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A New Approach to Augustine’s Dialogues

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Michael P. Foley, ed.: *Against the Academics*. Vol. 1 of *St. Augustine’s Cassiciacum Dialogues*. With translation, annotation, and commentary. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019. Pp. xli, 307.)

Michael P. Foley, ed.: *On the Happy Life*. Vol. 2 of *St. Augustine’s Cassiciacum Dialogues*. With translation, annotation, and commentary. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019. Pp. xlii, 184.)

Michael P. Foley, ed.: *On Order*. Vol. 3 of *St. Augustine’s Cassiciacum Dialogues*. With translation, annotation, and commentary. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020. Pp. xlii, 310.)

Michael P. Foley, ed.: *Soliloquies*. Vol. 4 of *St. Augustine’s Cassiciacum Dialogues*. With translation, annotation, and commentary. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020. Pp. xlii, 360.)

Nearly all twenty-first-century readers of St. Augustine of Hippo become interested in him after reading the story of his *Confessions*. Yet when nonspecialists want to read more of him, they are directed to the later and more magisterial writings whose author is not immediately recognizable as the young searcher from the *Confessions*: *City of God*, *On The Trinity*, *On Christian Doctrine*, the scriptural commentaries, the anti-Pelagian tracts. The bishop of Hippo, unlike his younger self—and also unlike his philosophic predecessors, as he well knew—was obligated not to let so much as his word choice cause scandal to pious and uneducated ears.¹

Before these pastoral responsibilities were imposed on him in his late thirties, Augustine wrote twelve works that remain extant, of which eight are philosophical dialogues in the Platonic-Ciceronian tradition. When we open their pages, we are visibly confronted with the restless seeker, passionate debater, and wide-eyed student of philosophy whom the *Confessions* depicted for us. For anyone still moved by the existential questions that tormented Augustine before, during, and after his conversion to Catholic Christianity, the early works are a priceless treasure.

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¹Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, ed. B. Dombart and A. Kalb (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1993), 10.23.

Why are these texts not part of any standard introductory course in Christian philosophy, or even in Augustine's own thought? The chief reason appears to be the twentieth-century prejudice that they were written by a naive Platonist who had not yet noticed the deep gulf separating his new-found faith from the doctrines of pre-Christian philosophy. Among many potential students of these dialogues, this prejudice has the effect of poisoning the well. Among the Augustine scholars who do still read them, some have produced any number of contorted "developmental" explanations of how the author could have secretly changed his mind on questions that he regarded as of highest importance. These explanations require mental gymnastics because, unlike any other philosopher we know, Augustine wrote an entire book at the end of his life (*Retractations*) with the sole purpose of identifying every passage in his previous writings that he had come to disapprove of. There, he still recommends reading his early works before his later ones; of the very few corrections that he makes to the former, most are directed at rhetorical slip-ups that had produced misunderstandings rather than at any substantive error.² A very high burden of proof should be placed on anyone claiming to have noticed a change in Augustine's mind that he did not expressly identify in the *Retractations*.

Recent decades have seen the beginnings of a reappraisal of Augustine's early works by scholars discontented with the reigning prejudice. Michael Foley's new four-volume translation and commentary on Augustine's five earliest writings represents a major achievement within this movement to recover their rightful place in Augustine's corpus. Besides the extensive and invaluable work of translating these texts for a new generation of readers, Foley has broken ground for a new approach to interpreting all of Augustine's dialogues, one that promises to make sense of what until now have admittedly remained their many puzzles.

Augustine's Christian Philosophy

Foley has translated the four dialogues that Augustine wrote at Cassiciacum, a rural retreat outside of Milan, at age thirty-two while preparing for Christian baptism. Augustine had just abandoned his prominent chair of rhetoric in that imperial capital and was spending some weeks on a wealthy friend's estate, along with a group of fellow North African expatriates: his mother, adult brother, illegitimate teenaged son, and two unlettered cousins; his "closest friend" Alypius; and two youthful students whom he was tutoring in philosophy (*HL* 1.6; *Acad.* 3.6.13).³ All of these appear as characters in the dialogues, which purport to be edited transcripts of actual

²Augustine, *Retractationes*, ed. Almut Mutzenbecher (Turnhout: Brepols, 1984), Prol. 1–3, 1.1.1–1.13.9.

