

Christianae vitae otium in Augustine's *De Academicis*
(or *Contra Academicos*)

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INTRODUCTION

In his earliest extant works which are commonly referred to as the *Cassiciacum Dialogues*, Augustine's *Contra Academicos* (*Against the Academicians*) is the first work begun during his retirement to a country-house in Cassiciacum (near Milan) preceding his baptism (Easter 387). The primary feature of *Contra Academicos* appears to be the critical assessment and refutation of the Academic scepticism, thereby being concerned with the epistemological argument about human knowledge (*episteme* = *scientia*) and its justification. Some scholars therefore proceed to examine and evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of his arguments against the sceptics. And a further characteristic of these dialogues must not be forgotten: they show us the name of addressees to whom Augustine writes the dedicatory letters. In the case of *Contra Academicos*, it consists of three books of which the first two are opened with dedicatory letters addressed to his friend and benefactor, Romanianus who is an adherent of Manichaeism. Because Augustine himself led his patron to become a firm believer. What we read here, thus, is a newly converted Christian author addressing a remaining Manichaean reader.

In what follows, first, I shall focus on both conclusions of Book 1 and 2, thereby showing the difference in the view about the probability of the acquisition of knowledge. Then, I shall turn to the descriptions related to *fortuna* (fortune) and *otium* (leisure) throughout the work, which I shall emphasise more, since they serve as the helpful suggestion for appreciating the significance of the discussion which is not rather concerned with the thread of the epistemological arguments so much as is committed to a Christian way of life. Finally, I shall conclude with some remarks on the intention of *Contra Academicos*.

THE DISCUSSIONS OF THE DIALOGUE

In this section I shall first provide a partial explanation of the discussion in *Contra Academicos*, then disclose an apparent conflict between the conclusions of Book 1 and 2.

Augustine begins by proposing the question of whether or not the knowledge of the truth is a necessary condition for attaining the happy life: one of the interlocutors,

Trygetius supports the view that anyone cannot live happily merely by searching after the truth; and the other, Licentius holds, standing on the side of Academic sceptics, that it is in the very search for the truth that one can find happiness: the knowledge of the truth is not necessary for happiness. Despite many digressions, which Augustine himself later regards them as rudimentary (*cf.* 1.9.25), both attempt to understand the nature of happiness and the scope of error and wisdom on it. The debate ends with Licentius's claim that (1) 'human wisdom is the search for the truth in virtue of which, due to the mind's tranquility, the happy life would follow' (1.9.24), on condition that human mortality cannot afford to search for the truth forever, thus being designated as the wise (*sapiens*) without finding the truth (*cf.* 1.4.10-12), and that (2) the knowledge the *sapiens* seeks after is the philosophical truth of human and divine matters, which would be converged with God's knowledge of himself. (1.8.23) Although he does not show approval of Licentius's sceptic view that human happiness consists only in searching for God, Augustine closes the discussion in Book 1 with saying that he will send the record of their conversation to Romanianus. (1.9.25)

At the end of book two, once again Augustine recapitulates the discussions for his friends as follows:

Therefore, the question between us is whether their arguments make it plausible that nothing can be perceived and that one should not assent to anything. Now if you prevail, I'll gladly yield. Yet if I can demonstrate that it's much more plausible that the wise man be able to attain the truth and that assent need not always be withheld, then you'll have no reason, I think, for refusing to come over to my view. (*Contra Academicos* 2.13.30; trans. P. King, p. 52)

Such is the way Augustine identifies a basic question at issue and introduces the succeeding discussions in Book 3. The main business of the dialogue in Books 3 is, indeed, to argue that it is at least plausible (*probabile*) that the wise man knows the truth, more precisely the philosophical truth. And he repeatedly stresses this conclusion. (*Cf.* 2.3.8, 3.5.12, 3.14.30, 3.14.31, 3.20.43) Here, in fact, we find the discrepancy between these two conclusions: Licentius makes the claim in Book 1 that it is impossible for us (including the *sapiens*) to know the truth; and the matter raised at the end of Book 2 is to clarify how it could be possible for the *sapiens* to know the truth. Although the outcome of *Contra Academicos* is that the knowledge is possible, how is it determined?

THE WAY OUT OF THE PROBLEM FOR THE ADDRESSEE AND THE INTERLOCUTORS

Next I would like to consider the significance of Augustine's solution to the problem proposed at the end of Book 2: how it could be possible for the *sapiens* to know the truth, provided that the search after truth is conditioned by our mortality/finitude.

