

AUGUSTINE'S *DE BEATA VITA*: ON CHRISTIANITY AND PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

In *Augustine's De beata vita: On Christianity and Philosophy*, I articulate how Augustine understood the relationship between Christianity and philosophy at the time of his conversion, in light of the dialogue *De beata vita*. In the dialogue, Augustine and his interlocutors take up a philosophical genre, a philosophical mode of inquiry, and a philosophical question: this is a work on the happy life, in dialogue form, in which the interlocutors are asking what it takes for a person to be happy. Augustine is writing as one in a tradition of philosophers seeking to understand and pursue happiness, and makes ready reference to the arguments and conclusions those philosophers have made. The completion of the human inquiry in the dialogue is theological in nature: while happiness is seen by philosophers to be the possession or having of God, the fulfillment of this comes from Christianity in the form of the indwelling of the Holy Trinity—a revealed truth.

While philosophy is, in some modes, theological, revealed theology outstrips the capacities of philosophy. The two are consonant, however. To see this consonance, I engage in a close reading of the dialogue. Then, I look at the various authors whose influence on this particular dialogue are clear. The most notable of those are Ambrose, Cicero, and Plotinus. Finally, I make my argument that Augustine sees Christianity and philosophy as consonant: that is, Christianity encompasses true philosophy, and a Christian engaged in the activity of philosophizing is a philosopher *par excellence*. However, Christianity is not only philosophy, nor is philosophy a requirement for being a Christian, and Augustine's mother Monica demonstrates that. She plays an important role both as her particular status as a fully initiated Christian, and as

a representative of the Church. Without formal philosophical training, she has attained to the summit of philosophy, and under her maternal care she shares her wisdom with all persons who are chastely seeking it.

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AUGUSTINE'S *DE BEATA VITA*:
ON CHRISTIANITY AND PHILOSOPHY

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Epigraph

Nulla est homini causa philosophandi nisi ut beatus sit.

De Civitate Dei 19.1

To my many teachers:
my professors at the University of Dallas, especially Dr. Matthew Walz;
my professors at the University of South Florida;
my professors at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, especially Dr. Gene Fendt;
my colleagues at each school, who taught by example, encouragement, and in dialogue;
my first teachers, my dear family, with love;
and with thanksgiving above all to God,
“For the Lord gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.”
(Proverbs 2:6, ESV)

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Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation is to articulate how Augustine understood the relationship between Christianity and philosophy at the time of his conversion in light of the dialogue *De beata vita*. With this dialogue, Augustine takes up a philosophical genre, and he and his interlocutors engage in a philosophical mode of inquiry, and seek to answer a philosophical question: this dialogue is a work on the happy life, in dialogue form, in which the interlocutors are asking what it takes for a person to be happy. The completion of the human inquiry, however, is theological in nature. While happiness is seen by rational argumentation to be the possession of God (*deum habet*), the identity of that God and the answer to how one attains to Him comes from Christianity in the form of the indwelling of the Holy Trinity. It is my contention that Augustine sees Christianity and philosophy as consonant. Christianity encompasses true philosophy, and a Christian engaged in the activity of philosophizing is a philosopher *par excellence*. However, Christianity is not only philosophy, nor is philosophy a requirement for being a Christian. While philosophy is, in some modes, theological, and occurs as a moment within theology,¹ revealed theology is a source of knowledge that outstrips the natural capacities of the philosopher.

¹ Joseph Pieper, in “The Philosophical Act,” uses this language of philosophy being an “inner moment” of theology. He argues that for Plato and the Greek philosophical tradition, “Theology is always prior to philosophy, and not in a merely temporal sense, but with respect to inner origin and their relationship to that origin. Philosophical inquiry starts with a given interpretation of reality and of the world as a whole; and in that sense, philosophy is intimately connected, not to say bound, to theology. There is no such thing as a philosophy which does not receive its impulse and impetus from a prior and uncritically accepted interpretation of the world as a whole.” Augustine, writing in the context of the later Roman Empire, is heir to this tradition, mediated by Cicero’s efforts to bring Greek philosophy into the Latin tongue. Not only is he heir to the tradition, but this relationship between philosophy and theology, and the recognition that all argument begins with assumption, is also the reality in which all philosophers dwell. *De beata vita* illustrates this relationship, as I argue in this dissertation. Joseph Pieper, “The Philosophical

In order to make the relationship between Christianity and philosophy clear, I propose the following definition of philosophy, as derived from the text of this dialogue. Philosophy is the loving pursuit of wisdom through the activity of reason. ‘Love of wisdom’ is the etymology of the word, and it is the understanding of the word that Augustine first seized when reading the *Hortensius* at age 19. While the exercise of reason in this pursuit is apparently unaided, it is attested to in the dialogue that God is always present, and so it would be presumptuous to say that it is entirely unaided, a “reason alone” approach.² Theology is not clearly defined in the text, but the later division into natural theology and revealed theology works well; the nature of God as arrived at by reason plays a role early in the dialogue while the nature of God as Trinitarian is significant in the concluding paragraphs. The relationship I am concerned with is between philosophy and Christian theology, which in this dialogue needs no further definition than that it is according to the Nicene belief.

The consonance of the truth as pursued by philosophy and the truth as pursued by a Christian is illustrated particularly by Monica’s early contributions in the dialogue, which are confirmed by Augustine’s interjections that follow immediately upon her claims as responses he had intended to reveal from pagan philosophers. Her later contributions—such as an appeal to

Act,” in *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, trans. Alexander Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2009): 130.

² Reason is never fully “unaided,” and we can see that in three different ways. This is true simply with respect to the human being engaging in rational activity: that activity is always part of an existential moment and the person exercising it is embodied, so the use of reason is bound up with willing and affectivity. Pieper is again helpful on this point: “philosophizing is a fundamentally human relationship to reality and is only possible if our whole human nature is involved.” Pieper, “The Philosophical Act” 135. Reason is also never fully unaided in that the act of contemplation (*theōrein*) is fundamentally a receptive act where the object sought is “given,” and that givenness is not produced by the thinker. Finally, the grace of God imbues the world and functions in mysterious ways, so its aid to human reason is unfathomable; Augustine (the “Doctor of Grace”) doesn’t use the language of grace or seem to have a theology of grace at the time of writing *De beata vita*, so the role of grace is not of interest in this dissertation.

the theological virtues and in praise of the Trinity—can come only from Christian teaching and revelation, as the fruit of Christian theology. It is here that she most clearly shows that through revelation, a Christian knows something more than the philosopher and has aids to accomplish the philosopher’s aim. These are things to which the philosopher—without Christianity—is not privy. While Monica is a spokesperson for Christianity, Augustine sketches out the theological meaning—that is, the way a theologian seeks and articulates the truths of Christian teaching—of some of her comments. His manner of handling and expanding upon those dicta demonstrate the proper activities of a Christian theologian. This activity is also philosophical: he inquires philosophically by reason in order to manifest the consonance and truth of theological dicta.

Here, I offer a reading of the dialogue *De beata vita*, first as a complete work, then with attention to particular themes that arise within the dialogue. After attending to the primary text, I will turn to a number of the sources and influences behind Augustine’s choice of the dialogue’s genre, method, and ideas. Finally, I take the first two sections as raw material for an argument that Augustine is writing a work that is both a work of philosophy and a work of theology. It is my argument that he begins in the mode of philosopher and conducts the dialogue as philosophy, but ends up in the territory of theology, praising the Trinity and seeking God’s help—through the theological virtues—to obtain happiness. Augustine *qua* philosopher knows that the possession of wisdom is happiness; Augustine *qua* Christian believer knows that this wisdom is the God who comes to us as a human being in the Incarnation in order to draw us to himself. Augustine’s form and method for answering the question of the dialogue shows a unity of truth of philosophy and Christianity. Because of this unity, I contend that this dialogue shows us both Augustine the philosopher and Augustine the Christian theologian, since he demonstrates a way in which Christianity both encompasses true philosophy and, in the end, realizes its ultimate end more

directly and completely by providing it with a greater impetus and trajectory. Thus, the dialogue itself is a work both of philosophy and of theology.

In what follows, I will render ‘*beata*’ as ‘happy’ and ‘*vita*’ as life, though these renderings do not capture the full significance of these key terms. Happiness is the rich term of the *eudaimonistic* tradition. Augustine dismisses the lives of wealth, pleasure, and honors as inadequate to render man happy, in keeping with Ciceronian and Neoplatonist approaches to the question of happiness. Furthermore, ‘*vita*’, as Brian Stock observes, seems to refer in the dialogue to “both the awareness of being alive and to the pattern of one’s life as a whole, as contrasted with its constituent episodes.”³ It might be an over-translation to render *beata* as ‘blessed’ (as some are inclined to do), because Augustine’s concern is with the concrete elements of *this* life and the choices man makes *here*, whereas ‘blessed’ often implies the afterlife. While this implication is not always the case with the term ‘blessed,’ it seems more appropriate to keep the translation as ‘happy’ within the context of the tradition of writings in antiquity on the happy life. While Augustine is ambiguous in this dialogue about whether or not one can be fully happy in this life, and the contemplation of wisdom that he identifies as happiness is one that extends into the life to come, by the time he writes *City of God* he is convinced that the happiness reached in this life is only in hope.⁴ This is one of the points Augustine draws a critical eye to in

³ Brian Stock, *Augustine’s Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2.

⁴ “Since, then, the supreme good of the city of God is perfect and eternal peace, not such as mortals pass into and out of by birth and death, but the peace of freedom from all evil, in which the immortals ever abide; who can deny that that future life is most blessed, or that, in comparison with it, this life which now we live is most wretched, be it filled with all blessings of body and soul and external things? And yet, if any man uses this life with a reference to that other which he ardently loves and confidently hopes for, *he may well be called even now blessed, though not in reality so much as in hope*. But the actual possession of the happiness of this life, without the hope of what is beyond, is but a false happiness and profound misery. For the true blessings of the soul are not now enjoyed; for that is no true wisdom which does not direct all its prudent observations, manly actions, virtuous self-restraint, and just arrangements, to that end in

his own work in the *Retractationes*: “I regret . . . that I said that, during this life, the happy life dwells only in the soul of a wise man regardless of the condition of his body; yet the Apostle hopes for a perfect knowledge of God, the greatest that man can have, in the life to come, for that alone should be called a happy life where the incorruptible and immortal body will be subject to its spirit without any vexation or resistance” (1.2).⁵ In A.H. Armstrong’s translation of Plotinus, the term *eudaimonia* is translated creatively as “being-in-a-good-state,”⁶ and the happy life or *beata vita* seems here to be that good state of a rightly ordered life, oriented properly to the highest good.

In what follows, I have relied heavily upon the translation by Michael Foley.⁷ In each instance, however, I have consulted the Latin and on occasion the translations by Roland J. Teske,⁸ Mary T. Clark,⁹ and Ludwig Schopp.¹⁰

which God shall be all and all in a secure eternity and perfect peace” (19.20, emphasis added). Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Modern Library, 2000). Augustine ambiguously suggests this as early as in the *Confessions*, where he says, “There is a certain other way by which a man is happy when he has the happy life, and there are also those who are happy because of hope” (10.20.29). Augustine does not, however, clearly associate this distinction between happiness in reality and in hope with, respectively, the life to come and this present age. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Image, 1960).

⁵ Augustine, *Retractationes*, trans. Sr. Mary Inez Bogan (Washington, DC: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1968), 1.2.

⁶ Plotinus, *Enneads*, trans. AH Armstrong, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960).

⁷ Augustine, *On the Happy Life: St. Augustine’s Cassiciacum Dialogues, Volume II*, trans. Michael P. Foley (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2019).

⁸ Augustine, “The Happy Life,” translated by Roland J. Teske, in *Trilogy on Faith and Happiness*, ed. Boniface Ramsey (New York: New City Press, 2010), 21-53.

