising from uniform experience, he concluded that belief in miracles is without rational foundation. He thus quipped that "the *Christian Religion* not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one" (*Enq.* 10.2).

Even if we are inclined to be charitable where Hume was not, problems remain. Most obviously, Augustine must explain why we should accept reports attributing miracles to Christ (or to the biblical prophets) while at the same time rejecting reports attributing miracles to figures who might be considered his rivals. Why, for instance, should we accept that Christ healed the blind and the lame and deny that Vespasian—or, for that matter, Apollonius of Tyana—did the same?[11] Are Christ's miracles so much better attested

10. While Cotta, Cicero's spokesman for the Academics, does not treat testimonial evidence of miracles, he does treat testimonial evidence of prodigies, theophanies, and the like. Not surprisingly, he disparages such evidence as "old wives tales" (*aniles fabellae*) and "rumors" (*rumores*). See *De nat. deor.* 3.5.11–13.

11. On Christ healing the blind and the lame, see Mk 3:1–6 and 8:22–26. On Vespasian healing the blind and the lame, see Tacitus, *Hist.* 4.81 and Suetonius *Vesp.* 7.2–3. On Apollonius of Tyana healing the blind and the lame, see Philostratus, *Vita Ap.* 3.39.

than theirs? And if they are not, how can they help us identify Christ as the genuine authority as opposed to those others? It is not clear how they can.[12]

In the face of these questions, Augustine would surely argue that the miracles of Christ are in fact better attested, but the Academics would just as surely view any such argument as special pleading on the part of a partisan. This is not to say that they would be right, but it is to say that appeal to miracles as a means of establishing authority, and thus as a means of solving the Problem of Recognizing Authority, faces difficult challenges. It is certainly far from unproblematic.

Popular Acclaim and the Recognition of Authority

To a certain extent, Augustine thinks that the problems associated with the appeal to miracles may be resolved by recourse to the second means of recognizing authority—popular acclaim—for it is popular acclaim that certifies the authority of both the scriptures, which record Christ's miracles, and the Church, which proclaims them. Let us begin with the authority of the Church by looking at a passage from *The Advantage of Belief* in which Augustine explains why someone who is seeking true religion is justified in turning to Catholic Christianity rather than to any other form of religion. He writes:

> Suppose that we are for the first time seeking the religion to which we should give our soul so that it may be purified and renewed. There is no doubt that we should take the Catholic Church as our starting point. There are now more Christians than Jews and idolaters added together. As all concede, there exists a single church among these same Christians, though there are many heretics who wish to be seen as Catholic and call others "heretics." If you consider the entire world, it is more numerous and also more pure in truth than the rest. This is something that everyone who is knowledgeable affirms. (*De util. cred.* 7.19)

What is interesting about this passage is the simple appeal that it makes to numbers. The fact that "there are now more Christians than Jews and

12. While Augustine does not address this problem in particular, he tells us that the credibility of the apostles, who testified to Christ's miracles, is guaranteed by the miracles that they themselves performed: "Those who had not seen Christ's bodily resurrection and ascension into heaven believed those who said that they had seen these things, not only because of what they said, but also because they performed miraculous signs" (*De civ. Dei* 22.5). Augustine's remarks on testimony are scattered throughout his corpus. For a helpful discussion that goes well beyond the problem of assessing the credibility of witnesses, see King and Ballantyne 2009.

idolaters added together" is put forward as evidence of the Church's authority. So is the fact that the Church is "more numerous" than any of its competitors. From a historical standpoint this is understandable. Augustine was writing at a time when the fortunes of the Church had risen dramatically and Catholic Christians could justifiably feel confident that the future lay with them. Those who are successful tend to take the fact of their success as vindication of the justice, rightness, or truth of their cause, and Augustine is no different in this respect. Even so, from a philosophical perspective, this is puzzling. Surely Augustine would have acknowledged that this argument could have not been made even a few generations earlier, when the Church occupied a very different status in Roman society. More important, we have no explanation as to why the numerical supremacy of the Church speaks to its authority.

We get some clarification of Augustine's thinking on this matter as we turn from the authority of the Church to the authority of its scriptures. In a passage from *Confessions*, Augustine writes about the process by which he began to move toward the Catholic faith after his break with the Manichees. His warming to the scriptures was an integral part of that process:

> Although sometimes strongly, sometimes weakly, I always believed in your existence and care for us, even if I did not know what to think about your substance or the way that leads—or leads back—to you. And so, since we are too weak to discover truth by reason alone and, because of this, need the authority of sacred texts, I now began to believe that you would have never endowed the scriptures with such great authority in all lands if you had not wanted us to believe in you and to seek you through them. (*Conf.* 6.5.8)

Once again, we have an appeal to popular acclaim. The fact that the scriptures enjoy such widespread acceptance in every land, Augustine tells us, attests to their authority. What he adds here is the reason. God in his providence would not have allowed this to happen if the scriptures were not genuinely authoritative. So, from the popular acclaim that the scriptures enjoy, we can infer with confidence that they are authoritative. Providence is what enables us to do this.

More Skeptical Problems

Unfortunately, this addition does not give Augustine the help that he needs. To see why, assume for the moment that providence is at work in the world. On this assumption, we must acknowledge that providence allows, among

other things, that children are routinely exploited and brutalized, that large numbers of people live under oppressive and tyrannical regimes, that natural disasters strike without warning and with devastating effect, and that humans are ravaged by a multitude of diseases against which they have little defense. In view of this, if we assume that providence is at work in the world, we must acknowledge that it is extraordinarily permissive and that judgments to the effect that providence would not allow such and such to occur have little basis. Because Augustine's inference from the popular acclaim that the scriptures enjoy to their authoritative status rests on just such a judgment, we must therefore reject it as facile. It ignores the extraordinary permissiveness of providence that he, as a believer in the reality of providence, must acknowledge.

This, of course, is not quite how the Academics would have responded. Instead, they would have pointed to these very same things—the exploitation of children, the devastation of natural disasters, and the like—not as a way of raising questions about whether we can know what providence would disallow, but as a way of raising questions about the very existence of providence. This is clear from the fact that the Academics gave considerable attention to Stoic accounts of providence and formulated a battery of powerful objections along these lines to discredit those accounts.[13] So successful were they in this that their objections have long since become boilerplate and have been deployed time and again with great effect by philosophers of a skeptical orientation. As they are now well-known, we need not rehearse these objections here. We need only take note of the fact that, because Augustine rests his case for the authority of both the Church and its scriptures on the affirmation of providence, he thereby makes their authority susceptible to a vigorous and well-developed challenge by the Academics. Thus, if he is not able to meet that challenge by mounting a successful defense of providence, his appeal to the authority of the Church and its scriptures will be entirely without force. It will simply fall on deaf ears.

A Brief Assessment

What we see in Augustine's response to the Problem of Recognizing Authority is a clear recognition of the need to explain how those who lack knowledge of God and spiritual things may recognize those who possess knowledge of God

13. Cicero sets out the Stoic defense of providence in the speech given by Balbus, his spokesman for the Stoics, in *De nat. deor.* 2.2.4–87.168. This defense is answered point by point in the speech given by Cotta, his spokesman for the Academics, in *De nat. deor.* 3.3.6–39.93. Sextus's extended treatment of the gods in *M* 9.13–194 covers much of the same ground.

and spiritual things and thus have recourse to them as authorities. He does this by assuring us that God has provided the means by which we may recognize authority and by identifying those means as miracles and popular acclaim. As we have seen, however, Augustine's appeal to these means is not free from problems. The first depends on our ability to certify the miracles of Christ on the basis of testimonial reports, and the second depends on assumptions about providence that are in need of defense. So, while Augustine has addressed the Problem of Recognizing Authority in a serious way, he has not done so in a way that would remove the reservations of the Academics concerning belief on authority within inquiry. Those reservations remain well-founded.

Final Thoughts

In this chapter we have examined Augustine's charge that Academic inquiry, at least when it is taken up with questions concerning God and spiritual things, is fruitless on account of the fact that it proceeds in the absence of authority. This charge, and the debate that surrounds it, is of obvious interest in its own right, for there are few questions of greater importance to philosophy than how inquiry should proceed. But it is also of importance to Augustine's critique of Academic skepticism as a philosophical practice. Very simply, if Augustine is able to persuade us that Academic inquiry is fruitless—as well as offer us an alternative that is not—we will be disinclined to count a life devoted to such inquiry a life well spent and will be unimpressed with the self-presentation of the Academics as inquirers. As a philosophical practice, we will find Academic skepticism wanting.

As we have seen, however, much of what Augustine has to say about inquiry and its basis in belief on authority rests on highly specific theological assumptions about the fallen condition of humanity on the one hand and about miracles and workings of providence on the other. To those who accept these assumptions, Augustine's charge against the Academics will seem powerful and his model of inquiry as faith seeking understanding will seem viable. However, to those who do not accept these assumptions, all of this will fall flat. Because of this, it is difficult to render a verdict on Augustine's charge, except to say what is uninteresting and bland, namely, that he has not succeeded in pressing that charge in a way that those who do not share his theological commitments will find compelling. Most certainly, he has not succeeded in doing so in a way that the Academics would find compelling. To this extent, while Augustine's remarks on the nature of inquiry in general, and on the necessity of belief on authority in particular, are engaging on their own terms, they are less than successful as part of his larger critique of Academic skepticism.

Chapter 6

The Error of the Academics

Academic skepticism is not value neutral. It is committed to an ethic that, among other things, mandates strong concern to avoid error. This is reflected in its incessant condemnation of opinion, which it equates with error, and its identification of rashness, from which opinion flows, as the primary moral fault. The Academic wise person, who is the ideal embodiment of this ethic, is thus someone who is free of rashness and lives without opinions. As a consequence, he or she is unsullied by error.

In view of this, it should come as no surprise that Augustine, in his attempt to discredit the Academics, would seek to convict them of error. To do so, he believes, is to show them to be in violation of their own ethic and to cast doubt on any perception that wisdom is to be found among them. In actuality, however, the mere fact that the Academics fall into error is of little consequence. As few, if any, of them would claim to have purged themselves of rashness and opinion, most, if not all, of them would admit to some error. But they would quickly add that such error must be attributed, not to the practice of skepticism itself, but to residual dogmatism that this practice has so far failed to eliminate. Thus, if Augustine's attempt to convict the Academics of error is to have any bite, it must be done with respect to error of a kind that cannot be attributed to residual dogmatism. More specifically, it must be done with respect to error of a kind that the Academics fall into

precisely on account of their practice of skepticism. This, as we will see, is a difficult task to accomplish.

Augustine understands this. That is why, when he goes to convict the Academics of error, he is careful to argue that, in addition to errors of assent, there are errors of non-assent as well, and that these errors are every bit as serious as those involving assent. This addition is essential to his case, for errors of non-assent—if there be any—are of such a nature that we commit them, not on account of the acts of assent in which we engage, but on account of our refusal to engage in such acts instead. They are thus errors to which the Academics are especially prone. In fact, the more successful an Academic becomes as a skeptic, the more prone he or she becomes to errors of this type. From Augustine's perspective, then, if the Academics think that they can avoid error altogether by erasing the residue of dogmatism within themselves, they are deluded. They will avoid one type of error only by falling into another.

The Objection from Error

The first discussion of error that we find in *Against the Academics* occurs in the debate between Augustine's pupils Licentius and Trygetius over the question of whether, in the absence of knowledge, we can be happy in the diligent search for truth. In addition to the three objections we examined in chapter 3, Trygetius puts forward a fourth objection to show that we cannot:

> It seems to me that whoever is in error neither lives according to reason nor is happy in the least. But anyone who is always searching and never finds is in error. Hence, you must show one of two things: either that someone who is in error can be happy or that someone who never finds what he is searching for is not in error. (*CA* 1.4.10)

This objection, which we may call the "Objection from Error," may be stated as follows:

(1) A person who is always searching and never finds is in error.
(2) A person who is in error is not happy.
∴ (3) A person who is always searching and never finds is not happy. (from 1 and 2)

Although the Academics are not the explicit target of this objection, the implication for them is clear. Insofar as they are always searching for truth but never find it, at least not in a way that allows them to claim knowledge of it, the Academics are in error and are thus unhappy. This goes not only

for the run-of-the-mill Academic, but for the Academic wise person as well. He or she, like the rest of the Academics, is in error and is thus unhappy.

In responding to this objection, Licentius mounts resistance to (1) and lets (2) go uncontested. Before he does, however, he asks for a definition of "error," and Trygetius obliges with the following: "To be in error is always to be searching and never to find" (*CA* 1.4.10). Seeing that the acceptance of this definition would make it impossible to resist (1), Licentius calls for a halt to the discussion, but returns the following day with a definition of his own: "Error is the approval of what is false as true" (*CA* 1.4.11). With this definition in hand, he dismisses (1), arguing that, as long as a person who is searching for truth does not assent to anything false, he or she is not in error. This is the case even if he or she never finds that for which he or she is searching.

As we might expect, Trygetius is unconvinced by this response, and a debate ensues over which of the definitions under consideration is correct. Since this debate is largely taken up with the examination of counterexamples to Trygetius's definition, it need not occupy our attention here. One point, however, is worth making. The Objection from Error, along with the debate surrounding it, raises the possibility that there are forms of error that do not involve assent—a possibility that Trygetius affirms and Licentius denies. In doing so, it raises the possibility that the Academics, no matter how scrupulous they may be in avoiding assent, are nevertheless susceptible to error. Since it is the actuality of this possibility that Augustine wishes to establish, the Objection from Error, along with the debate surrounding it, serves as an appropriate prelude to his own attempt to convict the Academics of error.

Getting Straight on Error: The Academics

Before examining Augustine's attempt to convict the Academics of error, it is best that we get straight on the nature of error as the Academics conceived it. To do so, the first thing to keep in mind is that the Academics identified assent as the locus of error. This is made clear by Lucullus, Cicero's spokesman for Antiochus, who complains: "Most absurd is the Academic view that the vices are in our power and that no one is in error except through assent, but that this does not hold for virtue, whose constancy and strength derive entirely from those things to which it gives assent and approval" (*Acad.* 2.13.39).[1] Needless to say, it was not assent taken without qualification that the Academics identified as the locus of error, but rash assent or opinion,

1. Note that the Latin behind "no one is in error except through assent" is *neque peccare quemquam nisi adsensione*.

which they understood to be assent to what is false or unknown. Such assent, Cicero reports, the Academics considered a great fault, and they saw the wise person as avoiding this fault precisely through his or her practice of *epochē*:

> In the first place, it seems to us that, even if something could be perceived, the habit of assent is dangerous and slippery. Because of this, since it is agreed that it is a great fault to assent to something false or unknown, the wise man should suspend all assent so that he does not tumble headlong by proceeding rashly. (*Acad.* 2.21.68)

It appears, then, that the Academics held an entirely simple and straightforward view of error. Error is nothing other than rash assent or opinion, which is nothing other than assent to what is false or unknown.[2]

Although simple and straightforward, it will help to complicate this view a bit by treating error so conceived as a genus and identifying two species falling under it. This we may do by disjoining the disjuncts, "false" and "unknown," and defining a distinct form of error associated with each.[3] We may call the first of these the "Error of Mistaken Assent" and define it as follows:

> *Error of Mistaken Assent.* S commits the Error of Mistaken Assent just in case S assents to some proposition, *P*, and *P* is false.

As this form of error is just false belief as we normally understand it, it is all too familiar. It is what Cicero has in mind when he says: "But just as I judge this, seeing truths, to be the best thing, so approving falsehoods in the place of truths is the worst" (*Acad.* 2.20.66). It is also what Licentius has in mind when, in words nearly identical to those of Cicero, he puts forward his definition in response to Trygetius: "Error is the approval of what is false as true" (*CA* 1.4.11).

The second form of error is less familiar, at least as a form of error. We may call it the "Error of Ignorant Assent" and define it as follows:

> *Error of Ignorant Assent.* S commits the Error of Ignorant Assent just in case S assents to some proposition, *P*, and S does not know that *P*.

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2. Augustine provides a succinct confirmation of this: "The Academics say that whoever approves, not only what is false, but also what is doubtful, even if it happens to be true, is in error" (*CA* 3.14.32).

3. It might be objected that, because everything that is false is also unknown, there is really only one form of error identified here, namely, assent to what is unknown. It might help, then, to replace the disjunct "unknown" with the disjunct "true but unknown," but we will proceed without this refinement.

Why the Academics counted this as a form of error is unclear. To give assent to what one does not know does not always yield false belief, and we do not usually regard true belief as error. It may be that they took there to be an implicit claim to know in every act of assent and judged this claim to be false in cases in which assent is given to what is unknown. Or it may be that they did so simply on the basis of the rashness of this assent.[4] Whatever the reason, by defining error as assent, not only to what is false, but also to what is unknown, the Academics treated error as being extremely broad in scope.

With these forms of error so distinguished and defined, we may round out our account of the Academic view of error with a final note. This is that, insofar as the Academics denied the possibility of knowledge, they took everything to which we might assent to be false or unknown. Hence, despite the fact that they did not identify assent taken without qualification, but rash assent or opinion, as the locus of error, the Academics not only took all error to involve assent, but also took all assent to involve error. In other words, they took error and assent to be co-extensive. It is in this light that we may understand their recommendation to withhold assent universally. As error and assent, on their view, are coextensive, the universal withholding of assent, on their view, is both necessary and sufficient for avoiding error.

The Error of Non-Assent

Turning now to Augustine, we see that, with respect to their views on error, he challenges the Academics on two fronts.[5] First, he challenges the Academic view that we commit one or another of the Errors of Mistaken and Ignorant Assent whenever we assent to anything at all. And second, he challenges the Academic view that it is only by committing one or another of the Errors of Mistaken and Ignorant Assent that we are in error. As it is this second challenge that interests us—since it is only by issuing it that Augustine is able to convict the Academics of error—we will put off a discussion of the first challenge for later.[6] For now, let us see how he issues the second challenge by introducing a form of error that does not involve any kind of

4. Cicero suggests that both forms of error manifest rashness: "What is so rash and so unworthy of the dignity and constancy of the wise man as to assent to what is false or to defend without hesitation what is not perceived or known with sufficient investigation?" (*De nat. deor.*1.1.1).

5. For commentary on the material that follows, see Curley 1996, 120–27. For general analysis of Augustine's views on error, though one that does not address his attempt to convict the Academics of error, see Keeler 1933.

6. On this, see the discussion later in this chapter under "An Additional Question on Behalf of the Academics" and "An Additional Reply on Behalf of Augustine."

assent. We will then see why he thinks that the Academics are guilty of just such an error.

We may begin with a passage late in *Against the Academics* in which Augustine introduces this form of error. Reflecting on how he came to identify it, he writes:

> While I was at leisure in the country, I thought a long time about how what is persuasive or truthlike can defend our actions from error. At first, the position struck me—as it usually did when I was selling it—as well shielded and fortified. Then, when I examined the entire matter more carefully, I seemed to see an opening through which error might attack those who are secure. I think it is not only the man who is following the false road who is in error, but also the man who is not following the true one. (*CA* 3.15.34)

It is the last line of this passage that is most important for our purposes. Before we get to it, however, we should note that Augustine raises the topic of error in connection with the Academic response to the Inaction Objection. The issue that is now before us is not whether the wise person is able to act by following what is persuasive without giving it his or her assent, but whether he or she can do so without being implicated in error. For the Academics, it is obvious that he or she can, for it is assent and assent alone that implicates one in error. Augustine thinks this to be facile. On his view, even if we grant that the wise person may act on the basis of what is persuasive without giving it his or her assent, he or she may still fall into error. He states his reason in the last line: "I think it is not only the man who is following the false road who is in error, but also the man who is not following the true one." This, of course, needs much interpretation. Augustine is telling us that, while the wise person may avoid error by not following the false road, he or she may fall into error by not following the true one. However, we need to know what following the false road and, more important, not following the true road amount to if we are to understand and evaluate this charge.

Although not entirely clear, it seems safe to say that following the false road means something along the lines of accepting what is false as true or giving one's assent to what is false. In other words, it means something along the lines of the Error of Mistaken Assent. If this is correct, then not following the true road—the error into which the Academics allegedly fall—must mean something along the lines of not accepting what is true as true or not giving one's assent to what is true. And if this, in turn, is correct, then what Augustine has identified here is not an error involving any kind of assent, but

an error involving lack of assent. We may call this the "Error of Non-Assent" and offer a preliminary definition of it as follows:

> *Error of Non-Assent (preliminary).* S commits the Error of Non-Assent just in case there is some proposition, *P*, to which S does not assent, and *P* is true.

As with the Error of Ignorant Assent, we may hesitate to count this as a genuine form of error, but if it is, then the Academics are certainly guilty of it. By attempting to withhold assent universally, they fail to accept innumerable truths as true and thereby become enmeshed in this error. What is worse, as their wise person succeeds in withholding assent universally, he or she is the most enmeshed of all. This is surely an unhappy outcome for the Academics.

Problems with the Error of Non-Assent

As unhappy as this outcome is, it may well be that the Academics have little reason to be concerned. This is because, while there does seem to be a valid intuition behind the Error of Non-Assent—namely, that we may fall into error not only by accepting what is false as true, but also by failing to accept what is true as true—it is difficult to cash out this intuition in a way that does not give rise to serious problems. To see this, consider that, on the preliminary definition given above, it turns out that each and every one of us is hopelessly mired in error from the moment of birth to the moment of death. The reason is that the number of truths to which we must assent in order to avoid the Error of Non-Assent vastly, if not infinitely, exceeds the number of truths to which we could ever actually assent, no matter how diligently we work at it. And with respect to each of these truths, as our definition has it, we will be in error. Now we may be willing to countenance such extreme pessimism with respect to our prospects for overcoming ignorance, but we may find such pessimism with respect to our prospects for overcoming error to be beyond the pale.

Even more problematic than the pessimism to which the Error of Non-Assent leads is the fact that it just seems wrong to take a person to be in error with respect to some truth simply by virtue of him or her not having assented to that truth. You might, for example, go your entire life without ever considering the axial tilt of Jupiter and, as a consequence, never accept it as true that it is 3.1 degrees. Nevertheless, it would be ludicrous to say, in accord with our preliminary definition, that you are thereby in error with respect to that truth or have somehow gone wrong on account of not accepting it. What is more, even if you have considered the matter, if you are not in a position to

know what the axial tilt of Jupiter is or, at a minimum, to form a reasonable belief about it, you can hardly be faulted for your lack of assent. If anything, you should be commended for your restraint. By holding yourself back, you have at least avoided the Error of Ignorant Assent. It thus appears that, if the Error of Non-Assent is a genuine form of error, we have not yet defined it properly and do not yet have any reason to think that the Academics are guilty of it.

Two Anecdotes

Fortunately, Augustine gives us guidance on this matter in the form of two anecdotes he presents toward the end of the monologue of *Against the Academics*. The first concerns two travelers who come to a fork in a road and are unsure how to proceed. The second concerns a young man who commits adultery with another man's wife. Both are meant to illustrate the Error of Non-Assent or, as he puts it, the error of not taking the true road, so it is well that we take a look at them. As we will see, these anecdotes are difficult to interpret and raise questions about whether Augustine himself had a clear idea of what the Error of Non-Assent involves.[7]

The Anecdote of the Two Travelers

To illustrate the form of error of which he wishes to convict the Academics, Augustine asks us first to imagine a pair of travelers who come to a fork in the road and are unsure how to proceed. While they are deliberating, a poorly dressed shepherd passes by on foot, and the men ask him which way to go. The shepherd advises them to take the road to the right, and the first traveler, being credulous, immediately accepts what the shepherd has to say as true. He then urges his companion to continue on with him, but the second traveler, being cautious, refuses to go. He does not trust the word of a lowly shepherd and prefers to wait. After some time, a well-dressed townsman passes by on horse, and the second traveler, still deliberating, explains his situation and asks for help. Here is Augustine's description of what transpires:

> Now the townsman was by chance a con man (or what the common folk now call a *samardocus*). The scoundrel followed his usual practice

7. For discussion of these anecdotes and their import, see Curley 1996, 120–27, and Neiman 1982. Both authors rightly see that these anecdotes are meant to show that the Academics are susceptible to error, but neither recognizes that error to be the Error of Non-Assent.

> and even did so gratuitously. "Take this road," he said. "I am just coming from there." He set his trap and left. But when would our traveler be deceived? "I do not approve this information as true," he said. "But, since it is truthlike, and since staying here doing nothing is neither honorable nor advantageous, I will go this way." Meanwhile, the man who was in error by giving assent and so quickly taking the words of the shepherd to be true was already resting at their destination. But our traveler, while avoiding error by following what is persuasive, is wandering about in some unknown woods and still has not found anyone who is familiar with the place he wishes to go. (*CA* 3.15.34)

In reflecting on this anecdote, it is natural to say that, of the two travelers, it is the second who has erred. Although he has exercised admirable caution that the first traveler has not, this has not prevented him from failing where his more credulous companion has succeeded. The Academics, of course, would deny this—insisting that it is the first traveler who has erred—but this, as Augustine wishes us to see, is mistaken. Striking a tone of ridicule, he writes:

> To tell the truth, when I was thinking about these things, I could not keep myself from laughing. I do not know how it happens that, in the words of the Academics, a man who follows the true road, even if he does so by chance, is in error, whereas a man who follows what is persuasive and is led over roadless mountains, not finding the region he seeks, seems not be in error. So that I may justly condemn rash consent, I more easily say that both men are in error than that the second man does not err. (*CA* 3.15.34)

The message is clear. It is ridiculous to think that we can avoid error while acting simply by following what is persuasive without assent. As the case of the second traveler attests, the withholding of assent offers no such immunization.

The Anecdote of the Vicious Youth

If we are still unconvinced, Augustine asks us to consider a second anecdote. This concerns a young man who hears the Academics proclaim that, in acting on what is persuasive, one may avoid all error if one refrains from all assent. Taking these words to heart, the young man immediately heads out and commits adultery with another man's wife. It was persuasive to him that he should do so. Moreover, since he did not take it to be true that he should do so, he did what he did without any concern that he was acting wrongly. For this ease of conscience, he has the Academics to thank.

Having recounted this anecdote, Augustine asks whether the Academics are in a position to accuse the young man of error. If it was persuasive to him that he should commit adultery, and if he acted on this without giving it his assent, this should be sufficient to exonerate him of all error in their eyes. Generalizing from this case, Augustine draws out the shocking consequence:

> If this reasoning is persuasive, a man may engage in any wrongdoing, not only without the shame of crime, but also without the shame of error, whenever it seems persuasive to him that he should do so. This he may do as long as he does not assent to anything as true. (*CA* 3.16.36)

In drawing out this consequence, Augustine wishes to expose the Academic view of error as offensive to our moral sensibilities. It excuses the vilest of acts on the slightest of grounds. If we find this consequence unacceptable, as Augustine thinks we should, we must either show that he is wrong to draw it out or dismiss the Academic view and acknowledge that we may fall into error without ever giving our assent to anything.

The Obvious Lesson of the Anecdotes

It is not difficult to discern the lesson of these anecdotes. This is that, when we act on what is persuasive, the fact that we do so without assent does not protect us from the possibility of error. In acting this way, we may not commit the Errors of Mistaken or Ignorant Assent, but we are still liable to go wrong in our actions. In the case of the second traveler, we may grant that he has avoided every error involving assent, but we cannot deny that he has acted wrongly insofar as he has taken the wrong road. Similarly, in the case of the vicious youth, we may grant he has avoided every error involving assent as well, but we cannot deny that he too has acted wrongly insofar as he has committed an act of adultery. Each man found it persuasive that he should do something that he in fact should not have done. Thus, each man was subject to a persuasive but false impression of what he should do. Although neither man gave his assent to this impression or took it to be true, each man allowed it to guide his actions. In doing so, each man fell into error.

As obvious as this lesson may be, however, it cannot be the real lesson that Augustine wishes to impart with these anecdotes. Here we need only recall that, just prior to his presentation of them, he writes: "I think it is not only the man who is following the false road who is in error, but also the man who is not following the true one" (*CA* 3.15.34). If our earlier analysis of this statement is correct, what he is referring to here is not a matter of going

wrong in one's actions, but rather a matter of not giving one's assent to what is true. What we should seek to understand in these anecdotes, then, is how each man fell into error by not giving his assent to what is true. In other words, what we should seek to understand in these anecdotes is how each illustrates the Error of Non-Assent. Because it will simplify our analysis to focus on one rather than both, we will confine our attention to the Anecdote of the Two Travelers.[8]

The Error of Non-Assent in Light of the Anecdote of the Two Travelers

We may begin with what is easy. If the second traveler has committed the Error of Non-Assent, his having done so can only have consisted in not assenting to the word of the shepherd. It cannot have consisted in not having assented to the word of the townsperson, for that word was false, and Augustine wishes to show by this anecdote that we can go wrong, not only by assenting to what is false, but also by not assenting to what is true. The question that confronts us, then, is whether there is any reason to take this non-assent to the word of the shepherd as an error. If there is not, then the anecdote fails to illustrate what Augustine intends it to illustrate. What is worse, we may even question whether Augustine has identified a genuine form of error.

To better understand what Augustine has in mind, it will help to consider that what the shepherd has told the two travelers is not a random or trivial piece of information. It is information that is directly relevant to the successful completion of their journey. To disregard it, as the second traveler has done, is to guarantee failure. What this suggests is that the Error of Non-Assent is committed, not with respect to any and every truth, but rather with respect to those truths alone whose acceptance is in some way necessary to the attainment of goals we are pursuing. It is goal specific, as it were. In view of this, we may revise the preliminary definition of the Error of Non-Assent by taking its goal-specific nature into account. Our revised definition is as follows:

8. Our choice to focus on the Anecdote of the Two Travelers is largely motivated by the fact that it more clearly illustrates the Error of Non-Assent, which is the particular error with which Augustine charges the Academics. We should note, however, that Curley sees the Anecdote of the Vicious Youth as the more important of the two. This is because it more clearly manifests Augustine's concerns with the deleterious moral effects of Academic skepticism. See Curley 1996, 120–27. Topping (2012), whose comments are less extensive, concurs with Curley in this assessment.

Error of Non-Assent (revised). S commits the Error of Non-Assent just in case:

(i) there is some goal, *G*, that S desires to attain, and
(ii) there is some true proposition, *P*, such that, if S does not assent to *P*, S will not attain *G*, and
(iii) S does not assent to *P*.

With this revised definition of the Error of Non-Assent in place, we now see what Augustine has in mind. The second traveler, like the first, desired to reach a certain destination. Both travelers were given a true report about which road leads to that destination. Unlike the first traveler, who assented to that report and subsequently reached his destination, the second traveler withheld his assent from that report and failed to reach his destination. In doing so, he fell into error.

This revised definition of the Error of Non-Assent is clearly more adequate, but it also makes Augustine's charge that the Academics commit this error more difficult to justify. To do so, he must now do more than show that there is some truth or another to which the Academics do not assent. He must, in addition, show that there is a goal they desire to attain and that their refusal to assent to that truth bars them from attaining that goal. If he is unable to show this, he cannot take the conditions of the definition to be satisfied and cannot count Academic non-assent as error. In this way, then, the specification of a goal with respect to which the Academics are in error is crucial to the success of his attempt to convict them of the Error of Non-Assent.

The Discovery of Truth and the Error of Non-Assent

Perhaps the most obvious goal with respect to which Augustine might convict the Academics of the Error of Non-Assent is the goal of discovering truth. As we have discussed at length, this is a stated goal of the Academics, who cite it on behalf of their claim to be genuine inquirers rather than practitioners of mere eristic. As we have also discussed at length, it is Augustine's view that, by withholding assent universally, and particularly by withholding it from what is proposed on the basis of authority, the Academics close themselves off to the possibility of attaining rational apprehension of what are arguably the most important truths of philosophy, namely, truths concerning God and spiritual things. Seen in this light, Augustine's charge that the Academics commit the Error of Non-Assent is natural and even predictable. By withholding assent universally, and particularly by withholding it from what

is proposed on the basis of authority, the Academics commit this error with respect to the goal of discovering truth.[9]

Happiness and the Error of Non-Assent

While it would be surprising if Augustine did not have the goal of discovering truth in mind when charging the Academics with the Error of Non-Assent, what seems to have been at the forefront of his thinking is a goal that is even broader and more fundamental. To see what this goal is, we may begin with the following passage from *Enchiridion*, in which he offers additional reflections on the Academic concern to avoid error:

> The Academics think that every error is a sin, which they contend can only be avoided by suspending all assent. Indeed, they say that anyone who assents to what is uncertain is in error, and they seek to establish with clever but shameless arguments that, because of the indistinguishable likeness to what is false, there is nothing certain in our impressions, even if what appears to be the case is perhaps true. We, however, think that *the just man lives by faith* (Rom 1:17). But if assent is taken away, so too is faith, since nothing is believed without assent. There are truths that, though they do not appear to be the case, must nevertheless be believed if we are to arrive at the happy life, which is eternal life. (*Ench.* 7.20)

In line with what we have seen in *Against the Academics*, Augustine begins this passage with a brief recounting of the identification of error with sin on the part of the Academics, their assertion of the inevitability of error in one's acts of assent, and their recommendation of universal withholding of assent. He then moves to his condemnation of the Academics, charging that their recommendation that we withhold assent universally is contrary to the demand issued by Paul that we live by faith. Without assent, he argues, there is no belief, and without belief, he argues, there is no faith. What the Academics recommend is thus something that, if put into practice, renders the Christian life impossible. It must therefore be rejected categorically.

