

Contra Academicos as autobiography: a critique of the historiography on Augustine's first extant dialogue

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Abstract

Contra Academicos is not one of Augustine's masterpieces and, as such, modern scholarship has largely ignored this text in favour of examining Augustine's more mature works. Scholars do, however, attempt to use it as a way of interpreting Augustine's psychological state of mind at the time of his conversion because this is his first extant text. I argue that this attempt at reading *Contra Academicos* as autobiography is dangerous because Augustine was deliberately offering a self-representation to a pagan-philosophical audience and, therefore, scholars should not attempt to interpret this dialogue as if it offered neutral insight into Augustine's state of mind around 386. This article will first review the history of the scholarship which has attempted to read *Contra Academicos* as autobiography to prove that Augustine was only a Neoplatonist at the time of his conversion, or to disprove this theory. In either case, the authors of both positions have relied on *Contra Academicos* to support their claims. Then, I will make three arguments why reading *Contra Academicos* as autobiography is dubious. First, I will argue that the literary genre of the dialogue shows that Augustine's intended audience was for pagan-philosophers. Second, I will argue that the dedication of the text shows that Augustine's audience is a pagan-philosophical audience. Augustine's dedicatee plays a larger role in this text than do most dedicatees of texts in late antiquity. Third, I will show that the specific content demonstrates that Augustine's text was focused on a pagan-philosophical audience. Augustine never quotes scripture but goes to great pains to demonstrate his knowledge of Vergil and Cicero.

Introduction

Contra Academicos, Augustine of Hippo's first extant text, is a curious dialogue which attempts to refute epistemological and ethical arguments of scepticism which he read in Cicero's *Academica* and against the sceptics whom he had personally encountered in his early life. 'I wrote, first of all', he would later state in his *Retractiones*, 'so that, with the most forceful reasons possible I might remove from my mind – because they were disturbing me – their [sceptical]

arguments which in many men instill a despair of finding truth and prevent a wise man from giving assent to anything or approving anything at all as clear and certain, since to them everything seems obscure and uncertain'.¹ Augustine's main arguments in his *Contra Academicos* are that epistemological certainties may be claimed and that one must not fall prey to the facile views of the sceptics or the lax ethical behaviour that scepticism is likely to engender.

Unfortunately, *Contra Academicos* – written during his retreat at Cassiciacum in late 386 just months before his baptism on Easter of 387 at the hands of Ambrose of Milan – may not be considered among Augustine's masterpieces such as *Confessiones*, *De Civitate Dei* or *De Doctrina Christiana*; nor can it even be included as a strong philosophical treatise which should be read among other great works of epistemology. J.J. O'Meara has correctly observed that 'the *Contra Academicos* cannot be recommended as a valuable contribution to the theory of knowledge'.² Its weak arguments and muddled organisation have rendered it an insignificant addition to philosophical inquiry.

Despite this analysis, *Contra Academicos* has not been entirely ignored by Augustinian scholars. Rather, writers on Augustine have turned to this text in an attempt to discern Augustine's psychological state of mind at that time of his life. Dennis Trout has adequately argued (concerning all of the Cassiciacum dialogues, not just *Contra Academicos*³) that 'as the earliest surviving pieces of Augustine's writings, these works have attracted considerable attention, but scholars most often have approached them either as evidence for the character of Augustine's Christianity in the months after his famous conversion in the garden, or as examples of the art of dialogue composition in antiquity'.⁴ Modern scholars, then, have attempted to mine

¹ Augustine, *Retractiones*, trans. Sister Mary Inez Bogan (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1968), 1.1. 'Cum ergo reliquissem, vel quae adeptus fueram in cupiditatibus hujus mundi, vel quae adipisci volebam, et me ad christianae vitae otium contulissem; nondum baptizatus, contra Academicos vel de Academicis primum scripsi, ut argumenta eorum, quae multis ingerunt veri inveniendi desperationem, et prohibent cuiquam rei assentiri, et omnino aliquid, tanquam manifestum certumque sit, approbare sapientem, cum eis omnia videantur obscura et incerta, ab animo meo, quia et me movebant, quantis possem rationibus amoverem. Quod miserante atque adjuvante Domino factum est.' *Patrologia Latina*, 32.

² Augustine, *Contra Academicos*, trans. J. J. O'Meara (Westminster: Newman Press, 1950), p. 18.