⁹ Augustine, “The Happy Life,” in *Augustine of Hippo: Selected Writings*, trans. and ed. Mary T. Clark (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984), 163-194.

¹⁰ Augustine, “The Happy Life,” trans. Ludwig Schopp, in *Saint Augustine: The Happy Life, Answer to Skeptics, Divine Providence and the Problem of Evil, Soliloquies* (New York: CIMA Publishing, 1948), 43-86.

Orienting sketch

De beata vita was composed by Augustine in 386, while on retreat in Cassiciacum the winter between his conversion and his entry into the Church through baptism at the Easter Vigil of 387. It forms a part of the corpus of works written at Cassiciacum in which he tries to understand the world anew in light of his newfound belief in Christianity as he was preparing for full initiation into Catholic Christianity.¹¹ The dialogue is—as the name reveals—one in which he and his interlocutors seek to understand what the happy life is. His concern with happiness within the Christian context remains one of enduring significance, but it is universal in both its humanness—happiness for the *human being*—and in the catholicity of Christianity—Christianity as being for *all* people. Augustine’s work reveals how both he and his readers must understand the universal human quest for happiness as part of our human—and thus both rational and moral—lives. In turn, he illustrates for us the relationship between philosophy, that fundamental human endeavor, and Christianity.

Augustine opens the dialogue with a dedicatory letter. In the letter, he first creates an allegory about three kinds of mariners seeking the happy life. Then, he gives his own autobiography in highly allegorical language, saying he himself is one of those kinds of mariners. The dedication concludes with an introduction to the characters and setting of the dialogue proper.

The dialogue is spread out over three days. On the first day, Augustine introduces the topic of the three-day conversation, the happy life. He and his interlocutors entertain questions of

¹¹ While not yet baptized, and therefore not yet Christian, Augustine uses the language of conversion for turning to-and-with God even prior to baptism; it appears in his description of reading the *Hortensius* as “it turned (*convertis*) my prayers toward you, Lord” (*Confessions*, trans. John K. Ryan, 4.4.7), and in the end of *De beata vita*, where he calls the discovery of and clinging to wisdom as a kind of conversion (*convertit*) (4.33), albeit an incomplete one (4.35).

human nature and its end, dispute the thesis that man's happiness is the possession of God, and digress at the conclusion of the day in a conversation about the Academics and their claims about human happiness. On day two, Augustine returns to the answers provided by his interlocutors about who possesses God. Together, the dialogue's participants determine that possession of God requires living a chaste life. There is a portion of the text missing at the end of day two; no extant manuscripts are complete, and this loss was true even at the end of Augustine's life.¹² During the final day, the group works through a conundrum about the relationship between need and misery in contrast to having what one both wants and needs. Throughout the dialogue, we learn that moderation is a key element in human activities, even in contemplation of God. The final exchanges, which are primarily between Augustine and his mother, identify God with the Trinitarian God of Christianity. God is himself the measure through which we practice that moderation, and it is he who aids those seeking him through the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity.

¹² Augustine, *Retractationes* 1.2.

A Survey of Interpretations

This dialogue has been read over the past century in a variety of ways and for sundry purposes. While my interest is particularly with respect to the dialogue as an integral whole and what it can reveal to us about Augustine's understanding of the relationship between Christianity and philosophy at the time of his conversion, my reading has benefited significantly from other approaches and from scholars who have read the dialogue in concert with the other Cassiciacum dialogues.

Often, readers of this dialogue are concerned with the historicity of the dialogue and the order in which Augustine composed the Cassiciacum dialogues. This "historicity" concern is primarily one of authorial activity. Does this dialogue—and the *Contra Academicos* and *De Ordine*—record an historical dialogue between Augustine and his interlocutors, or is the dialogue a fiction created by Augustine for some purpose? The text of *De beata vita* and the other Cassiciacum dialogues reveal that Augustine certainly engaged in editing of the works, especially as he prepared them and appended cover letters dedicating them to noteworthy Romans. Those who argue that *De beata vita* is a fiction point to the tradition of composing philosophical dialogues that are fictional, to other philosophers like Cicero who are characters within their own dialogues, and to the mirroring of the form of a Ciceronian dialogue that would be difficult to emulate in person.¹³

¹³ For example, John J. O'Meara claims that the dialogues are "emphatically not reliable. They are written compositions of Augustine, and consciously follow closely, in outline and in detail, the forma and matter of previous models. ... [T] here is ground for believing that the element of fiction is far from negligible." John J. O'Meara, *Studies in Augustine and Eriugena* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1992): 22-23. Boone gives an excellent overview and summary of the historicity debate in Mark J. Boone, *Conversion and the Therapy of Desire: Augustine's theology of desire in the Cassiciacum dialogues* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2016): 3-4.

Other textual evidence indicates, however, that Augustine had a scribe recording the dialogues as they happened, even if he did edit them. This seems to me the more convincing position for three reasons. First, there are references within the text indicating that there was a scribe writing things down,¹⁴ that the conversation in another of the Cassiciacum dialogues had to be ended one day because darkness fell,¹⁵ and setting changes.¹⁶ While one can read these things symbolically, it is not necessary in interpreting the work, and it runs contrary to Augustine's testimony, which is the second reason why I am inclined to think these are actual recorded dialogues. Augustine presents them as actual conversations both to his dedicatee in the dialogue¹⁷ and to us, his readers, in the *Retractationes*.¹⁸ I am inclined to believe him who so explicitly values honesty throughout his Christian adult life.¹⁹ Finally, several exchanges within the work indicate very human exchanges that do not add to the content of the dialogue in any way, but which do reveal to us shortcomings both in Augustine's interlocutors and even in Augustine himself. In *De beata vita*, for instance, the young Licentius speaks quickly and foolishly: "The man who doesn't have what he wants," he said, laughing irritably, "is totally happy" (2.15).²⁰ Augustine's response—to keep "the youngster all worked up between shame and consistency" (2.15)—is to demand his words be recorded just as they were spoken, to the dismay of the young man. The inclusion of details about emotions and reactions could have been left out; in many philosophical dialogues written as fictions, such additions are left to the

¹⁴ Augustine, *De beata vita* 2.15 and 3.18, for example.

¹⁵ Augustine, *Contra Academicos* 2.10.24.

¹⁶ *De beata vita* takes place in the bathhouse for the first two days, but the return of good weather allowed them to meet in the meadow on the third day. See *De beata vita* 4.23.

¹⁷ Augustine, *De beata vita* 1.5.

¹⁸ "it was agreed upon by those of us making the investigations," Augustine, *Retractationes*, trans. Sr. Mary Inez Bogan, 1.2.

¹⁹ See both Augustine's work *On Lying* and *Against Lying*.

²⁰ "*Prorsus beatus est, inquit, qui quod vult non habet, quasi stomachanter arridens.*" Augustine, *De beata vita* 2.15.

imagination of the reader. Augustine also speaks sharply in response to a question from Licentius, refusing to answer his question—but then he goes on to answer that very question in the next substantive exchange (2.10). It is true that other philosophers who composed dialogues included some fictional elements within them, which could parallel the dramatic exchanges in *De beata vita*. Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods* serves as a parallel example; following the dedication letter, he begins the dialogue proper by establishing the conversation to follow as though it were an historic event at the home of a friend.²¹ However, the event to which he refers is not an event contemporary to the time the book was written,²² and there are inconsistencies about the span of time over which the dialogue takes place in contrast to Cicero's initial presentation.²³ Augustine's work does not share these latter qualities, and that coupled with his forthrightness both in the dialogue and in his *Retractationes* about its being a conversation that actually took place, leaves me convinced this is not a fiction. As a result, I do not sharply distinguish between Augustine the character and Augustine the author in my commentary on the work, as one might distinguish between Socrates and Plato's Socrates in Plato's dialogues, or Dante the author and Dante the pilgrim in the *Commedia*.

Often intertwined with the historicity debate is the concern with the order in which the dialogues were written. In his *Retractationes*, Augustine says that he wrote the first book of *Contra Academicos* prior to the *De beata vita* birthday feast.²⁴ This makes *De beata vita* the first extant completed work by Augustine (his earlier book *On the Fitting and the Beautiful* had been

²¹ Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, trans. PG Walsh (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 1.6.

²² The work was composed in 45 BC, but the event supposedly recorded must have occurred in about 77 BC. P.G. Walsh, "Introduction," in *On the Nature of the Gods*, xiv.

²³ He originally says it took place in one day, but the text is divided up into three days' worth of conversation. See Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, 1.6, 2.29, 3.7, and P.G. Walsh, "Introduction," *On the Nature of the Gods*, xv.

²⁴ Augustine, *Retractationes* 1.2.

lost during Augustine's lifetime²⁵). Augustine then wrote *De Ordine*, before completing the second and third books of *Contra Academicos*. *Soliloquies*, a dialogue between Augustine and Reason, was written "meanwhile," but completed last of the Cassiciacum works.²⁶ While this seems straightforward in Augustine's presentation, there is considerable scholarly effort in establishing on which days in November he wrote each work. This debate is intriguing but bears no relevance to my own reading of *De beata vita*.

Other scholars scour the Cassiciacum dialogues in investigation of the authenticity of Augustine's conversion to Christianity.²⁷ As I will argue below, his conversion was genuinely to Christianity, but that he also takes the insights of Neoplatonism and Stoicism seriously—anything true is necessarily part of the true philosophy. My position is not the scholarly consensus. Some hold that he was only Christian and eschewed Neoplatonism, such as Catherine Conybeare.²⁸ Some, such as Prosper Alfaric, think that he was a Neoplatonist up until roughly his ordination and that he misrepresented himself in the *Confessions*.²⁹ Others argue that he was committed to both Christianity and Neoplatonism, such as O'Connell.³⁰ Those who hold positions similar to my own are plentiful in number. Notable members include Carol Harrison, Goulven Madec, John Rist, Etienne Gilson, Ryan Topping, Michael Foley, and others.³¹

²⁵ Augustine, *Confessions* 4.13.20.

²⁶ "Inter haec scripsi," Augustine, *Retractationes* 1.4, 1.5.

²⁷ The best breakdown of these positions and the variations within each of the four can be found in Boone, *The Conversion and Therapy of Desire*, 3-4.

²⁸ Catherine Conybeare, *Irrational Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006).

²⁹ See also Adolf Harnack, *Augustins Konfessionen* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020).

³⁰ In, for example Robert J. O'Connell, *Art and the Christian Intelligence in St. Augustine* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1978), 12-17.

³¹ There is, of course, variety within these authors' presentations; this list does not indicate full agreement among one another or with my own position. This group is inclined, however, to say that Augustine's conversion was to Christianity.

Finally, scholars take interest in *De beata vita* because they want to know what books of the Platonists he read. Both in *De beata vita* and in the *Confessions*, Augustine emphasizes the importance reading Neoplatonist philosophy had for him, converting him—in the words of *Confessions*—from having a “carnal imagination”³² to recognizing the existence of spiritual reality that is not material in any sense, and indeed that God’s immateriality necessarily makes him more real than the reality of the material world and its source.³³ I follow the lead of scholars such as Williams and Fendt, who find the ideas Augustine learned from the Neoplatonists important but the particular authors and texts less so. These scholars point to Augustine’s reluctance in his autobiographical accounts to identify particular authors and texts, unlike in other works in which he had no qualms doing so, as when he names Cicero’s *Hortensius*, or refers to influence of Ambrose.³⁴ While the particular texts scholars have identified as likely those read by Augustine play a role in my own reading of the dialogue, it is with consideration of the substance of the claims and not in an effort to argue that Augustine read these particular texts and not others.

³² Augustine, *Confessions* 6.3.4.

³³ Augustine, *Confessions* 7.20.26.