It is noteworthy that Augustine often reminds his interlocutors and the addressee, Romanianus about the *fortuna* (fortune) in the course of our lives. First, in the prefatory letters appended at the beginnings of Book 1 and 2, Augustine refers to the *fortuna* that 'is governed by some hidden order, and we only call "chance" those events in the world whose reason and cause are concealed' (CA 1.1.1; pp. 1-2) If even 'bad fortune' (1.1.1; 2.1.1) seems to block the path of the 'resolute application of oneself' (2.1.1) towards the wisdom, his conviction that it is necessary for us to hold to its course is based on the belief that the 'Divine Providence extends all the way to us' (1.1.1), so that any search after the truth cannot be led astray by ill fortune. Thus, second, he estimates his friends committing or attempting to commit themselves to the search for truth as those who are favoured by fortune, and says to Licentius:

... no one will drink of philosophy more eagerly than your father [sc. Romanianus], after so long a thirst. What if you saw him investigating and arguing these matters with us? I for one will never think myself more fortunate than at that moment. (2.7.18, p. 42)

Augustine, then, is waiting for the good turn of fortune that will admit him to the quest for philosophy.

But if there is an element of indeterminacy in the turn of fortune, what assurance is there for the view that it seems to be impossible for the *sapiens* to know the truth? In fact, in the first part of the Book 3 (3.1.1-3.2.4), Augustine once again refers to the necessity of *fortuna* for the acquisition of the knowledge in question. While stressing the need for the wholehearted search for the truth, because of the difficulty faced by them, he turns their attention directly to the problem of *fortuna*, thereby exploring the possibility of overcoming the difficulty.

It has accordingly always been my view that nothing is necessary for a man who is already wise, whereas fortune is necessary for a man to become wise. (3.2.2, p. 53)

Yet since our life while we're living on this Earth (*ipsa uita nostra, cum hic uiuimus*) is in the power of fortune (*in potestate fortunae*), and only someone alive can become wise, shouldn't it be admitted that we need its favor to be brought to wisdom? (3.2.4)

His repeated references to the fortune that is necessary only for those who wish to be the *sapiens* (and not for the *sapiens*) fails to convince the interlocutor, Alypius. Although he admits that the fortune could permit those who are by themselves incapable of arriving at the wisdom to discover it, being derived from the total dependence of our living in this life on the 'power of fortune', Alypius is unable to agree with him. And they break off the discussion. Why does Augustine not prevail on him? It may be because Alypius does misunderstand here the meaning of *fortuna* which would differ from the common usage of the term.

Almost forty years after this discussion, Augustine's late reflection on this dialogue in *Revisions* (*Retractationes*, 1.1.1-4) will give us the exact meaning of the term *fortuna*:

I regret that in *Against the Academicians* I so often used the name 'fortune.' Of course, I didn't intend any goddess to be understood in this name, but rather ... to be traced back to divine providence. (*Revisions* 1.1.2, p. 167)

This view that divine providence guides and governs all things insofar as they are creatures is an essential one for the probability/prosibility of our acquisition of wisdom. As we have seen, it is also expressed in the letter addressed to Romanianus. But Alypius cannot read it. Why, then, does Augustine not make it explicit within the discussion itself? Is there any reason that he continues to use the term 'fortune'?

THE DESCRIPTIONS OF THE OTIUM THROUGHOUT CONTRA ACADEMICOS

In this section I shall focus on the situation in which Augustine and his friends holds the discussion, with the help of his references to the *otium* (leisure) and its cognates in *Contra Academicos*.

Examples showing how Augustine values the *otium* from his youth onwards may be taken from many of his works/writings both in the early and in the later periods. Most simply, he regards the *otium* as free from public affairs. And he recognises the tendency to associate it with laziness and vanity. In consequent, he carefully constructs the positive support for the *otium*, thereby identifying/appreciating paradoxically its active pursuit for beneficial activities. This view is also evident in his reminiscence about *Contra Academicos* in his *Revisions*, in which he succinctly situates the *otium* within his course of events: away from the worldly concerns and considerations, he commits himself to the spiritual retreat (*otium*) into oneself, ~~the religious practice in a small community~~, and the exploration of philosophical issues:

When I had renounced the worldly ambitions I had achieved and those that I wanted to achieve, I devoted myself to retirement in a Christian life (*christianae uitae otium*). Even before I was baptized, I first wrote *Against the Academicians* (or *On the Academicians*). (*Revisions*, 1.1.1; p. 167)

But how does Augustine refer to the *otium* in *Contra Academicos*? It is clear that we can see his remarks about the *otium* from two different places from the viewpoint of the structure of this dialogue. First, as he explains the situation and occasion of the discussion, he often speaks about the *otium*.