³ Although the argument that I make in this article may be applied to all of the Cassiciacum dialogues, I am strictly concentrating on *Contra Academicos* in order to remain focused and for the sake of brevity.

⁴ Dennis Trout, 'Augustine at Cassiciacum: Otium Honestum and the Social Dimensions of Conversion'. *Vigilae Christianae* 42 (1988), p. 132.

what they can from *Contra Academicos* concerning Augustine's biography at the moment before his entrance into the Christian community and have largely ignored the philosophical arguments themselves.

This use of *Contra Academicos* as a text which may offer autobiographical insight into Augustine's mind at the beginning of his life as a Christian is dangerous and any assertion to do so must be read critically. *Contra Academicos* is not a text which lends itself to be examined for autobiographical content because it only offers a particular self-representation which is intended for a narrowly defined pagan-philosophical audience. Augustine purposely omitted many details of the burgeoning Christian side of his life because in making a significant number of references to Christianity he would have lost the attention of his pagan-philosophical audience. Because he did not want to alienate his intended audience, Augustine never quoted any non-canonical Christian writers. His scant biblical references may have largely gone unnoticed by his intended audience,⁵ and his references to Christ were few and far between. Therefore, future scholarship on *Contra Academicos* should refrain from attempting to read this text as if it offered a clear picture of Augustine's mind at Cassiciacum.

I will attempt to accomplish two objectives in this article. First, I will review the scholarship since the early twentieth century in order to show that *Contra Academicos* has been inappropriately read for autobiographical content by scholars over the past 100 years. Then, in order to prove that Augustine's text was intended for a specific pagan-philosophical audience and, therefore, must not be read as an unfiltered biographical offering, I will analyse three aspects of the text: its literary genre, its immediately stated audience and the substantial references from pagan authors in the text itself. After considering these three points, it will become clear that Augustine was only offering a small slice of his life to a pagan-philosophical audience and to read *Contra Academicos* with the intention of gleaning a broad autobiographical account of him is to misread the text.

The usage of *Contra Academicos* as biography in modern scholarship

There are many examples which demonstrate the tendency in modern scholarship to read *Contra Academicos* for autobiographical information about Augustine's early career. One example from the early twentieth century which should be mentioned comes from Prosper Alfaric's 1918 book

⁵ For example, Augustine quotes Matthew 7:7 'Search and you shall find'. But it is probable that the majority of his pagan-philosophical audience would not have known this was a scriptural reference. Augustine, *Contra Academicos*, trans. Peter King (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co. 1995), 2.3.9.

L'évolution intellectuelle de Saint Augustin: Du Manichéisme au Néoplatonisme. There were scholars earlier than Alfarcic who had argued that *Contra Academicos* offers an autobiographical moment in Augustine's life but I have chosen to start with Alfarcic's text because, as O'Meara has argued, 'these views are well summed up and clearly stated in a work [Alfarcic's] which is regarded with considerable respect by Augustinian scholars'.⁶ Alfarcic voiced an issue which scholars have often turned to in Augustine's first dialogue in order to debate: did Augustine convert fully to Christianity immediately after his experience in the garden or was he strictly a philosopher at that time and it was only years later that he embraced Christianity? Alfarcic took the stance that Augustine was not converted to Christianity but that he was only a philosopher. In order to make this argument, Alfarcic turned to all of the Cassiciacum dialogues in his attempt to determine what Augustine was thinking at that time. He stated:

when he received baptism, he granted little importance to that rite that, in the writings of this epoch [the Cassiciacum dialogues], where he frequently spoke of himself and of all that which interested him, he never made even the smallest remote allusion. He was, then, rather not very Catholic. Without a doubt he accepted the Christian tradition, but he only considered it as a popular adaptation of Platonic wisdom. It was only a long time later that he arrived to give faith importance over reason.⁷

The Cassiciacum dialogues were crucial for Alfarcic's argument. He sees almost no mention of Christianity in them and, as he states, 'in him the

⁶ This quote comes from O'Meara's translation, p. 20. There are earlier scholars, during the nineteenth century, who also argued that *Contra Academicos* sheds light on Augustine's mind. Some of these are: A. Naville, *Saint Augustin, étude sur le développement de sa pensée jusqu'à l'époque de son ordination* (Geneva, 1872); *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 85 (Jan. 1888), pp. 43–69; cf. G. Boissier, *La fin du paganisme* (3rd edn. Paris, 1898), pp. 291–325; Adolf Harnack, *Augustins Confessionen* (2nd edn. Giessen, 1895), p. 17; Friedrich Loofs, 'Augustinus' in *Realenzyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*, vol. 2, 3rd edn. edited by A. Hauck, (Leipzig, 1897), pp. 266ff; L. Gourdon, *Essai sur la conversion de saint Augustin* (Geneva, 1900); W. Thimme, 'Augustins geistige Entwicklung in den ersten Jahren nach seiner Bekehrung' (386–391) (Berlin, 1908), p. 11. These entries come from O'Meara's introduction to his translation of *Contra Academicos*, noted here, on pp. 19–20 and footnotes on pp. 159–60.