³⁴ Both Gene Fendt and Thomas Williams have expressed this opinion. Fendt helpfully elaborates, commenting on *Confessions* 7.20.26: “the Platonists” are used as a term... for human reason’s best efforts—they get much right, but can’t achieve some things. While one might think Cicero or the Stoics have some claim to equality in terms of reason, Augustine seems to have some moral qualms about them which never appear (so far as I know) in his discussions of the Platonists. Therefore, their light (Cicero, et al) must have more darkness in it (Mt. 6)—it shows up in their action.” Gene Fendt, Email exchange with the author, June 2021. Thomas Williams, “Augustine and the Platonists,” (lecture, Freshman Program of Christ College, the Honors College of Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, IN, October 23, 2003).

Fundamental Approaches to the Text

Any well-composed text lends itself to a variety of approaches. *De beata vita* is a text written in a particular language, at a particular time, in a particular culture, under particular circumstances. One can read it as a work of history, literature, or theology, and particularly moral theology. It could also be of interest to classicists and linguists. Members of many different disciplines may find value in reading this work, and my philosophical reading benefits from the details these other approaches attend to.

In terms of its place in history, the work is an historical snapshot of Augustine's life in the midst of the Roman tradition of *otium*. Recognizing that it does meet these criteria plays a role in how I read the dialogue. Augustine's activities are part of a tradition that allows the peculiarities of this work to stand out. For example, the odd assortment of companions in this dialogue distinguishes him from the usual leisurely pursuit. Augustine's mother Monica, his son, uneducated teens, teens receiving tutelage from Augustine, and Augustine and his brother all participate; their friend Alypius is an educated Roman but is absent during the days over which the conversations take place. The unusual collection of participants in the dialogue I take as a sign, as I argue below, of the Christian character of this work.

One could also examine the language in which the dialogue was written as would a classicist, attending to grammatical style and vocabulary choices. The elevated language and grammar in the dedication are remarkable. In one sense, they mark this as the work of a word-smith and testify that young Augustine had great facility with language and style. Augustine employs tropes, drawing from the pilgrim image from Cicero which actually stretches back into the Greek tradition, as well as from Stoic word-play in tracing etymologies.

Dialogue is a literary genre that has its own devices and conceits. Even in this dialogue that I take to be nonfiction, those devices and conceits are woven through by Augustine in his editorial work, where his commentary and observations are recorded. Noting the laughter of the characters, or the way they all marvel at Monica's claims about desiring what is truly good in order to be happy, draws a reader in to engaging with the dialogue more than simply spectating. Augustine's engaging style of composition ties in with the following way of reading as well, because Augustine orchestrates the conduct and conversation within the dialogue masterfully. Because he is conducting something akin to a school, one can read the dialogue as a demonstration of Augustine's pedagogy, as has been done with good results by Ryan Topping.³⁵ We can see the give-and-take between students and teacher that show a pedagogue attentive to the abilities and backgrounds of his students. Augustine's rebuke of the overly-eager Licentius is balanced by his effort to draw out his young cousins. He acknowledges that there is a legitimate concern behind the question of his brother about human nature but skillfully prevents the conversation from getting derailed. In the best sense, he is a respecter of persons, in both his regard for what his mother has to offer and his attentiveness to the contributions of the other interlocutors. He draws together the substance of the early exchanges and develops them on the third day into a grand conclusion, yet one in which his interlocutors still take part—it is not a class setting where the professor's lectures bore the students to a stupor in the last moments of class. In keeping with Topping's investigation, this dialogue demonstrates the role of a liberal education in bringing one to happiness, and it does so within the moral theology Augustine was working out in his early years. Topping observes that for Augustine, teaching is “an act of

³⁵ Ryan Topping, *Happiness and Wisdom: Augustine's Early Theology of Education* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 2012).

friendship motivated by a dual love for God and for the student,” and this shines through in the dialogue.³⁶

Finally, the dialogue could be read also as a work of moral theology. Moral theology’s concern is with determining and applying the principles that move one towards happiness in light of Christian revelation, and certainly one aspect of that requires grasping the orientation one has to that final end. Augustine’s *De beata vita* makes clear that the contemplation of and union with God is the satisfaction of our natural desire.

As I argue, Augustine’s *De beata vita* is profitably read as a work of philosophy and a Christian work. It is a philosophical inquiry into the happy life that concludes with praise of the Trinitarian God of Christianity. The harmony between the inquiry by means of apparently unaided reason and the conclusion with distinctly Christian praise testifies to the unity of the truth as pursued by philosophy and as believed by Christians. This dialogue is simultaneously a work of philosophy and a Christian work, and it exhibits the manner in which Augustine understands Christianity to encompass true philosophy.

³⁶ Topping, *Happiness and Wisdom* 17.

Part I. A reading of the dialogue: Augustine's Birthday Feast

De beata vita was composed by Augustine in 386, while on retreat in Cassiciacum the winter between his conversion and his entry into the Church through baptism at the Easter Vigil of 387. In the dialogue, Augustine and his interlocutors seek to understand what the happy life is. In this first part, I offer a reading of the dialogue, working through the dedication letter first and then each consecutive day of conversation recorded in the dialogue.

Chapter 1. The Dedication Letter

Introduction

Augustine opens *De beata vita* with a dedication letter. In the letter, he paints an image: philosophy is like the harbor to the solid ground of happiness, at the mouth of which is a mountain which mariners must carefully avoid but which is deceptively like the solid ground they seek. After informing us that our path to happiness is directed by reason and desire, he tells us about the three classes of mariners in this harbor: (1) those properly led by reason and desire in a quick trip to philosophy; (2) those led by false reason, who in the end turn to books that direct them the right way; and (3) those led by false desire, but in the end the desirability of philosophy attracts them. All three, however, must face the mountain of vainglory at the entry to the port, which can be alluring because the mariner suffers either from a puffed-up intellect (i.e., proclaims his privileged knowledge) or from a puffed-up desire for honor and glory (i.e., desires praise for his knowledge or position).

Then Augustine observes to his dedicatee Manlius Theodorus that he, Augustine, is like one of these kinds of mariners, although he does not say precisely which, and sketches his own journey. Augustine begins his autobiography with the moment at which his reason and will were oriented in the right direction: the reading of the *Hortensius*. But alas, that orientation does not guarantee immediate fulfillment and satisfaction. While in this telling his desires were oriented rightly, he immediately rejects the Christian teachings which alone will satisfy his intellect and instead pursues false knowledge with the Manichaeans. Then, when he rejects their false teachings, his desires have gotten so habitually disordered that he can hardly pursue what he should. Finally, he converts in such a way that his mind and his desires are fed solid, healthy, true food—as demonstrated in this dialogue. But his troubles are not over; no one's are. Pride is

a temptation for everyone at every stage, whether Christian or not. Augustine has to continue to humble himself, avoiding the desire to appear intelligent or “holy” in his newfound asceticism, and the desire to appear important because of his oratorical skills.

He gives this brief autobiographical sketch of his journey before introducing the dialogue proper and its participants. In the dedicatory letter, we learn that the conversation recorded is Augustine’s birthday present to himself and that he has seven interlocutors.

Section 1. The image

All human beings seek happiness: that end gives us a starting point, both for the dialogue and in motivating the actions of every person. But we also begin at a distance from that destination, and Augustine admits he does not know what causes this separation, whether it is “God, or nature, or necessity, or our will, or some combination of them or all of them at once” (1.1).¹ However, he does know that our movement towards the happy life is directed by reason and desire.² Augustine launches a nautical analogy describing the destination of happiness and the various routes by which people travel during their lives in pursuit of that desired happiness. While for all men the “solid ground” of happiness is the destination, many are confused about what that solid ground is or where it may be found (1.1).³ In this image, that ground may be reached through a harbor of philosophy.⁴ The harbor of philosophy is wide and tranquil, and only

¹ “*siue deus siue natura siue necessitas siue uoluntas nostra siue coniuncta horum aliqua siue simul omnia*” (1.1).

² *Ratione* and *uoluntas*, 1.1.

³ “*regionem solumque proceditur*” (1.1).

⁴ This port of philosophy is a trope that Augustine invokes also in *Contra Academicos* 1.1.1; Cicero uses it in *Tusculan Disputations* 5.2.5; cf. *On Duties* 2.6.19, *De finibus* 5.19.49; Plotinus, *Ennead* I.6.6. Many commentators on this passage refer to this as an Odyssean journey home, with the many possible pitfalls that delayed the Ithacan, culminating with the mountain of vainglory as the abode of the Sirens (*Odyssey* 12; cf. Michael Foley, “Commentary,” in *On the Happy Life*, 61-62; Jackson, “Augustine all at Sea,” 73; Doignon, *Allegories* 390-391, O’Connell, *Images of Conversion*, 4; cf. O’Connell, *Soundings in St. Augustine’s Imagination* 167). However, while that may be the origin of this trope in its extended form, we also find it in the Latin authors Vergil and Cicero, with whom Augustine was familiar. Vail points out in her short commentary and comparison that in the Homeric image the Sirens in the *Odyssey* are on an island. In Vergil, they are on spooky, dangerous cliffs beneath which the waters roar and carry many a boat to its fate (*Aeneid* 5). It seems to me that this difference indicates a Vergilian source more than Homeric. Further, since we know from *De Ordine* 1.8.26 that Augustine was reviewing half a book per day of the *Aeneid* with his young students, it is more likely this was the immediate source of the image. However, the clear parallels to the Ciceronian works (see below, Part III, Chapter 4) make them also an immediate and viable source. Considering Augustine’s self-proclaimed distaste for Greek literature, and his love of the Roman literature and philosophers, I hesitate to jump to Homer’s iteration of this tale. Amy Vail, “Dante, Vergil,

a few “ships”—individual people—have already made their way to these waters. Augustine supposes that those who have entered the harbor of philosophy have done so by “a course set by reason and will,” though he expresses concern that this is an unreliable and infrequently navigated course (1.1).⁵ Augustine does not make explicit in this introduction whether there are other harbors to this land. However, he thinks Theodorus has entered this particular harbor, and Augustine conceives of himself as having been recently driven in to this harbor (1.1).⁶ Their current situation sets up for us already the importance of the theological turn at the end of the dialogue—the theological virtues that Monica introduces (4.35) are essential to “the attainment of truth and the happy life”⁷—and the final coming ashore. This also asserts the insufficiency of the intellectualism of Platonism as a doctrine of salvation.⁸ Philosophy is construed as a tranquil harbor but not the land itself. This “evinces [Augustine’s] own lack of confidence in man’s free will”⁹ to navigate human affairs successfully, as Clark argues, but it does not negate the reality of freedom as illustrated in the varying journeys of the mariners.

Augustine developed his extended metaphor with his own biography in mind, and we can use the autobiographical sketch to gain greater understanding of the various elements. The solid land of happiness can be construed as Catholic Christianity, if happiness is the possession of the Christian God, for which Augustine argues in the text of the dialogue.¹⁰ The harbor is distinctly

and the Case of the Disappearing Sirens,” Annual Meeting of the Classical Association of the Middle West and South, Cincinnati, OH, April 11-14, 2007.

⁵ “*ratione institutus cursus et uoluntas*” (1.1).

⁶ *Compingeret* (1.1).

⁷ Mary T. Clark, *Augustine, Philosopher of Freedom: A Study in Comparative Philosophy* (New York: Desclée Co., 1958): 61.

⁸ Pieper makes this point in relation to *Confessions*, but is also true of *De beata vita*. Pieper, “The Philosophical Act,” 130.

⁹ Clark, *Augustine, Philosopher of Freedom* 59.