³In-text citations use abbreviations to refer to each of Foley's four volumes (*Acad.* = *Against the Academics*; *HL* = *On the Happy Life*; *Ord.* = *On Order*; *Sol.* = *Soliloquies*).

conversations held at Cassiciacum, although Foley rightly avoids putting much interpretive weight on that claim (see *Sol.*, pp. 321n81, 126, 251). Three dialogues depict Augustine in the role of Socratic discussion-leader, primarily but not exclusively with his two students. In the fourth, the *Soliloquies* (a neologism that Augustine himself coined for this work), the author turns the tables by portraying his own internal monologue as a dialogue, with "Augustine" cast as the confused student subject to aggressive Socratic interrogation by the often belligerent voice of "Reason." Foley has also helpfully appended the short treatise *On the Immortality of the Soul*, which began as notes for a never-written continuation of *Soliloquies* and is linked to it by subject matter.

As Foley rightly emphasizes, the Augustine whom we meet here has in fact already made his decisive break with the non-Christian Platonism to which he had recently adhered. Augustine clearly states at Cassiciacum that the humility of Christ's incarnation has opened up to the multitude a true salvation independent of philosophic disputations, and that he himself has submitted to Christ's authority even while he continues to carry on such disputations (*Acad.* 3.19.42–3.20.43). Through the Christian mysteries, he says, the truth purifies the human soul without help from philosophy; even philosophers stand in need of this purification, although a perverse pride keeps many of them from acknowledging as much (*Ord.* 2.9.27, 2.5.16). From Cassiciacum to the *Confessions* to *City of God*, Augustine's account of his break with his own earlier Platonism is consistent. Platonic philosophers have well described the human *summum bonum*, but philosophers and nonphilosophers alike need assistance from Christian faith if we are to reach that desired end, and philosophic pride is a major obstacle to the humility of this faith.⁴

It is striking (although consistent with the understanding just sketched) that the Augustine of the dialogues never describes the recent revolution in his life as a conversion to Catholic Christianity, or even to religious faith.⁵ At Cassiciacum, he had already been a catechumen for over a year, and he had revered the name of Christ since boyhood.⁶ Nor would he have called himself a Christian until his baptism a few months after he wrote these dialogues. He speaks here only of his recent conversion to *philosophy*, which he has finally embraced after the twelve years of conflicted longings that had begun with his youthful reading of Cicero (*HL* 1.4).

References to Augustine's works are by traditional section numbers; page references are to Foley's notes and commentaries; quotations are rendered in Foley's translations.

⁴See Augustine, *Confessiones*, ed. M. Skutella, H. Juergens, and W. Schaub (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1996), 7.20.26; *De civitate Dei* 10.29.

⁵Foley seems to agree that Augustine's "religious conversion" did not take place until his subsequent baptism (pp. xxv–xxvii of the general introduction; but cf. xxiv and *Acad.*, pp. 117–18, 172).

⁶See Augustine, *Confessiones* 5.14.25, 3.4.8.

Philosophy is the great theme of the Cassiciacum dialogues. The first, *Against the Academics*, discusses whether human reason can acquire the truth in this life, which is to say, whether philosophy is worthwhile (*Acad.* 3.9.18–20, 3.20.43–44). The second, *On the Happy Life*, discusses the nature of human happiness in light of the assumption that the soul lives on knowledge (the object of philosophy) just as the body lives on food (*HL* 2.7–8). The third, *On Order*, discusses the order of the cosmos that philosophy investigates as well as the intellectual preconditions of that investigation (*Ord.* 2.7.23–2.20.52). And *Soliloquies* depicts Augustine himself engaged in philosophy, that is, using his reason to seek a deeper understanding of himself and of the cosmos's First Cause (*Sol.* 1.1.2, 1.2.7; see *Ord.* 2.5.16, 2.18.47).