⁷ All trans. from French are mine. Prosper Alfarcic, *L'évolution intellectuelle de Saint Augustin: Du Manichéisme au Néoplatonisme* (Paris, Emile Nourry, 1918), p. viii. 'Quand il a reçu le baptême, il accordait si peu d'importance à ce rite que, dans les écrits de cette époque, où il parle fréquemment de lui-même et de tout ce qui l'intéresse, il n'y fait jamais la plus lointaine allusion. Il était alors assez peu catholique. Sans doute il acceptait la tradition chrétienne, mais il ne la considérait que comme une adaptation populaire de la sagesse platonicienne. Ce n'est que long temps plus tard qu'il est arrivé à donner à la foi le pas sur la raison.'

Christian disappeared behind the disciple of Plotinus. If he had died after having written the *Soliloquies*, one would only consider him as a convinced Neoplatonist, with more or less a tint of Christianity.⁸ For Alfarc, then, *Contra Academicos* and the other Cassiciacum dialogues offer a snapshot into the mind of Augustine – a mind which was entirely Neoplatonist and offered only a wan nod to Christianity.

Two years after Alfarc published his book, Charles Boyer wrote a response in his book *Christianisme et Néo-Platonisme dans la formation de Saint Augustin*. In this text, Boyer takes the exact opposite position to Alfarc and he asserts that ‘we have often affirmed it . . . he was a Christian with fervour’.⁹ Augustine, according to Boyer, had been converted to Christianity in the garden and any assertion that he was simply a philosopher is inaccurate.

Boyer initiates his argument by turning to Augustine’s *Confessiones* to see what the Bishop of Hippo had to say about his earlier life. In this text, for Boyer, Augustine confirms that over ten years earlier he was, indeed, a Christian and that, contrary to Alfarc’s opinion, Augustine did not just become a ‘true’ Christian when he became ordained. Boyer states that:

we have admitted that the *Confessions* present with exactitude the psychology of Saint Augustine up to his conversion. There is reason to believe that the neophyte of Cassiciacum had not modified his manner of conceiving the harmony of philosophy and Christian religion. But does one find in the *Dialogues* some texts which consider faith?¹⁰

Boyer is not content to cite Augustine’s *Confessiones* as his proof that he was a Christian in 386. He turns back to the Cassiciacum dialogues and sees continuity between the representation of Augustine’s Christianity between *Confessiones* and Augustine’s first four dialogues written before his baptism. Boyer claims that:

one finds without pains in those declarations of the *Dialogues* on the harmony of philosophy and faith, the conception that Saint Augustine,

⁸ Ibid., p. 527. ‘En lui le Chrétien disparaît derrière le disciple de Plotin. S’il était mort après avoir rédigé les *Soliloquies*, on ne le considérerait que comme un Néo-Platonicien convaincu, plus ou moins teinté de Christianisme.’

⁹ Charles Boyer, *Christianisme et Néo-Platonisme dans la formation de Saint Augustin* (Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne, 1920), p. 166. ‘Nous l’avons successivement reconnu . . . il est Chrétien avec ferveur.’

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 166–7. ‘Nous avons admis que les *Confessiones* présentaient avec exactitude la psychologie de saint Augustin jusqu’à sa conversion. Il y a toute raison de croire que le néophyte de Cassiciacum n’avait pas modifié sa manière de concevoir les rapports de la philosophie et de la religion chrétienne. Mais trouve-t-on dans les *Dialogues* des textes qui en fassent foi?’

in the *Confessions*, affirms themselves to be true during this epoch [at Cassiciacum] of his life.¹¹

Boyer, then, uses *Contra Academicos* – as well as the other three dialogues – to convince his readers that Augustine was a true Christian at the moment of his baptism by Ambrose as well as when he was a bishop in North Africa over ten years later.