When it was daylight again — for matter had been arranged the day before so that there would be a good deal of free time (*otium*) — the business to be gone through was undertaken immediately. (1.6.16, p. 17)

I don't think that arguments will forsake Trygetius if we permit him to search for them at his leisure (*otiose*) (1.9.24, p. 23)

After the initial discussion written up in Book 1, we took a break (*otiosi*) from our debate for nearly seven days, since we were reviewing the second, third, and and fourth books of Vergil's *Aeneid* and talking about them. (2.4.10, p. 34)

When in my retirement (*otiosus*) in the country I had been pondering for a long time just how the plausible or the truthlike can defend our actions from error, ... (3.15.34, p. 83)

In fact we find here the idea, ~~particularly expressed in Augustine's early writings~~, that *otium* denotes the unburdened and dignified time that is marked by ~~the prayer, discussions~~, philosophical and/or scriptural study and writing, based on the classical tradition of *otium honestum* (*otium liberale*, *otium cum dignitate*) devoted to the philosophical reflection and literary endeavour.

But it is not only in the dialogue between the participants referred to above that the word '*otium*' occurs; indeed, it is a word which is remarkable in the prefatory letters towards Augustine's patron, Romanianus, applied to the moment in which he achieves/fulfills the long-held aspiration.

Now philosophy nourishes and sustains me in that retirement (*otium*) we have so much hoped for. It has freed me completely from the superstition in to which I had thrown you headlong with myself. (1.1.3; p. 4)

Finally, you are the one who has inspired, advance, and brought about whatever I now enjoy in my retirement (*otium*) — that I've escaped from the chains of superfluous desires; that in putting down the burden of mortal cares I breathe, come to my senses, return to my self; that I'm searching for the truth most eagerly; that I'm now beginning to find it; that I'm confident about arriving at its highest degree. ... I declared earnestly many times that no fortune (*fortuna*) would seem good to me except what would provide leisure (*otium*) for doing philosophy, and that no life would seem happy except one in which I might live in philosophy. (2.2.4; pp. 28-29)

The difference between this description and that of those preoccupation within the dialogue is clear if we compare the passages: in the prefaces Augustine explains to Romanianus not only the situations of the *otium* but the obstacles of his enquiry, from which he is now starting to live in philosophy. It may be that at this point his explanation is similar to his reminiscence in *Revisions*. However, a different element of the *otium* is given in the second preface, in which he shows us the close correlation between the fortune, the *otium*, the philosophical enquiry, and the happiness: happy would be he who is encouraged in the philosophical *otium*, in so far as the fortune assigns him the *otium*. Hence, after the discussion in Book 1, the second preface makes clear the point that Augustine's starting point at Cassiciacum is under the guidance of the fortune.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In his *Confessions*, despite the close relationship the name of Romanianus is only known to us by the passage in which Augustine and his friends were moved by their hope for the formation of a community that would provide the significant *otium* devoted to the search for wisdom.

... among us some that were extremely wealthy, most notably Romanianus, my fellow-townsmen and close friend from an early age, ... He was most insistent on this point, and had the most authority in putting his case, because the amount of his property far excelled the rest. (*Conf.* 6.14.24; trans. P. Burton, p. 129)

Although the proposal was dropped due to their indecision whether the present or prospective wives of members would be integrated into the community, it is noteworthy that the central figure in the project of the otiose life was Romanianus.

The plan described here perhaps in late 385 bears a close resemblance to the retreat to Cassiciacum in late 386. Among some characteristics of the plan which show us the similarities is the eager for the life in *otium* which would become the basis/focus for his and his patron's idea on the importance of the search for wisdom. The conviction on the importance of *otium* naturally figures in the dedicatory letter to Romanianus when the treatise on the search for wisdom is written. The discussion in Book 1 ends by confirming the sceptic view on the impossibility of the knowledge of human and divine matters which is constitutive of wisdom. Although the next discussions in Book 2 and 3 centre on the probability of the wisdom, both take the same position on the/our inability/imperfection of the acquisition of wisdom, in so far as the latter calls for the intervention of divine providence. Thus, the outcome of *Contra Academicos* that we may be happy with the acquisition of wisdom through the guidance of divine providence would be situated in the light of Augustine's faith on the divine sign, while the sceptics admit that we are able to be happy only in the search for the wisdom. We settle the difference with respect to the commitment to the mode of life, in which Augustine professes the faith in the divine providence.

With regard to the intention and the purpose of this work, it seems to be interesting that the second preface indicates Romanianus's apparent indifference to the Academic sceptics (2.3.8). It appears that the dialogue is chiefly concerned with the search for the truth, in which we are reminded about the story of young Augustine who was trapped into the Manichaeans who repeatedly claimed that they knew what the truth was and who seemes to possess the very thing for which he was looking. (*Conf.* 3.6.10) It may be that at this point Augustine intentionally wrote it for an adherent of Manichaeism, Romanianus. Because the essential part of the correlation between the *otium* and the fortune as to the probability of the wisdom is not made explicit towards the participants of the discussion but only to him who is able to read the whole of the work. The true aim of Augustine is to encourage him to know the limited feature of the search for the

truth and then to appreciate the power of the divine providence, by which we are truly led to the happy life.