Philosophy is also on display throughout these dialogues in the person of Augustine. God has now given him the mental disposition, he says, "to prefer nothing whatsoever to finding the truth, to want nothing else, to think of nothing else, to love nothing else" — adding, in another rebuff to his erstwhile pagan colleagues, that he owes this disposition to his Christian mother's prayers on his behalf (*Ord.* 2.20.52). "I am now of such a mind that I impatiently long to apprehend what is true not only through believing, but also through understanding" (*Acad.* 3.20.43). "What solid ground have I held onto, I for whom the question about the soul still pitches and lists?" (*HL* 1.5). By "the question about the soul" he means, at least, the question about its mortality or immortality, which he says "moves me greatly" (*Sol.* 2.4.5): he will remain "more than a little afraid" of death so long as he remains uncertain about the possibility, and at any rate the precise character, of an afterlife (*Sol.* 2.13.23, 2.20.36). He is likewise uncertain about the source of order in the cosmos, which he believes to be "divine providence" but knows could instead be "the nature of bodies" (*Ord.* 1.4.10; *Acad.* 3.10.23). He spends half of every night or all of it awake in pursuit of the truth, often moved to tears by the moral and intellectual inadequacies that impede him in that pursuit (*Ord.* 1.3.6, 1.8.22; *Sol.* 1.14.26, 2.1.1).

More than any other extant literature from the seven hundred years after Plato and Xenophon, these dialogues also depict philosophy within its living context of human relationships. Augustine starts to cry and to berate his two young students when he sees them distracted from sincere pursuit of the truth by their intellectual vanity (*Ord.* 1.10.29–30). He tries to ensure that they get enough of the sleep that he denies to himself (*Ord.* 1.3.6). He shares with them the frustration of a day spoiled for conversation by farm chores (*Acad.* 3.2.2). They all get distracted from philosophic discussion by the sight of two roosters fighting, then launch into another discussion of what makes these natural spectacles so attractive to us (*Ord.* 1.8.25–26). Privately, Augustine struggles with his resolution to forgo marriage for the sake of philosophy (*Sol.* 1.10.17, 1.14.25). He considers recommencing the "great effort" of achieving earthly honors, whose pursuit he has only just abandoned, if doing so might help his friends in their philosophizing (*Sol.* 1.11.18, 1.10.17). And he reflects on his own motivations in becoming an

author, namely to benefit absent friends, remember new insights, and cheer himself by the vision of his intellectual "offspring" (*Sol.* 1.1.1).

The thirty-two-year-old Augustine's attitude to philosophy strikes nearly all his readers today as excessive, unrealistic, or even irreligious. But I have not seen evidence that the author ever abandoned this attitude or repented of having depicted it so vividly in his earliest works. Admittedly, these works say relatively little about how the author arrived at this attitude. He will soon lay out his own case for the love of wisdom in book 1 of his *On Free Choice*, which summarizes a moral-philosophical investigation that he had already completed before Cassiciacum (see *Acad.* 2.2.5).⁷ And in his early anti-Manichean polemics, he will defend Christian faith's role in leading us to wisdom: it was after all the Manicheans who had attracted his younger self with the promise of attaining wisdom by reason alone, unassisted by faith.⁸

But philosophy will become a much less prominent theme in the works that the bishop of Hippo will later write with a view to his whole flock, few of whom can philosophize (see *Ord.* 2.5.16). This only heightens his early works' importance, precisely for understanding his later works. For instance, in the conversation recorded in *On the Happy Life* about the relationship between happiness and wisdom, Augustine insists on having their whole group take part, including his uneducated relations (*HL* 1.6, 2.12, 2.16). This small community is a microcosm of the wider Catholic Christian community that he is about to join, where philosophy is more revered than practiced; Augustine wants to learn something by observing their reactions to a discussion led by himself on philosophical topics (*HL* 4.36; see *Ord.* 1.5.13). His resounding success in this small group, which his later career would reproduce on a much larger scale, is of some importance for understanding his mature preaching and the entire Western intellectual culture that it would help form. For better or worse, we have all been shaped by the intellectual-historical event whose greatest literary expression remains (arguably) the dialogues of Cassiciacum.

The Translations

Foley's exceptional labors now allow modern Anglophone readers to access the treasure of these dialogues, along with the related *On the Immortality of the Soul*. In each of Foley's four volumes, an excellent translation is accompanied by a short introduction, then a commentary slightly longer than Augustine's text, as well as hundreds of footnotes. Each volume stands on

⁷See Augustine, *De libero arbitrio*, ed. W. M. Green (Turnhout: Brepols, 1970), 1.4.10–11, 1.16.52–1.34.115.