Unfortunately, this theme that *Contra Academicos* offers an unbiased autobiography of Augustine does not end in the early twentieth century but continues in modern scholarship.¹² Joanne McWilliam, in her 1990 article ‘The Cassiciacum Autobiography’, believed that *Contra Academicos* offered just as much autobiographical information as Augustine’s *Confessiones*, albeit in a ‘stilted, pedantic and apparently dispassionate’¹³ form. McWilliam’s thesis is to ‘concentrate on the similarities between *Confessions* and the Cassiciacum writings, rather than on their differences, in an effort to show the autobiographical character of the latter’.¹⁴ Although McWilliam does not draw heavily on Boyer’s argument, she does agree with Boyer that there is continuity between Augustine’s earliest dialogues and his *Confessiones*, proving that Augustine was more than simply a Neoplatonist while at Cassiciacum.

Although Carol Harrison, in her recent book *Rethinking Augustine’s Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity*, rejects the assumption made by earlier scholars that there is a noticeable distinction between Augustine in his

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 169. ‘On retrouve sans peine dans ces déclarations des Dialogues sur les rapports de la philosophie et de la foi, la conception que saint Augustin, dans les *Confessions*, affirme s’en être faite à cette époque de sa vie.’

¹² Other scholars who assert that *Contra Academicos* may be read as autobiography should be noted in passing: John A. Mourant, ‘Augustine and the Academics’, *Recherches Augustiniennes* 4 (1966), pp. 67–96; John Heil, ‘Augustine’s Attack on Skepticism: The *Contra Academicos*’, *Harvard Theological Review* 65/1 (Jan. 1972), pp. 99–116; David E. Roberts, ‘Augustine’s Earliest Writings’, *Journal of Religion* 33/3 (July 1953), pp. 161–81; Augustine, *Contra Academicos*, trans. J. J. O’Meara; O’Meara, ‘Neo-Platonism and the Conversion of St. Augustine’, *Dominican Studies* 3 (1950), pp. 331–43; O’Meara, *The Young Augustine: The Growth of St. Augustine’s Mind up to his Conversion* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1954); Denis J. Kavanagh, *Answer to Sceptics: A Translation of St. Augustine’s Contra Academicos* (New York: Cosmopolitan Science and Art Service Co., 1943); Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, trans. L. E. M. Lynch (New York: Random House, 1960); Maurice Testard, *Saint Augustin et Cicéron* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1958).

¹³ Joanne McWilliam, ‘The Cassiciacum Autobiography’, *Studia Patristica* 18/4, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Kalamazoo, MI: Peeters Press, 1990), p. 17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

early years and Augustine in his mature years,¹⁵ she – like all of the other scholars mentioned here – still believes that Augustine’s early dialogues offer an insight into what he was ‘actually thinking’¹⁶ at the time of his conversion. While having a strong confidence in the autobiographical nature of Augustine’s writings from Cassiciacum, she is much more cautious than previous scholars about the veracity that his *Confessiones* may offer about his earlier life. She claims, in reference to Augustine’s most famous text, that ‘we should certainly not attempt to use it to obtain an accurate insight into Augustine’s thoughts, dilemmas, and decisions at this time or for a blow by blow historical account of what actually happened’.¹⁷ Not only does Harrison have less confidence in the autobiographical character of Augustine’s *Confessiones*, Harrison also rejects the dichotomy of Augustine’s early and late careers, presented by Alfaric and Boyer, and her thesis argues that ‘the real revolution in Augustine’s thought happened not in 396 but in 386, at his conversion, and that the defining features of his mature theology were in place from this moment onwards’.¹⁸ She, like all of the scholars surveyed here, has relied on Augustine’s earliest works to determine what ‘insight into Augustine’s thoughts and feelings’¹⁹ the Cassiciacum dialogues may offer.

Contra Academicos: for a Pagan-Philosophical Audience

Now that we have seen how Augustinian scholars have turned to *Contra Academicos* in order to determine Augustine’s mental state in 386, we may turn our attention to the text itself and it will become clear that Augustine intended his text for a pagan-philosophical audience. The first marker of this intention is that Augustine employed the genre of the Socratic dialogue. At the time that Augustine was writing *Contra Academicos*, the dialogue was not widely employed by Christians in the Latin West as a literary genre. Minucius Felix’s *Octavius*, probably written in the early third century, may well have been the first attempt by a Latin Christian in this genre;²⁰ Justin Martyr’s *Dialogus cum Tryphone* is the most famous example of a dialogue in the early church but, because it was written in Greek, it is likely that Augustine had not read this text; Jerome had written *Altercatio Luciferani et Orthodoxi* in 383 as another early example of a Latin dialogue but its influence on Augustine in

¹⁵ Carol Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine’s Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. vi.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁰ Denis J. Kavanagh in his *Answer to Skeptics*, p. xx.