There is much that is of interest in this passage, but what concerns us here is Augustine's specification of the goal with respect to which he wishes

9. Interpreting Augustine's charge in this way makes good sense on its own terms and allows us to see it as a development of Trygetius's Objection from Error. On Augustine's view, the Academics are in error not merely because they are always searching for truth but never find it, but also because of what accounts for this fact, namely, that they do not assent to certain truths to which they must assent if their inquiry is to be fruitful.

to convict the Academics of the Error of Non-Assent. This occurs in the last line of the passage: "There are truths that, though they do not appear to be the case, must nevertheless be believed if we are to arrive at the happy life, which is eternal life." In saying this, Augustine identifies the goal with respect to which the Academics commit the Error of Non-Assent as nothing less than the ultimate goal of human life—happiness. By withholding assent universally, he charges, the Academics cut themselves off from truths to which we must assent if we are to attain happiness. In doing so, they consign themselves to unhappiness in this life and the next.[10]

That Augustine makes this charge is readily understandable in light of his view that faith is the foundation of that life whereby we are purified of sin and its debilitating effects. As we have already seen, it is because of this view that he considers faith to be necessary for the attainment of a rational apprehension of truths concerning God and spiritual things. But it is also because of this view that he considers faith to be necessary for the attainment of happiness. Of the many passages we could cite in this regard, two will suffice. The first is from *Enchiridion*:

> When the mind has been imbued with the beginning of faith, *which works through love* (Gal 5:6), it tends by living well to arrive at that sight whereby those who are holy and perfect in heart know ineffable beauty, the full vision of which constitutes supreme happiness. (*Ench.* 1.5)

The second is from *The Trinity*:

> Everyone has the will to be happy, but not everyone has the faith by which the heart is purified and arrives at happiness. So it happens that we must strive for something that everyone necessarily wills by means of something that not everyone wills. (*De Trin.* 13.20.25)

From the perspective that Augustine articulates here, the problem with the Academics is easy to see. Very simply, their policy of universally withholding

10. This is not the only place where Augustine speaks of error in connection with happiness. In book 2 of *Free Choice of the Will* we find the following: "Inasmuch as all men seek the happy life, they are not in error. However, inasmuch as someone does not adhere to the way of life that leads to happiness—though he professes that he wills nothing other than to reach it—he is in error, for error is to follow something that does not lead where you want to go" (*De lib. arb.* 2.9.26). Two points are worth making here. First, Augustine is not explicitly targeting the Academics in this passage, though he would surely think his comments are applicable to them. Second, in saying that *error is to follow something that does not lead where you want to go*, he seems to have in mind what he refers to in *Against the Academics* as following the false road rather than not following the true road. Hence, he does not have in mind what we are here calling the Error of Non-Assent.

assent negates the possibility of faith and thereby negates the possibility, not just of the rational apprehension of truths concerning God and spiritual things, but of a life whereby the prospect of happiness becomes open to us as well. Far from shielding them from error, their policy of universally withholding assent implicates them in error of the most serious kind. This, it seems, is ultimately what Augustine has in mind in charging the Academics with the Error of Non-Assent.

A Question on Behalf of the Academics

For anyone sympathetic to Augustine's theological outlook, all this stands as a powerful and persuasive indictment of the Academics. In their policy of withholding assent universally, the Academics forfeit the possibility, not only of coming to a rational apprehension of the most important truths we can come to know, but of attaining the highest goal for humans. Nevertheless, there is a question to which even the most sympathetic reader of Augustine must demand an answer before accepting this indictment. This is the question of why the life whereby we are purified of sin and its debilitating effects must be grounded in faith of a kind that involves assent. This question is well motivated. Just as we can imagine the second traveler going down the wrong road without assenting to the word of the townsperson, we can imagine him going down the right road without assenting to the word of the shepherd. And if we can imagine this, there is no reason that we cannot imagine an Academic taking guidance from the truths of faith, and thus leading the life whereby we are purified of sin and its debilitating effects, without giving assent to those truths. Thus, until Augustine has explained why we are wrong in imagining this as a possibility, he has not established that the Academics have undercut their prospects for happiness in their practice of universally withholding assent. Because of this, he has not made good on his charge that the Academics have committed the Error of Non-Assent with respect to the goal of attaining happiness.

Two Replies on Behalf of Augustine

Unfortunately, Augustine never addresses this question directly. It may never have occurred to him, or he may have considered it too fanciful. In any case, there are at least two replies available to him for doing so—the first having to do with an Academic taking guidance from the truths of faith, and the second having to do with an Academic withholding assent from the truths of faith. Considering these replies will help us better understand the basis of

his charge that the Academics commit the Error of Non-Assent with respect to the goal of happiness.

First Reply

The first reply that is available to Augustine is that an Academic cannot take guidance from the truths of the faith without abandoning the Academic prescription for action. This, he may argue, is because the Academic prescription for action dictates that we take guidance only from what is persuasive, and at least some of the truths of faith are not persuasive. This is what Augustine has in mind when, in the passage we have examined from *Enchiridion*, he says that we must believe these truths *though they do not appear to be the case*. Presumably, such truths as that God is a Trinity, that the second person of the Trinity became incarnate in Jesus Christ, and that Jesus Christ was born of a virgin fall into this class. Thus, unless the Academic is prepared to abandon the Academic prescription for action by taking guidance from what is not persuasive, he or she cannot take guidance from at least some of the truths of faith and cannot, as a consequence, live a life by which he or she is purified of sin and its debilitating effects. Like the second traveler, who found the word of the shepherd to be unpersuasive and refused, not only to give his assent to that word, but even to act on that word, he or she cannot travel along the road that leads to his or her ultimate destination, which is happiness.

Second Reply

The second reply that is available to Augustine is that an Academic cannot withhold assent from the truths of faith without acting in a way that is incompatible with the life whereby he or she is purified of sin and its debilitating effects. Here he need only make two points. The first is that the life whereby we are purified of sin and its debilitating effects is a life in which we subject ourselves to God. It is a life in which we place ourselves under God's authority and subordinate our will to his.[11] The second is that the act of withholding assent from the truths of faith is an act of refusing to

11. Here we should keep in mind that, on Augustine's view, it is naturally good for humans, as creatures of God, to be subject to God—so much so that obedience is the primary virtue from which all other virtues spring. Augustine makes this clear in two passages dealing with the prohibition God issued to our ancestors against eating fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The first is from *City of God*: "Obedience was commended in the precept. This virtue is the mother and guardian of every virtue in a rational creature, since the rational creature has been so made that submission is advantageous to it, while doing its own will in preference to the will of its creator

subordinate ourselves to God. It is an act of refusing to accept as true what God has proposed for our acceptance as true. On this basis, Augustine can then argue that it is not possible for an Academic to live a life whereby he or she is purified of sin and its debilitating effects while at the same time withholding assent from the truths of faith. The life whereby we are purified of sin is a life in which we subject ourselves to God, and it is precisely this that the Academic refuses to do in withholding assent from the truths of faith. Such a life, according to Augustine, can be underwritten by nothing less than faith of a kind that involves assent.

An Additional Question on Behalf of the Academics

It seems, then, that Augustine has the resources to answer our first question, but there is an additional question that we may demand he answer if we are to accept his charge that the Academics have committed the Error of Non-Assent with respect to the goal of attaining happiness. This is the question of whether a person, in seeking to avoid the Error of Non-Assent with respect to the goal of attaining happiness, can do so without thereby committing the Error of Ignorant Assent. To see how this question arises, recall that a person commits the Error of Ignorant Assent whenever he or she assents to something unknown. On Augustine's view, however, in order to avoid the Error of Non-Assent with respect to the goal of attaining happiness, he or she must do precisely that. He or she must assent to at least some truths of faith whose truth he or she is not in a position to know. What is worse, he or she must assent to at least some truths of faith that are not even persuasive. It thus appears that, on Augustine's view, a person can avoid committing the Error of Non-Assent with respect to the goal of attaining happiness only by committing the Error of Ignorant Assent.[12] If this is correct, then the Academic is within his or her rights to protest that there is something amiss in Augustine's views about error.

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is its destruction" (*De civ. Dei* 14.12.1). The second is from *Literal Commentary on* Genesis: "It was necessary that man, having been placed under the Lord God, be prohibited from something so that obedience would itself be the virtue that makes him worthy of the Lord. I can truthfully say that this is the sole virtue of every rational creature acting under the authority of God and that the first and greatest vice of someone swollen to ruin is to wish to act by his own authority. The name of this vice is disobedience" (*De Gen. ad litt.* 8.6.12).

12. Augustine seems to acknowledge as much when, at the end of the Anecdote of the Two Travelers, he charges both men with error: "So that I may justly condemn rash consent, I more easily say that both men are in error than that the second man does not err" (*CA* 3.15.34). The first traveler, it would appear, is guilty of the Error of Ignorant Assent.

An Additional Reply on Behalf of Augustine

In replying to this question, Augustine would surely charge that the formulation of the Error of Ignorant Assent that motivates it is excessively broad and advocate for a narrower formulation. What precisely this narrower formulation would be need not worry us here, except to say that it would be consistent with his view, which we discussed at length in chapter 5, that belief on the basis of proper authority, far from being rash, is reasonable and even necessary. Hence, it would be such as to cause assent to the truths of faith to fall outside the scope of the Error of Ignorant Assent—at least to the extent that such assent is given on the basis of proper authority. With this formulation in hand, Augustine could then reply that it is perfectly possible for a person to avoid committing the Error of Non-Assent with respect to the goal of attaining happiness without thereby committing the Error of Ignorant Assent. This is because it is perfectly possible for a person to assent to the truths of faith without doing so rashly or thinking him- or herself to know what he or she does not know. The fact that he or she may not be in a position to apprehend those truths does nothing to change this.[13]

Final Thoughts

If Augustine is correct in his charge that the Academics commit the Error of Non-Assent with respect to the goal, not only of discovering of truth, but also of attaining happiness, then there is a tragic irony at the heart of Academic skepticism. This is that the Academic, in seeking to free him- or herself from error, engages in a practice of universally withholding assent that causes him or her to fall into error. What is worse, it causes him or her to fall into error, not with respect to just any goal, but with respect to the ultimate goal of human life. Thus, if Augustine is correct in his charge, then the Academic, in seeking to free him- or herself from error, will succeed only in becoming enmeshed in error and cut off from the prospect of happiness. Herein lies the tragic irony at the heart of Academic skepticism.

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13. Much of *The Advantage of Belief* is taken up with this very issue. Particularly important is the (not entirely perspicuous) distinction Augustine makes between knowledge (*scire*), belief (*credere*), and opinion (*opinari*), which he explicates in *De util. cred.* 11.25. With respect to the latter two—belief and opinion—the crucial distinction is that belief proceeds from proper authority and carries with it the recognition that it falls short of knowledge, whereas opinion does neither: "But if they diligently consider that it makes a great difference whether we think that we know or believe on authority what we understand that we do not know, they will avoid errors and the charge of inhumanity and pride" (*De util. cred.* 11.25). On this distinction, see also the letter to Consentius, *Ep.* 120.2.8.

Needless to say, none of this would impress the Academics. For them to accept that they have committed the Error of Non-Assent with respect to the goal, not only of discovering truth, but also of attaining happiness, they would have to buy into Augustine's views on the necessary role that faith plays in orienting us both to the rational understanding of truths concerning God and spiritual things and to the attainment of happiness. However, since these views are grounded in a range of theological assumptions that the Academics would see no reason to grant, it is exceedingly unlikely that they would do this. Thus, even if Augustine is correct in his charge that the Academics commit the Error of Non-Assent with respect to the goal, not only of discovering truth, but also of attaining happiness, the charge is made to little effect. It expresses what a Christian may well take to be the fundamental error of Academic skepticism, but it will do little to move an Academic.

Afterword to Part I

Generalizations about the history of philosophy are tricky, but it is safe to say that concern with skepticism in the modern world has focused on meeting the challenge it issues to the possibility of knowledge. In this sense, concern with skepticism in the modern world has been epistemological in character. As we will see in part 2 of this book, Augustine shared this concern and so devoted a great deal of energy to vindicating the possibility of knowledge against the Academic denial of that possibility. As important as this was, however, Augustine's concern with skepticism ran deeper than the epistemological. On his view, Academic skepticism is a philosophy that both feeds and is fed by despair. In particular, it is a philosophy that both feeds and is fed by a despair of finding truth that is antithetical to philosophy as the pursuit of wisdom. It is for this reason that he sought not only to vindicate the possibility of knowledge against the Academic denial of that possibility, but also to discredit Academic skepticism as a philosophical practice.

In our examination of Augustine's critique of Academic skepticism thus far we have focused on four charges that he levels against it: first, that the Academics, because they incessantly search for truth without finding it, are neither happy nor wise in their philosophical practice; second, that the Academics, because they disavow all knowledge, are unable to appeal to what is persuasive as a basis of action; third, that Academic inquiry, because it rejects

belief on authority, is fruitless; and fourth, that the philosophical practice of the Academics, because it encourages the universal withholding of assent, implicates its practitioners in the Error of Non-Assent with respect to the goals of discovering truth and attaining happiness. There is no doubt that each of these charges is powerful in its own right. Taken together, they constitute a thorough repudiation of Academic skepticism as a philosophical practice.

This is not the place to litigate these charges. We have done more than enough of that in the preceding chapters. Nevertheless, it is appropriate that we close this part of the book with some general observations concerning the success of this portion of Augustine's critique. We may begin with the observation that, as Augustine evolved as a thinker, he increasingly came to believe that, because of the debilitating effects of sin, the wisdom that makes happiness possible is available only in small measure in the here and now. Even the Christian, who benefits from the remediating effects of grace, can achieve no more than a partial vision of truth in this life and can enjoy no more than a foretaste of happiness before death. Because of this, as Augustine evolved as a thinker, the most important question he could ask about Academic skepticism was not whether an Academic could make any legitimate claim to be happy or wise. Nor was it whether the practice of Academic skepticism, if carried out with sufficient rigor, renders life unlivable. Rather, it was whether Academic skepticism orients its practitioners to the wisdom that makes us happy.

As we have seen, Augustine's answer to this question is a resolute no. His reason is that the philosophical practice that puts us on a path to the attainment of wisdom, whether that wisdom is attainable in this life or confined to the next, is properly carried out within the life of faith. It is the practice of faith seeking understanding. Now the Academics, Augustine charges, by issuing a veto against assent to anything that is not apprehended, and particularly by issuing a veto against belief on the basis of authority, effectively issue a veto against faith. In doing so, they not only cut themselves off from the truth they profess to seek, but cut themselves off from the prospects of happiness as well. For Augustine, there can be no more serious indictment of Academic skepticism than this.

This indictment of Academic skepticism will no doubt resonate with a great many of Augustine's readers. However, because it depends on a set of robust theological commitments concerning the human end, the fallen state of humanity, the authority of scripture, and the like, we must judge his success in issuing it to be limited in at least two respects. First, it is not clear why an Academic should accede to Augustine's criticisms. He or she will surely see the theological commitments that underlie them as just so much dogma

having no special claim on his or her assent and, as a consequence, will find many of Augustine's most damning arguments unpersuasive. Second, many of us, even if we are not skeptics, will have the same reaction. We may appreciate the seriousness with which Augustine engages Academic skepticism as a philosophical practice, but if we do not share his theological commitments as well, we may be no more persuaded than the Academics.

None of this is to assail the credentials of this portion of Augustine's critique as properly philosophical. It is only on the narrowest conception of philosophy that we may do so. Instead, it is to point out that to be fully persuaded by this portion of Augustine's critique of Academic skepticism requires theological buy-in of a kind that many of us, to say nothing of the Academics, will be willing to make. Even granting this limitation, however, there is no denying the significance of what Augustine has accomplished. He has taken Academic skepticism seriously as a philosophical practice having profound consequences for life and has measured it against a standard that should be of vital concern to all of us as philosophers. This standard is the conduciveness of that practice to leading a good life.

Part II

Vindicating the Possibility of Knowledge

Chapter 7

The Academic Denial of the Possibility of Knowledge

So far we have treated Academic skepticism primarily as a philosophical practice and have examined Augustine's concerns with it taken as such. Given that this form of skepticism, like its Pyrrhonian cousin, was ultimately meant to be lived rather than theorized, this is as it should be. To take Academic skepticism in any other way is to fail to understand it on its own terms and to miss what troubled Augustine most deeply about it. Even so, we cannot ignore the fact that the Academics advanced a number of bold epistemological theses and developed a set of sophisticated arguments to defend them. Chief among these was the thesis that knowledge is not possible. As we might expect, then, Augustine was concerned not merely to show that Academic skepticism fails as a philosophical practice, but to overturn this thesis by vindicating the possibility of knowledge as well. It is his attempt to do so that will occupy us for the remainder of this book.

Before we undertake this examination, it is best that we prepare the way with a look at a debate that took place between the Academics and the Stoics over the possibility of knowledge. Although the Academics set themselves in opposition to all dogmatic schools, it was principally in the course of their engagement with the Stoics that their signature arguments were developed and refined. In looking at this debate, our focus will be the Academic attack on a cognitive state, apprehension (*katalēpsis*/*comprehensio*), that the Stoics

considered to be a necessary precursor to knowledge. This attack aimed to show that, because we cannot attain this necessary precursor to knowledge, we cannot attain knowledge either. Since we cannot understand this attack without first getting clear on the basics of Stoic epistemology, it is with those basics that we begin.

Stoic Epistemology at a Glance

It is convenient that we begin with a brief summary of Stoic epistemology that Cicero puts in the mouth of Varro, his spokesman for Antiochus.[1] Speaking of the changes that Zeno of Citium introduced in the third division of philosophy, dialectic, Varro begins:

> Zeno made several changes in the third part of philosophy. First, he said new things about sensation, which he thought to be formed from a kind of impact offered from the outside. He called this impact *"phantasia,"* whereas we call it "impression." . . . To these impacts, which are impressions received, as it were, by the senses, he joined the assent of the mind, which he thought to be placed within us and to be voluntary. (*Acad.* 1.11.40)

The idea expressed here is simple. Sensation comes about through the action of external objects on our senses, resulting in the formation of what are called "impressions" (*phantasiai/visa*) in the ruling part of the soul—the *hēgemonikon*.[2] Such impressions—conceived by Zeno as imprints, along the lines of those left in wax by a signet ring—are not themselves the primary objects of sensory awareness. Rather, they are that in virtue of which we are aware of the many and diverse objects around us. To take a simple example, from the action of Marcus (or the light reflecting off Marcus) on my eyes, an impression of Marcus is formed in the *hēgemonikon* of my soul, and it is in virtue of this that I have sensory awareness of him.

It thus appears that Zeno viewed sensation as entirely passive. It results from the action of external objects on our senses and not from any activity on our part. As Varro tells us, however, Zeno conjoined an active com-

1. For this summary, see *Acad.*1.11.40–42. See also the parallel accounts given by Sextus in *M* 7.227–260 and Diogenes in DL 7.45–54. For a general overview of Stoic epistemology, see Gerson 2009, 100–111; Hankinson 2003; Frede 1999b; Annas 1990; and Long 1974, 123–31.

2. This is best attested by Sextus: "Therefore when Zeno says that 'impression is an imprinting in the soul,' again 'soul' is to be understood not as the whole of it but as the part, so that what is said is of this sort: 'impression is an alteration in the leading part'" (*M* 7.236). (Bett's translation has been slightly altered: "appearance" has been changed to "impression.") See also DL 7.45.

ponent to sensation. To understand what this is, we must first understand that, on the Stoic account, the impressions formed in us by the action of external objects do not simply present those objects, but at the same time present states of affairs. Thus, in the case in which Marcus is standing in front of me, the impression that Marcus (or the light reflecting off Marcus) causes in me is not simply an impression *of* Marcus, but is at the same time an impression *that* Marcus is standing in front of me. Because of this, I may accept this impression as true, or, if there is reason for doubt, I may refrain from doing so. Such acceptance, which comes in the form of assent (*sunkatathesis/adsensio*), the Stoics regarded as active rather than passive. As our passage indicates, it is generated from within and is under our voluntary control.

Now to say that assent is generated from within and is under our voluntary control is to invite questions about whether it is rational to assent to all impressions or only to some and not others. To answer these questions, Zeno identified a special type of impression that not only presents an object or state of affairs as it is, but does so in a way that makes that object or state of affairs manifest. This is the so-called apprehensible impression (*phantasia katalēptikē/visum comprehendibile*), and it is to impressions of this type alone, Zeno argued, that we may give our assent while acting in accord with the highest standards of rationality. Varro continues:

> Zeno did not put his trust in all impressions, but only in those that make their objects uniquely manifest. Since impressions of this kind are discerned through themselves, he called them "apprehensible." (*Acad.* 1.11.41)

We will analyze the nature of the apprehensible impression in the following section, but for now, we should note that its significance lies in the fact that, on Zeno's view, acceptance of such impressions by way of assent puts us into a special type of cognitive state, which he called "apprehension" (*katalēpsis/comprehensio*). This is a state in which we apprehend or grasp the object or state of affairs that is presented to us by an impression. Varro explains: "But when an [apprehensible impression] has been received and approved, he called it 'apprehension'—similar to things that are grasped by the hand" (*Acad.* 1.11.41). As apprehension comes about by way of assent to an apprehensible impression, and as an apprehensible impression not only presents an object or state of affairs as it is but does so in a way that makes that object or state of affairs manifest, apprehension can thus be thought of, roughly speaking, as a state in which we assent to what is evidently true.

As cognitive states go, apprehension is at a high level, but Zeno did not identify it with knowledge (*epistēmē*/*scientia*), which is at a higher level still.[3] To get to knowledge, Varro reports, he held that an additional requirement must be met:

> He called what has been apprehended by sense a "sense impression." And if it has been apprehended in such a way that it could not be subverted by reason, he called it "knowledge." If not, he called it "ignorance," from which arises opinion, which is weak and pertains to both what is false and what is unknown. (*Acad.* 1.11.41)

As this passage indicates, the attainment of apprehension is necessary for knowledge, but is not itself sufficient. What is needed, in addition, is that the assent given to the apprehensible impression be entirely secure and stable. If it has any element of insecurity or instability, we attain apprehension but fall short of knowledge.[4]

Although it is not entirely clear how one achieves the security and stability of assent in virtue of which apprehension is transformed into knowledge, an essential element is the mastery of dialectic.[5] Among other things, such

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3. More precisely, Zeno identified apprehension as a cognitive state between knowledge on the one hand and ignorance or opinion on the other. According to Varro: "Zeno placed the apprehension of which I have spoken between knowledge and ignorance, and he counted it neither among the good things nor among the bad things, but said that it alone should be trusted" (*Acad.* 1.11.42). According to Sextus: "For the Stoics say that there are three interconnected things: knowledge, opinion, and the one positioned between these, apprehension. Of these knowledge is apprehension that is unshaken and firm and immutable by reason, opinion is weak and false assent, and apprehension is the one between these, namely assent to an apprehensive impression" (*M* 7.1.151). (Bett's translation has been slightly altered: "appearance" has been changed to "impression.") In what follows this second passage, Sextus reports that Arcesilaus objected that the Stoics were not entitled to treat apprehension in this way since assent to an apprehensible impression is given either by a wise person, in which case it yields knowledge, or by a fool, in which case it yields opinion. See *M* 7.1.153.

4. Cicero tells us that Zeno illustrated this point by a simile: "Zeno used to display his hand in front of him with his fingers outstretched and say: 'An impression is like this.' Next, he would close his fingers a little and say: 'Assent is like this.' Then, he would close them into a fist and say that this was apprehension. It was on the basis of this likeness that he imposed the name '*katalēpsis*,' which had not been used before. Finally, he would apply his left hand to his fist, squeeze it tightly, and say that such was knowledge, which belongs to the wise man alone" (*Acad.* 2.47.145).

5. See, for example, Diogenes' comment: "Knowledge itself they define either as unerring apprehension or as a habit or state in which reception of [impressions] cannot be shaken by argument. Without the study of dialectic, they say, the wise man cannot guard himself in argument so as never to fall; for it enables him to distinguish between truth and falsehood, and to discriminate what is merely plausible and what is ambiguously expressed, and without it he cannot methodically put questions and give answers" (DL 7. 47). This is what Augustine has in mind in the following: "Surely you are aware that certain philosophers and men of keen intelligence thought that not even that which the mind apprehends deserves the name 'knowledge' unless the apprehension is so firm that no reasoning can dislodge it from the mind" (*De quant. an.* 30.58).

mastery allows one to diffuse objections to what one has given assent so that they do not cause one to falter in that assent. However, since complete security and stability in assent would seem to require the ability to diffuse all possible objections, it is difficult to see how anyone could have it. It is for this reason, perhaps, that the Stoics limited the possession of knowledge to the wise person and treated him or her, if not as a purely ideal type, then as an individual of exceedingly rare gifts.[6]

Fortunately, it is not necessary that we provide a full account of how we get from apprehension to knowledge, for the Academics, recognizing that the possibility of knowledge would be undercut by undercutting the possibility of apprehension, directed their efforts to this latter task. As a consequence, the debate between the Academics and the Stoics over the possibility of knowledge largely came to be a debate over the possibility of apprehension. This had the effect of making the debate more foundational, by focusing it on a more basic form of cognition, but it also had the effect of raising the stakes. It is one thing if knowledge, which pertains to the wise person alone, is not possible, and quite another if apprehension, which pertains to the rest of us, is not possible. If apprehension is not possible, the epistemic prospects for all of us are dim indeed.

The Apprehensible Impression: Zeno's Definition

We may begin our analysis of the apprehensible impression with an imaginary dialogue that Cicero constructs between Arcesilaus and Zeno.[7] It begins with a question that Arcesilaus poses to Zeno: "Arcesilaus, perhaps, asked Zeno what would happen if the wise man could not apprehend anything and it was the mark of the wise man not to hold opinions" (*Acad.* 2.24.77).

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6. On the Stoic wise person, including his or her mastery of dialectic and possession of knowledge, see Kerferd 1978 and Long 1978.

7. In what follows we will analyze Zeno's account of the apprehensible impression as it is presented by Cicero. However, it is worth quoting Sextus's and Diogenes' presentation of that account as well. Sextus: "An apprehensible one is the one that is from a real thing and is stamped and impressed in accordance with just that real thing, and is such a kind as could not come about from a thing that was not real. For since they trust this impression to be capable of perfectly grasping the underlying things, and to be skillfully stamped with all the peculiarities attaching to them, they say that it has each of these as an attribute" (*M* 7.247). (Bett's translation has been slightly altered: "apprehensive" has been changed to "apprehensible" and "appearance" has been changed to "impression.") Diogenes: "[The apprehensible impression], which they take to be a test of reality, is defined as that which proceeds from a real object, agrees with that object itself, and has been imprinted seal-fashion and stamped upon the mind" (DL 7.46). For further discussion of the material in this section, see the literature cited in note 1, above, and the following: Thorsrud 2009, 45–50; Hankinson 1995, 78–83; Frede 1983; and Sandbach 1971b.

The point of the question is clear. Given that the Stoics believe that the wise person holds no opinions, Arcesilaus wishes Zeno to acknowledge that he or she would withhold all assent in the event that there is nothing apprehensible. In other words, Arcesilaus is seeking to force Zeno to concede that the wise person would be a skeptic. Zeno, however, refuses to take the bait: "Zeno, I believe, replied that the wise man would not hold an opinion since there was something he could apprehend" (*Acad.* 2.24.77). Like a politician who refuses to answer hypothetical questions, Zeno denies that the circumstances Arcesilaus proposes obtain. The wise person can very well engage in acts of assent without being implicated in opinion because, as a matter of a fact, something is apprehensible. What the wise person would do if nothing were apprehensible is something about which Zeno refuses to speculate. As Cicero imagines it, however, Arcesilaus is undeterred. His next move is to press Zeno to specify what it is that is apprehensible: "Then Zeno defined it as follows: an impression that is impressed, stamped, and molded from what is, in accord with what is" (*Acad.* 2.24.77). This, as is generally agreed, is reflective of the earliest definition that Zeno gave of the apprehensible impression, so it is worth lingering a bit to see what it involves.[8]

The most obvious thing to note about this definition is that it defines an apprehensible impression by setting forth two conditions that any impression must satisfy in order to be apprehensible. Following Cicero's wording, we may thus say that an impression, *I*, is apprehensible just in case:

(i) *I* is impressed, stamped, and molded from what is, and
(ii) *I* is impressed, stamped, and molded in accord with what is.

As there is much that is difficult to understand about these conditions, let us treat each of them separately.

8. Note that Cicero has Zeno, in response to the question of what the wise person can apprehend, put forward the apprehensible impression rather than the object or state of affairs that the apprehensible impression presents (a fact reflected in his translation of "*phantasia katalēptikē*" by "*visum comprehendibile*" or "*visum quod percipi possit*"). Given that it is the latter rather than the former that we apprehend in a state of apprehension, this is puzzling and perhaps more than a little misleading. In doing so, Cicero is attributing to Zeno and his Stoic followers the view that the apprehensible impression not only makes the object or state of affairs it presents to be evident, but makes its own character as a truthful presenter of that object or state of affairs to be evident as well. This allows him, as we will presently see, to cast the debate between the Stoics and the Academics over the possibility of apprehension as one over the possibility of distinguishing true and false impressions. Be that as it may, we should always keep in mind that this debate is ultimately over the apprehensibility of what impressions present rather than the apprehensibility of the impressions themselves. For more on this, particularly on Cicero's translation of Greek terminology, see Brittain 2006, xxxix–xliii.

Condition (i)

The first of these conditions may strike us as problematic, for we may wonder what an impression may be impressed, stamped, and molded from if not from what is. Matters are only made worse when, later in the dialogue, a distinction is drawn between impressions that arise from what is and impressions that arise from what is not. To anyone committed to *ex nihilo, nihil fit*, this is all very strange. Even so, this condition is susceptible of an easy interpretation. To say that an impression is impressed, stamped, and molded from what is, is to say that it arises from an object or state of affairs that is external to the mind.[9] Put negatively, it is to say that it does not arise from the imaginative activity of the mind itself in states of dreaming, hallucination, or vivid reverie. Impressions that arise in this way are, to use Zeno's language, impressions that arise from what is not rather than from what is.

Condition (ii)

The second of these conditions may strike us as problematic as well, for it is not clear what it is for an impression to be impressed, stamped, and molded in accord with what is. What this language suggests is that an apprehensible impression is one that faithfully reproduces the features of the object or state of affairs from which it arises—much as an impression in wax faithfully reproduces the features of the signet ring that causes it—but it is difficult to see how an impression can do this.[10] Among other things, it requires that the soul be capable of taking on the properties (shape? size? color? relative position?) of the objects of its awareness. In view of this, later Stoics, beginning with Chrysippus, interpreted impressions not as literal imprints, but as alterations of the soul, and argued that, in order to be apprehensible, an impression need not faithfully reproduce the features of the object or state of affairs from which it

9. This interpretation of "from what is" (*ex quod esset*) as referring to both objects and states of affairs outside the mind depends on taking the phrase as ambiguous between "from what exists" and "from what is the case." This is mirrored in the Greek "*apo huparchontos*," which both Diogenes and Sextus employ. See DL 7.46 and *M* 7.248–49. For discussion of this ambiguity, see Long 1974, 127. Frede also discusses this ambiguity, but argues that the phrase should be read as meaning "from what is the case." See Frede 1999b, 302–4.

10. Sextus, in the passage quoted in note 7, tells us that Zeno took the apprehensible impression to be stamped and impressed with *all* the features of the object. Cicero reports a weaker claim: "Zeno thought that an apprehension produced by the senses was both true and faithful, not because it grasped every detail in its object, but because it left out no detail that could fall under it" (*Acad.* 1.11.42).

arises.[11] It need only present that object or state of affairs as it is. It is in this way, then, that we may take the language of being impressed, stamped, and molded in accord with what is.

In view of the above, Zeno's initial definition of an apprehensible impression is reasonably clear. An apprehensible impression is one that arises from an object or state of affairs that is external to the mind and that presents that object or state of affairs as it is. As such, it may serve as the basis of the cognitive state of apprehension. All that is needed to reach this state is to give such an impression our assent.

At this point, we may think that Zeno has met Arcesilaus's demand to specify what the wise person assents to without falling into opinion. Arcesilaus, however, is not satisfied, for he thinks that an impression is not apprehensible merely in virtue of meeting the conditions Zeno has so far laid out. Cicero thus has him pressing Zeno for more:

> Arcesilaus next asked what would happen if a true impression and a false impression were of the same kind. At this point Zeno clearly saw that, if an impression from what is not could be of the same kind as an impression from what is, no impression would be apprehensible. (*Acad.* 2.24.77)

Although Arcesilaus here frames his question in terms of true and false impressions, it is clear from what follows that he is asking what would happen if an impression that arises from what is were indistinguishable from an impression that arises from what is not. In other words, he is asking what would happen if an impression that arises from an object or state of affairs that is external to the mind were indistinguishable from an impression that arises from the imaginative activity of the mind itself in states of dreaming, hallucination, or vivid reverie. The answer, as Zeno admits, is that it would be inapprehensible. With this admission we get what must be treated as a third condition that an impression must satisfy in order to be apprehensible.