⁸See Augustine, *De utilitate credendi*, ed. Joseph Zycha (Vienna: Tempsky, 1891), 1.1.2; *De moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae et de moribus Manichaeorum*, ed. John B. Bauer (Vienna: Hoelder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1992), 1.2.3.

its own for classroom use, as each also contains a general introduction, glossaries of names and terms, a dramatic timeline of the four dialogues, and a bibliography.

Foley's footnotes are already an education in themselves. They point the reader to internal references among the five texts, to later treatments of the same themes in Augustine's other works, and to related discussions in Plotinus, Cicero, and many other classical authors with whom Augustine's works are in conversation. One could spend countless hours following out all of Foley's references, and it would be time well spent.

These five texts have not been published together in English since 1948. In the seventy-five years since, many translators (Foley included) have begun to favor literalness even at some cost in elegance of expression. This is a necessary tradeoff if students are to encounter something approximating Augustine's ideas in an age where no undergraduates, and a diminishing number even of graduate students, can be expected to read the original texts. One previous translation had deleted the caveat "according to Vergil" from a statement about the goddess Venus (see *Acad.* 1.5.14).⁹ Another had translated "banquet" as "symposium" (see *HL* 4.34, 2.8–9)—crippling *On the Happy Life's* book-long extended metaphor for conversation as a "meal" that "nourishes" souls (wine does not nourish).¹⁰ Yet another translation, where Augustine exhorts a friend to turn to philosophy while "choosing the better part" (see *Ord.* 1.2.4), had ignored and buried this quiet allusion to the New Testament's own contrast between the active and contemplative lives.¹¹ For an accurate translation of the complete Cassiciacum dialogues, Foley's is the only game in town.

Nor does Foley's literalness always come at the expense of elegance. At one point he has Augustine ask, "How is it that God makes nothing evil and is omnipotent, while such great evils are being committed? For what purpose did He who needs nothing make the world? Has evil always existed or did it begin in time? And if it has always existed, was it on God's terms?" (*Ord.* 2.18.46). These questions (with more following) offer a crisp and clean rendition of a very long run-on sentence in Latin, with "on God's terms" as a particularly acute formula for *sub conditione dei*. Similarly, Foley's beautiful diction in Augustine's long prayer to the Trinity at the beginning of *Soliloquies* helps to showcase that passage as what it is: one of the highest points of these dialogues, both psychologically and rhetorically (see *Sol.* 1.1.2–6). Or again, while no English can convey the almost biblical forcefulness of *tantum flebo ut vita nulla sit*, Foley comes closer than I would have

⁹Cf. *Augustine: Against the Academicians and The Teacher*, trans. Peter King (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1995), 15.

¹⁰Cf. *Augustine of Hippo: Selected Writings*, trans. Mary T. Clark (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1984), 192.

¹¹Cf. *Writings of Saint Augustine*, vol. 1, ed. Ludwig Schopp (New York: CIMA, 1948), 242.

thought possible: "I'll weep so much that my life will be rendered nil" (*Sol.* 2.1.1).

No translator can avoid making debatable judgment calls. I am not sure about all of Foley's interpolations in square brackets, but unlike most translators, he does employ those brackets rather than simply interpolating at whim. The classical Latin preference for nominal sentences also sometimes makes it hard for the translator to avoid interpretation: does the character "Reason" really suggest that "a discipline is the truth," or is it rather that the truth is a discipline (cf. *Sol.* 2.13.24)? Foley follows older English usage in rendering *homines* as "men" rather than "human beings," which may confuse modern readers and results in some avoidable obscurity in texts that discuss differences between men and women (e.g., *HL* 2.10; *Ord.* 1.8.24, 1.11.31–32; *Sol.* 1.10.17, 1.14.24, 2.16.30). Although he maintains a remarkable uniformity of diction across the five works, he does not explain his one switch from rendering *cupiditates* as "desires" in *On Order* to "lusts" in *Soliloquies* (both are defensible). Occasionally literalness gets carried a bit to excess: *tantum errabit quantum errari plurimum potest* is hard to translate, but Anglophones may trip over "by however much he can make the most mistakes, by that much will he make them" (*Ord.* 2.16.44).