¹⁰ Particularly in the final paragraphs, where the God possessed by the happy man is identified with the Trinity; Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.33-35.

philosophy. I attribute the former to Augustine’s recent conversion and the fact that he is currently on retreat and preparing to be baptized in the coming spring; he will travel to Milan for catechesis by Bishop Ambrose beginning in Lent. The latter is evidenced in his dedication of this work to Theodorus, who is also a Milanese Christian and a Platonist, to which Augustine draws attention, saying that he and Theodorus had both read the same Platonists (1.4).¹¹ Theodorus himself had recently sought his own *otium* during which he was translating Greek philosophy into Latin, if panegyrist Claudian is to be believed.¹² Furthermore, Augustine himself has called at this port after responding to the summons of successive philosophers: first by reading Cicero’s *Hortensius*, then the Academics, and finally the Platonists, as he recounts near the end of the dedication letter (1.4).¹³ Few people undertake a dedicated pursuit of philosophy as not only an intellectual pursuit but more robustly as a way of life. Still fewer of those are able to enter this port, which Augustine points out (1.1).¹⁴ It is a difficult task, hard both to understand and to undertake. Augustine is attempting both, and he praises Theodorus for likewise trying to make sense of this situation (1.1).¹⁵

The particularity of Augustine’s relation to this image is not intended as a restriction, however. This is universally true: all men are seeking happiness, and all find themselves tossed about in the open sea. All men, in seeking the solid ground of happiness, are faced with a variety of choices. It is obscure to us how we should move or in which direction we should go, and some would never even take the rudder if they were not influenced to do so by some storm. It is even the case that the storm, as a storm, seems unfavorable—despite the fact that it is moving us in the

¹¹ “*Lectis autem Plotini paucissimis libris, cuius te esse studiosissimum accepi*” (1.4).

¹² Claudianus, “Panegyric on the Consulship of Fl. Manlius Theodorus (AD 399), 62-64, 84-92.

¹³ “*In schola rhetoris librum illum Ciceronis, qui Hortensius uocatur ... in mediis fluctibus Academici tenuerunt ... lectis autem Plotini paucissimis libris*” (1.4).

¹⁴ “*multo minoris numeri homines ad eum peruenturos fuiss*” (1.1).

¹⁵ “*res enim multum obscura est, set tamen a te iam inlustranda suscepta*” (1.1).

direction we ultimately want to travel (1.1).¹⁶ These storms, as Holte points out, are meant to bring about humility and penitence.¹⁷ Those things which prod us to such reformation of character are rarely comfortable or pleasant.

“There are three kinds of men sailing this sea whom philosophy would welcome,” Augustine continues (1.2).¹⁸ He names three classes as though they were distinct, but upon examination we can see that this is meant to be an exhaustive set of options by way of the description of two extremes, with the third class encompassing all those who are intermediate to those two extremes.¹⁹

The first class is characterized by people awakening to their desire for the happy land at a young age, promptly making a quick and easy trip into the port of philosophy, and becoming exemplars for fellow travelers. These people have their reason and desire or will properly oriented from adolescence on. They erect some kind of “clearest signal” or beacon once they have entered the port of philosophy, thus serving as guides for future travelers (1.2).²⁰

The second class described is at the opposite extreme: after reaching the age of reason, these people continue sailing away from the harbor into the “beguiling” seas (1.2).²¹ These older people are moved about on the open seas without resisting, with both reason and will directed at improper ends. While Augustine describes the seas themselves as “supreme misery,” the mariners experience their condition with “elation and rejoicing,” delighting in the deceitful calm

¹⁶ “*nisi aliquando et invitos contraque obnitentes aliqua tempestas, quae stultis videtur adversa, in optatissimam terram nescientes errantesque compingeret?*” (1.1).

¹⁷ Knut Ragnar Holte, *Béatitude et sagesse : saint Augustin et le problème de la fin de l'homme dans la philosophie ancienne* (Worcester, MA: Augustinian Studies, 1962): 292.

¹⁸ “*Igitur hominum, quos philosophia potest accipere, tria quasi nauigantium genera*” (1.2).

¹⁹ This list is presented as exhaustive of all persons whatsoever, but unmentioned by Augustine are those from one class or another who remain lost at sea.

²⁰ “*Lucidissimum signum*” (1.2).

²¹ “*Fallacissima facie maris decepti*” (1.2).

of lives of pleasure and honor (1.2).²² These people only feel miserable when there is some storm—violent or gentle—that forces them to move and alters their passions, but they can “awaken” to the truth of their situation by reading philosophy, which awakens their rational capacities (1.2).²³

The final class are all those people who are between these first two classes. Some of these are young—at the “threshold of adolescence” (1.2)²⁴—and others have already been long on their journey. They are in the open seas and unhappy. But these people somehow remember happiness and are drawn to it. Some go directly to that harbor when they wake up to their unhappiness. Others delay, wandering aimlessly or constantly changing their course, following first this and then that as guiding principles. These demonstrate a desire for the truth and a willingness to follow it, but in their ignorance or under the strength of their disordered passions, they cannot quite find their proper end. Finally, some kind of tempest forces them to enter the port of philosophy, which the mariner welcomes with varying degrees of relief and liking.²⁵

²² “*altissima miseriarum elati atque gaudentes*” (1.2).

²³ *Euigilant*, 1.2.

²⁴ “*In ipso adulescentiae limine*” (1.2).

²⁵ Following Foley, who also discusses this image in terms of a threefold division of desires, Boone interprets the entire allegory in terms of root desires, and less as an individual’s possible chronology of life events or actions directed by desires. The storms, he says, are ripping away unhealthy desires, painful redirections that lead to reordering of desires. Boone, *Conversion*, 72; cf. Foley, “The Other Happy Life: The Political Dimensions to St. Augustine’s *Cassiciacum Dialogues*,” in *The Review of Politics* 65, no. 2 (Spring 2003). It seems to me that the image is open to both interpretations: one can view those storms as either the removal of temptations—particular objects or situations where those temptations are manifest—or as elimination of the desires themselves, but it seems that Augustine wants the desires reordered without violence to the person. The language of “ripping away unhealthy desires” seems to me too extreme. His later anthropology, as described particularly in the second half of Book 10 of *Confessions*, does not involve language of violence or “ripping away” desires, but rather exercising self-control, reshaping one’s habits in relation to those desires, and by means of these actions reforming the desires themselves to be rightly ordered.

One can see in this array that the three classifications of sailors captures all men in any conditions in which they could be directing their travels, and in all subjective conditions of happiness or misery. Whether young or old, this captures all persons of at least the age of reason such that they could have awareness and responsibility for their condition. Augustine had begun the dialogue by observing that everyone begins life out on this open sea, but only upon the threshold of adolescence are they directing their own paths. Objectively, they are all on the open seas that are misery, distanced from the solid ground of happiness. Subjectively, some are aware of this and immediately search out the way to the harbor. Others are aware but do not know how or lack the perseverance to make their way to those tranquil waters. Others are unaware of their true condition and unmotivated to do anything different with their lives. Still others are unaware of their condition and embrace it as though it was the true good. Furthermore, the three classifications capture the variety of paths traced to happiness: some straight and easy, some straight but arduous; some tortuous and painful, others convoluted but not particularly torturous.

Regardless of which class of mariners one is to be found in, all alike face one tremendous obstacle between the open waters and the calm harbor: the mountain of vainglory (1.3).²⁶ This mountain presents itself as a safe place to come ashore: as though one has reached, at last, the desired solid land, and one that towers magnificently and obviously firmly above the ever-rocking waters. From its elevations, one can see a vast panorama—and be seen by others. This poses a temptation not only for those coming from being out on the open seas, but even for those already within the harbor. It is a deceitful calm of knowledge and honors, and it attractively affords an opportunity to cast that “clearest signal” while standing far above those one is

²⁶ “*unus inmanissimus mons... uanissimam gloriam*” (1.3).

beckoning in from the open seas (1.1, cf. 1.3).²⁷ But the mountain represents the deceit of vain glory. Those who ascend this mountain are motivated by a “proud zeal,” and it lures even those who have overcome their lower desires to its lofty heights.²⁸ It places the happiness of man in an achievement short of the goal, namely, being recognized and honored by others. He places himself as adjudicator and arbiter, and, once having made that climb to its heights, he tends to warn those coming of the dangerous rocks at the base of the mountain as well as the difficult climb upward—and thus he becomes a signal directing people away from the mountain of vainglory. Avoiding climbing the mountain of vainglory, one can either enter into the harbor of philosophy or, sadly rebuffed, wander back out to sea. Those who have fallen prey to the snares of glory think they are projecting a signal that protects their privileged position from the imposition of fellow climbers and prevents others from attaining happiness. Instead, those self-congratulatory²⁹ few potentially direct other sojourners to true happiness, to the slightly more distant but less dangerous shores of the happy land.

Concluding with this mountain of vainglory, Augustine has identified the array of things that can prevent mariners from approaching happiness. The first is simply the state or condition in which every human being is found when on the “threshold of adolescence” (1.2).³⁰ This is illustrated with the first class of mariners who are young and have an easy voyage. There is no obvious cause of their having been in a condition of unhappiness and needing to make this

²⁷ The “clearest signal” is the *lucidissimum signum* of the first class of mariners who have entered the harbor; those on the mountain of vainglory—which itself shines with a bright but deceitful light (“*fulget, ita mentiente illa luce uestitur,*” 1.3) — think they are a member of that class already within the harbor.

²⁸ “*Superbum stadium*” (1.3).

²⁹ Harrison refers to the mountain of vainglory as “self-congratulation,” which echoes the hollowness of misled self-satisfaction. Carol Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine’s Early Theology, An Argument for Continuity* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006): 173.

³⁰ “*In ipso adulescentiae limine*” (1.2); see above.

voyage. Their intellect awakened and their will not yet deformed by disordered desires, this mariner needs only a simple journey to reach the happy land. Augustine points to this state of life as “a very obscure thing” in the first paragraph: he is not sure “whether God, or nature, or necessity, or our will, or something connected with them, or all of them at once” are the cause of the human condition (1.1).³¹ Augustine indicates that Theodorus is trying to elucidate this point in his own works (1.1),³² and later says to Theodorus, “I implore you—through your virtue, through your humanity, though the mutual bond and intercourse of souls—that you extend your right hand” to help him to understand the “question of the soul”—presumably its origins and native condition (1.5).³³

The second and third things that can prevent the sailors from reaching the port of philosophy are disorders of desires for bodily pleasures and honors. These are found most clearly among that second class of mariners: Augustine describes them as being captivated by pleasures (*voluptatum*) and honors (*honorum*) (1.2). He points out that these things flatter or seduce (*blanditur*) this class of persons who stray farthest from the happy land (1.3). They are happily caught up in enjoying the pleasures of life, be they physical pleasures of food, drink, and sex, or the pleasures of shows, the circus, and like spectacles. Habit and pleasure keep these men firmly in the grips of their seducers. They also busy themselves with seeking honors; they want the benefits that come from their business affairs, positions of esteem, and efforts to achieve ever-higher offices. A person pursuing this lifestyle learns quickly that it is fast-paced, consuming of one’s time and energies, and tied to a kind of financial necessity to maintain and exercise one’s

³¹ “*siue deus siue natura siue necessitas siue uoluntas nostra siue coniuncta horum aliqua siue simul omnia*” (1.1); see above.

³² “*res enim multum obscura est, se tamen a te iam inlustranda suscepta*” (1.1); see above.

³³ “*Quid enim solidum tenui, cui adhuc de anima quaestio nutat et fluctuat? Quare obsecro te per virtutem tuam, per humanitatem, per animarum inter se vinculum atque commercium, ut dexteram porrigas*” (1.5).

position—and it comes with its own pleasures. Breaking with the ties of pleasure or honors is quite difficult, and often not something a person desires.