(iii) It is impossible that there be an impression, *I′*, that arises from what is not and that is indistinguishable from *I*.

As we will see, it was the satisfiability of this condition that became the focal point of the controversy between the Stoics and the Academics

11. See the passage from Sextus in note 2. For a full account of this controversy, see *M* 7.227–41.

over the possibility of apprehension. A few comments about it are thus in order.[12]

Condition (iii)

The need for this condition is easy to motivate. Suppose you have an impression that arises from some object or state of affairs that is external to your mind and that presents that object or state of affairs as it is. Such an impression satisfies conditions (i) and (ii) and may be counted as true. But what if there could be another impression of the same object or state of affairs that arises, not from that object or state of affairs, but from the imaginative activity of your mind, and that is indistinguishable from your impression? If the existence of such an impression is a genuine possibility, there would be nothing about your impression that would enable you to rule out the possibility that it is false. It is for this reason that the satisfaction of conditions (i) and (ii) are insufficient to render an impression apprehensible. What is needed, in addition, is a guarantee that the impression you are having is true. It is precisely this that condition (iii) is meant to provide.

With the addition of condition (iii) to conditions (i) and (ii), Arcesilaus seems to have been satisfied that the apprehensible impression had been adequately defined.[13] And it was at this point, Cicero imagines, that he launched his campaign to show that there can be no such impression:

> Arcesilaus agreed that this addition to the definition was correct, since neither a false impression nor a true impression, if a false impression could be just like it, was apprehensible. But he threw himself into these

12. Against this interpretation, which is fairly standard, the reader should consult Frede 1983 and 1999b, who argues that the third condition adds nothing beyond what is stated in the first two conditions—it simply makes explicit what is implicit in them. On Frede's view any impression that satisfies the first two conditions will have a certain feature—clarity and distinctness—that cannot belong to any impression that fails to satisfy the first two conditions. Furthermore, Frede argues that we are sensitive to this feature insofar as it is that in virtue of which an impression elicits our assent, but it is not a feature that we need be aware of the impression possessing. Criticisms of Frede's view can be found in Hankinson 2003 and Annas 1990.

13. We should note here that, in the course of the debate, the Stoics added a fourth condition, which they took, not as a condition that an impression must satisfy in order to be apprehensible, but as a condition that an impression must satisfy in order to command assent. This condition is that there be no obstacles (in the way of beliefs or other commitments) that might cause us to reject the apprehensible impression as false. Sextus reports: "Now the older Stoics say that this apprehensible impression is the criterion of truth. The later Stoics, on the other hand, added 'if it has no obstacle.' For there are times when an apprehensible impression does strike us, yet is not trusted because of the external circumstances" (*M* 7.253–54). (Bett's translation has been slightly altered: "apprehensive appearance" has been changed to "apprehensible impression.")

> disputes in order to show that no impression from what is true is such that there could not also be an impression from what is false of the same kind. (*Acad.* 2.24.77)

On Cicero's account, the main thrust of Arcesilaus's attack on apprehension was to establish the unsatisfiability of condition (iii) by showing that, for every impression that arises from what is, it is possible that there be an impression that arises from what is not and that is indistinguishable from it. More simply, he sought to show that, for every true impression, it is possible that there be a false impression that is indistinguishable from it.

A Simplified Definition

Although Zeno's definition of the apprehensible impression is straightforward, it will simplify matters if we recast it in terms of true and false impressions. In order to do so, let us take a true impression to be one that satisfies conditions (i) and (ii)—namely, to be one that arises from an object or state of affairs that is external to the mind and that presents that object or state of affairs as it is—and let us take a false impression to be one that fails to satisfy conditions (i) and (ii)—namely, to be one that does not arise from an object or state of affairs that is external to the mind or that does not present that object or state of affairs as it is. If we take true and false impressions in this way, we can do two things: first, we can collapse conditions (i) and (ii) into a single truth condition, and, second, we can treat condition (iii) as a distinguishability condition requiring that a true impression, in order to be apprehensible, be distinguishable from all false impressions. Doing so yields the following simplified definition of the apprehensible impression:

> *Apprehensible Impression.* An impression, *I*, is apprehensible just in case:
>
> (i) *I* is true, and
>
> (ii) it is impossible that there be a false impression, *I′*, that is indistinguishable from *I*.

For the sake of convenience, we will refer to the first of these conditions as the "Truth Condition" and the second as the "Distinguishability Condition." On this definition, an apprehensible impression is simply one that is both true and distinguishable from all false impressions. As we have already seen, it was precisely impressions of this type that the Stoics took to be the basis of apprehension.

The Core Argument

It is time now that we turn from our account of Stoic epistemology to the attack on apprehension that the Academics launched against the Stoics. We may begin with an argument that came to play a central role in that attack. This argument, which has aptly been named the "Core Argument," Cicero presents as follows:[14]

> So that I may focus the controversy, see how small our dispute is. There are four theses from which we may conclude that nothing can be known, perceived, or apprehended, which is the entire question. The first is that there is such a thing as a false impression. The second is that such an impression is inapprehensible. The third is that, among impressions that do not differ in any respect, it is impossible that some be apprehensible and others not. The fourth is that there is joined to every true impression arising from sense an inapprehensible impression that does not differ from it in any respect. (*Acad.* 2.26.83)

With some modification and expansion of the premises, we may formalize this argument as follows:

(1) No false impression is apprehensible.
(2) For any true impression, it is possible that there be a false impression that is indistinguishable from it.
(3) For any true impression, it is possible that there be a nonapprehensible impression that is indistinguishable from it. (from 1 and 2)
(4) Any impression for which it is possible that there be a nonapprehensible impression that is indistinguishable from it is itself nonapprehensible.
∴ (5) No true impression is apprehensible. (from 3 and 4)

To this we may add an additional premise:

(6) Every impression is either true or false.

And from this we may derive a more general conclusion:

∴ (7) No impression is apprehensible. (from 1, 5, and 6)

14. This appellation comes from Brittain 2006, xxii. See the more elaborate version of this argument presented by Lucullus in *Acad.* 2.13.40–42.

This is the conclusion at which the Academics aimed, and it is by establishing it that they sought to undermine the possibility of both apprehension and knowledge.

Interestingly, Cicero reports that the Stoics conceded each of the premises of the Core Argument except (2). That they would concede both (1) and (4) is easy to understand. The former reflects their commitment to the Truth Condition of the apprehensible impression, and the latter reflects their commitment to the Distinguishability Condition. To reject either of these premises would be to abandon the very conception of the apprehensible impression that Zeno articulated and to which they were committed. Hence, as they had no reason to reject (6), the only premise left for them to contest was (2), and it was over this, Cicero tells us, that the "entire fight" took place. It thus happened that the focal point of the debate between the Stoics and the Academics over the possibility of apprehension came to be the issue of whether, for any true impression, it is possible that there be a false impression that is indistinguishable from it. By making the case for just such a possibility, the Academics hoped to force the Stoics to concede the Core Argument and abandon all claims to apprehension. Ultimately, they hoped to force the Stoics to abandon all claims to knowledge.

The Indistinguishability Thesis

As we have just seen, the crucial premise for which the Academics had to win acceptance if the Core Argument was to succeed against the Stoics was (2). It will thus be helpful to set forth this premise, which we may henceforth refer to as the "Indistinguishability Thesis," by itself. We may do this as follows:

> *Indistinguishability Thesis.* For any true impression, it is possible that there be a false impression that is indistinguishable from it.

This thesis may strike us as extravagant, and we should expect the Academics to offer strong reasons on its behalf. Before we look at those reasons, however, we should note that the Indistinguishability Thesis is really a denial of the satisfiability of the Distinguishability Condition of an apprehensible impression. This is to say that, if this thesis is correct, then there may be impressions that are true, but none of them will be distinguishable from all false impressions. Because of this, we can take Academic arguments for the Indistinguishability Thesis at the same time to be arguments for the unsatisfiability of the Distinguishability Condition. With this in mind, we may proceed to the reasons the Academics advanced in its favor.

Defending the Indistinguishability Thesis

In making the case for the Indistinguishability Thesis, the Academics adopted the strategy of putting forward examples of false impressions masquerading as true impressions so potent as to render all claims to the distinguishability of true and false impressions implausible. Such examples varied considerably, but the majority fell within one or another of two groups. As we might expect, the first consisted of false impressions of some object or state of affairs that arise, not from that object or state of affairs, but from the imaginative activity of the mind in states of dreaming, hallucination, or vivid reverie. Since impressions of this kind present no real object or state of affairs, we may call them "vacuous impressions." The second consisted of false impressions of some object or state of affairs that arise, not from that object or state of affairs, but from some highly similar object or state of affairs. Since impressions of this kind present, not what they purport to present, but something that is similar to it, we may call them "similar-object impressions." By way of illustration, the false impression of Marcus that arises, not from Marcus, but from the mind's imaginative activity in a state of dreaming is a vacuous impression, and the false impression of Marcus that arises, not from Marcus, but from his twin brother, Lucius, is an example of a similar-object impression. Since for any true impression there could be an impression of either type so like it as to be indistinguishable from it—or so the Academics alleged—the appeal to such impressions would be sufficient to establish the Indistinguishability Thesis.[15]

The Challenge of Vacuous Impressions

As we have just noted, the first group of impressions to which the Academics appealed in order to establish the Indistinguishability Thesis consists of vacuous impressions, namely, false impressions of some object or state of affairs that arise, not from that object or state of affairs, but from the imaginative activity of the mind in states of dreaming, hallucination, or vivid reverie.[16] The point to be made about such impressions is that many of them are so like true impressions in content and quality that, while we are having them, we take what they purport to present as perfectly real. It is in this vein that

15. On the Academic attempt to establish the Indistinguishability Thesis in particular, see Perin 2005.

16. For Sextus's account of the Academic appeal to vacuous impressions, see *M* 7.403–406.

Cicero asks us to consider the case of Ajax, who has gone mad and mistakenly thinks that he sees Ulysses:

> What about Ajax, who said, "I see. I see you. Live, Ulysses, while you are able"? Did he not twice shout that he saw, though he saw nothing at all? (*Acad.* 2.28.89)

What is important here is that Ajax did not respond to the impression to which he was subject as if it were a hallucination. Rather, he responded just as he would have responded had Ulysses been directly in front of him. This, the Academics argued, is a sign that the vacuous impression to which Ajax was subject made it appear that Ulysses was directly in front of him in exactly the way a true impression would have done so, and it is for this reason that they could cite this and similar examples of vacuous impressions on behalf of the Indistinguishability Thesis. In the eyes of the Academics, such examples show that vacuous impressions can be so like true impressions in content and quality as to be indistinguishable from them.

In response to this line of argument, the Stoics countered that at least some true impressions are perspicuous in a way that vacuous impressions are not, and that this serves as a mark by which they can be distinguished from vacuous impressions.[17] We thus find that when Lucullus, Cicero's spokesman for Antiochus, defends the distinguishability of true and false impressions, he rests his case squarely on the deficiency of vacuous impressions in this regard:

> There is one defense against vacuous impressions, whether they are formed by the imagination (which we concede is what usually happens) or in quietude or under the influence of wine or in a state of madness. We will say that perspicuity, which we must hold on to tenaciously, is missing from all impressions of this kind. (*Acad.* 2.16.51)

As evidence for this claim, Lucullus cites the fact that, when we wake up or recover from madness, we immediately recognize the vacuous impressions to which we have been subject for what they are and reject them as false: "Is there anyone who, representing something to himself and picturing it in his imagination, does not recognize the difference between his perspicuous and vacuous impressions as soon as he has woken and recollected himself?" (*Acad.* 2.16.51). This shows well enough that a vacuous impression, even if possessed of the same content as a true impression, lacks the clarity and dis-

17. For the Stoic response to the Academic appeal to vacuous impressions, see *Acad.* 2.16.51–54.

tinctness that only true impressions have. They are invariably confused and indistinct. Hence, when we are subject to a perspicuous impression, we may have every confidence that it is not vacuous.

Not surprisingly, the Academics were unmoved by this rejoinder and waived aside as irrelevant the ex post facto judgments to which Lucullus has here appealed. Thus, in his response to Lucullus, Cicero argues:

> But you accomplish nothing when you refute the false impressions of those who are mad or dreaming by appeal to their own recollection. The question is not what kind of recollection is usually had by those who have woken up or come out of their madness, but what kind of impression they had when they were in the midst of their madness or dream. (*Acad.* 2.28.90)

It is Cicero's view that ex post facto judgments with respect to vacuous impressions merely reflect our changed state of mind and do nothing to indicate the character that those impressions had while we were subject to them. The only thing that gives us an indication of that character, he repeats, is the response we make to them, and that, as the example of Ajax illustrates, is often the same as it would have been had the impressions been true. Cicero thus concludes that there is every reason to think that vacuous impressions may be every bit as clear and distinct as true impressions and that Stoic appeals to ex post facto judgments with respect to them give us no reason to think otherwise. From the Academic perspective, then, the Stoic appeal to perspicuity as a mark by which true impressions may be distinguished from false impressions is illegitimate and does nothing to overturn the Indistinguishability Thesis.

The Challenge of Similar-Object Impressions

The second group of impressions the Academics put forward to establish the Indistinguishability Thesis consists of similar-object impressions, namely, false impressions of some object or state of affairs that arise, not from that object or state of affairs, but from some highly similar object or state of affairs.[18] Examples of such impressions are those emanating from such identical or nearly identical objects as eggs, snakes, bees, ears of corn, strands of hair, and, most famously, twins. Appealing to this last case, the case of twins, Cicero explains the problem it presents:

18. For Sextus's account of the Academic appeal to similar-object impressions, see *M* 7.408–11.

> If someone looking at Publius Servilius Geminus thought that he was looking at [his twin brother] Quintus, he was subject to an inapprehensible impression. This is because there was no mark to distinguish the true impression from the false. With this distinction taken away, what mark that cannot be false could he rely on for recognizing Gaius Cotta, who was twice consul with Geminus? (*Acad.* 2.26.84)

What Cicero is imagining here is a case in which someone is having an impression of Quintus that is caused by his brother Publius and is thereby false. However, since Quintus and Publius are not just brothers, but are twins, that impression is indistinguishable from the true impression of Quintus that is caused by Quintus himself. What this shows, Cicero thinks, is that we can never recognize the true impressions to which we are subject for what they are, for there is nothing about such impressions that distinguishes them from false impressions and alerts us to their truth. It is for this reason, he concludes, that when we are having an impression of Gaius Cotta—or any other person we might care to name—we have no assurance that it is really him we are looking at: "Therefore, since Publius Geminus can appear to you as Quintus, what reason do you have for thinking that someone who is not Cotta cannot appear to you as Cotta—since something appears to be what it is not?" (*Acad.* 2.26.85).

To this appeal to similar-object impressions, the Stoics responded by advancing a piece of metaphysics that they believed would block its force.[19] This was a version of what we know as the "Identity of Indiscernibles Principle," according to which every individual thing has at least one property that is not a property of other individual things and is thus unique.[20] By appealing to this principle, the Stoics argued that if two things were to impress themselves confusedly and indistinctly on a subject, they might well cause impressions that are indistinguishable from one another. However, if they were to impress themselves clearly and distinctly, they

19. For the Stoic response to the Academic appeal to similar-object impressions, see *Acad.* 2.17.54–18.58.

20. Lucullus states the principle simply as follows: "Individual things have individual properties" (*Acad.* 2.18.56). Seneca gives a fuller statement: "Among the reasons on account of which the intellect of the divine craftsman is marvelous, I include this as well: in such a great multitude of things there are never two occurrences of the same thing. Even things that appear to be similar are, when they are compared with one another, diverse. The divine craftsman has made so many kinds of leaves, each marked by its own property, and so many animals, none the same size as any other. Indeed, something is different [in every case]. He has laid it down from himself that distinct things should also be dissimilar and unequal" (*Ep.* 113.16). For a discussion of this principle as it was advanced by the Stoics, see Sedley 1982.

would cause fully distinguishable impressions, for each such impression would present what caused it with all its properties and in its uniqueness. Hence, as long as the impression we are having is perspicuous, we need not worry that it may have arisen from some object or state of affairs that is similar to the object or state of affairs it purports to present rather than from that very same object or state of affairs. In other words, we need not worry that the impression to which we are subject is a similar-object impression.

As we might expect, the Academics were unmoved by this rejoinder as well and saw no reason to amend their objection as a result. For one thing, they thought it implausible that individual things are unique in the way the Stoics claimed, and for another, they judged the question of uniqueness to be of no ultimate consequence. Cicero explains:

> You say that everything is unique and that nothing is the same as anything else. Indeed, it is the Stoic view—and not a credible one at all—that no strand of hair or grain of sand is the same as any other in the world. These claims can be refuted, but I do not wish to fight. It makes no difference to our debate whether the objects of our impressions do not differ in any of their parts or, even if they do differ, cannot be distinguished from one another. (*Acad.* 2.26.85)

On the Academic view, then, it does not matter whether individual things are unique in the way the Stoics claim, for two things that are unique may nevertheless differ from one another in such a way that their differences fall below the threshold of what we are able to perceive. If they do, then they will produce indistinguishable impressions in us on the basis of which we will be unable to discriminate between them. To think otherwise, the Academics argued, is to think that things can impress themselves on us in such a way that their properties are presented with a degree of precision that admits of no limit. However, since there is no reason to think that they can—even when they impress themselves in a way that can be considered clear and distinct—there is nothing about true impressions—even those that are perspicuous—that enables us to distinguish them from similar-object impressions. The alleged uniqueness of individual things thus does nothing to overturn the Indistinguishability Thesis.

The Mark of Truth

It is easy to see why the Academics would appeal to vacuous impressions and similar-object impressions as a way of establishing the Indistinguish-

ability Thesis, for impressions of each type regularly mimic true impressions and often do so to a striking degree. In view of this, the challenge facing the Stoics was to identify a feature of at least some true impressions that cannot be a feature of any false impression and can thus serve as the basis for distinguishing those impressions from all false impressions. This would not be an easy thing to do, for the Academics, by appealing to vacuous impressions and similar-object impressions, had made a strong prima facie case that false impressions can match true impressions with respect to both content and quality. They had thus made a strong prima facie case that there is no such distinctive mark of truth. In the words of Cicero: "We do not deny that certain things appear true to us, but we say that true impressions are all joined with false impressions of such great likeness that they contain no certain mark allowing us to exercise judgment or assent" (*De nat. deor.* 1.5.12).

The Stoics, of course, denied this, but they faced the difficult task of discrediting the examples on which the Academics had built their case. Generally speaking, they held on to perspicuity as the mark of truth and argued, with respect to vacuous impressions, that such impressions lack this character altogether, and, with respect to similar-object impressions, that perspicuous impressions of diverse individual things present those things as diverse. As we have seen, the Academics did not let any of this go unchallenged. They countered by questioning the degree of support the Stoics received from ex post facto judgments in the case of vacuous impressions and the alleged uniqueness of individual things in the case of similar-object impressions. In each case, they argued, this support was little or none.

The General Consequences of the Academic Attack

In the above discussion, we have reviewed the basic elements of Stoic epistemology and the main contours of the debate between Stoics and Academics over apprehension, but we have left much of importance untouched. Most significantly, we have left untouched the Stoic account of how we apprehend anything beyond what is directly presented in sense impressions, including the conclusions of philosophy in each of its divisions. While the details of this account are complex and cannot be explored here, the important point for our purposes is that, in order to apprehend anything beyond what is directly presented in sense impressions, we must first acquire a basic stock of concepts and come into possession of first principles and other

instruments of discovery.[21] As Varro tells us, however, this is possible only insofar as there is apprehension at the sensory level:

> Nature has furnished [sensory] apprehension as a kind of standard and principle for the knowledge of the world from which the concepts of things could later be stamped on our minds. From these concepts there arise not only principles, but certain wider paths to discovering reason. (*Acad.* 1.11.42)

This is reiterated by Lucullus:

> If these concepts were false or stamped from [sense] impressions of such a kind as could not be distinguished from false impressions, how would we use them? How would we see what agrees with something and what is repugnant to it? (*Acad.* 2.7.22)

And again:

> The mind uses the senses, develops the arts to function as additional senses, and strengthens philosophy to such a degree that it produces virtue, which is the one thing from which the whole of life is well-ordered. Therefore, those who deny that anything can be apprehended take away the very instruments or ornaments of life. They subvert the whole of life at its foundation and deprive the animal of its mind. (*Acad.* 2.10.31)

The point in these passages is clear. If we do not apprehend what is directly presented in sense impressions, we will not apprehend anything beyond this either, including the conclusions of philosophy in each of its divisions, for

21. Note, for example, the following from Lucullus: "The mind takes up some [sense] impressions to use immediately, while it stores away others, which become the source of memory. The rest it groups according to likeness, and it is from these that it makes the concepts of things. Such concepts the Greeks sometimes call '*ennoiai*' and sometimes call '*prolēpseis*.' When reason, proof, and an innumerable multitude of facts have been added to this, the apprehension of all things appears, and this same reason, having been perfected in these stages, arrives at wisdom" (*Acad.* 2.10.30). Compare with the following from Aetius: "When a man is born, the Stoics say, the commanding-part of his soul is like a sheet of paper ready for writing upon. On this he inscribes each one of his conceptions. The first method of inscription is through the senses. For by perceiving something, e.g., white, they have a memory of it when it has departed. And when many memories of a similar kind have occurred, we then say we have experience. For the plurality of similar impressions is experience. Some conceptions arise naturally in the aforesaid ways and undesignedly, others through our own instruction and attention. The latter are called 'conceptions' only, the former are called 'preconceptions' as well. Reason, for which we are called rational, is said to be completed from our preconceptions during our first seven years" (*Dox. Gr.* 4.11.1–5; Long and Sedley 39E). For discussion, see Brittain 2005; Hankinson 2003; Frede 1999b; and Sandbach 1971a.

we will not come into possession of the concepts and principles requisite for such apprehension. In view of this, it is understandable that the Academics would expend so much energy attacking the apprehensibility of sense impressions and that the Stoics would expend so much energy defending it. On the Stoic account, sense impressions play a foundational role in the formation of concepts and principles in such a way that, if we do not have apprehension at this most basic level, we will not have it at any other level either. It is because of this that the Academic attack on apprehension, though focused on the apprehensibility of sense impressions, has quite general consequences for the Stoics. If it is successful, the Stoics face serious problems maintaining the possibility of apprehending and thus knowing anything at all. This, as should be clear, is a function of the empiricist epistemology to which they are committed.[22]

Final Thoughts

In this survey of the debate between the Stoics and the Academics over the possibility of knowledge—more particularly, the debate over the possibility of apprehension—we have not examined the full range of issues at play in the debate, but have focused on what is at its core. This is the issue of whether there are any true impressions that can be distinguished from all false impressions. If the Academics have (as they think they have) successfully established that there are no such impressions, then they have successfully established the impossibility of apprehension as it was understood by the Stoics. Moreover, since apprehension was taken as a necessary precursor to knowledge, they have also successfully established the impossibility of knowledge as it was understood by the Stoics. This debate continued unabated and with no resolution until, in the first century BCE, Academic skepticism dissipated as a movement and Stoicism became decidedly less exercised by epistemological questions. It was not until the fourth century CE, with Augustine, that the debate was revisited in a serious and sustained way. This time it was taken up by a philosopher who was neither a Stoic nor an Academic, but a Catholic Christian, and whose philosophical commitments were deeply Platonic. It is to Augustine's contribution to the debate that we will turn in the next chapter.

22. A natural question that arises as a consequence of this is whether and to what degree the Academic attack on the possibility of apprehension, as we have presented it here, has similar consequences for those who reject the empiricism of the Stoics. As we will see, it is Augustine's view that it does not. This is something we will take up in chapter 9, when we examine Augustine's Platonic commitments.

Chapter 8

The Apprehensible Truths of Philosophy

In addition to his concern to discredit Academic skepticism as a philosophical practice, Augustine was concerned to vindicate the possibility of knowledge against the Academic denial of that possibility. As we have already seen, he considered this denial to foster a despair of finding truth that threatens both to derail us from the search for truth and to undercut the hope that stands at the foundation of the Catholic faith. Even so, Augustine did not think it sufficient to counter this denial by highlighting the deleterious consequences that fall out from it. In his view, it had to be challenged head-on by directly establishing the possibility of knowledge.

It is in the monologue of *Against the Academics* that Augustine dedicates himself precisely to this task. Dropping the format of dialogue in favor of extended discourse, he sets out to do three things. First, he constructs three dilemmas concerning Zeno's definition of an apprehensible impression that are designed to force the Academics to acknowledge that something can be apprehended or, at the very least, to abandon their claim that nothing can be apprehended. Second, he puts forward an argument to establish that Zeno's definition not only correctly specifies the conditions of apprehensibility, but is itself something that can be apprehended. Finally, he enumerates a set of truths in each of the divisions of philosophy—physics, ethics, and

dialectic—that he claims to know and whose apprehensibility he thinks the Academics cannot plausibly deny. In what follows, we will examine each of these moves that Augustine makes against the Academics, but we begin with his understanding of Zeno's definition.[1]

Augustine and Zeno's Definition

From his reading of Cicero, Augustine was intimately familiar with the Stoic-Academic debate over the possibility of knowledge, which he rightly took to reduce to a debate over the possibility of apprehension.[2] We see this familiarity in the synopsis that he provides for his students Licentius and Trygetius at the beginning of book 2 of *Against the Academics*:

> Zeno contended that nothing can be perceived except what is true in such a way that it can be distinguished from what is false by dissimilar marks and that the wise man should not open himself up to opinion. When Arcesilaus heard this, he claimed that man cannot discover anything of this kind and that the wise man should not entrust his life to the shipwreck of opinion. Hence, he concluded that we should not assent to anything. (*CA*. 2.6.14)

As this synopsis makes clear, Augustine takes the main point at issue between the Stoics and Academics to be the satisfiability of the Distinguishability Condition of Zeno's definition.[3] In line with this, he offers the following four formulations of that definition:

(F1) An apprehensible impression is of such a kind as to have no signs in common with a false impression.[4] (*CA* 3.9.18)

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1. Analysis of Augustine's attempt to vindicate the possibility of knowledge against the Academics can be found in Dutton 2003; O'Daly 2001; Curley 1996, 105–16; Rist 1994, 53–56; Kirwan 1989, 24–34; Nash 1969, 12–23; Diggs 1949; and Gilson 1929, 44–52.

2. As a matter fact, despite being aware of the Stoic distinction between knowledge and apprehension, Augustine for the most part ignores it and treats the two as being one and the same. This may be because he himself rejects the distinction, as is clear from *Soliloquies*, which is contemporaneous with *Against the Academics*: "Reason: Do you hesitate to call the learning of these things, if you possess any, knowledge? Augustine: Not if the Stoics would allow it, for they do not ascribe knowledge to anyone but the wise. Certainly, I do not deny that I have a perception of things, which they concede even to fools. But I have no fear of the Stoics. Indeed, I hold the things about which you have been asking as knowledge" (*Sol.* 1.4.9).

3. On this condition, see chapter 7.

4. The Latin reads: "Tale scilicet visum comprehendi et percipi posse, quale cum falso non haberet signa communia" (*CA* 3.9.18).

(F2) An apprehensible impression is one that appears in such a way that a false impression cannot appear.[5] (*CA* 3.9.21)

(F3) An apprehensible truth is one that is impressed on the mind by what it comes from in such a way that it cannot come from anything else.[6] (*CA* 2.5.11)

(F4) A truth can be apprehended by means of signs that cannot belong to what is false.[7] (*CA* 2.5.11)

Since (F1) and (F2) hew closely to what we find in Cicero, there is little to say about them here. An apprehensible impression is simply one that, in addition to being true, is distinguishable from all false impressions. Far more interesting are (F3) and (F4). Rather than providing a characterization of apprehensible impressions, they provide a characterization of the truths those impressions present. We are told that, like the impressions that present them, such truths are distinguishable from all falsehoods. Indeed, it is precisely in virtue of this distinguishability that they are apprehensible.

That Augustine takes Zeno's definition to be concerned with both apprehensible impressions and apprehensible truths is significant. Among other things, it allows him to make his case for the possibility of apprehension, and ultimately for the possibility of knowledge, in terms of both impressions and the truths they present. As we will see, Augustine favors the latter, thinking it to be a straightforward matter to establish that there are truths whose apprehensibility cannot be plausibly denied. Despite this, it is sometimes unclear whether, in speaking of Zeno's definition, he is taking that definition to define an apprehensible impression or an apprehensible truth. Where possible, we will make that specification. Otherwise, we will leave it unspecified.

Three Dilemmas concerning Zeno's Definition

Having offered his formulations of Zeno's definition, Augustine sets out to challenge the Academic denial of the possibility of knowledge by challeng-

5. "Id visum ait posse comprehendi, quod sic appareret, ut falsum apparere non posset" (*CA* 3.9.21).

6. "Id verum percipi posse, quod ita esset animo impressum ex eo unde esset, ut esse non posset ex eo unde non esset" (*CA* 2.5.11). A more literal translation is as follows: "That truth can be perceived which is so impressed on the mind from that from which it comes that it could not be from that from which it does not come."

7. "Quod brevius planiusque sic dicitur, his signis verum posse comprehendi, quae signa non potest habere quod falsum est" (*CA* 2.5.11). Note that Augustine takes (F4) to be a gloss on (F3).

ing the Academic denial of the possibility of apprehension. The first step in his strategy is to construct a set of three dilemmas concerning that definition with the intention of forcing the Academics either to admit that something can be apprehended or, at the very least, to abandon their claim that nothing can be apprehended. Success here would obviate the need to enter into a debate over the acceptability of the definition or the satisfiability of its conditions. In effect, it would shut the door on the skepticism of the Academics at its very point of origin.

Dilemma 1

The first of the three dilemmas trades on the consequence of the definition being true and the consequence of the definition being false. Augustine presents it as follows:

> "The Academics deny that anything can be known." "On what basis do you agree with them, you devoted and learned men?" "Zeno's definition has moved us," they say. "Why?" I ask. "If it is true, anyone who knows it knows something true; but if it is false, it should not trouble men of such great constancy." (*CA* 3.9.18)

We may formulate this dilemma as follows:

(1) Zeno's definition is either true or false.
(2) If it is true, then anyone who knows it knows something true.
(3) If it is false, then the alleged unsatisfiability of its conditions does not count against the possibility of an impression being apprehensible.
∴ (4) Either anyone who knows Zeno's definition knows something true or the alleged unsatisfiability of its conditions does not count against the possibility of an impression being apprehensible. (from 1, 2, and 3)

If this is correct as a formulation of the first dilemma, it is not clear why Augustine thinks it to have force against the Academics. Admittedly, insofar as the Academics base their denial of the possibility of apprehension on the alleged unsatisfiability of the Distinguishability Condition, the second disjunct of (4) poses a problem for them. Such, however, is not the case with the first disjunct. The Academics can freely admit that, assuming Zeno's definition to be true, anyone who knows it knows something that is true. But they can then challenge anyone's claim to know it. Against this

challenge it does no good to protest that even Arcesilaus knew the definition, for the sense of "know" that Augustine needs here is not the ability to recite or recall the definition, but the unwavering apprehension of its truth. Since the Academics would think it questionable that anyone has this, they can affirm the first disjunct of (4), and hence (4) itself, without doing any damage to their position. Thus, as a challenge to the Academics, dilemma 1 is a failure.

Dilemma 2

The second of the three dilemmas is cast in the form of a challenge to Arcesilaus and trades on the consequence of him being able to meet it and the consequence of him not being able to meet it. Augustine presents it as follows:

> I think that the fool cannot be answered if he tells you to use that impressive skill of yours to refute Zeno's definition and show that it too can be false. If you are unable to refute it, you have the definition itself as something you perceive; but if you are able to refute it, there is nothing that prevents you from perceiving. (*CA* 3.9.21)

We may formulate this dilemma as follows:

(5) Either Zeno's definition can be shown to be false or Zeno's definition cannot be shown to be false.
(6) If it can be shown to be false, then the alleged unsatisfiability of its conditions does not count against the possibility of an impression being apprehensible.
(7) If it cannot be shown to be false, then it is true and can be apprehended to be so.
∴ (8) Either the alleged unsatisfiability of the conditions of Zeno's definition does not count against the possibility of an impression being apprehensible or Zeno's definition is true and can be apprehended to be so. (from 5, 6, and 7)

Here again there is a problem. The Academics would surely object that, from the fact that something cannot be shown to be false, it does not follow that it is true and can be apprehended to be so. If it did, we could infer that the number of stars in the universe is odd and can be apprehended to be so from the fact that we cannot establish that the number of stars is not odd. With good reason, then, the Academics would reject (7) and thus reject (8) along with it.