386 is dubious.²¹ It is clear that in the late fourth-century Latin world there was little employment by Christian authors of the dialogue literary genre.

The most likely scenario concerning Augustine's influences on this matter is that he had appropriated his knowledge of the dialogue form from the pagan philosophers. Rudolph Arbesmann has convincingly argued that 'St. Augustine had become acquainted with the tradition of the dialogue literature through Cicero and Varro, by whom he was greatly influenced. Especially well known is the influence of Cicero's *Hortentius*'.²² O'Meara would later confirm Arbesmann's claim when he said that Augustine's 'first dialogues were modeled mainly on Cicero'.²³ Indeed, throughout *Contra Academicos*, Augustine quoted and explicitly referred to Cicero's dialogues on numerous occasions.²⁴

Why would a young man – who was on the threshold of baptism and had little, if any, knowledge of Christian dialogues – choose to write his first Christian text in imitation of pagan philosophers?²⁵ I would posit that Augustine's imitation of the pagan writers of the past was due to his desire to capture the attention of his contemporary pagan-philosophers. Augustine's imitation of the great pagan-philosophical predecessors in choosing the dialogue genre should not be dismissed as an insignificant move and I hold that Augustine was purposefully following the dialogues of Cicero's *Academica* and *Hortentius* in an attempt to appeal to the same of audience for whom Cicero had written. Augustine's use of the dialogue is a clear indication that he had intended his *Contra Academicos* to be read by a pagan-philosophical audience.

Another way in which it may be determined that Augustine intended his text to be read by a pagan-philosophical audience is to note that the dedicatee of this text is his patron Romanianus. Although many texts from late antiquity were dedicated to an influential sponsor, the presence of Romanianus in this dialogue is much more prominent than other texts which only briefly mention the dedicatee before moving to the substance of the text. In fact, there are two (fairly lengthy) dedications to Romanianus – one at the beginning of book 1 and a second dedication in book 2 which is approximately twice as long as the first. Romanianus was not a Christian and he had been brought to Manichaeism by none other than Augustine himself.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., p. xx.

²³ O'Meara, *The Young Augustine*, pp. 192–3.

²⁴ One need only see 1.1.4 and 3.4.7 by way of example. Augustine. *Contra Academicos*, trans. King.

²⁵ For a discussion of Augustine's use of the dialogue genre and concerning the historicity of *Contra Academicos* see Augustine, *Contra Academicos*, trans. O'Meara, pp. 28–30.

Augustine states in his first dedication to Romanianus that ‘now philosophy nourishes and sustains me in that retirement we have so much hoped for. It has freed me completely from the superstition into which I had thrown you headlong with myself.’²⁶ Although Romanianus was a member of a religion which had occupied Augustine’s mind for many years, Romanianus was not drawn to scepticism in the same way that Augustine had been. In the second dedication, Augustine addresses Romanianus and says that ‘you have often been angry at the Academicians: the more severely, in fact, the less knowledgeable you were about them; the more gladly, because you were led on by your love of the truth’.²⁷ *Contra Academicos*, then, was not dedicated to a Christian or someone, like Augustine, who was on the verge of becoming a Christian. Augustine intended his text to be read initially by someone who did not hold his religious views.

Romanianus, as dedicatee, allows us insight into Augustine’s intended wider audience. Not only was *Contra Academicos* intended for someone who was persuaded by Cicero’s sceptical arguments, Augustine intended his text for a wider philosophical audience; his dedication to the Manichean Romanianus easily allows for this assertion. Augustine Curley also asserted that Augustine’s intended audience was pagan-philosophical when he argued that ‘because it is a dialogue directed to someone not yet a Christian, and meant to bring him to an acceptance of Christianity, the *Contra Academicos* uses language that would be familiar and acceptable to its intended audience. In other words, it is not too heavily religious in tone.’²⁸ Curley correctly asserts that Augustine did not emphasise his religiosity in this text because he was seeking a specific non-Christian audience. The immediate dedication to the Manichean Romanianus assures us of this conclusion.