Finally, at just a few points, the translations seem to become confused in ways that could easily be corrected in a second edition.¹² The word "not" should be added to the first two of the four logical alternatives presented at *Sol.* 2.5.7. The two main nominal phrases have switched places in one sentence at *Ord.* 1.1.1 ("divine management" and "some servant") and in another sentence at *Sol.* 1.6.12 ("this [health]" and "nothing else but faith"), as have the two predicates in a clause at *On the Immortality of the Soul* 8.13 (existence and beauty/form). *Dare operam liberis* should be rendered "procreate children," not "devote oneself to children" (*Sol.* 1.10.17).¹³

However many nits one might wish to pick, Foley's translations are excellent overall. They will do all that can be expected of a Latin translation: allow a great number of students and teachers to gain some familiarity with these texts, and inspire a few to learn Latin and read the originals.

How to Read the Dialogues

As valuable as the translations themselves, and perhaps even more so, are Foley's interpretative essays. Here we find enormous strides taken toward a long-overdue recovery of the way Augustine intended these dialogues to be read.

¹²The second edition should also add bibliographic information for the myriad classical texts cited in the bibliography, most of which appear with only title and author.

¹³See Cicero, *De officiis*, ed. Mark Winterbottom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 1.128, where the phrase has the same meaning.

Augustine's dialogues consciously imitate Cicero's. At Cassiciacum, he has his mother Monica compare the dialogue that he is composing about her to those older philosophical dramas that she has often heard him reading with his friends (in which she has heard of no female characters: *Ord.* 1.11.31, with p. 145). Cicero, the great Latin Platonist, was in turn consciously imitating Plato and Socrates.¹⁴ And in our own understanding of the original Platonic dialogues, a revolution has taken place over the past several decades of scholarship, with interpreters becoming increasingly sensitive to the texts' literary or dramatic element. The character of each interlocutor is relevant to his or her statements; arguments made by the characters are not necessarily Plato's arguments; and even arguments made by Socrates are not necessarily Plato's arguments, since Socrates often speaks ironically or prefers to draw out others' opinions rather than reveal his own. Foley's commentaries are, I believe, the first to apply these same basic insights consistently to the Cassiciacum dialogues.

For although Augustine appears as a teacher in these dialogues (including, in *Soliloquies*, in the guise of "Reason"),¹⁵ he is always a Socratic teacher (*HL*, p. 111). He conceals his real opinions (*Acad.* 2.4.10; *Ord.* 2.20.53). When he attacks his students' arguments, he wants them to defend themselves and worries that they will yield too quickly (*Acad.* 1.9.25, 2.7.17; *Ord.* 1.3.8, 1.7.20). When a student claims to know something, Augustine claims ignorance and defers to this knowledge, inducing the student to "teach" what he knows, which leads to a demolition of the alleged knowledge (*Ord.* 1.4.10–1.6.16). Augustine warns his students not to make rash concessions in their dialectical back-and-forth; they fail to heed these warnings (*Acad.* 1.3.8, 1.4.10; *Sol.* 2.15.27). He commits intentional fallacies and praises his students when they catch him doing so (*HL* 3.19; *Sol.* 2.3.4–2.4.5). Most significantly, he admonishes readers of these dialogues to watch out for logical deficiencies in the arguments he has recorded, and to carry those arguments further by (as it were) inserting themselves into the conversation (*Ord.* 1.9.27; *Sol.* 2.15.28).

Foley rightly concludes that the "impishly straight-faced Augustine" who appears as a character here is frequently practicing "Socratic irony or dissemblance," offering "deliberately flawed arguments" and "incomplete riddles" with a "pedagogical . . . purpose," "exercising his interlocutor with deceptive mind games" and "red herrings," and drawing us into the argument by breaking the fourth wall (*Acad.*, p. 150; *HL*, p. 86; *Ord.*, pp. 146, 164, 173–74; *Sol.*, pp. 155, 164, 183, 188, 242, 262).¹⁶ The morality of all these tactics clearly depends on the author's later-famous "distinction between

¹⁴See *ibid.*, 1.2; Cicero, *Academicus primus*, ed. Tobias Reinhardt (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 3.10; *De legibus*, ed. J. G. F. Powell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1.5.15, 2.6.14, 3.1.1.

¹⁵The *Retractions* spells out, in case we missed the joke, that both "Reason" and "Augustine" are in fact the author: Augustine, *Retractions* 1.4.1.