To be fair to Augustine, this may not be the correct way to interpret dilemma 2. Perhaps we should take his challenge to refute Zeno's definition, not as a challenge to show that it *is* false, but as a challenge to show that it *can be* false. After all, what he asks Arcesilaus to do is "to refute Zeno's definition . . . and show that it too *can be* false." On this interpretation, the dilemma may be reformulated as follows:

(5′) Either it can be shown that Zeno's definition can be false or it cannot be shown that Zeno's definition can be false.
(6′) If it can be shown that Zeno's definition can be false, then the alleged unsatisfiability of its conditions does not count against the possibility of an impression being apprehensible.
(7′) If it cannot be shown that Zeno's definition can be false, then it is true and can be apprehended to be so.
∴ (8) Either the alleged unsatisfiability of the conditions of Zeno's definition does not count against the possibility of an impression being apprehensible or Zeno's definition is true and can be apprehended to be so. (from 5′, 6′, and 7′)

Insofar as it repairs the defect with (7), reformulating the dilemma in this way is certainly advantageous to Augustine. If the Academics are unable to show that Zeno's definition can be false, they will be hard pressed to deny its truth or apprehensibility. Hence, they will not be able to reject (7′) with the ease with which that they are able to reject (7).

That being said, the advantage Augustine gains by replacing (7) with (7′) is largely erased by the replacement of (6) with (6′). This is because we cannot take the acceptance of Zeno's definition on the part of the Academics to be based on a claim to have apprehended its truth. It must be based on something weaker. This is something that even Augustine recognizes, when he has Arcesilaus say: "I do not know whether it is true, but, because it is persuasive, I follow it" (*CA* 3.9.21).[8] Given that this is the case, there is no inconsistency in the Academics appealing to the alleged unsatisfiability of the conditions of Zeno's definition while at the same time admitting that the definition can be false. Thus, until Augustine provides a reason for thinking that such an appeal cannot be made on the basis of anything less than apprehension of the truth of Zeno's definition, the Academics are within their rights in rejecting (6′). As a consequence, dilemma 2, even in its reformulated version, is a failure as well.

8. The attribution of persuasiveness as a criterion to Arcesilaus is anachronistic. As we have seen in chapters 1 and 4, it was introduced into the Academy by Carneades.

Dilemma 3

Like the first, the third of the three dilemmas trades on the consequence of the definition being true and the consequence of the definition being false. Augustine presents it as follows:

> Zeno's definition is either true or false. If it is true, I am correct to grasp it. If it is false, something can be perceived, even if it has signs in common with what is false. (*CA* 3.9.21)[9]

We may formulate this dilemma as follows:

(9) Zeno's definition is either true or false.
(10) If it is true, then anyone who grasps it is correct to do so.
(11) If it is false, then something can be apprehended though it has signs in common with what is false.
∴ (12) Either anyone who grasps Zeno's definition is correct to do so or something can be apprehended though it has signs in common with what is false. (from 9, 10 and 11)

In evaluating this dilemma, we may begin with the second disjunct of (12), which Augustine takes to be a consequence of Zeno's definition being false. The problem is that there is no reason to think that the Academics would find this disjunct objectionable. This is because distinguishability requires difference in at least one, recognizable, respect. It does not require difference in every respect. Thus, the fact that an impression has signs in common with a false impression does not rule it out as being apprehensible.

Although genuine, this problem can easily be avoided. Augustine need only replace (F1) with

(F1′) An apprehensible impression is of such a kind as to have at least one sign that cannot be common to a false impression,

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9. The Latin reads: "Aut enim vera est, aut falsa: si vera, bene teneo; si falsa, potest aliquid percipi, etiamsi habeat communia signa cum falso" (*CA* 3.9.21). The translation follows King (1995) in rendering "*bene teneo*" as "I am correct to grasp it." However, this could be translated as "I am correct to hold it," or more loosely as "I am correct to affirm it." With respect to these translations, we should note that the Academics might well concede that if *P* is true, then one is thereby correct in holding or affirming *P* in the sense that one is not mistaken in holding or affirming *P*, but they would surely not concede that one is thereby correct in holding or affirming *P* in the sense that one is acting with epistemic propriety in holding or affirming *P*. Recall the discussion of the Error of Ignorant Assent in chapter 6.

in order to replace (11) with

(11′) If it is false, then something can be apprehended though it has no sign that cannot belong to what is false.

This will then allow him to replace (12) with a new disjunction:

(12′) Either anyone who grasps Zeno's definition is correct to do so or something can be apprehended though it has no sign that cannot belong to what is false.

As the Academics would find it objectionable that something can be apprehended though it has no sign that cannot belong to what is false, they would find it difficult to admit the second disjunct of this new disjunction. Doing so would require them to put their denial of the possibility of apprehension on an entirely new footing.

Even with this adjustment, however, the third dilemma will still not cause trouble for the Academics. The reason is that the first disjunct of (12), which Augustine considers to be a consequence of Zeno's definition being true, carries over to (12′) and brings with it a problem that we have already encountered in our examination of dilemma 1. Very simply, to affirm, as the first disjunct does, that anyone who grasps Zeno's definition is correct to do so does not require us to affirm that anyone does or even can grasp the definition. Thus, the Academics may happily affirm the first disjunct, and affirm (12′) along with it, without in any way compromising their denial of the possibility of apprehension. As a consequence, dilemma 3 is a failure.

Conclusion

Although Augustine is not successful in any of the dilemmas he has formulated with respect to Zeno's definition, we may nevertheless have sympathy with what he is trying to do. In very general terms, he is trying to show that (a) if Zeno's definition is acceptable, then it counts as a counterexample to the Academic claim that nothing is apprehensible; and that (b) if it is unacceptable, then the Academic case for that claim is built on an unacceptable foundation. Either way, the Academics lose. The problem, of course, is that the devil is in the details, and Augustine has not been able to work those details out in a way that is satisfactory. Thus, despite the sympathy we may have with what he is trying to do, we must judge this part of Augustine's critique to be less than convincing.

The Apprehensibility of Zeno's Definition

Although Augustine's dilemmas fail to damage the Academic position, they raise the prospect of another, more promising, line of attack against it. Simply put, this is to show that Zeno's definition cannot, without absurdity, be taken to be false. If Augustine is able to show this to be the case, then the Academics must not only concede that the definition is true, but, insofar as it satisfies its own conditions, concede that it can be apprehended as well. In Augustine's words:

> At the same time that it designates the kind of thing that can be perceived, it shows itself to be that kind of thing. And so it is both a definition and an example of what is apprehensible. (*CA* 3.9.21)

In the eyes of Augustine, as the truth of Zeno's definition, which must here be taken as a definition of an apprehensible truth, is apprehensible, there should be no dispute over whether the conditions it sets forth are satisfiable. That they are should be clear at the very moment the definition is advanced.

Unfortunately, things may not be as clear to us as they are to Augustine. That Zeno's definition correctly defines the conditions of an apprehensible truth is certainly not evident, and we may well wish to take issue with it. Thus, if we are to take the definition not only to be true, but to be apprehensible as well, Augustine must supply us with a good reason for doing so. This he does in a brief argument that immediately follows the presentation of his three dilemmas:

> I judge the definition to be absolutely true. Either falsehoods can also be perceived—which is something the Academics abhor and is in fact absurd—or those things that are similar to falsehoods cannot be perceived. Hence, the definition is true. (*CA* 3.9.21)

The argument may be taken as a disjunctive syllogism and stated as follows:

(13) Either some falsehoods are apprehensible or any truth that is not distinguishable from all falsehoods is nonapprehensible.
(14) No falsehoods are apprehensible.
∴ (15) Any truth that is not distinguishable from all falsehoods is nonapprehensible. (from 13 and 14)

As (15), the conclusion of this argument, is a restatement of Zeno's definition of an apprehensible truth, Augustine's point is simple.[10] If we are to avoid the

10. To see this, consider that the logical equivalent of (15) is: (15′) Any truth that is apprehensible is distinguishable from all falsehoods. Since (15′) makes distinguishability from all falsehoods to be a necessary condition of apprehensibility, so too does (15).

absurdity of affirming that some falsehoods can be apprehended, we have no choice but to affirm the truth of Zeno's definition.

This is a powerful argument, but the Academics would surely not concede it without at least raising a question about whether the disjuncts of (13) are exhaustive. Why, they would ask, should we accept that, unless any truth that is not distinguishable from all falsehoods is nonapprehensible, some falsehoods are apprehensible? Since this is far from obvious, they would be correct to demand from Augustine support for (13). In the absence of such support, they would be correct in rejecting the argument as inconclusive.

In response to this demand, Augustine might surprise the Academics by calling their attention to the fourth premise of the Core Argument, which they themselves put forward against the Stoics.[11] Although that premise was concerned with apprehensible impressions, we may easily restate it in terms of apprehensible truths as follows:

(16) Any truth that is not distinguishable from all propositions that are nonapprehensible is itself nonapprehensible.

With this premise in hand, Augustine may then construct the following conditional proof whose conclusion is (13), the disjunctive premise on which his argument hinges:

(16) Any truth that is not distinguishable from all propositions that are nonapprehensible is itself nonapprehensible.
  (14) No falsehoods are apprehensible. (Assumption for Conditional Proof)
  (15) Any truth that is not distinguishable from all falsehoods is itself nonapprehensible. (from 16 and 14)
(17) If no falsehoods are apprehensible, then any truth that is not distinguishable from all falsehoods is itself nonapprehensible. (Conditional Proof, 14–15)
∴ (13) Either some falsehoods are apprehensible or any truth that is not distinguishable from all falsehoods is nonapprehensible. (from 17)

As this proof makes clear, the Academics, in the form of (16), have supplied Augustine with the means to establish the very disjunction, (13), he needs for

11. Premise 4 of the Core Argument is as follows: "Any impression for which it is possible that there be a nonapprehensible impression that is indistinguishable from it is itself nonapprehensible." See chapter 7 for a presentation and discussion of the Core Argument.

his argument on behalf of the apprehensibility of Zeno's definition. In view of this, any attempt on the part of the Academics to reject that argument puts them in an embarrassing position.

Be that as it may, the degree to which Augustine's argument on behalf of the apprehensibility of Zeno's definition succeeds is still not clear. As we have seen, its crucial premise—(13)—is not obviously true and must be derived from something else if it is to command acceptance. We have derived it from (16), which is a restatement of the fourth premise of the Core Argument. The problem is that, while the Academics have advanced this premise as part of that argument, they have done so, not as apprehensible, but merely as persuasive. Hence, even if they accept the derivation of (13) from (16), they will have no reason to regard (13) as anything more than persuasive and thus will have no reason to accept Zeno's definition as anything more than persuasive either. As a consequence, if Augustine's argument on behalf of the apprehensibility of Zeno's definition is to succeed against the Academics, he must either show (16) to be apprehensible or find some other premise from which to derive (13) that can be shown to be apprehensible. Until he does, the Academics need not acknowledge the apprehensibility of Zeno's definition.

Apprehensible Truths of Philosophy

Having put forward his dilemmas and worked to establish the truth of Zeno's definition as apprehensible, Augustine is confident that he has done all that is required to achieve victory over the Academics. Nevertheless, he recognizes that there is more to be said, and he hopes that by saying it he will make his victory fully secure.[12] His strategy is straightforward. Given that Academic claims about nonapprehensibility are made primarily with respect to what falls within the domain of philosophy, Augustine sets out to defeat those claims by advancing a set of truths in each of the divisions of philosophy that he claims to know and whose apprehensibility he believes the Academics cannot plausibly deny. Following the standard Stoic division of philosophy, these are truths of physics, truths of ethics, and truths of dialectic. As we will see, many of these truths are trivial or otherwise uninteresting when taken in themselves, but this does not matter. Augustine is simply out to establish

12. Augustine comments: "Although these arguments, unless I am mistaken, are sufficient for victory, they are perhaps insufficient for complete victory. The Academics make two claims that we have decided to oppose as far as we are able. These are that nothing can be perceived and that we should not assent to anything. We will speak about assent in a moment. As for now, we will say a little more about perception" (*CA* 3.10.22).

the possibility of knowledge against the Academics, and he does not need to establish that any highly substantive or deeply profound truth can be known in order to do so. We may begin with the apprehensible truths of physics.[13]

Apprehensible Truths of Physics

Augustine begins his discussion of the apprehensible truths of physics by addressing the Academics as follows:

> You say that nothing can be perceived in philosophy. In order to spread your teaching far and wide, you exploit the squabbles and disagreements of the philosophers, thinking that they will supply you with arms to use against them. (*CA* 3.10.23)

What Augustine is referring to here is the Academic practice of opposing the views of one philosopher or school to those of another philosopher or school in order to highlight the lack of consensus—and hence the lack of knowledge—among experts with respect to any philosophical question or issue. It is his intention to show that this practice does not accomplish all that the Academics wish.

Augustine begins by singling out four questions in physics that have divided philosophers and their schools against one another since the time of the Presocratics. These are as follows:

(A) Is there just one world or is there not just one world?
(B) Is this world as it is in virtue of the nature of the bodies that constitute it or in virtue of the work of providence on it?
(C) Did this world have a beginning?
(D) Will this world have an end?

Augustine acknowledges the difficulty of these questions and is unsure about whether their answers can be known even by those who are wise. Whatever

13. Mosher (1981) makes an interesting point with respect to Augustine's aim in putting forward these truths. This is that he is trying to establish that it is more plausible than not that something can be apprehended to which we may give assent and ultimately that it is more plausible than not that the wise person apprehends and assents to wisdom. Here is the proof text, which comes shortly after Augustine's presentation of these truths: "If it is now persuasive that the wise man knows wisdom, I desire nothing further. It seemed truthlike that he should withhold assent for no other reason than that it was truthlike that nothing could be apprehended. Now that this reason has been removed—for the wise man, as is now conceded, perceives at least wisdom itself—no reason remains why the wise man should not assent at least to wisdom" (*CA* 3.14.30). For further analysis along these lines—one that altogether rejects the view that Augustine is attempting to vindicate the possibility of knowledge—see Neiman 1982.

the case may be, however, he does not think that this leaves us with nothing we are able to know. Using (A) as his point of departure, he explains:

> Although I am still a long way from being wise, I know something in physics. I am certain that the world is either one or not. And if it is not one, then there is either a finite number of worlds or an infinite number of worlds. (*CA* 3.10.23)

Even if we are unable to know the answer to (A), then, there are at least two items related to (A) that we are able to know and that fall within the domain of physics. These are:

(18) Either there is just one world or there is not just one world.
(19) If there is not just one world, then there is either a finite number of worlds or an infinite number of worlds.

In Augustine's eyes, the apprehensibility of each of these truths is fully sufficient to establish the possibility of knowledge within physics. The apprehensibility of each is therefore fully sufficient to refute the Academic denial of the possibility of knowledge.

What Augustine is presenting us with here are two cases of what he considers to be exhaustive disjunction. (18) is a simple disjunction, while (19) is a conditional whose consequent is a simple disjunction. Now if these disjunctions are truly exhaustive, as he takes them to be, his point is both simple and powerful. Not only do (18) and (19) hold true irrespective of what the truth with respect to (A) turns out to be, but our inability to apprehend the truth with respect to (A) in no way translates into an inability to apprehend the truth of (18) or (19). This is important, for it means that the fact of disagreement among philosophers over foundational questions within a certain domain—even the fact of irresolvable disagreement—does not entail that we are left without the possibility of knowledge within that domain. In fact, if the disagreement is vigorous and widespread enough, it may generate an exhaustive set of disjuncts on the basis of which we can attain knowledge.

As a strategy for answering the Academics, this may be effective, but before we assess it, we should note that Augustine deals with disputes concerning (B) through (D) in exactly the same way. With respect to those questions, he writes:

> I know that our world has been so ordered either by the nature of bodies or by some providence. I also know that it either has always been and will always be, or began to be but will never cease to be, or did not

> have a beginning in time but will have an end, or began to exist and will not exist forever. (*CA* 3.10.23)

With this, two more items are added to the list of apprehensible truths of physics. These are:

(20) The world has been so ordered either in virtue of the nature of the bodies that constitute it or in virtue of the work of providence on it.

(21) The world either (a) did not have a beginning and will not have an end, or (b) had a beginning but will not have an end, or (c) did not have a beginning but will have an end, or (d) had a beginning and will have an end.

Once again we are presented with what Augustine takes to be exhaustive disjunctions. As exhaustive, he thinks, the truth of these disjunctions cannot be questioned—and this is so regardless of our ability or inability to apprehend what is true with respect to (B) through (D) or resolve disputes that have arisen over them.

It is here that Augustine ends the first stage in his enumeration of apprehensible truths of physics. Having put forward (18) through (21), he concludes with a bold proclamation of knowledge that is directed at the Academics: "I know innumerable truths in physics in this way. These disjunctions are true, and no one can call them into question because of some likeness to falsehood" (*CA* 3.10.23). We may think that Augustine is too bold in this proclamation. First, we may entertain doubts about whether the disjunctions he has presented are genuinely exhaustive. At the very least, (20) looks suspicious, and we would be right to ask for further explication and support before giving it our assent. In addition, we may entertain doubts about whether these disjunctions actually fall within the domain of physics. If they are genuinely exhaustive, as Augustine takes them to be, then they are true in virtue of their logical form and are not properly empirical. It is thus legitimate to ask whether his knowing them—if, indeed, he knows them—gives Augustine any claim to know something in physics.

While these questions are entirely appropriate and well worth pursuing, we will turn our attention instead to a set of objections that Augustine himself considers and puts into the mouth of a hypothetical Academic. Like the skepticism with respect to the external world with which Descartes famously contended, these objections raise questions about the possibility of knowing anything outside of our own minds and thus raise questions about the possibility of knowing such truths as (18) through (21). As skepticism about the

external world has had a long and consequential history, it is good that we give Augustine's response to it our careful attention. Once we have done so, we will turn to the second part of his attempt to establish that there are apprehensible truths of physics.

External World Skepticism: The Deception of the Senses

In responding to his claim to know truths in physics, Augustine has his Academic objector pose the following question: "If your senses are deceived, how do you know that the world exists?" (*CA* 3.11.24). As a skeptical question, this is basic and familiar, but it is also surprising in this context. Instead of asking how, given the deception of the senses, Augustine can know (18) through (21), the objector asks how, given the deception of the senses, Augustine can know that the world exists. Although basic and familiar, the question thus appears to be only indirectly related to the issue at hand.

Despite its indirectness, the motivation behind this question is easy to see. It would seem that each of (18) through (21), insofar as it is or involves an exhaustive disjunction, can be known independently of the senses and is thus immune to the skeptical problems that attach themselves to sensation. By posing this question, the Academic objector is challenging this immunity. Because he or she takes each of (18) through (21) to have existential import—which is to say that he or she takes each of them to have the existence of the world among its truth conditions—by appealing to the deception of the senses as a way of throwing into question our ability to know that the world exists, he or she hopes to throw into question our ability to know any of (18) through (21). In short, the objector hopes to show that, because we are unable know any of (18) through (21) unless we are able to know that the world exists, and because we are unable to know that the world exists on account of the deception of the senses, we are unable to know any of (18) through (21). This, it would seem, is the motivation behind the question.

In responding to this line of objection, Augustine has several options open to him. One is to deny that any of (18) through (21) has existential import. Another is to admit that all or some of them do, but to modify them in such a way that they do not. Perhaps because he wishes to count (18) through (21) as truths within physics, Augustine chooses instead to meet the objection head-on and argue that the deception of the senses—at least as far as the Academics have been able to establish it—provides no reason to think that we are unable to know that the world exists. To this end he writes:

> Your arguments have never been able to undermine the power of the senses to such a degree as to establish that nothing appears to us. Nor have you ever been so bold as to attempt that, but have devoted yourself to persuading us that something can seem to be the case and yet be otherwise. (*CA* 3.11.24)

The point that Augustine is making here may be put as follows. If the Academics are correct about the deception of the senses, then any given thing may appear to be other than it is. The stick may appear bent and yet be straight; the tower may appear round and yet be square; and the boat may appear at rest and yet be moving. However, it does not follow that what appears to us is nothing at all. In fact, given that our sensory impressions are caused by objects or states of affairs impressing themselves on us, it would be absurd to think that it is. What appears to us must thus always be something, even if it is not as it appears.

In view of this, Augustine is willing to concede that, if the senses are deceptive in the way that the Academics claim, then the world may be very different than it appears to be. However, he sees no reason to concede that the world would be nothing at all. When we look about us, there is most certainly something that appears, and that something may properly be called the "world." He writes:

> I call this whole, or whatever it is that contains and sustains us, the "world"—this whole, I say, that appears to my eyes and that I perceive to hold the heavens and the earth or the quasi-heavens and the quasi-earth. (*CA* 3.11.24)

From Augustine's perspective, there is no cause to be skeptical concerning the existence of the world, even if there is cause to be skeptical concerning its nature and composition. The fact that the senses sometimes deceive us does not suffice. By extension, there is no cause to be skeptical of the truth of (18) through (21) either. Just as our knowledge of the existence of the world is fully immune to the skeptical problems that attach themselves to the senses, so too is our knowledge of those truths of physics. Thus, if the Academics are to call into question our knowledge of those truths, they must do so on a different basis.

External World Skepticism: The Possibility of Dreaming

As far as it goes, this reply on the part of Augustine is excellent. As the Academics have failed to establish the possibility that what appears in

sensation is nothing at all, he is right to argue that the deception of the senses does nothing to call into question the existence of the world and thus does nothing to call into question our knowledge of (18) through (21). Nevertheless, the Academics are not without additional questions they may ask, and some of these questions may prove more difficult than the first. Augustine thus imagines his Academic objector pushing further: "You will ask: 'If you are asleep, is it the world that you see?'" (*CA* 3.11.25).

Once again, we are faced with a basic and familiar question, and the objector is right to ask it. It may well be that sense impressions are caused by external objects and make us aware of those objects, but that is not the case with all impressions. Dream impressions, for example, arise from the activity of the mind alone and present us with nothing other than the objects of the mind's own making. For this reason we cannot simply and without qualification identify the world with what appears to us and thereby hope to identify it with something real. If what appears to us does so as part of a dream, then to identify the world with what appears to us is to identify the world with nothing real. At the very least, then, we must restrict our identification of the world with what appears to us in sensation.

Although it is not raised in any explicit way, we can see the skeptical problem that this poses. If we are unable to distinguish waking experience from dream experience in such a way that we can, at least some of the time, exclude the possibility that we are dreaming, we will never be in a position to identify what appears to us as the world and thus conclude that the world exists. Hence, we will never be in a position to know any truths about the world—even such seemingly unassailable truths as (18) through (21). It would thus seem that Augustine, if he is to make good on his claim to know (18) through (21), must find a way to distinguish waking experience from dream experience.

Interestingly, Augustine does not see things this way and so offers no account of how we may distinguish waking experience from dream experience.[14] Instead, he deflates the threat that dreams pose to the knowledge of (18) through (21) by appealing to the existence of what we may call the "phenomenal world": "As I have already said, I call the 'world' whatever appears

14. This problem, which so plagued Descartes, has been designated by Matthews the "Epistemological Dream Problem." For perceptive analysis of the difference between Augustine and Descartes with respect to it, see Matthews 1992, 52–63.

to me as such" (*CA* 3.11.25).[15] Augustine's point seems to be this. Even if, because of the possibility that we are dreaming, we do not know that what appears to us is the external world, something appears to us and it is with respect to this, whether it be external or merely phenomenal, that we can confidently assert (18) through (21).

This is a promising move, and it deserves to be developed in much greater detail. Perhaps sensing that the Academic will dismiss it as a dodge, however, Augustine immediately turns his response in another direction:

> If the Academic wishes to call the "world" only that which appears to those who are awake or sane, maintain, if you can, that those who are asleep or insane are not asleep or insane in the world. Accordingly, I say that this entire mass of bodies and the structure in which we exist—whether we are asleep or awake, sane or insane—is either one or not one. Explain how this view can be false. (*CA* 3.11.25)

What Augustine has done in this passage is not so much solve the skeptical problem raised by dreams as sidestep it. Just as he did not earlier feel the need to defend the veracity of the senses against the charge that they may be deceiving him, he does not now feel the need to defend his wakefulness against the charge that he may be asleep and dreaming. Instead, he is content to point out that the very hypothesis that the objector has advanced in order to undermine his confidence in the existence of the world requires that the world exist, for neither he nor anyone else can be asleep and dreaming except in the world. Because of this, Augustine does not see in the possibility that he is asleep and dreaming anything that should cause him to doubt the reality of the world. Hence, he does not see in this possibility anything that should cause him to doubt the truth of (18) through (21). As a consequence, there is no need to rule this possibility out.

Further Thoughts on the Possibility of Dreaming

Having dealt with the Academic objector's second question in this fashion, Augustine could easily move on to other matters. However, he lingers on the

15. Matthews also sees this as an appeal to the phenomenal world. However, he thinks that the appeal begins earlier, in response to the Academic's question: "If your senses are deceived, how do you know that the world exists?" (*CA* 3.11.24). Matthews may be correct, but Augustine's comment "I call this whole, or whatever it is that contains and sustains us, the 'world'" makes little sense if he is. See Matthews 1992, 64–66. Curley, who is much less clear, seems to follow Matthews in this. See Curley 1996, 111–12. Bolyard, on the basis of (what he takes to be) the Epicurean background of this response, argues that Augustine is in fact not referring to the phenomenal world, but to a world constituted by images having objective reality. See Bolyard (2006).

topic of dreams a while longer in order to clarify the scope of the skeptical threat that they pose. Referring again to the disjunctive truths about the world he has enumerated—and especially to (18)—he writes:

> I do not say that I have perceived this because I am awake. You can say that this also could have appeared to me while I was asleep and so can be very similar to what is false. However, if there is one world and six worlds, then, no matter what state I am in, it is evident that there are seven worlds, and I claim to know this without any immodesty. Therefore, teach me that this inference or the previously mentioned disjunctions can be false on account of sleep, insanity, or the unreliability of the senses. If I remember them when I wake up, I will concede defeat. I believe it is now clear enough what falsehoods appear to be the case through sleep and dementia. They are those that pertain to the bodily senses. It is necessary that three times three is nine and the square of rational numbers, even if all of humanity is asleep and snoring. (*CA* 3.11.25)

The first and most obvious thing to note about this passage is that, in addition to a reaffirmation of (18) through (21), we are given three new truths that Augustine claims to know. These are as follows:

(22) If the number of worlds is equal to 1 + 6, then the number of worlds is equal to 7.
(23) $3 \times 3 = 9$.
(24) 3^2 is the square of a rational number.

What is new about these truths is that each is mathematical in nature, though Augustine certainly intends to count (22) as falling within the domain of physics. Whether he intends the same for (23) and (24) is not clear. What is important, however, is not how these truths may be classified, but the fact that they—perhaps even more clearly than (18) through (21)—are illustrative of the kind of truths that fall outside the scope of what comes under the skeptical threat of dreams, hallucinations, and the like.

Consider again Augustine's claim toward the end of this passage that the falsehoods that "appear to be the case through sleep and dementia" are "those that pertain to the bodily senses." What he means by this is not only that dreams, hallucinations, and the like present their objects in a way that is very much like the way that sensation does, but that the objects they present are very much like the objects that sensation presents. To be sure, many of the objects of dreams and hallucinations are fantastic and lack correlates in

the real world, but they are nevertheless constructed out of the remains of sense experience and would be sensible if they were real. As we have seen, particularly when we looked at the Academic appeal to vacuous impressions, the Academics habitually trade on such similarities to generate skeptical problems. Augustine does not deny the legitimacy of their dong so, but he sees an important limitation here. Because what is expressed in each of (22) through (24)—in addition to what is expressed in each of (18) through (21)—is completely nonsensible, there is no question of there being some object of a vacuous impression that forms part of a dream or hallucination that is similar to it. There is certainly no question of there being some object of a vacuous impression that forms part of a dream or hallucination from which it is indistinguishable. For this reason, Augustine argues, truths of this kind—truths that are completely nonsensible—fall outside the scope of the skeptical threat that is posed by dreams, hallucinations, and the like. For the time being, then, Augustine is willing to dismiss this threat and move on.

More Apprehensible Truths of Physics

With (18) through (21) now secured against the objections of the Academic objector, Augustine turns back to the question of what can be known in physics and puts forward a new set of truths that are neither disjunctions nor mathematical in nature. As we see in the following section of a dialogue he constructs, these are truths, not about how things are in themselves, but rather about how things appear to us:

> [Augustine]: Do not assent to more than this, namely, that you are persuaded that it appears so to you. In that case, there is no deception. I do not see how an Academic refutes someone who says: "I know that this appears white to me; I know that this sounds delightful to me; I know that this smells pleasing to me; I know that this tastes sweet to me; I know that this feels cold to me."
>
> [Academic]: Say instead whether the leaves of the wild olive tree, which the goat so intensely desires, are bitter in themselves.
>
> [Augustine]: You rude man! Does not the goat itself have more modesty? I do not know how the leaves taste to livestock, but they taste bitter to me. What more are you seeking? (CA 3.11.26)

As there are too many truths to list here, we will cite one that is representative. It is:

(25) The leaves of the olive tree taste bitter to me.

This claim is notable for the caution it displays. In making it, Augustine backs off asserting that a certain object—the leaves of the olive tree—possesses a certain property—bitterness—and restricts himself to asserting that that object appears to possess that property. This may be disappointing, for we may wish Augustine to defend a more robust claim against the Academics, but it makes good strategic sense. As he is surely right to argue, how things appear is directly accessible to us in a way that how things are is not. Thus, by restricting himself to claims about how things appear and remaining silent about how things are, Augustine makes himself less vulnerable to the attacks of the Academics.

We may be willing to concede all this to Augustine, but we may also wonder about the degree of protection his caution buys him. This is because claims about how things appear are still claims about the things that appear, and all of our claims to know those things are subject to challenge by the Academics. To see why, consider what is really being asserted by (25). When we translate this claim into the language of impressions, we get the following:

(26) The leaves of the olive tree are causing an impression of themselves in me as bitter.

So translated, what initially appeared to have been an exceedingly cautious claim now appears to be rather incautious. Its truth requires not only that I am subject to an impression of the leaves of the olive tree as bitter, but, in addition, that the leaves of the olive tree are the cause of that impression. According to the Academics, however, I can never know that this additional requirement is met, for true and false impressions, they maintain, are indistinguishable from one another. For this reason, though I may think that I am tasting the leaves of the olive tree—and tasting them to be bitter—I may really be subject to a vacuous impression that arises as part of a dream.

Not surprisingly, Augustine anticipates this objection, but his response is seemingly confused. He writes:

> Who is so immodest as to say to me, while I am savoring the flavor of something: "Perhaps this is a dream, and you are not really tasting it"? Do I stop savoring it? It would nevertheless please me even in a dream. (*CA* 3.11.26)

The reason that this response is seemingly confused is that Augustine seems not to see what is involved in (25). As we have seen, to claim that the leaves of the olive tree taste bitter to one is not only to claim that one is subject to an impression of those leaves as bitter, but also to claim that that impression is

caused by those leaves. However, when one's impression is vacuous and arises as part of a dream, that claim is manifestly false. In such a case, we might say, one does not taste anything at all.

To be fair to Augustine, it may be that we are loading into (25) much more than he intends and that this is the source of the problem. Given what he says in the passage just cited, it appears that he equates tasting with having an experience of a certain sort and thinks that one can have that experience in a dream just as well as in waking life. Hence, if we continue to use the language of impressions, it may be that (25) is more fairly translated as follows:

(27) I am having an impression of the leaves of the olive tree as bitter.

If this is the case, then Augustine's claim to know that the leaves of the olive tree taste bitter to him seems secure—at least against the kind of objection that the Academics would likely throw at him. The fact that the impression of the leaves may be vacuous or otherwise false and that this possibility cannot be eliminated is of no consequence. Augustine is merely reporting on the fact that he is having an impression with a certain presentational content. There is nothing that the Academics have said that should make us think that he might go wrong in doing so. Hence, if (27) is acceptable as a translation of (25), we must recognize a genuine victory in Augustine's struggle with the Academics. There does appear to be something that he knows.

A Question about Augustine's Success

Although we have called this a genuine victory, there are questions we may raise about its significance. Most obviously, we may ask whether Augustine has succeeded in doing what he has set out to do, namely, whether he has succeeded in establishing that there are apprehensible truths falling within the domain of physics that can be known. Now it is clear that we do not need a precise map of the boundaries of physics to say that truths about how things appear—particularly when they are taken as reports on the presentational content of one's impressions—do not fall within the domain of physics. Very simply, such truths are of no concern to the physicist except insofar as they aid him or her in knowing how the world and the things in it are. In view of this, we must judge that Augustine has failed to do what he had set out to do.