In addition to the literary genre and the immediate audience, the literary references from Augustine make it evident that his intended audience is pagan-philosophical. Although there are many pagan philosophers whom

²⁶ Augustine. *Contra Academicos*, trans. King, 1.1.3. ‘Evigila, evigila, oro te; multum, mihi crede, gratulaberis quod pene nullis prosperitatibus quibus tenentur incauti, mundi hujus tibi dona blandita sunt: quae meipsum capere moliebantur quotidie ista cantantem, nisi me pectoris dolor ventosam professionem abjicere et in philosophiae gremium confugere coegisset. Ipsa me nunc in otio, quod vehementer optavimus, nutrit ac fovet: ipsa me penitus ab illa superstitione, in quam te mecum praecipitem dederam, liberavit.’ *Patrologia Latina*, 32.

²⁷ Augustine. *Contra Academicos*. trans. King, 2.3.8. ‘Quorum primum, si tamen inest, ista tibi disputatio fortasse detrahet. Saepius enim succensuisti Academicis, eo quidem gravius, quo minus eruditus esses; sed eo libentius, quod veritatis amore illiciebaris.’ *Patrologia Latina*, 32.

²⁸ Augustine J. Curley, *Augustine’s Critique of Scepticism: A Study of Contra Academicos* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), p. 26.

Augustine referenced, for the sake of brevity I will only examine here the two most referenced authors in *Contra Academicos*: Vergil and Cicero.²⁹

Vergil was referenced several times throughout each of the three books. One particular direct quotation comes from his *Aeneid* that Licentius uses to refute a definition of wisdom put forth by Trygetius. Licentius states that ‘this definition [of wisdom] is refuted in a similar fashion’, Licentius countered. ‘For instance, Aeneas was told by his mother: *Now set forth and direct your step as the way leads you*. When Aeneas followed this way, he arrived at what he had been told about. That is to say, he arrived at the truth. Maintain, if you like, that where he placed his foot as he was walking can be called “wisdom!”’ (emphasis added).³⁰ Although this quotation offers a clear example of Augustine’s usage of Vergil, there are two instances where he mentions Vergil that are disjointed from the larger conversation. At the very conclusion of the second day of discussion, Augustine says something quite peculiar. ‘We had started the debate when the sun had already begun to set’, Augustine says, ‘since we were occupied for almost the whole day on the one hand while putting the affairs of the farm in order, and on the other hand reviewing the first book of Vergil’s *Aeneid*.’³¹ A few pages later he says something after the second dedicatory preface to Romanianus. He

²⁹ There are a number of other pagan references which should be mentioned. Those listed here are not exhaustive but offer a brief sample of where the references may be found in the King trans.: Carneades, 2.1.1; Vulcan, 2.1.1; Celsinus, 2.2.5; Aesop, 2.3.7; Zeno, 2.5.11; Philo’s pupil Antiochus, 2.6.16; Verres, 2.9.22; Daedalus, 3.2.3; Helicon, 3.4.7; Plato, 3.9.18; Democritus, 13.10.22; Epicurus, 3.10.23; Catiline, 3.16.36; Socrates, 3.17.37; Pythagoreas, 3.17.37; Pherecydes of Syros, 3.13.37; Polemo, 3.17.38; Arcesilaus, 3.17.38; Chrysippus, 3.17.39; Arcesilaus, 3.17.39; Plotinus, 3.18.41; Philo, 3.18.41; Cynics, 3.19.42; Peripatetics, 3.19.42; Platonists, 3.19.42; Aristotle, 3.19.42.

³⁰ Augustine. *Contra Academicos*. trans. King, 1.5.14. ‘Diu ille tacuit; deinde: En, inquit, iterum definitio, si hoc tu nunquam finire statuisti. Sapientia est via recta, quae ad veritatem ducat. Similiter et hoc, inquit ille, refellitur: nam dum apud Virgilium Aeneae dictum est a matre: *Perge modo, et qua te ducit via dirige gressum*. Sequens hanc viam ad id quod dictum erat, id est ad verum, pervenit. Contende, si placet, ubi pedem ille incedens posuit, sapientiam posse dici: quanquam stulte prorsus istam descriptionem tuam effringere conor; nam causam meam nulla plus adjuvat. Etenim sapientiam non ipsam veritatem, sed viam quae ad eam ducat, esse dixisti.’ *Patrologia Latina*, 32.