The third class of mariners is beset by uncertainties and doubts. These people possess a desire to return to happiness but lack understanding about how to get there. They have not set their sights on any one particular path; rather, they are ensnared by a particular empty business affair or chained by a habitual pleasure with the expectation that they will be happy if only they could have further pleasures of—as Augustine suggests later with regard to himself—“a wife and honors” (1.4).³⁴ Some do catch sight of the happy land and steer a straight course back, but it is more common that they cannot find a way to what they desire but lack. The primary obstacles to knowledge of God—the attainment of which constitutes our happiness—are seen here to be moral, and they “can be removed by directing desire away from inordinate attachment to temporal goods.”³⁵ These mariners are found variously “straying within the mists, or gazing upon sinking stars, or captivated by some allurements, or scattering during the times of good navigation” going one way and then another without persistence (1.2).³⁶

³⁴ “*uxoris honorisque inlecebra detinebar*” (1.4).

³⁵ In a brief article on the Cassiciacum dialogues, David Roberts offers this commentary, to which he adds that this is a particularly Platonist way of viewing the pursuit of happiness. The chief obstacle, he says, is inordinate *intellectual* pride (the mountain of vainglory). Intellectual pride is the obstacle which prevents knowledge of the good, which knowledge he says is constitutive of happiness. This seems to be an oversimplification of the metaphor Augustine paints in the dedication letter. Augustine’s understanding of the possession of God does not seem limited to simple knowledge of the good, but rather knowledge paired with purified passions. Knowledge is a loving union with God that demands also a conversion of the passions. Or, as Michael Foley says, passion for wisdom “finds its true fulfillment in the Triune God, for the soul’s nourishment consists not only of an understanding and knowledge of things, but of union with the divine reality that cannot be taken away.” Evidence for this is the dialogue’s conclusion in praise of the Trinity and the invocation of the theological virtues, which are not merely intellectual virtues. David Roberts, “Augustine’s Earliest Writings,” in *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine*, ed. Roy Battenhouse (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1955): 161-162. Foley, “The Other Happy Life,” 177.

³⁶ “*vel inter nubila deviantes, vel mergentia contuentes sidera, vel nonnullis illecebris capti, bonae navigationis tempora differentes*” (1.2).

The mountain of vainest glory (*vanissimam gloriam*) shows the dangers involved in the pursuit of knowledge, self-satisfaction with one's accomplishments, and desire for adulation for what one knows (1.3). This is in contrast to the honors of the second class of mariners, who sought recognition for their position and what they do or have done through that external honor. Those who desire this glory are people who have successfully progressed this far in from the open seas, or men who have already entered into the harbor of philosophy but are drawn away again. They are people guided by their intellects, who have mastered the lower passions, and understand that their route to happiness involves entering the harbor of philosophy. But they are so proud of themselves and the progress they have made that they fall prey to the pretenses of something short of the goal. They attribute their happiness to themselves. They are puffed up with knowledge that does not lead them to true happiness; thus, this mountain of vainglory has "nothing within of substance or solidity" (1.3).³⁷

Thus, I conclude that the three kinds of mariners virtually include all the different conditions of life and disordered desires that can keep one away from the solid land of happiness. First we see the fallen human condition, this baffling separation from the happy life in which all, upon reaching the age of reason and reflecting upon their state, find themselves. Next Augustine moves through the disordered attachment to physical pleasures as well as to goods proper to men as social creatures, and then, finally, pride.³⁸

³⁷ "*quod ita nihil intus plenum atque solidum habet*" (1.3).

³⁸ This threefold division of disordered desires, as Michael Foley astutely observes, is "particularly prevalent in Augustine's" writings. These are the "three basic kinds of human desire, known in the Platonic tradition as the three parts of the soul." Foley, "The Other Happy Life" 175, 125. This also appears as the three concupiscences in *Confessions*, where he is clearly drawing on 1 John 2:16. Entry into the port of philosophy, Boone comments, "is a virtuous life characterized by reordered desires; right doctrine and right love are intimately connected." Boone, *Conversion*, 71.

Three important things are left uncertain in this initial presentation, however. While Augustine opens the letter by saying that we are “thrown into this world” and that we all seek to return to happiness, he is providing a very generic sketch (1.1).³⁹ On the one hand, I have drawn attention to the comprehensiveness of that sketch, in that Augustine has captured persons at all stages of adult life and in all conditions of desire for true happiness, that is, generally speaking all the ways one can go wrong in that pursuit. On the other hand, some things remain unclear: first, whether all men must arrive at the happy life through philosophy (and if this philosophy is a particular school or manner of philosophy); second, the role that divine action or grace may play in one’s progress; and third, at what point someone in the harbor of philosophy actually makes land on the solid ground of happiness. Augustine himself presents his situation as what Harrison calls “but a partial resolution” to his own quest: “He has not yet decided on which stretch of dry land he will disembark; he is still confronted by the mountain which stands just beyond the harbour.”⁴⁰ However, Augustine presents this to us in a decidedly hopeful tone: all the classes of mariners “may eventually find the happy life.”⁴¹

³⁹ “*In hunc mundum... proiecerit*” (1.1).

⁴⁰ Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine’s Early Theology*, 25.

⁴¹ Bourke emphasizes the hopefulness of this image; Vernon Bourke, *Augustine’s Love of Wisdom, An Introspective Philosophy* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue Univ. Press, 1992): 181.

Section 2. Biographical parallels

After his nautical image, Augustine says he will give an autobiographical sketch through which Theodorus will be able to discover “which of these three kinds of men delivered [Augustine] to [Theodorus]” (1.4).⁴² This is a theme to which Augustine returns again in the *Confessions*, to view his life as a journey of coming home to the faith of his youth. In that work, his conversion is the apex, and his farewell to Monica, who nourished his spiritual infancy alongside his physical youth, concludes the “autobiographical” portion of the text.⁴³ In his reflections at age 33 in *De beata vita*, it is immediately clear that Augustine is not a member of the first class of mariners he has described; he considers them to be younger people, presumably younger than himself, perhaps the age of his students. He also did not make a quick, easy, direct trip to the port of philosophy as those first kind of mariners have done; his life has traced a considerably more serpentine route than that. One could imagine he has someone like his adolescent son Adeodatus in mind as a member of this first class of mariners: just fourteen, also a new convert, and a person of great intellectual promise, but with relatively little life experience (1.6; cf. *Conf.* 9.6.14). Insofar as the first autobiographical detail Augustine provides for us in *De beata vita* is his reading of Cicero’s *Hortensius* at the relatively young age of 19 as a matter of

⁴² “*quod illorum trium genus hominum me tibi dedit*” (1.4).

⁴³ BeDuhn, in writing on Augustine in relation to Manicheism, sees Augustine’s conversion to Catholic Christianity as an apostasy from Manicheism, and the skewed perspective of time (both at the writing of *De beata vita* and over ten years later when he composed *Confessions*) as a whitewashing fiction (a “historically fallacious characterization”) of the reality of Augustine’s life that inadequately attends to the influence and importance of his Manichean friends. While I do not share in his opinion that Augustine is lying about his conversion to Christianity at this stage, it is true that Augustine has abandoned Manicheism for Christianity, and that his experiences and acquaintances as a Manichean still influence him later in life, not because he still holds Manichean belief but because that is just how life works: one does not lose past experiences in conversion, and one does not cut ties with all acquaintances instantaneously. Jason BeDuhn, *Augustine’s Manichean Dilemma, Volume 1: Conversion and Apostasy, 373-388 C.E.* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2010): 286.

course in his studies (1.4), one might also expect he is not a member of the second class of mariners: “These are the men, who because either the tearful downfall of their fortunes, or the anxious difficulties of their empty pursuits, as if they have nothing else which to do, push into the books of teachers and the wisest men” (1.2).⁴⁴ Augustine read the book of a teacher at a young age not because he was lamenting his misfortunes and seeking solace, but because he was undertaking a normal assignment in his studies.⁴⁵ By elimination, this leaves the third class of mariners, that broadest class that captures everyone in between, as that which has delivered him to Theodorus.

Augustine’s sketch includes a dozen events or periods in his life, but he oscillates between speaking directly and lapsing back to nautical imagery. There are fairly clear parallels with what he says in the *Confessions*, however, that can help us identify those events.⁴⁶

(1) Augustine reads the *Hortensius* at age 19. Cf. *Confessions* 3.4.7-8.

Augustine says that upon reading this exhortation to philosophy, “so greatly was I inflamed with love for philosophy, that I intended to establish myself in her presence” (1.4).⁴⁷ In the *Confessions*, he elaborates on this as a love for wisdom. This reading of the *Hortensius* was the first of the moments he describes as transformative. He says that his affections were

⁴⁴ “*Hi sunt homines, quos cum vel lacrymabiles tragoediae fortunarum suarum, vel inaniam negotiorum anxiae difficultates, quasi nihil aliud habentes quod agant, in libros doctorum sapientissimorumque hominum truserint*” (1.2).

⁴⁵ He describes the effect of reading *Hortensius* as his first turning to God and love of wisdom: “*Quomodo ardebam, Deus meus, quomodo ardebam revolare a terrenis ad te, et nesciebam quid ageres mecum! Apud te est enim sapientia. Amor autem sapientiae nomen graecum habet philosophiam, quo me accendebant illae litterae.* *Confessions* 3.4.8.

⁴⁶ Mandouze observes that there is nothing in this biographical sketch that is not also in the *Confessions*, but I reserve judgment to a slight extent insofar as the metaphors Augustine uses are not always clear parallels to *Confessions*; drawing the parallels out requires some guesswork. André Mandouze, *Saint Augustin: L'aventure de la Raison et de la Grâce* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1968): 261.

⁴⁷ “*tanto amore philosophiae succensus sum, ut statim ad eam me ferre meditarer*” (1.4).

completely altered (3.4.7);⁴⁸ he repented of his vain aspirations and desired to return to God (3.4.7).⁴⁹

(2) Augustine encounters delays. Cf. *Confessions* 3.5.9.

Augustine's quest for philosophy was immediately delayed due to obscuring clouds, and his path was confused because he chased "stars which slide into the ocean" (1.4).⁵⁰ The combination of clouds and following stars which are not fixed frustrates navigation. Augustine moves immediately from this to following the Manicheans, in the third autobiographical event in *De beata vita*. Thus, I surmise the clouds and falling stars correspond roughly with Augustine's attempts to read Scripture literally and with a corporeal imagination, or with his brief fascination with astrology.⁵¹ That is, Augustine says in *Confessions* that he did not wholly trust Cicero because he did not find Christ's name in the text, and so he tried immediately to seek wisdom in Scripture. But in reading Scripture, he found it unfathomable; it was "veiled over in mysteries" and his "sharp gaze did not penetrate into its inner meaning" (3.5.9).⁵² At the moment, it was the humble style of writing that most obviously sent him on to other philosophers, but later he diagnoses this as an inability to seek out allegorical and not merely literal readings of certain texts (*Conf.* 5.14.24).

(3) Augustine falls in with the Manicheans. Cf. *Confessions* 3.6.10.

Augustine says in *De beata vita* that he next submits as student to some who teach rather than to those who command. These teachers are those who worship the "light seen by eyes," i.e.,

⁴⁸ "*mutavit affectum meum*" (C3.4.7).

⁴⁹ "*repente omnium vana spes... ad te redirem*" (C3.4.7).

⁵⁰ "*nebulae defuerunt... labentia in oceanum astra suspexi*" (DBV1.4).

⁵¹ Cf. *Confessions* 4.3.