This is not a trivial point, and it is not confined to physics. In fact, we may ask whether the truths that Augustine has here established as apprehensible are of any philosophical concern at all. At least one prominent skeptic of the ancient world, Sextus Empiricus, suggests that they are not:

> When we investigate whether existing things are such as they appear, we grant that they appear, and what we investigate is not what is apparent but what is said about what is apparent—and this is different from investigating what is apparent itself. For example, it appears to us that honey sweetens (we concede this inasmuch as we are sweetened in a perceptual way); but whether (as far as the argument goes) it is actually sweet is something we investigate—and this is not what is apparent but something said about what is apparent. (*PH* 1.10.19)

Sextus, of course, is a Pyrrhonian, but his point could just as easily be made by an Academic. What philosophy is in the business of investigating is not how things appear, but whether things are as they appear or what we may say about the things that appear. As it is the success of this form of investigation about which skeptics of both traditions raise questions, it seems that, if confronted by Augustine's claim to know (25) and other such truths, Sextus and the Academics would collectively shrug their shoulders in indifference. They most certainly would not regard such a claim as a challenge to their enterprise.[16]

It may be, however, that such indifference is unwarranted. While (25) and other such truths are in one sense trivial, it does not follow that Augustine's claim to know them is of no philosophical significance. This should be obvious to anyone who is familiar with the many and long debates that have taken place over "the given" or "the myth of the given," for what Augustine is seeking to do is to isolate what is given in experience and is thus outside of what may be called into question by the Academic. What, precisely, Augustine takes to be given in experience is something we will have to explore once we have examined those truths he claims to know that fall within the remaining divisions of philosophy. But even now, it should be clear that we are here witnessing the first moves in a debate that will occupy philosophers concerned with the foundations of knowledge for centuries to come.

Apprehensible Truths of Ethics

When we turn to ethics, there is not much new that is to be found in what Augustine has to say. It is more or less a reapplication of the strategies we have already encountered to a new domain. We may see this by beginning

16. On this, see Burnyeat 1982, who credits Augustine with being the first philosopher to identify subjective states as items of certain knowledge.

with Augustine's claim that we can know that certain things are pleasant and other things are unpleasant to us. He writes:

> Nothing impedes those who place the supreme and true good of man in pleasure from saying that they know that they are delighted by what delights them and are offended by what offends them—not the pigeon's neck or the uncertain voice or the weight that is heavy to a man but light to a camel or hundreds of other things. I do not see that this can be refuted. (*CA* 3.12.27)

Augustine's claim here is much like his claim to know that the leaves of the olive tree taste bitter to him. On his view, just as we are directly aware of the qualitative features that an impression presents its object as having, so also are we directly aware of the quality of our experience of that object. He thus thinks that we are fully justified in claiming to know such truths as the following:

(28) This wine is pleasant to me.
(29) That wine is unpleasant to me.

As there is little difference between these truths and (25), we should accord them the same level of security against Academic objections that (25) enjoys. However, so as to avoid the kind of problem associated with (25), when it is understood in terms of (26), it is best that we translate these truths along the lines of (27) as follows:

(30) I am having a pleasant impression of this wine.
(31) I am having an unpleasant impression of that wine.

When taken in this way, Augustine seems fully justified in claiming that we can know (28) and (29). At the very least, the Academics have done nothing to challenge his claim.

Moving on, Augustine turns to the more substantive ethical question of that in which the highest good resides. In agreement with the Stoics, he affirms that it resides in the mind rather than in the body, but he stops short of claiming to know that this is so. It is merely what seems to him to be so. He immediately adds, however, that he is not completely without knowledge with respect to the highest good:

> Even though I am slow-minded and foolish, I can in the meantime know that the final human good, in which the happy life dwells, is

> either nothing or in the mind or in the body or in both. Convince me, if you can, that I do not know this. This is something that those most famous arguments of yours completely fail to do. (*CA* 3.12.27)

What Augustine claims to know may be stated as follows:

> (32) The highest good for a human is either (a) nothing or (b) in the mind or (c) in the body or (d) both in the mind and in the body.

Once again we are presented with an apparent example of exhaustive disjunction, but it is one that does not well serve Augustine. This is because it rests on two reasonable, but eminently contestable, assumptions. The first is that the highest good for a human must reside in the human (or in a part of the human) as the possession of the human. The second is that a human, being a composite of mind and body, is dualistic in nature. Without the first of these assumptions Augustine cannot claim that, if the highest good is not either in the mind or in the body or both in the mind and in the body, then it is nothing. And without the second of these assumptions, Augustine cannot claim that, if the highest good is not nothing, then it is either in the mind or in the body or both in the mind and in the body. In view of this, since Augustine would be hard pressed in this context to claim to know that these assumptions are true, his claim to know the truth of (32) in this context must be looked on with suspicion.[17] There is certainly no reason that the Academics should grant him this claim.

Although Augustine's attempt to establish that there are apprehensible truths in ethics that can be known is by and large a reapplication of strategies that he used with success in the domain of physics, his results in this new domain are mixed. While his claim to know such truths as (28) and (29) are well founded, his claim to know the truth of (32) is questionable. This, however, may not be so much a problem with the strategy he employs as with his execution of that strategy. That Augustine falters at this point may thus be of no great significance. His overall point remains, and it is one for which we should demand a response from the Academics. We may now turn to the third branch of philosophy, dialectic, and see how Augustine fares within it.

17. As a matter of fact, Augustine later came to reject the first of these assumptions and place the highest good for humans in God. He thus writes in *Retractions*: "I might have said 'in God' more truly. The mind enjoys Him as its greatest good so that it may be happy" (*Ret.* 1.1.4).

Apprehensible Truths of Dialectic

Augustine begins his presentation of the apprehensible truths of dialectic with another bold proclamation: "I know more about dialectic than about any other part of philosophy" (*CA* 3.13.29). In large measure Augustine makes this proclamation because he, in agreement with the Stoics, considers dialectic to be a basic tool of philosophy and thus to be that through which a great many of the truths of philosophy are known. Augustine gives us a sample of these truths right up front:

> If the number of elements in the world is four, then it is not five. If there is one sun, then there are not two. One and the same soul cannot both die and be immortal. A man cannot be happy and unhappy at the same time. It cannot happen that the sun is shining and it is night in the same place. At this moment we are either asleep or awake. What I seem to see is either a body or not a body. (*CA* 3.13.29)

This list could be extended indefinitely, and there is no need to set forth its contents in the form of individual propositions. What we should note, however, is that the truths given here are not so given because they fall within the domain of dialectic proper but because they are known by means of dialectic. What fall within the domain of dialectic proper are rather the most general laws of thought and rules of inference that govern all correct reasoning. In the following, Augustine presents us with two among the many of these laws and rules that he claims to know:

> With regard to the conditional statements I have just put forward, dialectic has taught me that, if the antecedent is assumed, I am to infer the consequent of necessity. However, the statements that I have enunciated involving opposition or disjunction have this nature, namely, that when the other parts of the statement are removed, something remains that is affirmed by their removal. This is so whether these parts are one or many. (*CA* 3.13.29)

What Augustine has here put forward are two rules of inference that are easily recognizable as Modus Ponens and Disjunctive Elimination respectively. These may be stated as follows:

(33) *Modus Ponens*. If *P* then *Q* / *P* // *Q*.
(34) *Disjunctive Elimination*. Either *P* or *Q* / not-*P* // *Q*.

There is not much to say about these rules other than that they strike most of us as obvious, basic, and necessary. Indeed, when we consider them with

even modest attention, they may strike us as so obvious, basic, and necessary that we are unable to conceive of them as being otherwise. Because of this, we may have no hesitation in conceding Augustine's claim to know them.

Doubts about the Apprehensible Truths of Dialectic

Some hesitation may nevertheless be warranted. As is well-known, there are numerous paradoxes of reason that arise within even the most carefully formulated systems of logic and that have occupied the vexed attention of philosophers over many centuries. As is also well-known, many of these paradoxes received their first formulation from philosophers of the ancient world, who gave them ample treatment in their writings on dialectic. It was perhaps inevitable, then, that the Academics would pick up on these paradoxes in order to exploit them for the skeptical possibilities that they present. To the Academic mind, what they show is that the laws of thought and rules of inference we take to be so basic, obvious, and necessary are no more sacrosanct than anything else.

Perhaps the most famous of the paradoxes to have come out of the ancient world is the so-called Liar Paradox, which purports to show that the Principle of Bivalence—according to which every proposition is either true or false—is false.[18] Traditionally, the paradox has been generated by putting forward some such proposition as the following:

(35) I am presently speaking falsely.

At first glance, this proposition appears unexceptional—a mere admission of dissimulation—but a simple consideration of whether it is true or false reveals it to be deeply problematic. This is because, if it is true that I am presently speaking falsely, then I am presently speaking falsely and what I say is false, and if it is false that I am presently speaking falsely, then I am presently speaking truly and what I say is true. Putting the point more simply, if it is true that I am presently speaking falsely, then it is false that I am presently speaking falsely, and if it is false that I am presently speaking falsely, then it is true that I am presently speaking falsely.

For anyone committed to the Principle of Bivalence, this is an embarrassment. Since we are led to a contradiction if we take (35) to be true, and

18. This paradox, along with the Sorites Paradox, is deployed by Cicero as part of an attack on the principles of Stoic logic. On this, see *Acad.* 2.28.91–30.98. For painstaking analysis of Cicero's use of this paradox, see Barnes 1997.

also if we take (35) to be false, we must—in violation of the Principle of Bivalence—take (35) to be neither true nor false. What this means is that, if we are unable to explain (35) away, then we will be required to abandon the Principle of Bivalence as an absolute principle that governs all propositions. This is of no small consequence. As recent attempts to develop nonstandard systems of logic demonstrate, if we abandon the Principle of Bivalence as an absolute principle that governs all propositions, we will be required to rethink logic in a fundamental way at every level. It is thus understandable that philosophers, rather than abandon the principle in the face of such propositions as (35), have been highly motivated to explain them away.

All of this spells trouble for Augustine. The form of dialectic about which he claims to know so much is Stoic dialectic, and Stoic dialectic, as is well-known, rests squarely on the Principle of Bivalence.[19] Here it is instructive to recall that the Stoics took every simple proposition to be either true or false and developed a truth functional account of compound propositions whereby the truth-value of every such proposition is made to be a function of the truth-values of the simple propositions from which it is composed. In Stoic dialectic, then, the logical meaning of every compound proposition is expressible solely in terms of the bivalent character of the simple propositions from which it is composed. What "not-*P*" means, for example, is nothing other than that *P* is false, and what "*P* and *Q*" means, for another example, is nothing other than that *P* is true and *Q* is true. This is immensely important, for each of the basic inference forms that the Stoics recognized as valid and from which they took all valid arguments to be constructed depends for its validity on the logical meaning of the compound statements that enter into it. Hence, each of the basic inference forms that the Stoics recognized as valid and from which they took all valid arguments to be constructed depends for its validity on the bivalent character of simple propositions. From the perspective of Stoic dialectic, then, to abandon the Principle of Bivalence is not merely to abandon a principle governing all propositions, it is to give up on the validity of the basic inference forms from which all valid arguments are constructed.

In view of this, we would expect Augustine to mount a defense of the Principle of Bivalence by attempting to resolve the Liar Paradox, for as long as the paradox remains and the principle is under threat, there is some

19. For an overview of Stoic logic, see Bobzien 2003. Classic treatments include Kneale and Kneale 1962, 113–76; and Mates 1961.

question about the validity of the two inference forms—Modus Ponens and Disjunctive Elimination—that he claims to know. What Augustine gives us instead is nothing more than a wave of the hand. If knowledge of dialectic is not a part of wisdom, he argues, then the wise person will not be bothered by the paradox. However, if knowledge of dialectic is a part of wisdom, then the wise person "knows it in such a way that he utterly destroys that most mendacious calumny of the Academics, namely, 'if it is true, it is false, and if it is false, it is true,' by despising it rather than pitying it and letting it wither and die" (*CA* 3.13.29). This, as we should acknowledge, is not even remotely adequate, and it is disappointing that Augustine would take such a dismissive stance. As the Liar Paradox raises a serious question about the Principle of Bivalence, Augustine must either resolve the paradox or explain how he can know the inference forms of Stoic dialectic to be valid while the bivalence of propositions is under doubt. Since he has done neither, we must regard as empty his boast to "know more about dialectic than about any other part of philosophy" (*CA* 3.13.29). It is certainly not a boast that would impress the Academics.

A Fourfold Classification of the Apprehensible Truths of Philosophy

In completing his presentation of the apprehensible truths of dialectic, Augustine has at the same time completed his presentation of the apprehensible truths of philosophy as a whole. We have followed him in this as he has made his way from physics to ethics to dialectic, and we have examined the truths he has enumerated in each of these divisions in the order in which he has enumerated them. Despite the fact that Augustine has presented these truths in this way, it is clear that they may be grouped in ways that cut across the three divisions of philosophy. We need only take note of the repeated appeal to exhaustive disjunction to see that this is so. Keeping in mind that any grouping will be somewhat arbitrary, we may thus offer the following as a way of classifying the truths that Augustine has put forward as apprehensible in philosophy:

(T1) *Tautological Truths.* Propositions that are true in virtue of their logical form. The most common examples Augustine gives are cases of exhaustive disjunction, such as: "Either there is just one world or there is not just one world."

(T2) *Mathematical Truths.* Simple and evident arithmetical propositions, such as: "$3 \times 3 = 9$."

(T3) *Dialectical Truths.* Basic inference forms of Stoic dialectic, such as: "If *P* then *Q* / *P* // *Q*."

(T4) *Presentational Truths.* Propositions that report, not how things are, but how things appear, such as: "The leaves of the olive tree taste bitter to me." More strictly, they are propositions that report that one is subject to an impression of a certain sort, such as: "I am having an impression of the leaves of the olive tree as bitter."

There is certainly much to quibble with here, and we should not expect that every truth Augustine has put forward will fall neatly into one or another of these groups. Even so, dividing them up in this way is serviceable as a point of departure for further inquiry. Not only does it provide a reasonable approximation of how the truths Augustine has claimed to know sort themselves out, but it allows us to ask in a focused manner the question of what it is that makes those truths apprehensible. If we wish to evaluate the overall effectiveness of Augustine's strategy against the Academics, this is surely a question we must answer.

Final Thoughts

As answering this question takes us well beyond what is contained in the monologue of *Against the Academics*, we will leave it for succeeding chapters. For now, we will close by saying that, in the context of the monologue, Augustine is content merely to put forward a set of truths in each of the divisions of philosophy that the Academics cannot plausibly deny are apprehensible and that he claims to know without offering any explanation of their apprehensibility or providing any deep reasons for it. He is, in effect, willing to throw a series of counter-punches at the Academics and leave it at that. All this makes the monologue engaging reading—and the Academics would unquestionably find much that is challenging in it—but it also renders it less than fully satisfying. What we need from Augustine, which he has not provided, is an account of what it is that makes the truths contained under (T1) through (T4) apprehensible. It is only by doing so that he will be able, in addition to convincing us that the Academics are mistaken, to show us why they are mistaken as well. For those of us who are not skeptics, it is the latter and not the former that is really of interest. This will be the topic of the next chapter.

Chapter 9

Platonism and the Apprehensible Truths of Philosophy

We closed the previous chapter with the observation that, in the monologue of *Against the Academics*, Augustine has put forward a set of truths whose apprehensibility he believes the Academics cannot plausibly deny, but that he has done little to explain the apprehensibility of those truths. It is the purpose of this chapter to explore what little explanation he has provided and to expand on that explanation by looking at supporting material from outside *Against the Academics*. In the course of this exploration and expansion, something that is not apparent from a reading of *Against the Academics* alone will become clear. This is that Augustine's Platonic commitments provide him the means of explaining the apprehensibility of those truths he has put forward as apprehensible. In other words, they provide him the means of explaining what it is in virtue of which those truths he has put forward as apprehensible are apprehensible.

Given the pervasive influence that Platonism had on Augustine, none of this should come as a surprise. He famously announces at the end of *Against the Academics* that, though he is bound to the authority of Christ, "as to what we should pursue by the most subtle reasoning . . . I am at the moment confident that I will find it among the Platonists and that it will not conflict with our Holy Scriptures" (*CA* 3.20.43). This confidence would wane over the years, especially as Augustine's assessment of the Platonists grew increasingly critical, but the impress of Platonism on his thought remained deep until the

end. Even so, it is one thing to hold as a general expectation that Augustine's Platonic commitments figure crucially in his views on apprehensibility and quite another to show how they do so in any detail. It is the aim of this chapter to undertake this latter task.[1]

Platonism and the Apprehension of Truth

We may begin our investigation by looking at a passage from the monologue in which Augustine pronounces on the limits of the Academic attack on apprehension. He writes:

> What the Academics have said against the senses cannot be said against all philosophers. There are philosophers [the Platonists] who maintain that what the mind receives from the bodily senses may give rise to opinion, but may not give rise to knowledge. Nevertheless, they hold that knowledge is contained in the intelligence and lives in the mind, removed from the senses. Perhaps the wise man we are seeking is among their number. (*CA* 3.11.26)

What Augustine is suggesting here is that the Academic attack on apprehension, to the extent that it is successful at all, is successful only in showing that we cannot attain apprehension by means of the senses. It is not successful in showing that we cannot attain apprehension by some other means. For this reason, though it has devastating consequences for the Stoics and the Epicureans, who lean toward empiricism, it poses little threat to the Platonists, who

1. The questions of which Platonist sources Augustine read, when he read them, and what influence they had on him are among the great questions of scholarship on Augustine. We cannot address these questions here, but a few elementary remarks are in order. First, in *Confessions* 7.9.13–20.26 and 8.2.3, Augustine tells us that, while in Milan, he read certain "books of the Platonists" (*libri Platonicorum*), which were translated into Latin by Marius Victorinus. It is generally agreed that these included works of Plotinus and Porphyry, though scholars are divided over their precise identification and the relative weight of their influence. Second, Augustine's reading of Platonist books continued well beyond his time in Milan and intensified for a period after 410 as he was preparing to write *City of God*, which displays extensive knowledge, not just of Plotinus and Porphyry, but also of Apuleius and Iamblichus. Third, most of Augustine's knowledge of Plato was secondhand, but it appears that, at least by 400, he had read Cicero's translation of *Timaeus* 27d–47b. Fourth, Augustine's exposure to Platonism did not come by way of written sources alone. While in Milan, he absorbed a great deal of Platonism from his contacts with Milanese Platonists, including Ambrose, Simplicianus, and Manlius Theodorus. For helpful discussion of Augustine's reading of Platonist books and the scholarly controversy surrounding it, see O'Donnell 1992, 2:413–26. The leading advocate (in English) for early Plotinian influence is O'Connell 1968; the leading advocate (in English) for Porphyrian influence is O'Meara 1958. See TeSelle 1970, 43–55, for a summary (skeptical of the early influence of Porphyry) of the debate over the primacy of Plotinus or Porphyry. On Augustine's reading of Cicero's translation of *Timaeus*, see Hagendahl 1967, 535–40.

seek apprehension through the intellect working in independence of the senses. In fact, insofar as the Platonists regard all belief that is derived from the senses as mere opinion, there is broad agreement between them and the Academics that sense-impressions are nonapprehensible. In Augustine's estimation, then, the Platonists have little to fear from the Academic attack on apprehension, and it is to them that we should look for guidance concerning what can be discerned through reason.[2]

Although Augustine's point should be obvious to anyone familiar with Platonism, it is useful to remind ourselves of it by looking at a passage from *Phaedo* in which Socrates questions his associate Simmias about how best to attain knowledge. In it, Socrates expresses deep pessimism about the possibility of doing so through the senses:

> [Socrates]: Then what about the actual acquiring of knowledge? Is the body an obstacle when one associates with it in the search for knowledge? I mean, for example, do men find any truth in sight or hearing, or are not even the poets forever telling us that we do not see or hear anything accurately, and surely if those two physical senses are not clear or precise, our other senses can hardly be accurate, as they are all inferior to these. Do you not think so?
>
> [Simmias]: I certainly do. . . .
>
> [Socrates]: When then . . . does the soul grasp the truth? For whenever it attempts to examine anything with the body, it is clearly deceived by it.
>
> [Simmias]: True.
>
> [Socrates]: Is it not with reasoning if anywhere that any reality becomes clear to the soul?
>
> [Simmias]: Yes.
>
> [Socrates]: And indeed the soul reasons best when none of these senses troubles it, neither hearing nor sight, nor pain nor pleasure, but when it is most by itself, taking leave of the body and as far as possible having no contact or association with it in its search for reality. (*Phaed.* 65a–c)

The message of this exchange is clear. If the soul is to apprehend truth—or what is truly real—it must turn away from the body and its senses and attempt to lay hold of its object by the power of reason that is in it.

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2. Given Augustine's view of the Academics as esoteric Platonists, this is precisely what we should expect. On this view, the Academic attack on apprehension was of a piece with their Platonism and was meant to clear the way for its reemergence. On this, see chapter 1.

Reliance on the body and its senses will do nothing but hinder the soul in this task. It will draw the soul away from its object and sow confusion within it. Thus, if the soul is to apprehend truth—or what is truly real—it must rely solely on its inner resources and forgo the aid of anything external.[3]

As is well-known, this message did not die with Plato. It reverberated for centuries and was championed especially by those Neoplatonists on whose writings Augustine relied for his knowledge of Platonism. Two passages from Plotinus's *Beauty* suffice to give us a flavor:

> But what about the beauties beyond, which is no more the part of sense to see, but the soul sees them and speaks of them without instruments—we must go up to them and contemplate them and leave sense to stay down below. (*Enn.* 1.6.4)

And again:

> But how shall we find the way? What method can we devise? How can one see the "inconceivable beauty" which stays within the holy sanctuary and does not come out where the profane may see it? Let him who can, follow and come within, and leave outside the sight of his eyes and not turn back to the bodily splendours which he saw before. (*Enn.* 1.6.8)

Although it is cast in different terms, Plotinus's message is essentially Plato's message. If the soul is to apprehend intelligible beauty, it must do so "without instruments" and "leave sense to stay down below." It must remain constant and "not turn back to the bodily splendours which [it] saw before." It thus comes as no surprise when Plotinus, just a few lines later, issues what would otherwise be a shocking admonition: "Shut your eyes and change to another way of seeing which everyone has but few use" (*Enn.* 1.6.9). This other way of seeing, which may best be described as pure intellection, is precisely the way of seeing that Socrates recommends to Simmias. It is the way of seeing that the soul attains when it reasons alone and apart from the senses. In identifying this as the means of apprehension, Plotinus thus speaks with a voice that Plato would recognize as his own.

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3. This is not to say that, for Plato, our encounters with corporeal and sensible things have no role to play in the acquisition of knowledge, especially when such acquisition is understood as recollection. Most important, our encounters with corporeal and sensible things may serve as prompts or stimuli of recollection. See *Men.* 81a–86c and especially *Phaed.* 72e–77a.

In view of this, it would appear that Augustine's brief comments concerning the Platonists in the monologue are on target. To the extent that the Academic attack on apprehension is directed at the possibility of apprehending truth by means of the senses, it will be of little concern to the Platonists, who seek truth apart from the senses. Their only concern will be to limit its scope and define its boundaries. This, however, is more than just a point of history for Augustine, and it is important that we see this. Because Augustine not only reports on, but aligns himself with, the Platonists in their identification of pure intellection as the means of apprehension, his comments are suggestive of an account that he may give of the apprehensibility of those truths he has put forward as apprehensible. Simply put, he may say that those truths are of such a nature as to be suitable objects of pure intellection and thus are of such a nature as to be suitable objects of apprehension. If this is correct, then what we find in Augustine's brief comments concerning the Platonists in the monologue is a suggestion that, if developed, could throw considerable light on his view of the apprehensibility of those truths he has put forward as apprehensible. In particular, we find a suggestion that could throw considerable light on his view of the apprehensibility of (T1) through (T4).

A Platonic Question

We may begin to cash this out by looking at question 9 from Augustine's *Eighty-Three Diverse Questions*, a work that was written in response to a variety of philosophical and theological queries from members of Augustine's monastic communities at Thagaste and Hippo. The question is entitled *Can Truth Be Perceived by the Bodily Senses?* and Augustine begins his response with the following remarks:

> Everything the bodily senses come into contact with—things that are called "sensible"—change without any interruption in time. For example, when the hairs of our head grow or our body flourishes in youth and declines in old age, this happens by a continuous and uninterrupted process. What does not remain the same cannot be perceived, for what is perceived is apprehended by knowledge, and what changes without interruption cannot be apprehended. Therefore, we should not expect purity of truth from the bodily senses. (*De div. quaes.* Q.9)

What is striking about this passage is the dimness of the view it expresses concerning the possibility of perceiving or apprehending truth by means of the senses. Echoing Plato, who tells us that the objects of the senses can be

said to become, but not to be,[4] Augustine tells us that such objects are in a state of continuous flux and do not remain the same from one moment to the next. Again echoing Plato, who tells us that what can be said to become, but not to be, is the object of opinion, but not of knowledge,[5] he then tells us that, because what is in a state of continuous flux cannot be perceived or apprehended, the objects of the senses cannot be perceived or apprehended. Because of this, we should not expect purity of truth from the senses.[6]

Although this is sufficient to answer the question, Augustine does not end his response here. Noting that some might object that heavenly bodies, though they are objects of the senses, are not in a state of continuous flux, he gives an additional set of considerations to bolster his claim that truth cannot be perceived or apprehended by means of the senses. He writes:

> Someone may say that there are sensible things that always remain the same and may question us about the sun and the stars. It is difficult to make a determination about these matters. This, however, is certain: no one can deny that every sensible thing is like what is false in such a way that it cannot be distinguished from what is false. Putting other considerations aside, all of the things that we sense through the body are such that, even when they are not present to the senses, we are nevertheless subject to their images, whether in sleep or in madness, so that it is as if they were present to us. When this happens, we are utterly

4. In *Timaeus*, Plato has Timaeus characterize the objects of the senses as "that which becomes but never is," and contrast them with the objects of the intellect as "that which always is and has no becoming" (*Tim.* 27d). See also *Rep.* 5.479c–d. Plotinus also draws this distinction: "Since, then, we are enquiring about being or beings, we must in our discussion first of all make a distinction between what we call being, about which at present our investigation would be correctly conducted, and what others think is being, but we call it becoming, and say that it is never really real" (*Enn.* 6.2.1).

5. In *Timaeus*, Plato has Timaeus say both that *that which becomes but never is* is "grasped by opinion, which involves unreasoning sense perception," and that *that which always is and has no becoming* is "grasped by understanding, which involves a reasoned account" (*Tim.* 28a). See also *Rep.* 5.477a–b. Plotinus also draws this distinction: "But as for the kinds of knowledge which exist in a rational soul, those which are of sense-objects—if one might speak of "kinds of knowledge" of these; "opinion" is really the suitable name for them—are posterior to their objects and likenesses of them; but those which are of intelligible objects, which are certainly the genuine kinds of knowledge, come from Intellect to rational soul and do not think any sense-object" (*Enn.* 5.9.7).

6. Compare to the following from the letter to Zenobius, in which Augustine draws a broader lesson from the transience of the objects of the senses: "I think we are in agreement that none of the things with which the bodily senses come into contact are able to remain the same for even a single moment of time, but pass on, slip away, and utterly fail to hold on to the present. To put the point in Latin, they do not have being. Therefore, that philosophy which is true and divine warns us to restrain and calm the ruinous love of such things so that the mind, even while it uses this body, may with its entire self be borne in yearning toward those things that are always the same and please us with a beauty that is not transient" (letter to Zenobius, *Ep.* 2.1).

> unable to tell whether we are sensing these things by our senses or are aware of their images. Therefore, if there exist false images of sensible things that cannot be distinguished by the senses, and if nothing can be perceived except what can be distinguished from what is false, then the criterion of truth is not in the senses. (*De div. quaes.* Q.9)

Here again the view is dim. Much like the Academics, who appeal to the indistinguishability of sense impressions and vacuous impressions in order to undermine the apprehensibility of the former,[7] Augustine appeals to the indistinguishability of the objects of sense impressions and the objects of vacuous impressions in order to do the same. Specifically, he argues that, because we cannot distinguish the bodies that are presented in sensation from the images that are presented in dreams or madness, the criterion of truth is not in the senses.

In putting forward these considerations, Augustine appears to be endorsing broad skepticism with respect to the senses and thus to be making a significant and potentially damaging concession to the Academics.[8] This, however, does not seem to bother him. As he explains in the conclusion to question 9, the fact that the objects of the senses are subject to constant change and are indistinguishable from images should not cause us to fall into skeptical despair. Rather, it should cause us to turn our gaze away from all that is corporeal and sensible and direct it to what is incorporeal and intelligible. In particular, it should cause us to turn our gaze toward God. He writes:

> Accordingly, it is to our benefit that we are admonished to turn away from this world, which is certainly corporeal and sensible, and to turn in all haste toward God—that is, toward the truth that is grasped by the intellect and mind within, that remains always and is forever the same, and that does not have a false image from which it cannot be distinguished. (*De div. quaes.* Q.9)

Unlike the objects of the senses, which are subject to constant change and are indistinguishable from images, God, according to Augustine, is subject to no change and is distinguishable from all images. Because of this, our inability to perceive or apprehend truth through the senses does not entail a corresponding inability to perceive or apprehend truth through the intellect. We

7. On the Academic appeal to the indistinguishability of sense impressions and vacuous impressions, see chapter 7.

8. The extent to which Augustine endorsed skepticism with respect to the senses is the topic of chapter 10.

may still perceive or apprehend God, who is the source of all truth and who is indeed Truth-Itself. Thus, the fact that we cannot perceive or apprehend truth through the senses is no cause for skeptical despair or even much cause for concern. For Augustine, as for the Platonists, truth is apprehended otherwise. It is apprehended through an act of pure intellection.

The Ascent of the Mind to God

On the basis of what we have seen in question 9, it is clear that, for Augustine, the way to knowledge lies in turning our gaze away from what is corporeal and sensible and directing it to what is incorporeal and intelligible. In particular, it lies in turning our gaze toward God, who is subject to no change and is distinguishable from all images. What this suggests is that, if we are to understand how Augustine thinks we are able to apprehend (T1) through (T4), we should look carefully at what he thinks is involved in turning our gaze toward God. In this section we will do precisely this. Using his schema of the ascent of the mind to God as it is presented in book 2 of *Free Choice of the Will*, we will examine the steps that Augustine sees to be involved in turning our gaze toward God.[9] When we have completed this examination, we will then turn back to the apprehensibility of (T1) through (T4) and see what we have learned.

According to Augustine's schema, the mind commences its ascent to God from the position of having its attention directed outward via the senses to the many corporeal objects that are external to it. Being mere bodies, these first objects of the mind's attention occupy the lowest rank on the scale of being and are the faintest reflections of God to be found among things within the created order. The mind, however, need not remain fixed at this lowest level. It may turn its attention away from these objects and direct it inward to the senses instead. When it does, Augustine contends, the mind advances, for the senses are powers of the soul and occupy a higher rank on the scale of being than do their objects. Thus, by directing its attention inward to the senses, the mind takes its first step in its ascent to God. It leaves behind what is lowest on the scale of being and moves to what is higher.

9. Augustine's account of the ascent of the mind to God is put forward in *De lib. arb.* 2.3.7–15.39 and is the centerpiece of an elaborate attempt to establish the existence of God through rational inquiry. Compare to the parallel account in *De ver. rel.* 29.52–31.57, the ascent passages in *Conf.* 7.10.16 and 7.17.23, and the celebrated vision at Ostia in *Conf.* 9. 10.23–25. For a full discussion of the material from *Free Choice of the Will*, see Menn 1998, 144–67. Also valuable are MacDonald 2001; Rist 1994, 67–73; and Gilson 1929, 12–29. See Cary 2000, 31–44 for a discussion of the Platonic (specifically Plotninian) background of Augustine's understanding of ascent.

The senses, however, are not the highest powers of the soul, and it is because of this, Augustine tells us, that the mind may travel further upward by directing its attention further inward. This it does when it directs its attention to the so-called inner sense, which is a cognitive power found in animals and humans alike to which the senses report and by which we are aware of those same senses and their acts. Since the inner sense stands as a judge of the senses themselves, assessing their functioning and comparing their reports, Augustine takes it to occupy a higher place on the scale of being than do the senses. When the mind directs its attention to this power, then, it directs its attention to what is higher and takes its second step in its ascent to God.

The third step in the mind's ascent comes when the mind turns its attention away from all that is below it—the objects of the senses, the senses themselves, and even the inner sense—and focuses its gaze on itself. When it has done this, Augustine argues, it has taken its most significant step thus far in its ascent to God, for the mind is the highest power of the soul and stands as judge over all the rest. It is also, though Augustine does not make this claim in *Free Choice of the Will*, that in virtue of which we may be said to have been created in the image of God.[10] Hence, when the mind turns its attention away from all that is below it and directs it to itself, it directs its attention to what is the brightest reflection of God among created things.

Having now identified this third step in the mind's ascent to God, Augustine appropriately asks whether there is anything higher than the mind to which the mind may direct its attention in order to ascend still further. His answer is that the mind may direct its attention to certain truths that are above and outside it.[11] To clarify, he cites as examples the truths of mathematics, which are speculative, and truths of wisdom,

10. Augustine was particularly concerned to assert this against the Manichees as the proper understanding of Genesis 1:26–27: "Let the Manichees know that the spiritual and faithful, in accordance with Catholic teaching, do not believe that God is limited by a corporeal form. When it is said that man is made in the image of God, it is said with respect to the inner man, wherein reason and intelligence reside" (*De Gen. c. Man.* 1.17.28). See Augustine's more developed remarks in *De Gen. ad litt.* 3.19.29–20.32. See also chapter 11 for further discussion.