³¹ Augustine, *Contra Academicos*. trans. King, 1.5.15. ‘Quamobrem aut definitio sapientiae ne requiratur, aut iudex noster in ejus patrocinium dignetur descendere. Tum ego, cum jam stilum nox impediret, et quasi de integro magnum quiddam disserendum viderem oboriri, in alium diem distuli: nam disputare coeperamus sole jam in occasum declinante, diesque pene totus cum in rebus rusticis ordinandis, tum in recensione primi libri Virgilii peractus fuit.’ *Patrologia Latina*, 32.

claims that ‘after the initial discussion written up in book 1, we took a break from our debate for nearly seven days, since we were reviewing the second, third, and fourth books of Vergil’s *Aeneid* and talking about them. This seemed to be a suitable activity at the time.’³² These references to the books of the *Aeneid* would have been subtle overtures to his pagan readers so that he may persuade them of his argument concerning scepticism. Augustine presented himself as someone from the educated class by demonstrating his knowledge of Vergil in order to win them over to his criticism of scepticism.

Throughout the text, there is no question that Cicero is the author to whom Augustine most often refers. There are several places where Cicero is referred to as the standard of Latin learning. In book 1, Licentius and Trygetius were discussing which authorities may be relied upon as wise men. Trygetius stated that he regretted claiming Cicero as an authority and Licentius responded by saying ‘so Cicero was not a wise man? The one who began philosophy in the Latin language and brought it to perfection?’³³ Trygetius salvaged his argument by claiming that Cicero was a wise man but that he disagreed with Cicero in this one particular instance. Later, in book 3, the status of Cicero was once affirmed as a great authority figure. By this point, Augustine had asserted his presence in the conversation and he claimed that ‘so the arguments of the Academicians not seem to cloud the issue, and so that we ourselves not seem to anyone to be so insolent as to contest the authority of highly learned men, among whom Cicero above all must carry weight with us, with your permission I’ll first offer a few remarks against those to whom it seems that these contentions are opposed to the truth.’³⁴ Cicero, despite his sceptical assertions, is still an authority for Augustine who must be esteemed as one of the wise men of antiquity. Even at the end of the text, when Augustine feels that he has dismantled the sceptical arguments put forth in the *Academica*, Augustine continues to posit Cicero as a superior intellect. ‘I wouldn’t lay claim in any way to follow in Cicero’s footsteps on

³² Augustine. *Contra Academicos*. trans. King, 2.4.10. ‘Post primum sermonem, quem in primum librum contulimus, septem fere diebus a disputando fuimus otiosi, cum tres tantum Virgilio libros post primum recenseremus, atque ut in tempore congruere videbatur, tractaremus.’ *Patrologia Latina*, 32.

³³ Augustine. *Contra Academicos*. trans. King, 1.3.8. ‘Ergone Cicero sapiens non fuit, a quo in latina lingua philosophia et inchoata est, et perfecta?’ *Patrologia Latina*, 32.

³⁴ Augustine. *Contra Academicos*. trans. King, 3.7.14. ‘Tamen ne aut Academicorum argumenta quasdam nebulas videantur offundere, aut doctissimorum virorum auctoritati, inter quos maxime Tullius non movere nos non potest, superbe nonnullis resistere videamur; si vobis placet, prius pauca contra eos disseram, quibus videntur disputationes illae adversari veritati.’ *Patrologia Latina*, 32.

the score of subtlety, alertness, ingenuity, or learning.³⁵ Throughout *Contra Academicos*, then, Cicero is held as the highest Latin intellect.

Not only was Cicero revered in this dialogue but his texts were constantly quoted. The first two quotations that I will use as examples here come from Cicero's *Academica* while the third comes from his *Hortentius*. Towards the end of book 2, Augustine attempts to educate his interlocutors concerning the sceptical view of probability and quotes a large of section of Cicero by saying that:

all the things I think ought to be called 'plausible' or 'truthlike' seem to me to be like this. I make no objection if you want to call them by another name. It's enough for me that you grasp what I mean, that is to say, the realities to which I'm giving these names. The wise man should not be a craftsman of words but an investigator of realities.³⁶

It is against this sceptical view of truth that Augustine would spend the rest of *Contra Academicos* refuting by claiming that certain truths may be known.