⁵² "*velatam mysteriis...acies mea non penetrabat interiora eius*" (C3.5.9). See also Proverbs 7:27, where the temptress's ways are described as "*infernus domus eius penetrantes interiora mortis*" (Vulgate).

the Manicheans (1.4).⁵³ He echoes this in the *Confessions*: the Manicheans presented the sun and the moon, “corporeal things, bright and heavenly,” instead of God, for worship (3.6.10).⁵⁴ These men were persuasive in their “tongue’s sound and clatter,” but their words were empty of the Truth they thought they were proclaiming (3.6.10).⁵⁵ In *De beata vita*, he names falling in with the Manicheans a “childish superstition” that scared him away from the right path in his quest to learn how to read Scripture (1.4).⁵⁶ The childish part of this he attributes in the *Confessions* to a kind of pride: “But in truth it was of its nature that [Scripture’s] meaning would increase together with your little ones, whereas I disdained to be a little child and, puffed up with pride, I considered myself to be a great fellow” (*Conf.* 3.5.9).⁵⁷ But superstition such as Augustine’s was a particular kind of ailment that a Roman citizen would have hesitated to dabble in. As John Scheid points out in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, a *superstitio* meant “a free citizen’s forgetting his dignity by throwing himself into the servitude of deities conceived as tyrants,” and under the Roman Empire this was particularly applied to Jews, Christians, and other religious groups other than the civic Roman religions.⁵⁸

(4) Augustine retains a kind of skepticism and seeks answers. Cf. *Confessions* 3.7.12; 5.3.3; 5.5.8-6.13.

Augustine was not satisfied by what these men taught, as he says in *De beata vita*, but thought that they had a secret teaching that would be revealed to him in time (1.4). In the *Confessions*, he reveals that he was uncertain about particular doctrines: the nature of God and

⁵³ “*incidi in homines quibus lux ista quae oculis cernitur, inter summe divina colenda videretur*” (1.4).

⁵⁴ “*corporea quamvis lucida et caelestia*” (C3.6.10).

⁵⁵ “*sono et strepitu linguae*” (3.6.10).

⁵⁶ “*superstitio quaedam puerilis*” (DBV1.4).

⁵⁷ “*Verum autem illa erat, quae cresceret cum parvulis, sed ego dedignabar esse parvulus et turgidus fastu mihi grandis videbar,*” Augustine, *Confessions* 3.5.9.

⁵⁸ Scheid, *Oxford Classical Dictionary* 1.

the nature of evil, primarily (3.7.12). As time went on, over the next approximately ten years while he was a member of this sect, he sank into the busy-ness of studying for and attaining posts as a teacher of rhetoric. But at age 29, he says, some of these concerns reached a peak and he eagerly awaited the chance to inquire of Faustus, a famous Manichean (5.3.3). Yet Faustus, though well-spoken, did not have adequate answers for Augustine (5.5-5.6).

(5) A sea voyage; cf. *Confessions* 5.8.14.

Augustine next says that he “escaped” the Manicheans by “crossing the sea” (1.4).⁵⁹ We know from *Confessions* that shortly after he encountered Faustus and was finally disillusioned with the Manichean cult, he traveled from Carthage across the Mediterranean to Rome (5.8.14).⁶⁰

(6) The Academics held his ship; cf. *Confessions* 5.10.19.

Augustine tells us in the *Confessions* that “the thought arose in [him] that those philosophers whom they call the Academics were wiser than the rest” (5.10.19).⁶¹ These Academics—of which Cicero was one—are descendants of the Academy of Plato, but in contrast to the Neoplatonists, they were skeptics. Augustine says he subscribed to their school of philosophy when tossed about by “all the winds in the midst of the waves” (*DBV* 1.4).⁶² Considering the nautical allegory with which he opened the dedicatory letter, we are left to wonder whether these storms, though they felt like adversities, were actually pushing Augustine in the direction of true happiness. At the time that he wrote *De beata vita*, he was also writing a

⁵⁹ “*evasi ... trajecto isto mari*” (1.4).

⁶⁰ In *Soundings in Augustine’s Imagination*, O’Connell lumps this voyage and the Academics holding his ship into one stage in Augustine’s conversion: “the foray into mid-ocean” is a “flirtation with Academic skepticism” from which his interactions with Ambrose and Manlius Theodorus recalled him. O’Connell is not, however, making the detailed effort to draw correspondences with the various parts of this metaphor. Robert J. O’Connell, *Soundings in St. Augustine’s Imagination* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 1994): 189.

⁶¹ “*Etenim suborta est etiam mihi cogitatio, prudentiores illos ceteris fuisse philosophos, quos Academicos appellant*” (C5.10.19).

⁶² “*ventis in mediis fluctibus*” (*DBV* 1.4).

refutation of the skepticism of the Academics; this other work comes up in the course of the dialogue, because Augustine's young students are not yet convinced—as Augustine has already been—that certainty is possible.⁶³ But it is possible that maintaining skepticism for a period of a year or two prevented him from assenting to doctrines of the Manicheans and other false teachings.

(7) Augustine came to “this land”; cf. *Confessions* 5.13.23.

It is likely that “this land” is referring to Augustine's arrival in Milan. He took a position in Milan teaching rhetoric—an important official Roman post, in the city that was at the time the capital of the western part of the empire. Augustine is celebrating his birthday with the writing of this dialogue at the country villa of his friend Verecundus at Cassiciacum, north of Milan (*Conf.* 9.3.5)—Milan is still the primary town of importance in the vicinity of Cassiciacum. At the end of his time of retreat at this location, he will return to Milan for baptism by Bishop Ambrose. While in the end he did not also return to that teaching post, he still had the intention of doing so at the time of *De beata vita* (*Conf.* 9.4.7; 9.5.13).

(8) Augustine “came to know the North Star”; cf. *Confessions* 5.13.23.

Augustine returns to the nautical imagery by saying that in this new land he came to know the North Star, “to which he could entrust himself” (1.4).⁶⁴ In *Confessions*, he offers what seems to be an identification of Ambrose with that star: “All unknowing, I was led to [Ambrose] by [God], so that through him I might be led. ... That man of God received me in fatherly fashion, and as an exemplary bishop he welcomed my pilgrimage” (5.13.23).⁶⁵ Thus, it would seem that Ambrose was the North Star leading Augustine to the land of happiness. He found in

⁶³ Cf. *Retractationes* 1.2.

⁶⁴ “*Deinde veni in has terras; hic septentrionem cui me crederem didici*” (DBV 1.4).

⁶⁵ “*Ad eum autem ducebar abs te nesciens, ut per eum ad te sciens ducerer. Suscepit me paterne ille homo Dei et peregrinationem meam satis episcopaliter dilexit*” (C5.13.23).

Ambrose a man who was approachable and well-spoken, and took time to teach his flock—and thus Augustine—the truth. However, the language there and here in *De beata vita* leaves it open that it could alternatively be the true God about whom he learned and whom he subsequently believed: from “our priest,” Augustine continues in *De beata vita*, he learned that God was entirely incorporeal, as was the soul (1.4).⁶⁶ And in *Confessions*, he goes on to say that from Ambrose he learned to read certain passages of Scripture “by way of allegory,” such that he stopped imagining God as being either material or some other enigmatic “spiritual substance” or stuff, but instead as entirely incorporeal (5.14.24, 25).⁶⁷ Augustine notes in the *Confessions* that learning about the incorporeality of God is the point at which he began to prefer Catholic teaching over that of the Manicheans, although he maintained an Academic’s skepticism (5.14.25). Additionally, some scholars offer that the “North Star” “could refer to the doctrine that Augustine absorbed from Ambrose, namely, the Plotinian doctrine of the incorporeal nature of God and of the soul.”⁶⁸ This can also be supported from the short line in *De beata vita* immediately following this, in which he learns about God’s incorporeality (1.4).⁶⁹ Augustine’s poetic brevity leaves this open and the valences of all three positions are acceptable—for all are, indeed, on the route to his learning the truth of Catholic teaching about God and about the Incarnation, which forms a sharp contrast to Manichean and Platonist positions.

The character of what he learned about either the North Star or through that guide is not only that God is incorporeal, and that likewise the soul is incorporeal, but also that the soul—that

⁶⁶ “*Sacerdotis nostri*” (1.4), i.e., as the bishop of Milan, the priest of both Augustine and Manlius Theodorus, as residents of Milan.

⁶⁷ “*saepius aenigmate... spiritalem substantiam*” (C5.14.24, 25).

⁶⁸ Teske, *Trilogy*, 29 n15.

⁶⁹ “*cum de deo cogitaretur, nihil omnino corporis esse cogitandum*” (1.4).

about which he expressed ignorance but a desire to discover more about its true nature in the opening salvos to Theodorus—is “the one thing closest to God” (1.4).⁷⁰

(9) Augustine delays “flying swiftly into the embrace of philosophy” (1.4);⁷¹ cf. *Confessions* 6.11.20.

Augustine says that rather than immediately “hasten[ing] with full sail and oars into that harbor” of philosophy, he delayed out of desire for wife and honors (1.4).⁷² He makes reference to this several times in the *Confessions*, although the reference is not directly to philosophy but to Catholic Christianity. There we learn that he sent away the mother of Adeodatus, his long-time concubine (6.13.23). Although Augustine was unable to remain chaste in the meantime, he was waiting for a suitable wife to be found, and then for the girl to grow old enough for marriage (6.15.25). The thought of giving up conjugal life entirely was not yet a consideration: “I had not yet groaned in prayer for [God] to come to my help, but my mind was intent on questioning and restless for argument. Ambrose[’s] ... celibacy alone appeared to me to be a hard thing” (6.3.3).⁷³ And again: “I looked with longing at honors, wealth, and marriage, and you laughed at me. Amidst such desires I suffered” (6.6.9).⁷⁴ Further:

Anxiously reflecting on these matters, I wondered most of all at how long was that time from my nineteenth year, when I had first been fired with a zeal for wisdom. For then I had determined, if wisdom were found, to abandon all the empty hopes and all the lying follies of my vain desires. But see, I was now on my thirtieth year, still caught fast in the same mire by a greed for enjoying present things. (6.11.18)⁷⁵

⁷⁰ “*nam id [de anima] est unum in rebus proximum deo*” (1.4).

⁷¹ “*in philosophiae gremium celeriter aduolare*” (1.4).

⁷² “*totis velis omnibusque remis in illum sinum raperem*” (1.4).

⁷³ “*Nec iam ingemescebam orando, ut subvenires mihi, sed ad quaerendum intentus et ad disserendum inquietus erat animus meus, ipsumque Ambrosi[ī] ...caelibatus tantum eius mihi laboriosus videbatur*” (C6.3.3).

⁷⁴ “*Inhiabam honoribus, lucris, coniugio, et tu irridebas. Patiebar in eis cupiditatibus amarissimas difficultates*” (6.6.9).

⁷⁵ “*Et ego maxime mirabar satagens et recolens, quam longum tempus esset ab undevicesimo anno aetatis meae, quo fervere coeperam studio sapientiae, disponens ea inventa relinquere*

And finally: “While I was saying all this to myself and the winds were shifting and driving my heart now this way and now that, time passed, and still I delayed to be converted to the Lord” (6.11.20).⁷⁶

Augustine, in his quick gloss of his autobiography in the *De beata vita*, conflates what seem in *Confessions* like distinct stages in his conversion. Here, he refers to his delaying to convert owing to his disordered desires as a delaying to convert to *philosophy*. At the time of writing, he is converting to Catholic Christianity—though not yet baptized—but he tells Theodorus that he is in the tranquil harbor of philosophy (1.4).⁷⁷ And this is the same philosophy that features in the harbor of the nautical image. Here he says this conversion would be “a blessing that only a few fortunate men attain” (1.4),⁷⁸ and in the opening paragraph of the dedication he says “those arriving [in the harbor] are few and far between” (1.1).⁷⁹ But in the *Confessions* his prayer to God indicates a delay in converting to God, to Catholic Christianity, to the faith of Ambrose in contrast to that of the Manicheans. While he does, in the interim, subscribe to Academic skepticism and Platonism, these are incidental to his movement toward where he settles, in Catholic Christianity.

(10) Augustine reads *Plotini paucissimis libris* (1.4); cf. *Confessions* 7.9.13-15.