11. The fact that Augustine identifies the realm of intelligible being as being above and outside the mind, rather than deep within the mind, has led Cary to argue that Augustine crucially modifies the Plotinian model of ascent by bringing it in line with Christian orthodoxy and its distinction between creator and creation. For Cary, the distinctive pattern of Augustinian ascent is what he describes as *in then up*: the mind turns inward in an examination of itself and then turns upward in an examination of what is above it. See Cary 2000, 38–40. For a discussion of the ontological status of the truths that are above and outside the mind, see Boyer 1920, 47–109.

which are practical. Among the former, he puts forward the following as an example:

(1) Whatever distance each number is from the beginning, its double is that distance from it. (*De lib. arb.* 2.8.23)

Among the latter, he puts forward the following as an example:

(2) Every person should be given what properly belongs to him. (*De lib. arb.* 2.10.28)

In considering these truths, we may wonder on what basis Augustine takes them to be higher than the mind such that, by turning its attention away from itself and directing it to them, the mind takes another step in its ascent. His answer, which is Platonic in inspiration, is that these and other such truths are common, unchanging, and regulative, whereas the mind is private, changing, and subject to rule.[12] To see what he means by this, we may briefly consider each of these characteristics individually.

Truths as Common

To say of these truths that they are common is to say that their being perceived by one person in no way excludes their being perceived by indefinitely

12. With respect to the first two characteristics of these truths—common and unchanging—Augustine comments: "Therefore, just as there are true and unchangeable rules of number, whose order and truth you said to be present unchangeably and in common to everyone who sees them, so also there are true and unchangeable rules of wisdom. When I questioned you just now about a few of them individually, you answered that they are true and manifest, and you conceded that they are present to be contemplated in common by everyone who is able to see them" (*De lib. arb.* 2.10.29). With respect to the third of these characteristics—regulative—he comments: "We judge these things in accord with the inner rules of truth that we see in common, but we do not make judgments about the rules themselves. When we say that eternal things are preferable to temporal things, or that seven and three are ten, we do not say that this ought to be so. We know it to be so. Thus, we are like someone who discovers and is made happy rather than like someone who examines and corrects" (*De lib. arb.* 2.12.34). It is also worth noting that, in question 46 of *Eighty-Three Diverse Questions*, Augustine appropriates explicitly Platonic terminology and speaks of these truths as "ideas" (*ideae*), "forms" (*formae*), or "reasons" (*rationes*) that are contained in the mind of God: "Ideas are the principal forms or reasons of things—stable and unchangeable, not themselves formed, and thus existing eternally and always the same—which are contained in the divine mind. Although they do not arise or pass away, everything that either can or does arise and pass away is nevertheless said to be formed in accord with them. Only a soul that is rational can gaze upon them, and this it does by that part in virtue of which it is superior. This is the mind itself or reason, which is, as it were, the soul's face or intelligible eye. As a matter of fact, not just any rational soul is said to be suited to that vision, but one that is holy and pure, that is, one having an eye to see such things that is healthy, sound, serene, and akin to the things it intends to see" (*De div. quaes.* Q. 46).

many other persons at the same time. In this respect, they are similar to the objects of visual perception, which can likewise be perceived by indefinitely many persons at the same time. Augustine thus says of these truths that they are public in their nature, which is just to say that to as many minds that are fit to perceive them, they are available to be perceived.

Truths as Unchanging

To say of these truths that they are unchanging is to say that they have never been, are not now, and never will be false. It is also to say that they are necessary and eternal, since it is only truths that are necessary and eternal that have never been, are not now, and never will be false. Because of this, Augustine treats such truths as ideas in the mind of God and thus as partaking in the divine being. To treat them otherwise would be to allow that there is something in the created order that is unchanging.

Truths as Regulative

To say of these truths that they are regulative is to say that they function as rules by which the mind judges whatever it judges and that they are not themselves subject to any judgment by the mind. Accordingly, Augustine claims that, while we judge of other things that they are or are not as they ought to be by recourse to these truths, with respect to these very same truths, we can do no more than recognize that they are. Such truths, on his view, are the immeasurable standards by which we measure everything that can be measured.

It is in the light of these characteristics that we may understand why Augustine counts these truths as standing above and outside the mind. Being common, they differ from the mind insofar as the mind's inner space is private and closed off to all that is outside itself. Being unchanging, they differ from the mind insofar as the mind's attention shifts from one thing to another and its judgment moves between error and truth. And being regulative, they differ from the mind insofar as the mind comes under their rule and is unable to judge other things except in their light. It is on the basis of these characteristics that Augustine thinks it evident that such truths surpass the mind in their mode of being and that the mind takes another step in its ascent when it turns its attention away from itself and directs it to them. In fact, as he considers these truths to partake in the divine being, he thinks that, by directing its attention to them, the mind arrives at the very threshold of seeing God and is thus made ready to take the final step in its ascent.

With its gaze turned upward, the mind takes this final step when it moves from a consideration of the many truths that are above and outside it to a consideration of God. In a passage that is reminiscent of the climax of Plato's Allegory of the Cave, in which a released prisoner, having made his way out of the cave, turns his gaze from the objects illuminated by the sun to the sun itself, Augustine writes:[13]

> There are people who chose what it pleases them to look at in the light of the sun and are happy when looking at those things. If some of these people were perhaps endowed with more lively, sound, and powerful eyes, they would look at nothing with more pleasure than the sun, which also illumines other things in which weaker eyes take pleasure. In a similar fashion, when a powerful and lively mental gaze contemplates with sure reason the many unchangeable truths, it turns toward Truth-Itself, in whom all things are disclosed. As if forgetting everything else, it clings to Truth and enjoys all things in it at once. Whatever is delightful in other truths is especially delightful in Truth-Itself. (*De lib. arb.* 2.13.36)

Having contemplated those truths that are above and outside it, the mind now turns its gaze toward God, who is *Truth-Itself, in whom all things are disclosed*. In doing so, it completes its ascent. What is more, as God is not only Truth-Itself, but Being-Itself, Goodness-Itself, and so on down the line, there could not be anything higher on the scale of being to which the mind might ascend. Thus, if the mind is fortunate enough to have

13. For the Allegory of the Cave and its interpretation, see *Rep.* 7.514a–518b. Augustine's comparison of God to the sun goes back to his first writings at Cassiciacum: "With respect to those things that are passed down in the disciplines, which anyone who understands concedes without hesitation to be true, we should believe that they cannot be understood unless they are illumined by another sun, as it were, of their own. Therefore, just as we may observe three things in this sun—it exists, it shines, and it illumines—so also we may observe three things in that most hidden God whom we wish to understand—he exists, he is understood, and he makes other things to be understood" (*Sol.* 1.8.15). In *Confessions*, Augustine credits his discovery of God, conceived as an illuminating light, to his reading of the books of the Platonists: "The books of the Platonists admonished me to return to myself. With you leading me, I entered into my innermost parts, which I was able to do because *you were my helper* (Ps 29:11). I entered and saw with my soul's eye, as it were, an immutable light above this same eye and above my mind. This was not the common light that is visible to all flesh. Nor was it a light of the same kind, only greater, which would shine more and more brightly and fill the whole with its magnitude. It was not this light, but another, completely different from all these. It was not above my mind in the way that oil is above water or the sky is above the earth. Rather, it was above me since it made me, and I was below it since I was made by it. He who knows truth knows it, and he who knows it knows eternity. Love knows it. O eternal truth and true love and beloved eternity, You are my God" (*Conf.* 7.10.16).

sufficient strength to sustain its upward gaze, it will find in God nothing less than complete satisfaction and rest. It will find in God nothing less than happiness.[14]

The Apprehensibility of (T1) through (T3)

Having just seen what Augustine takes to be involved in turning our gaze away from the sensible world toward God, we may now consider the explanation this provides him of the apprehensibility of (T1) through (T4), which we may list again as follows:

(T1) *Tautological Truths.* Propositions that are true in virtue of their logical form. The most common examples Augustine gives are cases of exhaustive disjunction, such as: "Either there is just one world or there is not just one world."

(T2) *Mathematical Truths.* Simple and evident arithmetical propositions, such as: "$3 \times 3 = 9$."

(T3) *Dialectical Truths.* Basic inference forms of Stoic dialectic, such as: "If *P* then *Q* / *P* // *Q*."

(T4) *Presentational Truths.* Propositions that report, not how things are, but how things appear, such as: "The leaves of the olive tree taste bitter to me." More strictly, they are propositions that report that one is subject to an impression of a certain sort, such as: "I am having an impression of the leaves of the olive tree as bitter."

In considering these truths, let us leave aside (T4) as a special case to be taken up later in this chapter and proceed by making what would appear to be an entirely safe assumption. This is that Augustine counts, or would be willing to count, (T1) through (T3) as common, unchanging, and regulative and thus counts, or would be willing to count, (T1) through (T3) among the truths that are above and outside the mind. If we proceed on this assumption, the obvious thing to say is that, for Augustine, the reasons he cites in question 9 on behalf of the inapprehensibility of corporeal and sensible things have no application to (T1) through (T3). As with God, in whose being they partake,

14. After Augustine completes his description of the ascent of the mind to God, Evodius exclaims: "I acknowledge that Truth-Itself not only is a good, but is the highest good. It is that good which makes us happy" (*De lib. arb.* 2.15.39). Compare to Reason's proclamation in *Soliloquies*: "The looking is followed by the vision of God. This vision is the end of the looking, not because the looking no longer exists, but because there is nothing further to which it directs itself. This truly is perfect virtue—reason arriving at its end—from which the happy life follows" (*Sol.* 1.6.13).

the truths that are above and outside the mind, including (T1) through (T3), are subject to no change and are distinguishable from all images. As a consequence, they do not share in the inapprehensibility of the objects of the senses.

While both of these features serve to explain the apprehensibility of (T1) through (T3), it is the second, the distinguishability of (T1) through (T3) from all images, that is of greatest interest to us. To understand this feature, it is helpful to remember that, as Augustine came to understand them, images are either *phantasiae*, in which case they are copies of corporeal and sensible things, or *phantasmata*, in which case they are fictions that are constructed out of material provided by *phantasiae*.[15] In either case, they have their origin in corporeal and sensible things transmitting their forms to the senses and the senses in turn transmitting those same forms to memory. It is this that explains the likeness of images to corporeal and sensible things and their ability to deceive us. They are products of those things and arise by the transmission of their forms. None of this, however, has any bearing on the apprehensibility of (T1) through (T3). Being incorporeal and intelligible, they do not generate images and are not imitable by images. Thus, when we are contemplating (T1) through (T3), or any of the truths that are above and outside the mind, we need not be concerned that we are contemplating images and are thus being deceived.

All of this, as should be clear, is of tremendous importance. Whether or not Augustine had the entirety of this account in mind at the time he put (T1) through (T3) forward in the monologue, it nevertheless makes good sense of his claim that these truths are apprehensible. In particular, since Augustine consistently treats images as false things in contrast to the true things of which they are copies, it makes good sense of his repeated claims that (T1) through (T3) are unlike what is false or that they cannot be confused with what is false:[16]

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15. Augustine provides several examples to illustrate this distinction. In an early text, *De mus.* 6.11.32, he uses the example of the *phantasia* of his father, whom he has seen, and the *phantasma* of his grandfather, whom he has not seen. In a late text, *De Trin.* 8.6.9 and 9.6.10, he uses the example of the *phantasia* of Carthage, which he has seen, and the *phantasma* of Alexandria, which he has not seen. For a discussion of Augustine on images, including the distinction between *phantasiae* and *phantasmata*, see O'Daly 1987, 106–30.

16. In *Soliloquies*, Augustine develops an account according to which an image of an *x* (for example, an image of a tree) is a false *x* (for example, a false tree) because it resembles an *x* without being an *x*. See *Sol.* 2.6.9–12. A bit later in *Soliloquies*, he develops an account according to which an image of an *x* (for example, an image of a tree) is a false *x* (for example, a false tree) because it in some way tries to be an *x* but fails to be an *x*. See *Sol.* 2.9.16.

(A) Let Carneades teach that this view is like what is false. (*CA* 3.10.23)
(B) No one can confuse them with any likeness to what is false. (*CA* 3.10.23)
(C) Assert either that these disjunctions are false or that they have something in common with what is false on account of which they cannot in the least be distinguished from what is false. (*CA* 3.10.23)
(D) Explain how this view can be false. (*CA* 3.11.25)
(E) No likeness to what is false confuses what I have said that I know. (*CA* 3.11.26)

From the perspective of Augustine's Platonism, the skeptical problem that images pose for the apprehensibility of corporeal and sensible things does not arise with respect to the apprehensibility of (T1) through (T3). As truths that are above and outside the mind, (T1) through (T3) are readily distinguishable from all images.

The Insufficiency Problem

To this point, we have been giving a largely dogmatic presentation of Augustine's Platonic commitments, focusing on his identification of pure intellection as a means of knowledge, his schema of the mind's ascent to God, and his discussion of truths that are above and outside the mind. In doing so, our primary concern has been to understand how these commitments help Augustine account for the apprehensibility of those truths he has put forward as apprehensible, particularly the apprehensibility of (T1) through (T3). There are, of course, any number of critical questions that we could raise about these commitments, especially in light of the fact that they implicate Augustine in profoundly hierarchical ways of thinking that we now view with great suspicion. Rather than pursue these questions, however, we will identify a single problem that concerns the sufficiency of these commitments to account for the apprehensibility of (T1) through (T3). We may call this the "Insufficiency Problem."

To understand this problem, let us grant that Augustine's Platonic commitments are sufficient to explain why, when we are contemplating (T1) through (T3), we need not be concerned that we are contemplating images. Because of this, they remove the threat that vacuous impressions pose to the apprehensibility of (T1) through (T3). Even so, unless we are willing to take vacuous impressions as the only type of false impression, there is no reason to grant that these commitments are sufficient to explain why, when we

are contemplating (T1) through (T3), we need not be concerned that we are contemplating something false. As a consequence, unless we are willing to take vacuous impressions as the only type of false impression, there is no reason to grant that these commitments are sufficient to explain the apprehensibility of (T1) through (T3).

In the face of this problem, Augustine might respond that his Platonic commitments do more than we are here recognizing. In particular, he might point out that, in addition to explaining why, when we are contemplating (T1) through (T3), we need not be concerned that we are contemplating images, they also explain why, when we are contemplating (T1) through (T3), we need not be concerned that we are contemplating corporeal and sensible objects. Because of this, they not only remove the threat that vacuous impressions pose to the apprehensibility of (T1) through (T3), they also remove the threat that deceptive sense impressions pose to the apprehensibility of those truths. This, he might add, includes the threat that similar-object impressions pose.

While this response is entirely on point—it shows the power of Augustine's Platonic commitments to explain the apprehensibility of (T1) through (T3)—it does not make the Insufficiency Problem go away. Here we need only amend our formulation of the problem and say that, unless we are willing to take vacuous impressions, *together with deceptive sense impressions*, as the only types of false impression, there is no reason to grant that these commitments are sufficient to explain why, when we are contemplating (T1) through (T3), we need not be concerned that we are contemplating something false. As a consequence, unless we are willing to take vacuous impressions, *together with deceptive sense impressions*, as the only type of false impression, there is no reason to grant that these commitments are sufficient to explain the apprehensibility of (T1) through (T3). Because there is no reason to limit false impressions to vacuous impressions and deceptive sense impressions, the response fails.

That the Insufficiency Problem is both genuine and significant should be apparent to anyone who has had the advantage of reading Descartes. In advancing the Malicious Demon Hypothesis, Descartes advanced the possibility that his impressions of such truths as (T1) through (T3), while neither vacuous nor sensory, are nevertheless false. He was then forced to take the extraordinary step of appealing to God's truthfulness in order to rule this possibility out. Augustine, however, did no such thing. Instead, he was content to show that the considerations that speak against the apprehensibility of what is corporeal and sensible—or against the senses as a means of apprehension—do not speak against the apprehensibility of what is incorpo-

real and intelligible—or against pure intellection as a means of apprehension. In the service of countering the specific attack that the Academics launched against apprehension, this makes good sense, but it falls short of a full accounting of the apprehensibility of (T1) through (T3). For those of us who have had the advantage of reading Descartes, it is natural to ask for more.

The Apprehensibility of (T4)

It is time that we take up (T4)—the class of presentational truths that concern, not how things are, but how things appear—and ask whether Augustine's Platonic commitments offer him a way of explaining the apprehensibility of this class of truths as well. The simple answer is that they do not. To see why, we need only consider that we do not apprehend presentational truths, as we do (T1) through (T3), by turning the mind's attention to what is above and outside it. Rather, we do so by turning the mind's attention to the impressions that are within it and to which it is subject. Here we need only recall that to describe how something appears is to describe the impression it makes on us or, more simply, the impression we have of it. Because of this, Augustine cannot, as he does with (T1) through (T3), appeal to the status of presentational truths as incorporeal and intelligible objects of pure intellection to account for their apprehensibility. They have no such status. For this reason, his Platonic commitments are of no use to him in explaining their apprehensibility.

Despite this fact, the apprehensibility of (T4) is not entirely unrelated to the apprehensibility of (T1) through (T3). This is because, like (T1) through (T3), (T4) is a class of truths that are apprehended by means of a mode of cognition that is distinct from sensation and that is not impugned by the considerations that impugn sensation as a means of apprehension. This is introspection, which occurs when the mind turns its attention back on itself in an examination of its own existence, powers, activities, and contents, all of which are immediately present to it. As is widely acknowledged, Augustine exploited this mode of cognition for the psychological, philosophical, and even theological insights it yields with greater effectiveness than perhaps any thinker before him, and it gives his thought an intimacy that we find in few writers before the modern world. We will save discussion of this mode of cognition for chapter 11, when we explore Augustine's account of our knowledge of first-person truths.[17] For now, we will simply note that the presentational truths of (T4) are the first examples of truths that are appre-

17. See especially the discussion of "Knowledge of First-Person Truths" in chapter 11.

hended by means of it. They are also the only examples of such truths that are put forward in the monologue.

Taking Stock

We are now ready to take stock of what we have learned by making some general observations concerning Augustine's view of the apprehensibility of those truths he has put forward as apprehensible in the monologue. The first thing to say is that, for all his concern to lay Academic skepticism to rest, Augustine was willing to grant the Academic attack on apprehension a surprisingly large sphere of legitimacy. This, as we have seen, is due to the fact that the Academics, having taken the Stoics as their chief interlocutors, directed their arguments primarily at what the Stoics decreed to be the foundation of all apprehension—sense impressions. Their attack was thus largely directed at Stoic empiricism, and it was for this reason that Augustine, like any good Platonist, could not help but have a certain degree of sympathy with it. Although he recognized the senses to be the indispensable means by which we cognize the world around us, he conceded that sense impressions do not satisfy the conditions of Zeno's definition. He thus conceded that the senses are not a means by which we attain apprehension. They may be useful and even necessary for many purposes, but we cannot count on them to deliver truth in a way that allows us to apprehend it.

That being said, Augustine's sympathy with the Academic attack on apprehension had its limits. On his view, the great discovery of the Platonists was the existence of an incorporeal and intelligible world that may be apprehended by means of pure intellection. The objects of this world, which include both God and those truths that are above and outside the mind, are subject to no change and are distinguishable from all images. Because they are subject to no change, they are inherently intelligible, and because they are distinguishable from all images, when we contemplate them, we need not be concerned that we are contemplating images. It was for this reason that Augustine, while willing to allow that the Academics had successfully called into question the apprehensibility of the objects of sensation, was not willing to allow that they had called into question the apprehensibility of the objects of pure intellection. To his mind, pure intellection remains as a means of apprehension that is unchallenged by the Academic attack.

Final Thoughts

If the analysis of this chapter is correct, then Augustine's Platonic commitments tell us much about how he conceived of the apprehensibility of those

truths he has put forward as apprehensible in the monologue. In the end, however, we may wonder how well served he is by those commitments. To say, on the side of epistemology, that apprehension is achieved by pure intellection, and to say, on the side of metaphysics, that the objects of such apprehension are truths that are above and outside the mind, is to put oneself far out on a philosophical limb and to invite vigorous challenge. More important, it is to make affirmations of the kind that the Academics would surely reject as rash. Thus, even if the Academics were the esoteric Platonists that Augustine alleges them to be, it is difficult to see how any of this would be persuasive to them qua skeptics.

In the final analysis, this may not matter much. This is because, in relation to his attempt to counter the Academic attack on apprehension, and ultimately his attempt to vindicate the possibility of knowledge, Augustine's Platonic commitments are more explanatory than anything else. This is to say that, rather than being put forward as truths whose apprehensibility the Academics cannot plausibly deny, they remain in the background of those truths as a means of accounting for their apprehensibility. It is in this that their value lies. Thus, even if the Academics were to reject those commitments as rash, this would not, by itself, entitle them to reject the apprehensibility of any of these truths. In view of this, what matters most is not the defensibility of Augustine's Platonic commitments, but the defensibility of his claim that the truths he has put forward as apprehensible are apprehensible. If we are convinced by this claim, we will judge his attempt to counter the Academic attack on apprehension—and ultimately his attempt to vindicate the possibility of knowledge—a success, irrespective of whether or not we are sympathetic to his Platonism.

Chapter 10

Defense of the Senses

In chapter 9, we undertook an investigation of Augustine's account of the apprehensibility of those truths he puts forward as apprehensible in the monologue of *Against the Academics*. In the course of this investigation, we found that, by linking apprehension to pure intellection, Augustine unlinks it from sensation to such an extent that he explicitly rejects sensation as a means of apprehension. This may not be a radical move for a Platonist to make, but it is significant nonetheless. It means that, with respect to the corporeal and sensible world in which we live, Augustine must concede that the Academics are largely, if not wholly, correct in their assertion that knowledge is not possible for us. Needless to say, this is disappointing. For those of us who are not Platonists, it renders his critique of Academic skepticism far less interesting than it would otherwise be.

In saying this, we should be careful not to oversimplify how things stand. Despite his unwillingness to countenance sensation as a means of apprehension, Augustine treats the senses as reliable instruments of cognition and resists any characterization of them as defective. Most important, he thinks that they warrant our trust to such a degree that we are right, as a general practice, to accept their deliverances as true. Thus, though Augustine remains a thoroughgoing Platonist, there are resources in his thought for those wishing to counter skeptical attacks on sensation. Since these resources form a

small, but significant, part of his critique of Academic skepticism, it is worth investigating them. It is to this task that the present chapter is devoted.

We begin our investigation with a brief examination of two arguments in defense of the general truthfulness of the senses. These are contained in the monologue and are aimed directly at the Academics. We then turn to an examination of remarks Augustine makes in *Literal Commentary on Genesis* concerning the distinguishability of bodies and the sense impressions that present them from images and the vacuous impressions that present them. Implicit in these remarks is an argument that may be used to block the Academic appeal to vacuous impressions as a means of denying the apprehensibility of sense impressions. After constructing and evaluating this argument, we close with some observations concerning Augustine's overall assessment of the cognitive value of sensation. When this investigation is complete, we will have arrived at a more balanced picture of Augustine's views on knowledge than would be possible by focusing exclusively on the Platonic commitments that underlie them.[1]

The Irrelevance Argument

The first argument, which we may call the "Irrelevance Argument," comes from the monologue and is intended to dispel worries about the truthfulness of the senses that emanate from reflection on dreams and hallucinations. Augustine writes:

> I see many things that can be said in defense of the senses and that we do not find countered by the Academics. I believe that the senses should not be accused because madmen suffer false imaginings or because we see false things in dreams. If the senses report what is true to those who are awake and sane, it is of no consequence to them what the mind of someone who is asleep or insane fabricates for itself. (*CA* 3.11.25)

The argument is as simple as it is brief. Since the falsity of the vacuous impressions to which we are subject in states of dreaming and madness does nothing to impeach the truthfulness of the senses, the falsity of those impressions should do nothing to cause us to question the truthfulness of the senses. The one is irrelevant to the other.

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1. Note that we will not examine Augustine's account of the mechanics of sensation. For this account, see *De quant. an.* 23.41–30.60, *De mus.* 6.8–15, and *De Gen. ad litt.* 7.13.20–20.26. A fuller account, which is embedded within Augustine's account of the mechanics of cognition generally, can be found in *De Trin.* 11.2.2–10.17. For a discussion of this material, see King 2014; Bermon 2001, 239–81; O'Daly 1987, 80–105; Nash 1969, 39–59; Gilson 1929, 56–65; and Boyer 1920, 170–74.

If this is indeed how the argument goes, we may be willing to accept it, but we may also wonder why Augustine bothers to make it. Here we need only recall that the Academic appeal to the vacuous impressions to which we are subject in dreams and hallucinations is not intended to impeach the truthfulness of the senses. Rather, it is intended to bolster the claim that, for every impression, it is possible that there be a false impression that is indistinguishable from it. From this the Academics conclude, not that sense impressions are false, but that they are inapprehensible. Augustine's argument does not speak to this at all. Thus, however acceptable it may be on its own terms, it does not get him anywhere against the Academics.

The Epicurean Argument

The second argument, which we may call the "Epicurean Argument," is also intended to dispel worries about the truthfulness of senses. In this case, the worries emanate from reflection, not on dreams and hallucinations, but on perceptual illusions. Appropriated from the Epicurean tradition,[2] it makes its first appearance in a passage from the monologue and immediately follows the argument we have just examined:

> It remains to ask whether, when the senses report something, they report what is true. Now suppose some Epicurean should say: "I have no reason to complain about the senses. It is unjust to demand of them what is beyond their capacity. Whatever the eyes are able to see, they see what is true." "So, is what they see of the oar in the water true?" "Of course it is true, for there is an intervening cause by which it appears as it does. If it were to appear straight when it is submerged in water, I would with greater reason accuse my eyes of giving a false report. Given the existence of such a cause, they would not have seen what they should have seen." (*CA* 3.11.26)

Some four years later, in *True Religion*, Augustine repeats this argument. This time he puts it forward without any mention of its Epicurean origin:

> Not even the eyes deceive, for they cannot report anything to the mind but their own affections. But if all the bodily senses, and not just the

2. For background to this argument, particularly the Epicurean doctrine that all sense impressions are true, see Cicero's discussion in *Acad.* 2.7.19, 2.25.79, 2.26.83, 2.32.101, Lucretius's discussion in *De rer. nat.* 4.469–529, and Sextus's discussion in *M* 7.203–216. For analysis of this material, see Gerson 2009, 91–100; Taylor 1980; and Long 1974, 20–30.

> eyes, report just as they are affected, I do not know what more we should demand of them. . . . If anyone is of the opinion that the oar is broken in water and restored when removed, he does not have bad messengers, but is a bad judge. By their nature, the eyes neither can nor should see anything else in the water. If water is one thing and air is another, it is appropriate that the eyes should see one thing in water and another thing in air. Hence, the eyes see rightly, for they were made only to see. (*De ver. rel.* 34.62)

In the first of these passages, Augustine, speaking in the voice of an Epicurean, advances the claim that our senses always report what is true and makes no exception for cases of perceptual illusion. In the second of these passages, Augustine, speaking in his own voice, advances the somewhat weaker claim that our senses always report things as they should and again makes no exception for cases of perceptual illusion. In both of these passages, he concludes that we have no cause for complaint against the senses.

At first glance, the position that Augustine takes in these passages seems nothing short of ludicrous, but we should not let this prevent us from trying to understand it. More important, we should see that, in claiming that our senses always report what is true or that they always report things as they should, Augustine is not claiming that our senses always report things as they are. Rather, he is claiming that they always report their objects as they are affected by them. Hence, as our senses are affected differently by diverse objects in the same circumstances or by the same object in diverse circumstances, they issue different reports accordingly. It is on the basis of this fact that Augustine claims that our senses always report what is true or that they always report things as they should.

To better understand this, we may consider the stock example of a perceptual illusion: the straight oar that appears bent. Now it is well known that, when an oar is lowered into water, the light reflecting off the part that is submerged is refracted as it passes from the water into the air. It thus acts on our eyes at a different angle than it would if it had not been refracted, and we should expect this difference to be expressed in the manner in which our eyes report the oar. This, as we know, is exactly what happens, for when the oar is lowered into water, our eyes report it as bent rather than as straight. Although this is an illusion, if they did not do this, we would rightly judge that something is wrong. We would rightly judge that our eyes are not appropriately sensitive to the stimuli that are affecting them. Even in the case of perceptual illusion, then, there is no cause for complaint against the senses.

Fortunately, as the Academics were familiar with this line of argument from the Epicureans, we need not speculate as to what their response might be. In a passage from *Academics*, Cicero presents it as follows:

> I would quarrel with a god, not because I do not see far enough, but because what I see is false. Do you see that ship? It appears stationary to us, but to the people on it, this villa seems to be moving. Look for the reason why this is the case. Even if you find it, though I am inclined to think that you cannot, you will not have shown that you have a truthful witness, but that your witness does not give false testimony without a cause. (*Acad.* 2.25.81)

Cicero's point is well taken. It may be that we can account for such perceptual illusions as the oar appearing bent or, in this instance, the ship appearing stationary in terms of the way in which our senses are affected by the stimuli they receive, but the fact remains that these are perceptual illusions and must therefore be counted as cases of misperception. Thus, when we account for such cases in terms of the way in which our senses are affected by the stimuli they receive, we do no more than state the cause of our misperception. We do not establish that our senses report what is true or that they report things as they should.

Cicero is certainly right about this. The truth that we are normally interested in discovering is the truth about how things are rather than about how things affect our senses. Thus, while we may acknowledge Augustine's point that many of the perceptual illusions to which we are subject are not indicative of any defect in our senses, we will nevertheless insist that such illusions count against the claim that our senses always report what is true. To construe that claim in such a way as to get around this fact is sophistical at best.[3]

It is perhaps on account of this that Augustine, when speaking in his own voice in *True Religion*, retreats to the weaker claim that our senses always report things as they should. As this eliminates some of the sophistry associated with the claim that our senses always report what is true, it is to his advantage to make this retreat. However, it is easy to see that doing so bestows only marginal advantage. First, it requires that Augustine reject the common-sense view that our senses should report things as they are in

3. In connection with this point, it is worth noting that Augustine, in *Soliloquies*, treats cases of stationary towers appearing to move and straight oars appearing to be bent as cases in which we perceive what is false. See *Sol.* 2.9.17. Even more strongly, in *The Trinity*, he treats such cases as cases in which the eye is mistaken: "[The eye] is mistaken as when an oar appears broken in water, a tower appears to be moving to those sailing past, and hundreds other things that appear to be other than they are" (*De Trin.* 15.12.21).

favor of the view that they should report their objects as they are affected by them. More seriously, it runs afoul of the fact that, while many perceptual illusions are not indicative of any defect in the senses, many others clearly are. One need only reflect on the case of twin images appearing to a person suffering from double vision to see that this is so. In the face of such cases, even the weaker claim that the senses always report things as they should cannot be sustained without inviting charges of sophistry as well. Thus, though the argument should make us cautious about inferring defect from perceptual illusion, it does not get Augustine much further against the Academics than the first.

The Distinguishability Argument

The third and final argument, which we may call the "Distinguishability Argument," is not one that Augustine formulates, but is strongly suggested by comments he makes concerning the distinguishability of sense impressions from vacuous impressions in book 12 of *Literal Commentary on Genesis*. Discussing the vacuous impressions to which we are subject in normal waking states of consciousness, he writes:

> When we are awake and the mind is not alienated from the bodily senses, we are in a state of bodily vision, which we distinguish from the spiritual vision by which we think of absent bodies in the imagination. We think of these bodies either by recalling objects we know from memory, or by somehow forming objects we do not know but that exist in the very thinking of the spirit, or by fashioning objects at will that do not exist anywhere at all. We distinguish the bodies we see and are present to our senses from all these objects so that we do not doubt that the former are bodies, whereas the latter are images of bodies. (*De Gen. ad litt.* 12.12.25)

What Augustine is telling us here is easy to understand and accords well with our experience. When we are in a normal state of waking consciousness, we may entertain any number of images, either of real things or of unreal things. Nevertheless, we are readily able to differentiate those images and the vacuous impressions that present them from bodies and the sense impressions that present them. Thus, when we are in a normal state of waking consciousness, we run little risk of deception on account of mistaking images for bodies or vacuous impressions for sense impressions.

That Augustine would say this may seem confusing in light of his remarks, which we examined in chapter 9, on the indistinguishability of images from

bodies and consequent inapprehensibility of sense impressions.[4] This confusion may easily be cleared up if we keep in mind that Augustine restricts the images that are indistinguishable from bodies to those that are presented by vacuous impressions arising in abnormal states of consciousness—states of dreaming, madness, vivid reverie, and the like. It is only in those states, he thinks, that vacuous impressions present images with a force and vivacity that matches that with which sense impressions present bodies. In normal states of waking consciousness, they do not. It is thus Augustine's view that, as long as we are in a normal state of waking consciousness, we need not worry about being deceived by the vacuous impressions to which we are subject in that state or the images that such impressions present. They pose no problem of indistinguishability for us.