¹⁶See Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 8.3 on Socrates's manner of teaching.

dissimulation and outright lying" (*Ord.*, p. 183). It is no accident that the *Soliloquies* contains his first thematic treatment of that very distinction: in the midst of an argument about the nature of the soul, "Reason" goes on an unexpected tangent about lying, fiction, and comic drama (see *Sol.*, 2.9.16–2.10.18). Foley persuasively suggests that this passage is offering self-referential observations about the whole work's fictionalized and often comic portrayal of an interior monologue, whose original had admittedly been too private to be shared with anyone (*Sol.*, pp. 182–87, 251; cf. *Sol.* 1.1.1).

These are crucial insights for interpreting Augustine's dialogues. Within the constraints of a short translator's commentary, Foley can hardly do more than adumbrate the beginnings of the interpretation that follows from them (see, e.g., *Sol.*, pp. 128, 185). The detailed, line-by-line commentaries that his work demands have yet to be written. But he has raised a standard that young scholars can flock to, and it is safe to predict that some will.

The Nature of Augustine's Platonism

Foley's new approach to these dialogues is based on suggestions made by his late teacher, Ernest Fortin, A.A., who first pointed the way to the work that Foley has now done (see *Ord.*, p. 272n81). Fortin, in turn, largely owed his understanding of the Platonic dialogue to Allan Bloom and Leo Strauss, whose school has contributed significantly to the broader revolution in Plato scholarship mentioned above. With the publication of Foley's translations, the project for a more dramatically sensitive interpretation of Augustine's dialogues has reached sufficient maturity that it can and should cut its Straussian leading strings.

For the weakest points in Foley's commentaries (standing out also by their uncharacteristic lack of textual evidence) are where he writes as if Augustine had shared a Straussian understanding of Platonic philosophy. Foley claims that Augustine never calls himself a "philosopher" because, by "customary usage at the time . . . a philosopher is someone who loves wisdom through the use of reason alone, without the aid of religious faith or divine revelation" (*Ord.*, p. 147). I have encountered this "customary usage" in Strauss and his students, but not in any thinker prior to the Enlightenment; Augustine appears to use "philosopher" interchangeably with "man [sc. human being] desiring wisdom" (*Acad.* 3.3.5). Foley further distinguishes between philosophy understood as a "way of life" "based on unaided reason" that "does not bend the neck to the yoke of Christ," and philosophy understood as a mere tool in a believer's intellectual arsenal (*Ord.*, p. 148; also *Acad.*, p. 118). These may be Strauss's ideas, but they are not Augustine's. It is true that Augustine, like Cicero and Socrates (and Strauss), has too much decorum to apply to himself "so venerable a name" as "philosopher."¹⁷ But

¹⁷Augustine, *Epistula* 1.1, in *Epistulae*, vol. 33 of *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1841).

he writes his first Cassiciacum dialogue in order to inspire future “philosophers”;¹⁸ he has embraced the life of philosophy and wants his friends to as well (*Ord.* 1.10.30, 1.2.4–5; *Acad.* 3.8.17, 2.3.8–9, 1.1.1–3; *HL* 1.1–5); he says that to attack “all philosophers” would be to attack “all philosophy” and hence all wisdom (*Ord.* 1.11.32); and he has his closest friend assert that Augustine seems like a reincarnation of one of the great philosophers of old (*Ord.* 2.20.53). Foley’s Straussian dichotomy between reason and revelation, or between the “life of the philosopher” and the “life of faith,” has no equivalent in Augustine’s thought (cf. *Ord.*, p. 201; *Sol.*, p. 220). The same goes for the distinction between “philosophy” and “theology,” which was important to Strauss as well as to Thomas Aquinas, but is foreign to Augustine, Cicero, and Plato. Foley’s frequent use of this latter distinction in interpreting Augustine is at least misleading (cf. *Acad.*, p. 159; *HL*, pp. 12, 81, 106; *Ord.*, pp. 116, 138, 158, 165; *Sol.*, pp. 205, 246–48, 256, 257).

The two Platonist philosophers whom Augustine speaks most highly of at Cassiciacum have been almost entirely neglected by Straussians, although they often show up in Foley’s excellent footnotes: Plotinus and Cicero (*Acad.* 3.18.41; *Sol.* 1.4.9). Cicero, who wrote dialogues on topics closely related to Augustine’s, is especially important at Cassiciacum. Augustine heatedly apostrophizes him at a crucial point, even while disclaiming the hope ever to compete with him intellectually (*Acad.* 3.16.35–36). More attention to Cicero’s rival version of Platonism might be a useful counterweight to the Straussian tropes that occasionally burden Foley’s interpretations.