The manuscript traditions diverge on an important word in the next of the events in Augustine’s autobiographical sketch. Some say that Augustine read a few—or some small—books of *Plotini*, that is, Plotinus. However, a slight minority of those manuscripts consulted in

omnes vanarum cupiditatum spes inanes et insanias mendaces. Et ecce iam tricenariam aetatem gerebam in eodem luto haesitans aviditate fruendi praesentibus fugientibus” (C6.11.18).

⁷⁶ “*Cum haec dicebam et alternabant hi venti et impellebant huc atque illuc cor meum, transibant tempora, et tardabam converti ad Dominum*” (C6.11.20).

⁷⁷ “*et optatae tranquillitati vel quassatam navem fessamque perducerem*” (1.4).

⁷⁸ “*quod paucis felicissimis licuit*” (1.4).

⁷⁹ “*multo minoris numeri homines ad eum peruenturos fuisse*” (1.1).

the production of the critical edition—two manuscripts and one codex—say that Augustine read *platonis*—books of Plato (or perhaps of the Platonists).⁸⁰ In the *Confessions*, Augustine says that he read the *platoniorum libros*, the books of the Platonists. The debates in the secondary literature on this point are extensive; I will touch on them in Part III, Chapter 3. For now, it is enough to observe that Augustine encountered and embraced Platonism, but rested only briefly there. He goes on to say in the same sentence that he compared these to the authority “of those who have handed on the divine mysteries” (1.4).⁸¹ This aroused again the flame of his experience reading *Hortensius*, and he “wanted to tear up all anchors” to enter the harbor (1.4).⁸²

(11) Augustine delays yet again; cf. *Confessions* 9.2.2-3.

But he did not immediately do as he wished, because he was “unsettled by the opinion of some men” (1.4).⁸³ Instead, he reports, he waits briefly until a “storm” came to his aid: he experienced chest pains that forced him to give up his rhetoric position, one given him by the Manicheans and which fed his desire for honors (1.4; cf. *Conf.* 5.13.23; 9.2.2-3).

(12) Augustine enters the harbor of philosophy (1.4-5); cf. *Confessions* 9.4.5.

“I threw off everything,” Augustine concludes his sketch, “and brought that shaken and weak ship into that most longed-for tranquility” (1.4).⁸⁴ If Augustine were not still, at the time of writing, on retreat at Cassiciacum, one might think this refers to his entry into the Church, if it is the greatly desired peace Augustine sought. However, as we see in 1.5, this is just the harbor and not the land of happiness yet. He describes this harbor. It is large and does not exclude all error,

⁸⁰ O’Donnell suggests that this is attributable to a mere scribal error, but offers no citation. O’Donnell fn. 20, p. 421 of Vol. II of *Confessions*. For the manuscript families and disparities, see Doignon, “Notes de critique textuelle le sur le *De beata vita* de saint Augustin,” In *Revue des études augustiniennes* 23 (1977): 63–82.

⁸¹ “*etiam illorum auctoritate, qui diuina mysteria tradiderunt*” (1.4).

⁸² “*ut omnes illas vellem anchoras rumpere*” (1.4).

⁸³ “*nisi me nonnullorum hominum existimatio commoveret*” (1.4).

⁸⁴ “*abicerem omnia, et optatae tranquillitati vel quassatam navem fessamque perducerem*” (1.4).

such that he is not quite sure how or where to land on the happy shores. Thus, he asks Theodorus—who is already on the shore—to extend a helping hand (1.5). Augustine’s philosophical retreat is a welcome respite and opportunity to prepare for the changes in his near future—his baptism as a Catholic Christian, with the different associates and employment opportunities this will afford—but there is no indication that this is an effort, as O’Meara suggests, to “escape from the world.”⁸⁵ Rather, it is an intermediate period during which Augustine is withdrawn from the business of daily life in order to engage more deeply with reality and discover it—in particular, here, what happiness is.

Conclusion

These twelve events allude to the key points in Augustine’s conversion story to date. He is writing this dialogue from a “harbor” or retreat of philosophy, enjoying the peace and the leisure he so desired in order to investigate a number of things, thereby reshaping his worldview as a Christian. There are things about which he is not yet certain, such as the “question of the soul” (1.5),⁸⁶ but he is content now to investigate things from within this relative safety, unbesieged. He does point out that he is sailing in the harbor of philosophy, but this dialogue is appropriately addressed to Theodorus because it turned out to be “more religious” than he had anticipated (1.5).⁸⁷ Here we also get a brief picture of Augustine’s now rightly-ordered loves. He reaches out in love, without fear of loss of what he has gained. Furthermore, he praises Theodorus for what fortune has favored him with—it is not praise for Theodorus in particular,

⁸⁵ O’Meara takes a skeptical position on these dialogues: he argues they are a fiction and “emphatically not reliable” (22) and that Augustine had a “psychological obsession” (35) with conversion. His is a mild expression of a small group of scholars who (to greater and lesser degrees) read Augustine as a dishonest author who is manipulating rather than an honest convert who is seeking with all his rhetorical skill to draw others into that conversion process with him. O’Meara, *Studies in Augustine and Eriugena* 44.

⁸⁶ “*de anima quaestio*” (1.5).

⁸⁷ “*disputationum mearum quod mihi uidetur religiosius*” (1.5).

but rather for the gifts Theodorus has. In the *Retractationes*, Augustine laments the misunderstanding he may have caused by his frequent references to fortune in the dialogue and one imagines this is one of those instances. In the *Confessions*, he says that one ought to rejoice “because he possesses that gift for which he is praised” rather than rejoicing in merely being praised (10.36.59).⁸⁸

This brings us now to connecting these events in Augustine’s life with the sailors he described in the opening paragraphs. While the first kind of mariner—the one encompassing those who at adolescence easily maneuver their way into philosophy and live exemplary lives—is the ideal, Augustine missed his opportunity for that. It was briefly a possibility with his experience of reading *Hortensius* in his own adolescence, but in his immediate straying into the disordered passions and his desire for the lofty language of misleading philosophers, he quickly navigated farther from the port of philosophy. The opposite extreme, those mariners who calmly float along with whatever prevailing current catches them, enjoy their experiences of pleasure and honor with “elation and rejoicing” (1.2).⁸⁹ While there are periods of Augustine’s life when he seems to have been content in his trajectory—such as his early days with the Manicheans, and upon receiving the position at Milan—he presents himself as spending much of his time troubled and beset. It is unlikely that Augustine identifies himself closely with this class of mariner. Rather, he seems to fall within the broad class of those actively unhappy and seeking happiness, though not always in the right places. While the age of 33 is not particularly old, Augustine has felt the pressure of this pursuit of happiness now for nearly half of his life, if one counts reading *Hortensius* as his first moment of conversion to philosophy. If it is a course set by reason and will that directs one into the port of philosophy, we can look to what are often characterized as

⁸⁸ “*sibi laudari se quam ipsum donum habere*” (C10.36.59).

⁸⁹ “*elati atque gaudentes*” (DBV1.2).

his “intellectual” and “moral” conversions recounted in Books 7 and 8 of *Confessions* as the points at which Augustine found his proper heading for each. He came to know the North Star—that is, he found a guiding light for his quest for true happiness—but delayed fleeing into the bosom of philosophy until overcoming his desires for wife and honors. Even then, a small push of a storm was required to get him past that mountain of vainglory. There is not a particular occasion of vainglory in Augustine’s life this would seem to represent, but it is possible that he considered particularly vainglorious the Academic position proclaiming they know their way of life to be right when their knowledge, as skepticism, is empty of substance. Regardless, Augustine now thinks he is in this port of philosophy, but not yet on the firm footing of the happy life. This leads to the proper consideration of the dialogue: what is that happy life? First, though, Augustine introduces us to his companions in this inquiry.

Section 3. Companions in the harbor

The very last portion of the introduction and dedicatory letter is a *dramatis personae* of the dialogue. The dialogue takes place on November 13, 386; the companions have consumed a moderate dinner and are gathered in the baths, a place suitable for the current weather conditions. The participants in the dialogue include Augustine's mother, Monica (or Monnica); his son, Adeodatus; his brother, Navigius; his students and fellow converts Trygetius and Licentius; and his young, uneducated cousins Lastidianus (or Lartidianus) and Rusticus. The absent but fellow convert and friend of Augustine, Alypius, is referred to but does not participate. It is noteworthy that these participants are "as a body characterized by their inequality":⁹⁰ from young to old, male and female, educated and uneducated.

(1) Monica, "our mother" (1.6)

Augustine refers to Monica as "our mother," perhaps only for the prosaic reason that he and his brother are both present, but perhaps because she is the motherly figure for all who are gathered, young and old alike (1.6).⁹¹ She is the senior member of the party. Monica's contributions to the dialogue are as the only woman, one who is uneducated in grammar and the rest of the trivium, and the only baptized Christian present. However, she is variously described as having "reached the very summit of philosophy" (2.10)⁹² and as like a "great man" whose wisdom flows from a divine source (2.10),⁹³ and on the last day she contributes a key point that

⁹⁰ Ernest Fortin, "Reflections on the Proper Way to Read Augustine the Theologian," in *The Birth of Philosophic Christianity: Studies in Early Christian and Medieval Thought*. Ernest L. Fortin: *Collected Essays, Volume 1*, ed. J. Brian Benestad (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996): 101.

⁹¹ "*nostra mater*" (1.6). Therese Fuhrer adds to this the implication that this group becomes a *familia* under her maternal care. Fuhrer, "Wife, Mother, Philosopher," 227.

⁹² "*arcem philosophiae tenuisti*" (2.10).

⁹³ "*ut obliti penitus sexus eius magnam aliquem uirum considerare...ex quo illa et quam diuino fonte manarent*" (2.10).

is the same as “something great drawn from philosophy” that Augustine had intended to say (4.27).⁹⁴ Her incisive wit draws laughter when she likens the skeptics’ position to that of those suffering from a falling sickness (2.16). She frequently reminds those present that God is also present with them (3.19, 3.21, 4.23), and she has what is nearly the last word when she bursts into praise of the Trinity, citing a song by Ambrose, at the conclusion of the dialogue (4.35).⁹⁵

(2) Adeodatus, “the youngest of us all” (1.6)⁹⁶

Adeodatus is fourteen at the time of this dialogue, and Augustine has a very high opinion of his intellect and character. He is quiet, however, speaking only if his contribution is solicited by Augustine. He offers the third of the definitions of what it means to have God: “He has God who does not have an unclean spirit” (2.12).⁹⁷ Later, Augustine asks him to elaborate on that statement. He immediately recognizes that one who has a clean spirit is chaste, and that chastity extends not merely to avoiding sins of the flesh, but rather requires one to “look to God and direct himself toward God alone” (3.18).⁹⁸ Augustine later cites this as key to living a happy life (4.33).

(3) Navigius

Navigius, the brother of Augustine, is well-spoken and even educated, though to an unknown degree. He quickly accepts an argument against skepticism, but this does not prevent him from quoting Cicero (2.14). He is cautious about logical consistency; when human nature is

⁹⁴ “*quod pro magno de philosophorum libris atque ultimum proferre paraueram*” (4.27).

⁹⁵ Monica also seems to represent the Church, as that mystical body of Christ making present that “great man”—who is of course also divine. She has attained to the summit of philosophy, and under whose maternal care she shares her wisdom with all persons. Her constant reminder of God’s presence and her manner of drawing all to unity and praise of God further evokes this imagery.

⁹⁶ “*minimus ominum*” (1.6); also at 2.12.

⁹⁷ “*Is habet deum, ait, qui spiritum inmundum non habet*” (2.12).

⁹⁸ “*qui deum adtendit et ad ipsum solum se tenet*” (3.18).

identified as a body-soul composite, he wants to make sure there is not some third thing being neglected (2.7), and he wants to make sure they do not fall prey to a fallacy in arguing about the relationship between the friendship of God and happiness (3.20). He shares his mother's sense of humor and makes her laugh with a joke about eating too many sweets (3.20).