Although he does not draw out its antiskeptical implications, the position that Augustine takes here is strongly suggestive of an argument that can be used to block the Academic appeal to vacuous impressions as a means of denying the apprehensibility of sense impressions. This argument has as its basis a principle to which Augustine, in light of the comments he here makes on the distinguishability of sense impressions and vacuous impressions, seems clearly committed. We may call this the "Principle of Distinguishability" and state it as follows:

> *Principle of Distinguishability.* If S is in a normal state of waking consciousness, then S is able to distinguish the sense impressions to which he or she is subject in that state from any of the vacuous impressions to which he or she is (or might be) subject in that state.

Employing this principle as an initial premise, we may construct the argument as follows:

(1) If S is in a normal state of waking consciousness, then S is able to distinguish the sense impressions to which he or she is subject in that state from any of the vacuous impressions to which he or she is (or might be) subject in that state.
(2) If S is able to distinguish the sense impressions to which he or she is subject in a normal state of waking consciousness from any of the vacuous impressions to which he or she is (or might be) subject in that state, then none of the vacuous impressions to which S is (or might be) subject in a normal state of waking consciousness count

4. On this, see chapter 9.

against the apprehensibility of the sense impressions to which he or she is subject in that state.

∴ (3) If S is in a normal state of waking consciousness, then none of the vacuous impressions to which S is (or might be) subject in that state count against the apprehensibility of the sense impressions to which he or she is subject in that state. (from 1 and 2)

If acceptable, this argument shows us that the mere fact that a person is in a normal state of waking consciousness in large measure nullifies the threat that vacuous impressions pose to the apprehensibility of his or her sense impressions. This is because the only vacuous impressions that may threaten the apprehensibility of those impressions are vacuous impressions from which he or she cannot distinguish those impressions, and none of the vacuous impressions to which he or she is subject in a normal state of waking consciousness are of that type.

So much is clear, but the argument may be extended to establish something even more significant. In particular, it may be extended to establish that the mere fact that a person is in a normal state of waking consciousness nullifies the threat that vacuous impressions pose to the apprehensibility of his or her sense impressions altogether—including the threat posed by those vacuous impressions arising in abnormal states of consciousness. To do so, we need only add a premise to the effect that the apprehensibility of that person's sense impressions may be threatened only by vacuous impressions arising in a normal state of waking consciousness:

(4) If a vacuous impression to which S is (or might be) subject counts against the apprehensibility of the sense impressions to which he or she is subject in a normal state of waking consciousness, then that impression is among the vacuous impressions to which S is (or might be) subject in that state.

From this we may now conclude:

∴ (5) If S is in a normal state of waking consciousness, then none of the vacuous impressions to which S is (or might be) subject count against the apprehensibility of the sense impressions to which he or she is subject in that state. (from 3 and 4)

If this conclusion holds, then the threat that vacuous impressions pose to the apprehensibility of sense impressions is eliminated completely for the

person who is in a normal state of waking consciousness. (3) eliminates the threat posed by vacuous impressions arising in a normal state of waking consciousness, and (4) eliminates the threat posed by vacuous impressions arising in an abnormal state of consciousness. The conclusion of the argument, (5), just states the consequence of this double elimination.

This is without question a powerful argument, and it is one that has the potential to significantly weaken the Academic challenge to the possibility of apprehension by undercutting its appeal to vacuous impressions. Nevertheless, it is not one that the Academics are bound to accept. While the obvious move for them to make would be to reject the Principle of Distinguishability on which the argument rests, it is more likely that they would reject (4). This is because it is precisely to the vacuous impressions that arise in abnormal states of consciousness that they appeal in order to deny the apprehensibility of sense impressions, and it is just such an appeal that (4) is invoked to exclude. Thus, if the Academics allow (4) to stand, they will have to abandon the appeal to vacuous impressions or limit it to those that arise in normal states of waking consciousness. As both of these options are unattractive, (4) will be the likely target of their attack.

The problem for the Academics is that (4) has a good bit of prima facie plausibility. Here we may rightly ask why vacuous impressions arising in abnormal states of consciousness should be taken to pose any threat at all to the apprehensibility of sense impressions arising in normal states of waking consciousness. After all, if the Principle of Distinguishability is correct, then the person who is in a normal state of waking consciousness is able to distinguish his or her sense impressions from all the vacuous impressions to which he or she is, or even might be, subject in that state. Why should we demand more of him or her than this? To do so seems wholly unreasonable.

To this question the Academic will surely reply that it is not only reasonable, but necessary, to demand more, and that we must reject (4) as a result. To see why, it may help if we imagine a dialogue between an Academic and Augustine in which the Academic makes just such a demand:

Academic: Please tell me something you take yourself to know.

Augustine: I'm happy to oblige. Among other things, I know that there's a boat sailing out there in the harbor.

Academic: How do you know that?

Augustine: That's easy. I see it.

Academic: Ah, you say that you see it, but how do you know that what you take to be a sense impression of a boat isn't really just a vacuous impression of an image of a boat?

Augustine: That's easy too. If it were a vacuous impression of an image of a boat, I'd know it.

Academic: How can you be so sure?

Augustine: I'm in a normal state of waking consciousness, and, in such a state, I can distinguish the sense impressions to which I'm subject from the vacuous impressions to which I'm subject. I can distinguish bodies from images for the same reason.

Academic: Perhaps you're right, but let me ask you another question.

Augustine: What's that?

Academic: How do you know that what you take to be a sense impression of a boat isn't really just a vacuous impression of an image of a boat that arises in an abnormal state of consciousness? More generally, how do you know that you're in a normal state of waking consciousness and not dreaming or hallucinating?

Here we must see that, in asking this last question, the Academic is demanding more from Augustine than that he be able to distinguish his sense impressions from the vacuous impressions to which he is subject in a normal waking state of consciousness. He or she is demanding that he be able to distinguish his sense impressions from the vacuous impressions to which he is subject in an abnormal state of consciousness as well. If he is not able to do this, the Academic suggests, then, for all he knows, he does not see what he thinks he sees and does not know what he thinks he knows.

Whether this demand on the part of the Academic is ultimately reasonable is a complicated issue that cannot be settled here. However, it must at least be acknowledged that the question that expresses it is a natural one to ask of someone who claims to know on the basis of what he or she believes his or her senses are reporting.[5] This may well be why Augustine, though committed to the Principle of Distinguishability, never put forward the argument that we have constructed on its basis. Taking the demand to be reasonable, he too rejected (4) and thus did not see that the Principle of Distinguishability could be wielded to block the Academic appeal to vacuous impressions as a means of denying the apprehensibility of sense impressions. This, of course, is just speculation, but it may explain why Augustine was willing to concede that

5. This, as we know, is the question Descartes asks while sitting by the fire in his dressing gown: "How frequently nocturnal rest persuades me of these common things—that I am here, clothed in my dressing gown, sitting near the fire—when I am lying between the sheets with my clothes removed" (*Med.* 1; AT 7.19). It is also the question Augustine asks in the monologue, when defending his claim to know truths within the domain of physics. See the discussion of the possibility of dreaming in chapter 8.

sense impressions are inapprehensible while at the same time maintaining that, when we are in a normal state of waking consciousness, our sense impressions and the bodies they present are distinguishable from the vacuous impressions to which we are subject and the images they present. Without an acceptance of the reasonability of the demand and a rejection of (4), this is difficult to explain.

The Senses as Sources of Knowledge

None of what we have just examined in any fundamental way changes the picture of Augustine that has emerged in the preceding chapters. However, it does bring balance to that picture, particularly as we have placed special emphasis on Augustine's Platonic commitments as a way of understanding how he accounts for the apprehensibility of those truths he puts forward in the monologue as apprehensible. In our examination of the Irrelevance Argument, we saw Augustine deny that the vacuous impressions to which we are subject in abnormal states of consciousness impeach the truthfulness of the senses, and in our examination of the Epicurean Argument, we saw him assert that the senses always report what is true or always report things as they should. Finally, in our examination of his remarks concerning the distinguishability of sense impressions and the bodies they present from vacuous impressions and the images they present, we saw him deny that we are liable to confuse the latter with the former while in a normal state of waking consciousness. It is on the basis of these remarks that we have constructed an argument—the Distinguishability Argument—that can be used to establish that no vacuous impressions of any kind threaten the apprehensibility of sense impressions. Taken as a whole, these arguments show that Augustine, even if unwilling to countenance sensation as a means of apprehension, is willing to defend the senses as reliable instruments of cognition that merit our trust. We thus find him writing that, in contrast to the Academics, "the City of God trusts the senses, which the mind employs through the body, as evidence in each matter, since the person who thinks that they should never be believed is more miserably mistaken" (*De civ. Dei* 19.18).[6]

6. The full passage reads as follows: "As to the distinctive feature that Varro attributes to the New Academics, for whom all things are uncertain, the City of God thoroughly detests such doubt as madness. It has absolutely certain knowledge of things it apprehends by the mind and reason, even if this knowledge is slight on account of the corruptible body, which weighs down the soul. . . . The City of God trusts the senses, which the mind employs through the body, as evidence in each matter, since the person who thinks that they should never be believed is more miserably mistaken" (*De civ. Dei* 19.18). For a discussion of Augustine's view of the value of the senses as instruments of cognition, see King 2014; O'Daly 1987, 92–102; and Boyer 1920, 41–44.

In view of this, it is not surprising to find Augustine speaking of what we learn—and even of what we know—through the senses. Perhaps the most striking instance of this occurs in book 15 of *The Trinity*, in a chapter dedicated to a review of truths whose apprehensibility can be maintained against the Academics. After putting forward several of these truths, he writes:

> We know two kinds of thing: what the mind perceives through the bodily senses, and what the mind perceives through itself. The Academics have chattered a great deal in opposition to the bodily senses, but they have been completely unable to cast doubt on those most firm perceptions of true things had by the mind itself, such as what I have said: "I know that I am alive." But we should not doubt that what we have learned through the bodily senses is true. Through them we have learned of the heavens and the earth, as well as of those things in them that are known to us, inasmuch as he who fashioned both us and them willed us to know them. (*De Trin.* 15.12.21)

What is significant about this passage is that Augustine, after drawing the familiar distinction between what the mind perceives through the senses and what the mind perceives through itself, now affirms that we know both kinds of thing. In doing so, he affirms not only that the corporeal and sensible world is knowable to us, but also that the senses are sources of knowledge. This latter point he reiterates just a few lines later: "We must confess that much has been added to our knowledge, not only by our own bodily senses, but by those of others as well" (*De Trin.* 15.12.21).[7] Thus, however much Augustine may disparage the senses elsewhere, he does none of it here.

If we are to make sense of all this, we must not think that Augustine here treats sensation as being on par with pure intellection. As we have seen, it is his view that we attain apprehension, and hence knowledge in the strict sense, by means of pure intellection rather than sensation, and this passage does nothing to suggest that he retreats from this view. What it does suggest is that Augustine is willing to acknowledge that we may attain knowledge in a less than strict sense by means of sensation. This he does explicitly in a passage from *Retractions*, in which he reaffirms that the senses (together with testimony) are sources of knowledge:

> When we speak properly, we say that we know only what we apprehend by the firm reason of the mind. But when we speak more in

7. In saying that our knowledge is augmented by the bodily senses of others, Augustine implicitly endorses testimony as a source of knowledge as well. See also his remarks on testimony as a source of knowledge in *De Trin.* 15.12.21. For analysis, see King and Ballantyne 2009.

> accord with common usage, as Holy Scripture speaks, we should not hesitate to say that we know both what we perceive by the bodily senses and what we believe on faith from worthy witnesses. We do this while nevertheless understanding the distinction between the latter and the former. (*Ret.* 1.14.3)

On the view that Augustine expresses here, there is a distinction to be made between knowledge in the strict sense, whose conditions are highly stringent and which has apprehension as its basis, and knowledge in a less than strict sense, whose conditions are not so highly stringent and which does not have apprehension as its basis.[8] What allows the senses to be counted as sources of knowledge in this less than strict sense, which is the sense in which we speak of it in ordinary contexts, is not specified. It is reasonable to assume, however, that it is what we saw defended in the arguments we have examined above, namely, that the senses are truthful and that we are not liable to confuse images and the vacuous impressions that present them with bodies and the sense impressions that present them while in a normal state of waking consciousness. From Augustine's perspective, then, since the Academics have done nothing to call any of this into question, though they have given us some reason to think that sensation is not a means of apprehension, and hence not a means of knowledge in the strict sense, they have given us no reason, as a matter of general practice, not to accept their deliverances as true. It is because of this, and not because he thinks that sensation is on par with pure intellection, that he is willing to waive aside what the Academics have said against the senses as mere chatter.

Final Thoughts

In keeping with his Platonic commitments, Augustine never abandons the view that sensation is not a means of apprehension and hence is not a means of knowledge in the strict sense. This he reserves for pure intellection. Consequently, he is willing to endorse the Inapprehensibility Thesis of the Academics with the proviso that its scope be restricted to sense impressions. What he is not willing to endorse are broader doubts about the senses of a kind that would undercut our trust in them as reliable instruments of cognition. As all of the material in this chapter indicates, Augustine is strongly

8. King (2014) makes a useful proposal concerning this. Noting that Augustine, in the passage we have cited from *De Trin.* 15.12.21, says that, through the senses, we learn about the world inasmuch as God has willed us to know it, King proposes that Augustine's trust in the senses ultimately stems from his belief that God has designed them to be used in coming to know the world.

committed to the truthfulness of the senses and is even willing to treat sensation as a means of knowledge in a less than strict sense. His overall assessment of the cognitive value of sensation is therefore positive. As readers of Augustine, we must always keep this in mind, especially when we are dealing with the more Platonically inspired aspects of his work. If we do not, we will likely end up with a caricature of his views.

Unfortunately, what is missing from Augustine's work is a fully developed defense of the senses as reliable instruments of cognition. The arguments he supplies to diffuse threats to their truthfulness emanating, first, from dreams and hallucinations and, second, from perceptual illusions, while interesting, are far from adequate. The first does not address any objection that the Academics actually put forward, and the second does not establish that the senses always report what is true or that they always report things as they should in the sense that really matters to us. More interesting are Augustine's remarks concerning the distinguishability of bodies and the sense impressions that present them from images and the vacuous impressions that present them, but he does little to exploit the antiskeptical potential of the fact of this distinguishability. Perhaps more seriously, Augustine fails to provide anything close to a precise analysis of the reliability of the senses in terms of its conditions and scope. Since he acknowledges that the senses at least some of the time do present things other than they are, this is certainly something that we would like to see him develop. Thus, while there are valuable resources in Augustine's thought for those looking to counter skeptical attacks on sensation, those resources fall short of a fully articulated defense of the reliability of the senses.

Chapter 11

First-Person Truths

It is often claimed that Augustine was the first philosopher to take subjectivity seriously. In the same vein, it is often claimed that he was the first philosopher to explore the inner self, practice philosophy as autobiography, or do philosophy from a first-person perspective.[1] Such claims are difficult to evaluate, in no small part because they are difficult to pin down, but it is easy to see why they have been made. On Augustine's view, it is a fundamental fact about the human mind that it is present to itself in such a way that it can be an object of its own awareness. It thus has access to its own first-person perspective and can reflect on it. Now this fact about the mind may seem blindingly obvious to us, but Augustine exploited it in his philosophical work in such a way that, if not entirely without precedent, no writer before him can be said to have done. It is one of the features of at least some of his work that makes it seem so modern.

Among the consequences of this interest in subjectivity is that, from his earliest days as a writer, Augustine identified a set of first-person truths of which he claimed to have knowledge. More precisely, he identified a set of truths concerning himself as a subject that are stated in the first person

1. Excellent summary treatments of Augustine's practice of philosophy from a first-person perspective can be found in Matthews 2010 and Taylor 1989, 127–42. For a study of Augustine's exploration of the inner self, see Cary 2000. For a study of classical views of self-awareness that contains extensive discussion of Augustine, see Sorabji 2006, 201–61.

of which he claimed to have knowledge. Although Augustine put these truths forward for a variety of purposes and discussed them in contexts in which concerns with skepticism are distant, he nevertheless recognized their antiskeptical potential and considered their apprehensibility to be immune to skeptical challenge. Thus, in addition to (T1) Tautological Truths, (T2) Mathematical Truths, (T3) Dialectical Truths, and (T4) Presentational Truths, which we have examined in previous chapters, we may take such first-person truths to constitute a fifth class of truths, (T5), whose existence Augustine thinks stands as a decisive refutation of the Academic denial of the possibility of knowledge. It is to the exploration of his treatment of these truths that this chapter is devoted.

First-Person Truths: An Initial Exploration

One of the earliest discussions of first-person truths in Augustine's corpus occurs in *Soliloquies*, an inner dialogue between Augustine and Reason that he composed at Cassiciacum during the same period as *Against the Academics*. In a passage from the opening of book 2, which sets up an investigation into the soul's immortality, we find the following:[2]

> Reason: You who wish to know yourself, do you know that you exist?
> Augustine: Yes, I know this.
> Reason: How do you know this?
> Augustine: I do not know.
> ……..
> Reason: Do you know that you think?
> Augustine: Yes, I know this.
> Reason: Therefore, it is true that you think.
> Augustine: Yes, that is true. (*Sol.* 2.1.1)

Here Augustine identifies two truths about himself as a subject—first-person truths—that he claims to know. These are:

(1) I exist.
(2) I think.

2. The questions with which this snippet of dialogue is concerned—"Do you know that you exist?" and "Do you know that you think?"—are examples of what Matthews calls "I★ questions" (I-star questions). These are questions that employ the reflexive use of a personal pronoun, whether "I" or "you" or some other, which can be marked by affixing "★" to the pronoun, as in: "Do I know that I★ exist?" or "Do I know that I★ think?" Matthews calls that which "I★" picks out in such questions "thought's ego" and identifies it as the central subject of Augustine's (as well as Descartes's) first-person investigations. See Matthews 1992, 1–10.

Interestingly, though Augustine claims to know these truths, he offers no defense of this claim. Nor does he offer any explanation as to how he knows them. That he knows them just seems to be given.

This would not be the case for long. Within a few years of completing *Soliloquies*, Augustine began work on *Free Choice of the Will*. In it, we find the following exchange between Augustine and his friend Evodius over the latter's knowledge of the same sort of truths:

> Augustine: So that we may begin from what is most evident, I first ask whether you know that you exist. Perhaps you fear that you will be mistaken in this line of questioning. Certainly, if you did not exist, you could not be mistaken at all.
> Evodius: Yes. Go on to what remains.
> Augustine: Therefore, since it is evident that you exist, and this would not be evident to you if you were not alive, it is also evident that you are alive. Do you understand these two things to be absolutely true?
> Evodius: Indeed, I understand.
> Augustine: Therefore, a third thing is also evident, namely, that you understand.
> Evodius: Yes. That is evident. (*De lib. arb.* 2.3.7)

In this passage the discussion is about the first-person truths that Evodius, rather than Augustine, knows, but that is of no consequence. One from the previous list is included:

(1) I exist.

And two new ones are added:

(3) I am alive.
(4) I understand.

More interesting than the differences in the lists is the justification that is offered on behalf of these truths and hence on behalf of the claim to know them. The truth of each, Augustine alleges, should be evident to Evodius, with the evidentness of (1) being cited as the basis of the evidentness of (3), and the evidentness of (3), in addition to the evidentness of (1), being cited as the basis of the evidentness of (4). Beyond this, we will not pause to reconstruct Augustine's reasoning except to note that, with respect to (1), Augustine claims that Evodius cannot be mistaken. This is a claim we will return to and examine in some detail as we proceed.

What is striking about all this is that none of the first-person truths that we have so far encountered are advanced for antiskeptical purposes. (1) and (2) are advanced in *Soliloquies* for the purpose of setting up an investigation into the soul's immortality, and (1), (3), and (4) are advanced in *Free Choice of the Will* for the purpose of setting up an investigation into God's existence. Even more striking is the fact that such first-person truths get only passing mention in *Against the Academics*, where Augustine's stated aim is to refute the Academics. There he writes:

> [If nothing can be apprehended], then we should say that wisdom cannot come to man rather than that the wise man does not know why he is alive, how he is alive, or whether he is alive. Finally, nothing more perverse, delusional, or insane can be said than that a man is wise and at the same time does not know wisdom. What is more difficult to accept: that a man cannot be wise or that a wise man does not know wisdom? (*CA* 3.9.19)

Augustine's point in this passage is that the Academics should say that humans cannot possess wisdom rather than that the wise person does not know wisdom and, in particular, that he or she does not know such things as why, how, or whether he or she is alive. However, he gives no indication here that he takes any of these to be truths that the Academics must concede that we are able to know. Hence, he does little at this early stage in his career to exploit the significant antiskeptical potential that appeal to first-person truths holds. Given that it was precisely at this early stage in his career that Augustine was most exercised by skepticism, this is curious.

Knowledge of First-Person Truths

As we will see, if Augustine did not initially recognize the antiskeptical potential that appeal to first-person truths holds, he most certainly came to recognize it as his career progressed. Before we get to that, however, we must first examine his account of our knowledge of first-person truths. This account receives its fullest expression late in Augustine's corpus, in an extensive discussion of the mind's knowledge of itself that occurs in book 10 of *The Trinity*.[3] Here we will begin with a passage in which Augustine considers our ability to obey the Delphic command "Know yourself," which he takes to be addressed to the mind:

3. For general discussion of Augustine on the mind's knowledge of itself, see Sorabji 2006, 212–29; and Rist 1994, 85–90. For detailed analysis of book 10 of *The Trinity*, see Bermon 2001, 77–104.

> It is not said to the mind, "Know yourself," in the same way it is said, "Know the Cherubim and the Seraphim." We believe about these beings, which are absent from us, what has been declared about them, namely, that they are heavenly powers. Nor is this said to the mind in the same way it is said, "Know the will of that man." That will is not present to us so that we can in any way perceive it, either by the senses or the intellect, unless it is disclosed to us by bodily signs. And when it is disclosed, we believe more than we understand. Nor is this said to the mind in the same way it is said to a man, "See your face," which cannot be done except in a mirror. Even the face itself is absent from our gaze, since it is not in a place where that gaze can be directed. But when it is said to the mind, "Know yourself," the mind knows itself at the very instant it understands the word "yourself," and this happens for no other reason than that the mind is present to itself. (*De Trin.* 10.9.12)

In this passage, Augustine makes a point that is central to his view of knowledge, namely, that we know only those things that are present to either the senses or the mind in such a way that we may be directly aware of them.[4] Because of this, such things as angels, the minds of other people, and even our own faces are not objects of knowledge, for they are not present to either the senses or the mind in such a way that we may be directly aware of them.[5] This, however, is not the case with the mind itself. As Augustine tells us, the mind not only is present to itself in such a way that it may be directly aware

4. The clearest statement of this occurs in *The Teacher.* With respect to our knowledge of sensible things, Augustine has this to say: "When we are asked about sensible things, if those things are present, we answer—as we do when, while looking directly at the new moon, we are asked what kind it is or where it is. In this case, if the person who asks does not see, he believes on the basis of our words. . . . However, he does not learn anything unless he sees what is being spoken about for himself. When he does, he does not learn from our words, but from the things themselves and the senses, for words make the same sound for both the man who sees and the man who does not see" (*De mag.* 12.39). With respect to our knowledge of intelligible things, he has this to say: "But when a question is raised about what we examine with the mind, that is, with intellect and reason, we are speaking about what we look at in that inner light of truth in which the so-called inner man is illuminated and finds enjoyment. But in this case, if the man who is listening to us also sees these things by an inner and unmixed eye, he knows what I am speaking about by his own contemplation and not by my words. Therefore, in speaking truths, I do not teach even this man, if he is looking at these truths. He is taught, not by my words, but by the things themselves insofar as they are made manifest by God's inner disclosure of them" (*De mag.* 12.40).

5. The case of one's own face is unclear. It is not present to the eye naturally but can be made present by the artifice of a mirror. Augustine does not tell us whether he considers this sufficient for knowledge. Instead, he is only concerned to distinguish this case from the case of the mind, which is naturally present to itself.

of itself, but is so present to itself that it obeys the command to know itself at the very moment that it receives it.

In view of this, it is easy to see how Augustine accounts for our knowledge of the most basic of first-person truths:

(1) I exist.

Very simply, as the mind is present to itself, it need only turn its attention back on itself in an act of introspection. When it does, it becomes directly aware of itself and knows the truth of (1). What goes for (1), however, goes for other first-person truths as well. This is because, in addition to the mind being present to itself, its acts are present together with it. In a passage, again from *The Trinity*, in which he constructs an argument for the immateriality of the mind, Augustine makes this clear:

> [If the mind were a material substance such as fire or air], it would not think of that substance in the same way as it does other material substances. It would not think of it by means of an imaginary figment, which it employs when thinking about sensible things that are absent from it. . . . Rather, it would think of it by means of an inward presence that is real and not simulated—for nothing is more present to the mind than itself—in the same way as it knows that it lives, remembers, understands, and wills. It knows these things in itself, and it does not imagine them as if it had come into contact with them through an external sense, as when it comes into contact with bodies. If it attaches nothing to itself from the thoughts of these things, so that it thinks of itself as being of this kind, then whatever remains to it of itself, this alone is its very self. (*De Trin.* 10.10.16)

We need not worry here about how this argument works in its details. We need only note that it hinges on the claim that, if the mind were a material substance, it would be directly aware of its materiality in the same way as it is directly aware of other things that are present to it. In particular, it would be directly aware of its materiality in the same way as it is directly aware of its acts of living, remembering, understanding, and willing. Hence, it would know the truth of

(5) I am fire,

or

(6) I am air,

in the same way that it knows the truth of

(3) I am alive,
(7) I remember,
(4) I understand,

and

(8) I will.

Since it does not, Augustine concludes, the mind is not a material substance.[6]

Taken together, these passages show that, as Augustine came to understand it, our knowledge of the most basic of first-person truths, (1), as well as our knowledge of such first person truths as (2), (3), (4), (7), and (8), is made possible by the fact that the mind, together with its acts, is present to itself. When the mind turns its gaze back on itself in an act of introspection, it becomes directly aware of itself and so knows a rich variety of truths concerning itself as a subject.[7] These, as is now clear, are not just any truths concerning itself as a subject. They are truths concerning the mind's existence and acts that are knowable on account of the presence of the mind to itself.

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6. Augustine presents a shorter version of this argument in *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, which ends with the following: "Therefore, let the soul cease to suspect that it is a body, since, if it were body, it would know itself to be so. The soul knows itself more than it knows the heaven and the earth, which it knows through its bodily eyes" (*De Gen. ad litt.* 7.21.28). For analysis, see Matthews 1992, 39–42.

7. There is a minor qualification that must be added here. Augustine tells us in two further passages that, because the mind, together with its acts, is always present to itself, it always knows itself and its acts. Strictly speaking, what we do when we introspect is attend to knowledge we already possess: "It is enough that we are certain that, if a man is able to think of his mind's nature and find what is true about it, he will not find what belongs to himself anywhere else. He will find, not what he did not know, but that of which he was not thinking. What do we know, if we do not know what is in our mind, for we cannot know any of the things that we know except by the mind?" (*De Trin.* 14.5.8). And again: "It remains that the sight of the mind pertains to its nature and that the mind is called back to that nature when it thinks of itself—not, as it were, through the places of space, but by an incorporeal conversion. When the mind does not think of itself, it is not in its own sight, and its gaze is not formed by that nature. Nevertheless, it knows itself as if it were a memory of itself to itself" (*De Trin.* 14.6.8). Though minor, this qualification is worth keeping in mind. It reveals just how intimately Augustine links the mind's presence to itself to its knowledge of itself and hence to its knowledge of first-person truths. For our purposes, however, we may continue to say that, for Augustine, we acquire knowledge of first-person truths by means of introspection and that this is made possible by the fact that the mind, together with its acts, is present to itself. We need only keep in mind that acquiring knowledge should be construed as attending to knowledge we already possess.

Defense of the Knowledge of First-Person Truths

With his account of our knowledge of first-person truths in place, we turn now to Augustine's defense of his claim to know such truths. Our focus will be *City of God* 11.26, since it is there that Augustine explicitly asserts the invulnerability of his claim to know first-person truths to skeptical attack. It is also there that he develops a set of antiskeptical arguments that have affinities with some of the signature arguments of Descartes, who came under Augustine's influence in his own treatment of first-person truths.[8]

Augustine begins *City of God* 11.26 with a remarkable statement: "We recognize in ourselves the image of God, that is, the image of the highest Trinity" (*De civ. Dei* 11.26). What is remarkable about this statement is not its affirmation that we are created in the image of God—standard fare among Christian thinkers—but rather its casting of this image as an image of the Trinity. Famously, since Augustine takes this image to be found, not in the body, nor even in the soul as a whole, but in the mind alone, this allows him to investigate the nature of the Trinity by way of an examination of various trinities of the mind.[9] His focus here is the trinity of being, knowing, and delighting: "We exist, we know that we exist, and we delight in the fact that we both exist and know it" (*De civ. Dei* 11.26). It is in the recognition of this trinity, Augustine tells us, that we recognize the image of the Trinity within ourselves.

Now what is of interest to us in these lines is that, in putting this trinity of the mind forward, Augustine claims to know a trio of first-person truths. These are:

(1) I exist.
(9) I know that I exist.
(10) I delight in the fact that I exist and know it.

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8. These affinities were first pointed out by Descartes's contemporaries, most notably by Mersenne (AT 1.376), Colvius (AT 3.247), and Arnauld (AT 7.198). On this material, see Gilson 1930, 191–201. The most helpful philosophical treatment of Augustine and Descartes on first-person truths is Matthews 1992. On the general influence of Augustine on Descartes, particularly with respect to the latter's metaphysical project, see Menn 1998. For a broader, historically oriented study, see Gouhier 1978.

9. This is a project that Augustine conceived as early as *Conf.* 13.11.12, but only gestures toward in *De civ. Dei* 11.26. He carries it out in full in *The Trinity*, where he writes: "We have now reached the point in our discussion where we consider the principal part of the human mind by which it knows—or is able to know—God. This we do so that we might find the image of God there. Although the human mind is not of the same nature as God, the image of his nature—a nature than which there is no greater—should be sought and found in us there where our nature has nothing better" (*De Trin.* 14.8.11). Note that the "principal part" of the human mind in which the image resides most especially is the so-called higher reason, whose function it is to contemplate God and eternal things. On this, see *De Trin.*12.4.4. On Augustine's general views on the Trinity, including his project of exploring mental trinities, see Clarke 2001.

As with his knowledge of other first-person truths, Augustine takes knowledge of these truths to be introspective and based on the fact that the mind, together with its acts, is present to itself. However, he does something here that we have not seen him do elsewhere. He defends his claim to know these truths by appealing to the fact that our existence, knowledge, and delight are not imitable by images:

> In the three things of which I have spoken, there is no falsity similar to truth that disturbs us. We do not come into contact with these things by any bodily sense, as we do with what is outside us—sensing colors by seeing, sounds by hearing, odors by smelling, flavors by tasting, and hard and soft things by touching. In thinking we turn to the images of sensible things. These images are similar to those things, but they are not actually bodily. We hold these images in our memory, and they excite in us a desire for sensible things. But without any deceptive imagination of *phantasiae* or *phantasmata*, I am absolutely certain that I exist and that I both know and love this. (*De civ. Dei* 11.26)

Augustine's point in this passage is familiar. Although bodies can be imitated by images in such a way that, when we are sensing them, we cannot rule out the possibility that we are subject to vacuous impressions, this is not the case with existence, knowledge, and delight. This is because the mind and its acts, being incorporeal, are not imitable by images. It is for this reason that, with respect to existence, knowledge, and delight, "there is no falsity similar to truth that disturbs us" (*De civ. Dei* 11.26). The falsity Augustine has in mind here is that of images and the vacuous impressions that present them.

This is a fair point—it speaks to the apprehensibility of (1), (9), and (10)—but it falls far short of establishing it. To see why, let us grant that the incorporeality of the mind makes it such that, when we are aware of our existence, knowledge, and delight, we need not be concerned that we are subject to vacuous impressions. Let us even grant that the incorporeality of the mind makes it such that, when we are aware of our existence, knowledge, and delight, we need not be concerned that we are subject to deceptive sense impressions. The problem is that, unless vacuous impressions and deceptive sense impressions are the only kinds of false impression, this does not explain why, when we are aware of our existence, knowledge, and delight, we need not be concerned that we are subject to false impressions. By extension, it does not explain why, when we assent to (1), (9), and (10), we need not be concerned that we are assenting to something false. This, as we may recall from the discussion of chapter 9, is the Insufficiency Problem all over again.