For instance, I do not know what texts Foley has in mind when he says “the gulf between the aristocratic gentleman and the philosopher” is “a common theme in Platonic dialogues”; Strauss thought he found this distinction in Xenophon, not Plato, and at any rate it is not Ciceronian (cf. *Ord.*, p. 145).¹⁹ The distinction between “the life of the statesman” and the superior “life of the wise man” is Straussian but hardly Ciceronian (cf. *Ord.*, p. 209). The disparaging use of the term “political” to mean “vainglorious” is not supported by these texts and is certainly not Ciceronian (cf. *Sol.*, pp. 172, 202, 205). The doctrine of the tripartite soul from Plato’s *Republic* is not Ciceronian and should not be read into Augustine’s texts without direct evidence (cf. *Acad.*, pp. 123–25; *Ord.*, pp. 141–42; *Sol.*, pp. 172–73). Foley’s repeated association of philosophy with comedy over against tragedy is Straussian, and plays down the fact that Augustine weeps in these dialogues more often than he laughs (cf. *Ord.*, pp. 11–12, 115–16, 133; *Sol.*, pp. 160–61, 174, 186, 190; *HL*, pp. 14–15); Cicero has a grimmer view of the philosophic life and depicts a fellow Academic skeptic weeping over the death of

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹See footnote references at Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 142–43. Cicero, *De officiis* 1.69–70 treats philosophers as a peculiar type of gentlemen.

Socrates.²⁰ Foley does refer regularly to Cicero, but when doing so he sometimes attributes to Cicero views voiced by Stoic and Epicurean characters in his dialogues, to which Cicero's own character responds with stinging rebuttals.²¹

Cicero follows an old Platonist tradition, not traceable to Plato himself (and hence of little interest to Strauss), by dividing philosophy into three branches: physics, ethics, and logic.²² Augustine follows the same division at Cassiciacum (*Acad.* 3.10.23–3.13.29) and will continue to do so in *City of God*, where he will classify theology under the category of physics (or natural philosophy).²³ Foley never seems to accept Augustine's exalted view of Platonic physics, preferring instead the anachronistic terms "metaphysics," "ontology," or even "metaphysical kinetics" (cf. *Ord.*, pp. 154, 170, 171; *Sol.*, pp. 215, 248). Foley's reservations on this point seem tied to his frequent assertion that according to a strict definition of "knowledge" (*scientia*), we can have no knowledge of anything perceivable by the senses (*Acad.*, pp. 134–36, 140, 167; *Ord.*, p. 114). By that definition, natural philosophy and the visible world could indeed never be objects of knowledge. But both Cicero and Augustine believe that they are, and neither thinker shares the definition in question.²⁴ The closest that Augustine comes to offering such a radical definition of knowledge appears to be a passage in the *Soliloquies* that Foley correctly identifies as a deliberate sophism by "Reason," which that character contradicts in almost the same breath and continues to contradict in subsequent passages (cf. *Sol.* 1.15.28–29 with 2.4.6–2.5.7 and 2.18.32, and pp. 155–56).

Or again, Augustine says that "no books" have ever managed to persuade him that a mortal soul should not fear death (*Sol.* 2.13.23). Foley's only example of such a book is Plato's *Apology* (*Sol.*, p. 301n85), which Augustine had not read. The likelier referent is book 1 of Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*, which purports to show that even a mortal soul should not fear death.²⁵ If Cicero had regarded his own arguments in that book as convincing, then Augustine's jibe at them would be hard to reconcile with all his praise of Cicero. But Cicero says that his arguments in that work represent his

²⁰See Cicero, *Tusculanae disputationes*, ed. Max Pohlenz (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), 3.28.68–70; *De natura deorum*, ed. W. Ax (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1964), 3.82.

²¹Cf. *HL*, pp. 76–77, and *Sol.*, p. 146, with Cicero, *De finibus bonorum et malorum*, ed. Claudio Moreschini (Munich: Saur, 2005), 4.23.64–4.24.65 (later cited at *Sol.*, p. 319n32); *Acad.*, p. 258n46, with Cicero, *De finibus* 2.6.17–18.