Another quotation from *Academica* is, by far, the most substantial quotation from any author that Augustine makes. Augustine recounts Cicero's story that philosophers of other schools would always put the sceptics as a second option after their own philosophical assertions. Because of the length of this quote, I will only sample a small bit of it here:

all the adherents of other schools, who seem to themselves to be wise, award second place to the wise man of the Academicians – since each inevitably claims the first place for himself! From this it can be plausibly inferred that the Academician correctly judges himself to hold first place, since his second in the judgment of all the others.³⁷

³⁵ Augustine, *Contra Academicos*, trans. King, 3.16.36. 'Imo solertissime prudentissimeque viderunt, nec mihi ullo pacto tantum arrogaverim, ut M. Tullium aliqua ex parte sequar industria, vigilantia, ingenio, doctrina: cui tamen asserenti, nihil scire posse hominem, si hoc solum diceretur, Scio ita videri mihi; unde id refelleret non haberet.' *Patrologia Latina*, 32.

³⁶ Augustine, *Contra Academicos*, trans. King, 2.11.26. 'Talia, inquit Academicus, mihi videntur omnia quae probabilia vel verisimilia putavi nominanda; quae tu si alio nomine vis vocare, nihil repugno. Satis enim mihi est, te jam bene accepisse quid dicam, id est quibus rebus haec nomina imponam. Non enim vocabulorum opificem, sed rerum inquisitorem decet esse sapientem. Satisne intellexistis, quomodo mihi ludicra illa quibus vos agitabam, de manibus excussa sint?', *Patrologia Latina*, 32.

³⁷ Augustine. *Contra Academicos*, trans. King, 3.7.15. 'Difficile est prorsus, ut quemquam non moveat, quod ibi dictum est, Academico sapienti ab omnibus caeterarum sectarum qui sibi sapientes videntur, secundas partes dari, cum primas sibi quemque vindicare

Augustine quotes this anecdote from Cicero in its full length and then attempts to refute Cicero's claims of truth.

Towards the conclusion of book 3, Augustine returns to the man who initiated his interest in philosophy but, this time, he quotes from his now lost *Hortentius*. Augustine returns to a discussion that Trygetius and Licentius had discussed in the beginning of the text: who is a wise man? Augustine summarises the sceptical view through Cicero's voice when he claimed that 'if, then, nothing is certain and the wise man doesn't hold mere opinions, the wise man will never give his approval of anything'.³⁸ Augustine feels, here at the end of the book, that he has successfully refuted Cicero's scepticism.

Conclusion

This article has endeavoured to demonstrate that the reading by modern scholars of *Contra Academicos* as an honest autobiographical self-representation has been misguided. Receiving its clearest voice in Alfarc, many scholars have employed Augustine's first dialogue in order to demonstrate that he was not a Christian while at Cassiciacum but that he was a philosopher. Boyer, among others, has refuted this conclusion but his method of proving this argument was via the same usage of *Contra Academicos*. McWilliam, while forming a different argument than her predecessor, reaches the same conclusion as Boyer that Augustine was, in fact, a Christian in 386. Harrison rejects the common view that Augustine's views significantly changed over time; in order to prove this thesis she spends much effort demonstrating how the Cassiciacum dialogues offer an unvarnished view of Augustine's thoughts at the time of his conversion. Despite the differing opinions of these authors they all had one important foundation in common: they turned to *Contra Academicos* in the hope that they would be able to understand Augustine's mental state at Cassiciacum.

Augustine wrote his text with a specific pagan-philosophical audience in mind and, accordingly, he presented himself in such a fashion that would make him acceptable to this group of intellectuals. He deliberately chose a literary genre in discourse with the *Academica*, written by the great Roman philosopher, to show his aptitude with the pagan-philosophical past masters; he articulated an immediate pagan audience – in the person of Romanianus – which sheds light on what he imagined his larger audience to be; Augustine

necesse sit. Ex quo posse probabiliter confici, eum recte primum esse iudicio suo, qui omnium caeterorum iudicio sit secundus.' *Patrologia Latina*, 32.

³⁸ Augustine, *Contra Academicos*, trans. King, 3.14.31. 'Si igitur nec certi est quidquam, nec opinari sapientis est; nihil unquam sapiens approbabit.' *Patrologia Latina*, 32.

also referenced and quoted the great writers in the Latin language in order to appeal to his audience and to demonstrate that he shared the same Roman education with them. Augustine did not choose to present every layer of himself in his first extant work. Nor did he exhibit an unbiased picture which would allow modern scholars to grasp an adequate understanding of the state of Augustine's mind while he wrote at Cassiciacum before his baptism that following Easter.