Si fallor, sum

Fortunately, Augustine has much more to offer in defense of his claim to know (1), (9), and (10). Having dismissed the possibility that the impressions that present these truths are vacuous, Augustine turns to his claim to know (1):[10]

> With respect to these truths, I do not fear any of the arguments of the Academics, who say: "What if you are mistaken?" If I am mistaken, I exist. Someone who does not exist certainly cannot be mistaken. By this very fact, I exist if I am mistaken. Therefore, since I exist if I am mistaken, how am I mistaken about the fact that I exist, when it is certain that I exist if I am mistaken? Therefore, since I would exist if I were mistaken, even if I am mistaken, there is no doubt that I am not mistaken about the fact that I know that I exist. (*De civ. Dei* 11.26)

In this justly famous passage, Augustine defends his claim to know,

(1) I exist,

on the ground that his belief that (1) is infallible. In other words, he defends it on the ground that it is impossible that he be mistaken in his belief that (1). This he does in opposition to the Academics, whom he imagines as raising the possibility that he is mistaken. Now we might expect Augustine to account for the infallibility of this belief by appealing to the fact that the truth of (1), insofar as it is a condition of his believing anything at all, is a condition of his believing that (1). What he does instead is appeal to the paradoxical fact that the truth of (1), insofar as it is a condition of his being mistaken in any of his beliefs at all, is a condition of his being mistaken in his belief that (1). This, at any rate, is what is expressed by the dictum, *Si fallor, sum*. Employing a version of this dictum as an initial premise, and adding an additional premise to the effect that, if he exists, then he is not mistaken in his belief that he exists, we may thus construe this passage as making something like the following argument:

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10. The most exhaustive study of what has come to be called the "Augustinian *cogito*," which finds one of its definitive expressions in this passage, is Bermon 2001, which takes a largely phenomenological approach to Augustine's work and draws connections to the work of Husserl. The best analytic treatment of what is contained in this passage remains Matthews 1972. This analysis is expanded, with some rethinking, in Matthews 1992, 29–38. Helpful discussion can also be found in Sorabji 2006, 212–29; Rist 1994, 63–67; Kirwan 1989, 30–33; and Boyer 1920, 32–41.

(11) If I mistakenly believe that I exist, then I exist.
(12) If I exist, then it is not the case that I mistakenly believe that I exist.
(13) If I mistakenly believe that I exist, then it is not the case that I mistakenly believe that I exist. (from 11 and 12)
(14) Either it is not the case that I mistakenly believe that I exist or it is not the case that I mistakenly believe that I exist. (from 13)
∴ (15) It is not the case that I mistakenly believe that I exist. (from 14)

Although this argument can easily be generated from the dictum *Si fallor, sum*, it will not do. As we have already seen, Augustine wants to establish that it is impossible that he be mistaken in his belief that he exists, and this argument only establishes that he is not, as a matter of fact, mistaken in that belief. It thus does not establish the infallibility of that belief. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to derive this stronger conclusion. We need only take the initial premises, (11) and (12), to be necessary and reformulate the argument accordingly:

(11′) It is necessary that, if I mistakenly believe that I exist, then I exist.
(12′) It is necessary that, if I exist, then it is not the case that I mistakenly believe that I exist.
(13′) It is necessary that, if I mistakenly believe that I exist, then it is not the case that I mistakenly believe that I exist. (from 11′ and 12′)
(14′) It is necessary that either it is not the case that I mistakenly believe that I exist or it is not the case that I mistakenly believe that I exist. (from 13′)
(15′) It is necessary that it is not the case that I mistakenly believe that I exist. (from 14′)
∴ (16) It is impossible that I mistakenly believe that I exist. (from 15′)

The initial premises of this argument rest on powerful intuitions and would be difficult for the Academics to contest. To contest the first, they would have to show that it is possible that Augustine be mistaken in his belief that he exists and yet not exist, and to contest the second, they would have to show that it is possible that Augustine exist and yet be mistaken in his belief that he exists. Since it is unlikely that they could do either, Augustine is perfectly entitled to assert that his belief that (1) is infallible. The confidence that he exhibits in his claim to know (1) is therefore well-founded.

Si fallor, vivo

Before moving on to (9) and (10), we should note that Augustine thinks that his claim to know a closely related first-person truth can be defended in the same way. This is his claim to know

(3) I am alive,

which he makes in the following passage from *The Trinity*:

> We have no fear that we are perhaps mistaken about this because of some truthlikeness, for it is certain that even someone who is mistaken is alive. This is not counted among the impressions that arise externally, so that the eye may be mistaken about it, as it is when the oar in water appears to be broken, the tower appears to be moving to those sailing past, and hundreds of other things that are other than they seem. This is not discerned through the eye of the flesh. (*De Trin.* 15.12.21)

Here Augustine argues that the perception each of us has of the fact that we are alive is nonsensory and is thus not subject to the kinds of illusion to which sense perception is subject. What is important for our purposes, however, is his argument that we need not fear the possibility of being mistaken in our belief that we are alive because "it is certain that even someone who is mistaken is alive." To understand this, we should remember that Augustine treats the act of living as an inseparable act of the soul such that, if the soul were ever to cease living, it would at the same time cease to be.[11] This is why he tells Evodius, in a passage we looked at earlier in this chapter, that "since it is evident that you exist, and this would not be evident to you if you were not alive, it is also evident that you are alive" (*De lib. arb.* 2.3.7). It is in virtue of this that, just as Augustine takes the truth of (1), insofar as it is a condition of his being mistaken in any of his beliefs at all, to be a condition of his being mistaken in his belief that (1), so also he takes the truth of (3), insofar as it too is a condition of his being mistaken in any of his beliefs at all, to be a condition of his being mistaken in his belief that (3). Thus, though he did not choose to do so, he could have easily utilized a similar dictum, *Si fallor, vivo*, to make his point. The cases are exactly parallel. As is the case with his belief that he exists, his belief that he is alive is infallible.

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11. In this, Augustine echoes Plato. See, for example, the final argument that Socrates gives for the immortality of the soul in *Phaed.* 102d–107a. For the parallel in Augustine, see *Sol.* 2.13.33 and *De imm. an.* 9.16.

Knowledge of (9) and (10)

Returning now to *City of God* 11.26, we should remind ourselves that Augustine not only claims to know

(1) I exist,

but also claims to know both

(9) I know that I exist,

and

(10) I delight in the fact that I exist and know it.

Although Augustine claims to know each of these truths, there is a significant difference between (9) and (10) on the one hand and (1) on the other hand, insofar as he cannot defend his claim to know the former in the same way that he defends his claim to know the latter. This is because neither (9) nor (10) are such that their truth is a condition of his being mistaken with respect to them. Thus, he cannot ask, as he does with respect to his belief that he exists, "How can I be mistaken in my belief that I know that I exist?" or "How can I be mistaken in my belief that I delight in the fact that I exist and know it?" Such questions are to no effect. As a consequence, it is not clear how he can counter the possibility, again imagined to be raised by the Academics, that he is mistaken with respect to either of them. His defense of his claim to know these truths must proceed along a different path.

Knowledge of (9)

Immediately after defending his claim to know (1), Augustine adds the following with respect to his knowledge of (9): "Consequently, I am also not mistaken about the fact that I know that I know. For just as I know that I exist, I also know this very thing, namely, that I know" (*De civ. Dei* 11.26). As a defense of his claim to know (9), this is sketchy. Augustine argues that, since he knows (1) he knows (9) as well, but he does not explain himself. To get an idea of what is behind this, we may turn back to *The Trinity*, where Augustine considers what we can know beyond those truths, such as (3), that we may believe without the possibility of being mistaken:

> If it is only such truths that pertain to human knowledge, then they are very few, unless they are multiplied in each kind so that they not only

> are not few, but are also found to extend to infinity. Someone who says, "I know that I am alive," says that he knows one thing. Next, if he says, "I know that I know that I am alive," there are now two things. The fact that he knows these two things, however, means that he knows a third. He can thus add a fourth and a fifth and an innumerable number, if he is able. But since he cannot apprehend an innumerable number by adding one thing after another or speak innumerably many times, he apprehends this very fact with utmost certitude and says that it is both true and so innumerable that he cannot truly apprehend or speak its infinite number. (*De Trin.* 15.12.21)

In this passage, Augustine argues that we can extend our knowledge beyond those truths, such as (3), that we may believe without the possibility of being mistaken in virtue of the fact that we can know our own acts of knowing. Given his views on the mind's presence to itself, this should come as no surprise, for an act of knowing is itself an act of the mind that is present to the mind. In the course of making this argument, Augustine thus appears to endorse what has come to be known as the "KK Thesis." In its strong version, this thesis may be stated as follows:

> *KK Thesis (strong).* If S knows that *P*, then S knows that S knows that *P*.

With this thesis in hand, Augustine argues that, from the fact that he knows

(3) I am alive,

it follows that he also knows

(3′) I know that (3) I am alive,

and that, from the fact that he knows this, it follows that he also knows

(3″) I know that (3′) I know that (3) I am alive,

and so on. This allows him to conclude that, from the fact that he knows this single proposition, (3), he knows indefinitely many iterative propositions.

In view of this, it is reasonable to suppose that, when Augustine, in *City of God* 11.26, claims to know

(9) I know that I exist,

on the basis of the fact that he knows

(1) I exist,

he has much the same thing in mind. This is because his knowledge of (9) is a consequence of his knowledge of (1) in the same way that his knowledge of (3′) is a consequence of his knowledge of (3). The strong version of the KK Thesis dictates this. That Augustine takes this consequence to be obvious is likely why he does so little to explain himself.

Whether we agree or disagree with Augustine about this, we should recognize that there are difficulties with the strong version of the KK Thesis that make this inference to be far more problematic than it may at first appear. Not only does the thesis not comport well with externalist accounts of knowledge that have come to dominate the contemporary landscape of epistemology, but it may give aid and comfort to the Academics. To see why, consider that the strong version of the thesis entails that, if a person knows a given proposition, then he or she knows, not just indefinitely many iterative propositions, but infinitely many iterative propositions. We may thus take the following as a corollary to the strong version of the KK Thesis:

Corollary to KK Thesis (strong). If S knows that *P*, then S knows an infinite number of iterative propositions.

This, as it is easy to see, spells trouble for Augustine. Since an Academic may with good reason ask how it is possible to know an infinite number of iterative propositions, this corollary—and hence the KK Thesis (strong) itself—allows him or her to challenge Augustine's claim to know anything at all. He or she may even challenge what would appear to be the most secure of Augustine's claims to know, namely, his claim to know (1). This he or she may do by the simplest of arguments, which we may call the "KK ad hominem Argument":

(17) If you know (1), then you know an infinite number of iterative propositions.
(18) You do not know an infinite number of iterative propositions.
∴ (19) You do not know (1). (from 17 and 18)

Having dispatched Augustine's claim to know (1) by means of this argument, the Academic may then proceed in similar fashion to dispatch each of his other claims to know. In the end, he or she will leave Augustine with nothing with which he may challenge the Academic denial of the possibility of

knowledge. This is the consequence of his affirmation of the strong version of the KK Thesis.

Since Augustine does not address this problem, it is difficult to know how he would respond. One possibility is that he would protest that he endorses neither the strong version of the KK Thesis nor its corollary and that this problem is therefore not a problem for him. In favor of this possibility, we should note that Augustine's remarks on the presence of the mind to itself might be construed to suggest the view that, for any act of knowledge, the mind *is able to know* that act rather than that the mind *does know* that act. Similarly, his remarks in the above passage might be construed to suggest the possibility of adding to the knowledge of (3) the knowledge of (3′), the knowledge of (3″) and so on without limit, rather than the possibility of knowing an infinite number of iterative propositions.[12] Thus, it may be that Augustine, rather than being committed to the strong version of the KK Thesis, is committed to a weaker version of the thesis, which may be stated as follows:

> *KK Thesis (weak).* If S knows that *P*, then S is able to know that S knows that *P*.

If this is correct, then Augustine gains an advantage in his attempt to defend his claim to know (9). As with the strong version of the KK Thesis, the weak version of this thesis allows him to claim knowledge of (9) by appealing to his knowledge of (1), but it does not force him to take on the extraordinary claim to know an infinite number of iterative propositions. For reasons that we have just seen, this is a claim that he would do well to avoid.

Even so, the advantage that Augustine gains from endorsing the weak version of the KK Thesis is not unambiguous. This is because this version of the thesis entails that, if a person knows a given proposition, not only is he or she able to know that he or she knows that proposition, but, by the successive exercise of his or her ability to know, he or she is able to know any proposi-

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12. Further support occurs earlier in *The Trinity*, as Augustine speaks of cases in which we are reminded of something we know but have not attended to in a long period of time: "And so, someone who reminds another [of what he knows but has not attended to] is correct to say: 'You know this, but you do not know that you know it. I will remind you, and you will find that you know what you did not think that you knew'" (*De Trin.* 14.7.9). Matthews, in his final analysis of *De Trin.* 15.12.21, points to this passage as evidence that Augustine does not hold any version of the KK Thesis. According to Matthews, Augustine is able to multiply the truths that he knows by appeal to what we may call the "Knowledge by Conjunction Thesis," which we may formulate as follows: *Knowledge by Conjunction Thesis*: If S knows that *P* and S knows that *Q*, then S knows that *P* and *Q*. As a matter of interpretation, this may be correct, but it is obvious that Augustine faces the same problem on this thesis that he does on the KK Thesis (strong). On this, see Matthews 2010.

tion that is a finite number of iterations removed from that proposition. It thus has a troublesome corollary all its own:

> *Corollary to KK* Thesis *(weak)*. If S knows that *P*, then S is able to know any proposition that is a finite number of iterations removed from *P*.

The trouble is easy to see. By this corollary, if Augustine knows

> (1) I exist,

then is he is also able to know

> (1′′′′′′′′′′) I know that (1′′′′′′′′′) I know that (1′′′′′′′′) I know that (1′′′′′′′) I know that (1′′′′′′) I know that (1′′′′′) I know that (1′′′′) I know that (1′′′) I know that (1′′) I know that (1′) I know that (1) I exist,

which is only ten iterations removed from (1). However, since an Academic may with similar good reason ask how it is possible that Augustine know this proposition, let alone one that is a hundred or a thousand iterations removed from (1), he or she may resurrect the KK ad hominem Argument we constructed above by modifying it accordingly:

(20) If you know (1), then you are able to know (1′′′′′′′′′′).
(21) You are not able to know (1′′′′′′′′′′).
∴ (22) You do not know (1). (from 20 and 21)

Since this argument is just as destructive as its predecessor, Augustine will again find himself hard-pressed to defend any of his claims to know.

There are, of course, ways for Augustine to block this argument. Since the problem with knowing an iterative proposition such as (1′′′′′′′′′′) would seem to lie in our inability to keep its several iterations distinctly in mind, he could reject (21), and so reject (22), by explaining how we are in fact able to keep these iterations distinctly in mind. More plausibly, he could explain why it is in fact not necessary that we do so, perhaps by developing a theory of virtual knowledge or something of the kind. Either of these options, however, would require him to develop his remarks on our ability to know that we know to a much greater degree than he has done. So, while there are ways for Augustine to block this argument, we must conclude that, in defending his claim to know (9) on the basis of his claim to know (1), he has nevertheless left himself vulnerable to a powerful and far-reaching skeptical attack. This is true irrespective of which version of the KK Thesis he ultimately endorses.

Knowledge of (10)

Just after his comments concerning his knowledge of (9), Augustine takes up a defense of his claim to know

(10) I delight in the fact that I exist and know it.

As with the previous truths (1) and (9), Augustine claims not to be mistaken with regard to this truth as well:

> When I love these two things, I add to what I know this very love as a third thing of no less value. Nor am I mistaken about the fact that I love, since I am not mistaken about the things that I love. Even if those things were false, it would be true that I love false things. How would it be right that I am criticized and prohibited from loving false things, if it were false that I love them? But since they are true and certain, who would doubt that, when they are loved, the love itself is true and certain? Moreover, just as there is no one who does not will to exist, so also there is no one who does not will to be happy. How can he be happy if he is nothing? (*De civ. Dei* 11.26)

This passage is difficult to interpret. At first sight, it appears that Augustine is arguing that the truth of (10) is guaranteed because it can be inferred from the falsity of (1) and (9), as well as from the truth of (1) and (9). Thus, it appears that he is arguing that if he is either mistaken or not mistaken with respect to (1) and (9), he is not mistaken with respect to (10). Either way, the truth of (10) is assured.

If this is indeed what Augustine is arguing, it is unfortunate, for it is not at all obvious that the truth of (10) follows from either the truth of (1) and (9) or the falsity of (1) and (9). In view of this, it may be that Augustine has something less ambitious in mind. Perhaps, instead of seeking to guarantee the truth of (10), he is seeking only to head off a possible challenge to its truth that arises from a challenge to the truth of (1) and (9). To see this, consider the consequence of taking delight to be a factive state akin to knowledge, so that, just as knowledge that *P* entails *P*, so also delight in *P* entails *P*. Any challenge to the truth of a person's claim that *P* would thereby be a challenge to the truth of his or her claim to delight in *P* as well. One might thus imagine an Academic taking delight to be a factive state and challenging Augustine on the truth of (10) in precisely this way:

(23) If you delight in (1) and (9), then (1) and (9).

(24) It is not the case that (1) and (9).
∴ (25) It is not the case that you delight in (1) and (9). (from 23 and 24)

Stated as such, the challenge may not seem powerful, but there is serious point here. If delight is a factive state akin to knowledge, then, if the Academic can successfully challenge either (1) or (9), he or she can challenge (10) as well. More broadly, if the Academic can raise doubts about either (1) or (9), he or she can also raise doubts about (10).

It is certainly possible that Augustine had no such challenge in mind when he wrote this passage, but what he says makes perfect sense when taken as a response to it. In the face of such a challenge, the first and most natural thing to do is to deny (24), which is exactly what he does by reasserting the truth of (1) and (9): "Nor am I mistaken in the fact that I love, since I am not mistaken about the things that I love." The second thing to do is to deny (23), which is effectively to deny that delight is a factive state. He does this as well: "Even if those things were false, it would be true that I love false things."[13] Appealing to common practice as support, he then adds: "How would it be right that I am criticized and prohibited from loving false things, if it were false that I love them?" Since the effect of this denial is to make the truth of (10) independent of the truth of (1) and (9), this blocks any challenge to the truth of (10) by way of a challenge to the truth of either (1) or (9). Thus, whether intended or not, Augustine's remarks in this passage constitute a direct strategy for heading off exactly this type of challenge.

This is all well and good, but we may ultimately find Augustine's remarks here to be disappointing. To establish that the truth of (10) cannot be challenged by a challenge to the truth of either (1) or (9) is fine as far as it goes, but, since most of us will likely agree that delight is not a factive state, we may find such a challenge to be tepid and uninteresting. Hence, we will likely judge that Augustine's success in heading it off does little to secure the truth of (10) and falls far short of a vigorous defense of his claim to know it. It most certainly does not establish that he is not be mistaken in his belief that (10). Thus, while we may agree with everything that Augustine says in this passage, we may ultimately judge that it does little to advance his case against the Academics.

13. Here it may help to think of Augustine denying the contrapositive of (23): If it is not the case that (1) and (9), then it is not the case that you delight in (1) and (9).

A Brief Assessment

In our discussion of *City of God* 11.26, we have seen that Augustine claims to know the following trio of first-person truths:

(1) I exist.
(9) I know that I exist.
(10) I delight in the fact that I exist and know it.

Of these he writes: "With respect to these truths, I do not fear any of the arguments of the Academics, who say: 'What if you are mistaken?'" (*De civ.* 11.26). With respect to (1), Augustine's confidence is well-founded. This is because the truth of (1), insofar as it is a condition of his being mistaken in any of his beliefs, is a condition of his being mistaken in his belief that (1). The same can be said with respect (3), which Augustine takes up in *The Trinity*. When we turn to (9) and (10), however, matters are far less clear. This is because the truth of (9) is not a condition of his being mistaken in his belief that (9), and the truth of (10) is not a condition of his being mistaken in his belief that (10). Thus, it is not open to Augustine to make a similar appeal to infallibility in defense of his claim to know these propositions. What is worse, the defense that he does make runs into problems in each case. In the case of (9), it implicitly relies on the KK Thesis, which in each of its versions has a troublesome corollary and gives rise to skeptical problems. In the case of (10), it is mounted to head off a challenge that is tepid and uninteresting. None of this is to question Augustine's claim to know (9) and (10), which there seems little reason to do. It is just to say that he has not sufficiently explained—as he has with respect to (1) and (3)—why he does not "fear any of the arguments of the Academics."

Dubito ergo . . .

We have now seen that Augustine has, with mixed success, defended his claim to know (1), (9) and (10), as well as his claim to know (3), against the possibility that he is mistaken with respect to them. As it turns out, he thinks that a similar defense can be made with respect to a wide range of first-person truths. We see this in a passage from *The Trinity* in which Augustine aims to gain an understanding of the mind by identifying those things we cannot doubt pertain to it.[14] After noting that doubts can be raised about whether

14. This is perhaps controversial. Kirwan, in brief comments on this passage, argues that its aim is not to establish knowledge, but rather to show that there are certain truths about which we should not suspend judgment. See Kirwan 1989, 30. Sorabji, whose comments are more extensive, sees it as part of an attempt to establish what he calls the "infallibility of self-knowledge." See Sorabji 2006, 217–19.

our capacity to live, remember, understand, and the like is grounded in anything material, including a corporeal organ such as the brain, he argues that we cannot properly doubt that we engage in these acts:

> Who would doubt that he lives, remembers, understands, wills, thinks, knows, and judges? Even if he doubts, he is alive. If he doubts, he remembers why he doubts. If he doubts, he understands that he doubts. If he doubts, he wills to be certain. If he doubts, he thinks. If he doubts, he knows that he does not know. If he doubts, he judges that he should not consent rashly. Therefore, whoever doubts anything else should not doubt any of these things. If they were not the case, he could not doubt anything. (*De Trin.* 10.10.14)

Here Augustine presents a substantial list of first-person truths he believes we cannot properly doubt. We have seen many of them before:

(3) I am alive.
(7) I remember.
(4) I understand.
(8) I will.
(2) I think.
(26) I know.
(27) I judge.

The claim Augustine makes with respect to these truths differs slightly from the claim he makes with respect to (1) and (3) in the passages we have already examined. Instead of saying that we cannot be mistaken with respect to them, he says that we cannot properly doubt them. The reason why we cannot properly doubt them is very much like the reason why we cannot be mistaken with respect to (1) and (3), namely, that the truth of each proposition, insofar as it is a condition of doubting anything at all, is a condition of doubting that proposition. This he makes clear in the last lines of the passage: "Therefore, whoever doubts anything else should not doubt any of these things. If they were not the case, he could not doubt anything" (*De Trin.* 10.10.14). Augustine thus seems to think that something like the following argument, which we may call the "No Proper Doubt Argument," can be made on behalf of each of these propositions:

(28) If the truth of *P* is a condition of S doubting that *P*, then S cannot properly doubt that *P*.
(29) The truth of *P* is a condition of S doubting that *P*.
∴ (30) S cannot properly doubt that *P*. (from 28 and 29)

Although this argument is not directed against the Academics, it makes a powerful antiskeptical point. Whatever else we may properly doubt, it is not proper for us to doubt any of the above listed truths.

This is certainly a clever argument, but Augustine may be overreaching in making it. When it is made with respect to (3), the argument is difficult to challenge, for living is quite clearly a condition of doubting. The same may be said when it is made with respect to (2), since doubting most certainly requires thinking, if only in the form of considering what it is that one doubts. However, the argument is less effective when it is made with respect to the other propositions on the list. This is because it is far less clear that the truth of these propositions is indeed a condition of doubting them, let alone a condition of doubting anything at all. To see this, we may examine the case of (26), which presents some interesting difficulties.

Knowing and Doubting

With respect to

(26) I know,

Augustine has this to say: "If he doubts, he knows that he does not know." In saying this, Augustine is presumably thinking that, unless a person knows that he or she does not know, he or she has no reason to doubt and will not do so. Thus, if a person does not know, for example, that he or she does not know that the First Crusade was preached by Urban II, then he or she has no reason to doubt that it was preached by Urban II and will not do so. If he or she happens to believe that it was preached by Urban II, this belief will be unaccompanied by doubt.

All of this seems plausible. Doubt is normally reflective of some sort of awareness that one does not know, and it is difficult to see how it could arise in the absence of such awareness. Nevertheless, we may ask whether anything as strong as knowing that one does not know is in fact required for doubting. Is it not possible, for example, for a person to doubt that the First Crusade was preached by Urban II merely on the basis of believing, or even suspecting, that he or she does not know that it was preached by Urban II? Is not the mere belief, or even suspicion, that he or she does not know a sufficient basis for doubt? If the answer to this question is yes, which it seems to be, then we must conclude that knowing that one does not know is not a condition of doubting. Hence, if Augustine is to convince us that we cannot properly doubt that we know, he must do so by some other means.

Augustine would no doubt resist this objection, but we can only speculate as to how. One possibility is that he would argue that he does not take knowing that one does not know as a *condition* of doubting, but as a *consequence* of doubting instead, and that the objection is therefore misguided. If this is correct, then the No Proper Doubt Argument must be modified in order to accommodate (26) as follows:

(28′) If the truth of *P* is either a condition or a consequence of S doubting that *P*, then S cannot properly doubt that *P*.
(29′) The truth of *P* is either a condition or a consequence of S doubting that *P*.
∴ (30) S cannot properly doubt that *P*. (from 28′ and 29′)

In view of this modified argument, the question we now face is whether the truth of (26) is indeed a consequence of doubting (26). More generally, the question is whether knowing that one does not know is indeed a consequence of doubting anything at all.

In order to show that it is, Augustine might adopt a simple strategy. He might argue that, when we doubt, we know that we doubt, and then argue that, when we know that we doubt, we know that we do not know. From this, he could draw his desired conclusion, namely, that when we doubt, we know that we do not know. Put formally, the argument is as follows:

(31) If S doubts that *P*, then S knows that S doubts that *P*.
(32) If S knows that S doubts that *P*, then S knows that S does not know that *P*.
∴ (33) If S doubts that *P*, then S knows that S does not know that *P*. (from 31 and 32)

At first sight, the argument appears promising. (31) is in line with Augustine's view that the mind, together with its acts, is present to itself, and (32) is in line with his view that doubting is incompatible with knowing. The problem is that, even if we are on board with these views, we may still object that, from the fact that we know that we doubt, it does not follow that we know that we do not know. What is needed in addition to knowing that we doubt is that we know that doubting is incompatible with knowing. Thus, while we may be willing to concede

(32′) If S knows that S doubts that *P* and S knows that doubting that *P* is incompatible with knowing that *P*, then S knows that S does not know that *P*,

we may not be willing to concede (32). As is obvious, however, this will not be enough to allow Augustine to draw his desired conclusion. Although (33) follows from (31) and (32), it does not follow from (31) and (32′). It thus appears that it is just as difficult to establish that knowing that one does not know is a consequence of doubting as it is to establish that it is a condition of doubting. Once again, if Augustine is to convince us that we cannot properly doubt that we know, he must do so by other means.

A Second Brief Assessment

None of the above shows decisively that Augustine is wrong in thinking that, if we doubt, we also know that we do not know. However, it should suffice to show that this is not nearly as obvious as he makes it out to be. Because of this, his claim that we cannot properly doubt

(26) I know,

should be regarded with a good bit of suspicion. Although we cannot here go through each of the remaining propositions on the list of putative truths that we cannot properly doubt, there is a good chance that a similar analysis would yield similar results. So, while we may be happy to concede that we cannot properly doubt

(3) I am alive,

and even,

(2) I think,

for precisely the reasons that Augustine has given, it is best to reserve judgment with respect to the remainder pending further examination.

Final Thoughts

In assessing this final portion of his attempt to vindicate the possibility of knowledge against the Academic denial of that possibility, we must give Augustine high marks. If nothing else, he has identified an additional class of truths—first-person truths—whose apprehensibility is difficult to deny and the knowledge of which is well fortified against skeptical attack. In addition, he has shown that there is good reason, for at least some of these truths, to think that we cannot be mistaken with respect to them and that our belief

in them is infallible. Unfortunately, the number of first-person truths for which Augustine has successfully established this may be much smaller than he thought. It certainly includes

(1) I exist,
(3) I am alive,

and a few others, but it most certainly does not include the majority of those first-person truths of which he has claimed knowledge. Thus, while Augustine has won an impressive victory over the Academics on this front, he may also have overestimated its scope.

To point this out may just be to quibble. This is because the real significance of Augustine's treatment of first-person truths lies not so much in the contribution it makes to his attempt to vindicate the possibility of knowledge, but in his exploration of introspection as a fertile source of knowledge that is grounded in the mind's presence to itself. For Augustine, such exploration was not carried out for its own sake, but for the sake of knowing God and the soul, which he announced at the beginning of his career as the sole end of his philosophical inquiry. Thus, in looking at Augustine's treatment of first-person truths through the lens of the contribution it makes to his attempt to vindicate the possibility of knowledge, we have only taken the first step toward a full appreciation of what he has accomplished in this area. To look at it through a wider lens, however, would take us well beyond our present aims.

Afterword to Part II

As it has emerged over the last several chapters, the core of Augustine's strategy for vindicating the possibility of knowledge against the Academic denial of that possibility is entirely straightforward. It is to put forward a number of truths in each of the divisions of philosophy—physics, ethics, and dialectic—that he claims to know and whose apprehensibility he believes the Academics cannot plausibly deny. We have treated these truths, at least as Augustine enumerates them in the monologue of *Against the Academics*, as falling into the following four classes:

(T1) *Tautological Truths.* Propositions that are true in virtue of their logical form. The most common examples Augustine gives are cases of exhaustive disjunction, such as "Either there is just one world or there is not just one world."

(T2) *Mathematical Truths.* Simple and evident arithmetical propositions, such as "$3 \times 3 = 9$."

(T3) *Dialectical Truths.* Basic inference forms of Stoic dialectic, such as "If *P* then *Q* / *P* // *Q*."

(T4) *Presentational Truths.* Propositions that report, not how things are, but how things appear, such as "The leaves of the olive tree taste bitter to me." More strictly, they are propositions that report

that one is subject to an impression of a certain sort, such as "I am having an impression of the leaves of the olive tree as bitter."

Augustine elsewhere identifies and explores a fifth class of truths that he claims to know and whose apprehensibility he believes the Academics cannot plausibly deny. This is:

(T5) *First-Person Truths.* Propositions concerning the knowing subject that are stated in the first person, such as "I exist."

Taken as a whole, this strategy is a success. In putting these truths forward as apprehensible, Augustine may not have succeeded in laying skepticism to rest in any definitive way, but he has unquestionably shifted the burden back to the Academics, who must explain why we cannot know them. To provide such an explanation, as even the Academics should acknowledge, is no easy task. Thus, while the objections of the Academics should give us pause if we think that knowledge is possible, the replies of Augustine should give us pause if we think that it is not.

As successful as this strategy is, it does not give us nearly what we might want. Here we should keep in mind that the Stoics, with whom the Academics were chiefly in dialogue, set forth conditions of apprehension that are highly stringent, and that the Academics were able to exploit this stringency in an attempt to show that knowledge is not possible. In view of this, Augustine could have made his job easier by changing the terms of the debate. In particular, he could have rejected the Stoic conditions of apprehension in favor of conditions that are less stringent. Rather than do this, he set out to show that, even with these conditions in place, knowledge is still possible for us. Now the fact that Augustine took this tack makes his success more impressive than it would otherwise be, but it also makes it less significant. The reason is simple. In declining to reject the Stoic conditions of apprehension in favor of conditions that are less stringent, Augustine left the Academics a strong platform from which to attack the apprehensibility, if not of everything we might wish to know, then at least of much of what we might wish to know, especially about the world and its workings. This is the case, even if we grant the apprehensibility of (T1) through (T5). As a consequence, Augustine may win on the question of the possibility of knowledge, but he does little to prevent the Academics from winning on the question of whether we can know most of what we might wish to know.

Since it would be disappointing to end this book with such a negative conclusion, we may add something positive here. This is that, even if Au-

gustine concedes that the scope of knowledge is narrow, he is emphatic that the scope of reasonable belief is wide. It includes, as we have seen, not only belief based on the evidence of the senses, but also belief based on credible authority. So convinced was Augustine of the reasonability of such belief that, despite its failure to meet the stringent conditions of apprehension set forth by the Stoics, he came to see it as absurd in ordinary contexts to deny it the status of knowledge. This is important. To the extent that he is successful in making the case for the reasonability of such belief, Augustine goes a long way toward blunting the consequences of skepticism. Simply put, if he is correct about the reasonability of such belief, skeptical doubt about a great many of our beliefs is misplaced.

By way of closing, we may make one last observation. It may be that, in the final analysis, Augustine is not that interested in establishing a wide scope for knowledge. He is, after all, a Christian Platonist whose primary interest is not knowledge of the world and its workings, but, as he announces at the beginning of his career, knowledge of God and the soul. Thus, it is of interest to him to show that the global skepticism of the Academics cannot be sustained. It is also of interest to him to show that Academic arguments do nothing to impugn the sources of knowledge—pure intellection and introspection—by which God and the soul are known. Most important, because knowledge of God and the soul is achieved in its fullness only within the life of faith, it is of interest to him to show that assent to what is not apprehended is not in all cases unreasonable. Beyond this, Augustine has little interest in carrying on a fight with the Academics, and he most certainly does not see the need to justify himself before their tribunal at every turn. When seen in this light, then, it is clear that Augustine's concerns with skepticism, while overlapping with those of the contemporary epistemologist, are also significantly different. Any fair assessment of his critique of Academic skepticism must measure its success, at least in part, in relation to those concerns.

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Index

Note: Titles of works can be found under the author's name.