²²Cicero, *De finibus* 4.2.3–4.5.13.

²³Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 8.4–8, 8.12.

²⁴Augustine's definition of knowledge (*scientia*) seems to presuppose sense-perception rather than denigrate it: see *De libero arbitrio* 1.16.57 (*ratione habere perceptum*). Foley asserts that Augustinian natural science teaches only "a priori" truths "not dependent on sensible experience," which I do not see in the texts he cites (cf. *Acad.*, pp. 189–91, 275n79; *Ord.*, p. 195).

²⁵Cicero, *Tusculanae disputationes* 1.34.82–1.46.111.

attempt to hide his own opinion while freeing readers from error.²⁶ I believe that a faithful interpretation of the *Tusculan Disputations* would show that Augustine has correctly grasped its author's intention, and would help account for some of the similar twists and turns in his own *On the Immortality of the Soul*.

A reading of Augustine's dialogues that brought them into more direct conversation with Cicero could also contribute to the recent and growing scholarly movement that seeks to recover, against the dominant postwar interpretation of Augustine as a harsh critic of earthly politics, his deep appreciation for healthy political life and Christians' role in it. At Cassiciacum, Augustine and his students read at least half a book of the *Aeneid* daily, mining the great national poet of Rome for insights applicable to their own moral, intellectual, and religious life (*Acad.* 1.5.14–15, 2.4.10, 2.7.18, 2.8.20, 2.9.23; *Ord.* 1.4.10, 2.20.54). Augustine frequently cites and draws on their other national (i.e., pagan) literature, from Terence's plays to Cicero's political speeches (*Acad.* 2.9.22; *Ord.* 1.7.20). He treats "our Cicero," their national philosopher-statesman, as an authority on both wisdom and virtue (*Acad.* 3.18.41, 2.11.26, 3.7.14). He treats as evident premises for moral philosophy, first, that Catiline was most blameworthy in his self-righteous attempt to subvert Rome's decadent republican constitution, and second, that Cicero was most praiseworthy in "saving Rome" by putting Catiline to death (*Acad.* 3.16.36; *Ord.* 2.7.22, 2.17.45). Augustine assumes that "ruling the republic" is a valuable and worthwhile act of service to one's fellow citizens, only warning his students not to seek such honors before they attain the moral and intellectual maturity needed to weather the storms of political life (*Ord.* 2.20.54). Foley is suspicious of some of these claims (see *Acad.*, pp. 145, 161–62; *Ord.*, p. 210), and they deserve to be evaluated on their merits. I at least do not believe that they are contradicted in any of Augustine's later writings, including *City of God*. Either way, the Cassiciacum dialogues need to be incorporated into future accounts of Augustine's political thought.

In the whole tradition of Platonism, including Christian Platonism, there is a tension between Socratic doubt and quasi-Pythagorean doctrinairism—two aspects that Plato singularly united via his dialectic (see *Acad.* 3.17.37). The skeptical aspect is more visible in Cicero and the dogmatic aspect in Plotinus. But both are present in any Platonist worthy of the name. The same tension pervades Cassiciacum: Augustine is pleased to have found some answers, but he longs painfully for many more. As he would later put it at the beginning of *Confessions*, it delights us even now to praise God, but our heart remains restless until it rests in Him. The more "comic" of these two aspects dominates *On the Happy Life*, the most public of the Cassiciacum dialogues; the more "tragic" aspect dominates *Soliloquies*, the most private; somewhere in between are *Against the Academics* and *On Order*. Both aspects are not only real but pedagogically necessary: as

²⁶See *ibid.*, 5.4.11.

Augustine says, students will never seek the truth if they despair of ever finding it, nor if they believe they already possess it (*Acad.* 2.3.8). Foley's commentaries tend to emphasize the Plotinian aspect of Augustine at the expense of the Ciceronian. I am inclined to think the Ciceronian aspect needs more emphasis today, in both Augustine's philosophy and his politics.

Of course, if we continue these arguments about how to read Augustine's dialogues, we will be following the trail that Foley has blazed and profiting from his great scholarly labors. We owe him a major debt of gratitude for making accessible these five early portraits, arguably unsurpassed in their intimacy and intricacy, of an astonishing mind driven by a restless heart.