(4) Trygetius and (5) Licentius

Trygetius is a fellow citizen and a student of Augustine, bright enough and eager to participate in the conversation. He has a tendency to let his mind wander, for which he is remonstrated by both Monica (2.8) and Augustine (2.11). He expresses a desire at the end of the dialogue to "be fed like this every day" (4.36).⁹⁹ Licentius is Trygetius's counterpart, and he is the more impetuous of the two students. He wants Augustine simply to tell him what he should want in order to be happy, but quickly recovers from Augustine's chastising (2.10). Licentius is afraid to let go of skepticism and wants Alypius to come back and defend him and the skeptical position (2.14). He is egged on by Trygetius and makes a hasty claim that one can be happy without having what one wants, but is embarrassed to have it pointed out to him and recorded in the written record of the dialogue (2.15). In the end, he articulates clearly that to be happy one must have the fullness of wisdom (4.27). These two young men play an important role in the dialogues *Contra Academicos* and *De Ordine*, also composed at Cassiciacum, and we see more of their personalities in those works.

(6) Lastidianus and (7) Rusticius

These two young men are shy and only make the motions of agreement with a definition of what it means to possess God when Augustine directly asks them for their opinions (2.12). Otherwise, they do not participate in the conversation.

⁹⁹ "*Quam uellem, inquit Trygetius, hoc modo nos cotidie pasceres*" (4.36).

In the conversation that follows, Augustine appears to be fostering a philosophical community that is “catholic” in its inclusion of educated, uneducated, young, old, male and female alike. He is the leader of the conversation and appears to have designs about its progress, but the conclusion is something of a discovery for them all. Altogether, and in harmony with the opening image of mariners overcoming disordered desires and ignorance, the dialogue unfolds as a process of engaging both reason and will in pursuit of the happy life.

Chapter 2. Day 1

Introduction

On the first day of the dialogue, Augustine initiates the conversation by a question of what it is to be human: are we composed of body and soul? This introduction allows Augustine to set up a parallel between body and soul. Just as the body needs food in proper measure in order to survive and cultivate virtue, so also the soul needs to be nourished. As O'Daly observes, the "reciprocal influence of body and soul allows us to describe their natures and activities in parallel terms. In particular, we may express the less easily understood nature of soul in language drawn from the bodily sphere."¹ But both body and soul can exhibit a greedy appetite; that is, there is a natural hunger that is felt physically in the body, but the soul's natural hunger is inspired by some kind of curiosity or wonder. Augustine sufficiently inspires such wonder in those gathered with him by posing the question: "Do we wish to be happy?" (2.10).² Their immediate and eager agreement is that to satisfy the desire for happiness, we have to possess what we want and to want what is good. To fail to possess what we desire is a state of want, or misery. That which we desire needs to be something independent of us and our instability. For it to be our highest good properly, and for our grasp of it to be truly satisfying, it needs to be eternal and independent of fortune or change, and, once grasped, it cannot be lost.

Only God, those discussing this question agree, meets this description of happiness. While reason led them to this conclusion, the boys' response is one Augustine describes as "pious devotion" (2.11).³ Augustine then obtains from his interlocutors three different definitions

¹ Gerard O'Daly, *Augustine's Philosophy of Mind*, (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987): 45.

² "*Beatos esse nos volumus?*" (2.10).

³ "*pia devotio*" (2.11).

of what it means to “possess God” (2.11).⁴ Drawing the conversation of the day to a close, there is a brief coda in which he and Licentius argue whether the Academic position is true, namely, that one need not have what one desires in order to be happy. Augustine speaks to the contrary, while Licentius appeals to the authority of an absent Alypius in siding with the Academics.

Augustine is making it clear in this chapter that to know what it takes to be happy requires knowing both who we are as human beings and something about the God whom we desire, the possession of whom is the only possibility that fully meets their description of happiness. We must, in other words, know both our nature and its end; in the words of the *Soliloquia*, we must know God and the soul.⁵ While the tension of certainty between Augustine’s position and Licentius’s Academic position is presented as an intrusion from a separate conversation—the one documented in another of Augustine’s Cassiciacum dialogues, *Contra Academicos*—it actually introduces a problem that the Christian and uneducated Monica returns to on Day 2: is it enough to be seeking God in order to be happy? This is the means by which Augustine introduces into the conversation the very important reality of the omnipresence of God. If Augustine is correct in his claim that one has to possess God in order to be happy, not only do we have to look at the orientation of the seeker of happiness to his end, but also the disposition of God to the person seeking Him. Thus, the one seeking happiness must inquire into God’s presence to and ability to be found by the person who seeks him.

⁴ “*deum habet*” (2.11).

⁵ “*Deum et animam scire cupio*” (S1.2.7).

Section 1. Nature and knowledge

If the question of the happy life requires consideration of the human being with powers of reason and will (cf. 1.1), then it makes sense to ask about the human capacities for these, what satisfies them, and how we know we have done so correctly. Augustine opens the dialogue with the question of human nature: are we composed of body and soul? He receives immediate push-back from Navigius, who questions the accuracy of this picture of human beings. Once this is accepted as a working definition, however, Augustine wants to know what satisfies the body. While his interlocutors discuss among themselves the relationship of body to soul—does what we eat feed the body alone or is it for the sake of the soul?—Trygetius observes that his recent dining experience runs counter to the claim that food makes the body grow. Augustine's response is to point to the natural limitations and ends of human bodies and food consumption: there is a limit that varies somewhat for each person, but we have to work within those individual limits in order to maintain health.

If food satisfies the body, what satisfies the soul? Monica has the answer to this: knowledge and understanding of things. However, she oddly does not feel hungry despite neither having “drunk deep of the fine arts” nor having “been educated by any of the disciplines” (2.8),⁶ which are what Augustine names as sources of nourishment for the mind. This illustrates for us that the body's hunger is easily felt by everyone, but not everyone “feels” the hunger of the soul. The privations of these goods exhibit as hunger and disease in the body, but mere barrenness in the mind without physical discomfort. The parallels between body and soul help us identify the hungers of the less easily understood soul through what O'Daly identifies as a favorite metaphorical elucidation of Augustine's: “knowledge and understanding can be described as the

⁶ “*Disciplinis eruditi sunt... que bonarum artium hauserunt*” (DBV2.8).

food of the soul, instruction as its medicine, slowness to learn as medical neglect, the soul's life and perception as its growth or aging, its learning and consent as its provision of food, shelter, and care for itself."⁷ We know we have appropriately satisfied the body and the mind when we have cultivated virtues within ourselves, and those virtues remain beyond the pleasurable moment of satisfaction of desire.

On this occasion, Augustine's birthday, he wants in particular to serve up the best for his guests as they "dine" more sumptuously than usual on what feeds the mind. He urges his students to apply themselves diligently, i.e., virtuously, to this task. If what the young men are accustomed to is reviewing a book of the *Aeneid* every day,⁸ among their other scholarly pursuits, one can imagine their trepidation about the difficulty of what is to follow—and their relief, when Augustine announces the topic as the pleasant concern: do we all want to be happy? Their chorus of agreement is immediate;⁹ this is a universal human concern. Also unanimously agreed upon is that one has to have what one wants in order to be happy.

When Augustine asks if anything a person wants, once obtained, guarantees happiness, it is Monica who tells us that we have to want what is truly good for us. Here we learn that Monica, though not formally educated, is a wise woman. Hers is an insight, that of an unlearned woman who nonetheless has what Kenney calls the "practical wisdom of a life well lived."¹⁰ Augustine's high praise for her is that she has attained "the very citadel of philosophy" (2.10). He quotes the

⁷ O'Daly, *Augustine's Philosophy of Mind* 45.

⁸ *Contra Academicos* 2.4.10.

⁹ The characters in the dialogue do a lot of exclaiming and laughing together; they enjoy camaraderie and enthusiasm for this joint inquiry.

¹⁰ In his discussion of Monica's role in the dialogue, Kenney places emphasis on the grace that "manifested itself in divine wisdom that had come upon her, conferring an understanding tantamount to a philosopher's." Kenney, *Contemplation*, 63. While this is a grace, Augustine does not use the language of grace to describe his mother's insights. He does, however, describe it as coming from a divine source (*divino fonte*, 2.10).

Hortensius: Cicero knew that there was a natural end to the will, and if the will is deprived of that which truly satisfies it, it is unhappy, no matter what else is obtained. Anything short of that true good is a state of misery. Between this and the first comment by Monica, the text raises a number of salient points. First, formal education is not the only means by which to gain wisdom about the most important of matters. Second, what is learned through a liberal education steeped in beauty is consonant with what Monica has learned as a faithful Catholic Christian, living a sacramental and liturgical life under the guidance of her pastors. This fundamental truth about the object of our desire is the same, though the means by which Monica and Augustine attained to it are very different. Augustine affirms this, in articulating her claim in Cicero's terms, and then in his narrative reflection he tells us: "In the meantime, to the extent that I could I tried to understand from what source and how divine a source these things flowed" (2.10).¹¹

Augustine is unwilling to define what exactly the true good is essentially, when Licentius tells him he ought. It is a bit odd that, even though Augustine's narrative says that Licentius made a "modest and deferential" suggestion (those are Augustine's own words; 2.10),¹² Augustine is still reluctant to respond. Does he not know? If he is feeding us a meal with the final purpose of happiness, why are we not allowed to know what it is we are to seek in order to consume? It seems, in fact, to be an admonition to patience, because the question does not go unanswered. First, however, he points out that unless we have this good thing, we are miserable.

The proper object to satisfy our longing has to be immortal and imperishable, and it cannot be lost in order to be truly satisfying. No goods of fortune can offer such stability, and even he who enjoys the goods of fortune in abundance and relative security does so properly

¹¹ "*me interim, quantum poteram, intellegente, ex quo illa et quam diuino fonte manarent*" (2.10).

¹² "*Modestae ac uerecundae*" (2.10).

only if he does so with moderation. This is again Monica's contribution to the conversation: this man's happiness is "not by virtue of the things ... but by the virtue of the moderation of his mind" (2.11).¹³ While he is still not in a perfect state—those goods of fortune can be lost—he is better off for what he has that is more stable, namely, his virtue. This proper enjoyment of goods possessed is necessary but not sufficient for happiness. But only God is the proper object of our desire for happiness, and the one whom we should seek and enjoy. Only God is "eternal and ever abiding" (2.11).¹⁴ That God is possessed of these qualities is unquestioned by those present, which acquiescence Augustine terms "pious devotion" (2.11).¹⁵ Therefore, he who has God is happy.

Augustine next seeks the opinions of those present about what sort of man has God. He receives three closely related opinions: he has God who (1) lives well, (2) does God's will, or (3) does not have an unclean spirit (*spiritum immundum*). The third definition is suggested by Adeodatus and finds Monica's particular approval. One possible reason for her approval is because it is a Biblical phrase that would have been familiar to her from hearing a Gospel proclaimed in which Christ expels the *spiritus immundus* from the demon-possessed.¹⁶ Furthermore, she may have been considering the efficacy of the upcoming Easter liturgies at which Augustine was to be baptized; such baptism would cleanse him from an unclean spirit, and he would receive instead the Spirit of God. On the third day of the dialogue, Augustine returns to these definitions.

¹³ "Non ergo... illis rebus, sed animi sui moderatione beatus est" (2.11).

¹⁴ "Deus...uobis aeternus et semper manens uidetur" (2.11).

¹⁵ "pia deuotione" (2.11).

¹⁶ E.g., Mark 5:8, "dicebat enim illi exi spiritus inmunde ab homine."

Section 2. The academics

Augustine leaves the discussion at this point and finishes the day's conversation with something tangential, a comment on the conversation they have been having prior to this day about the Academics. The Academics were skeptics who thought they could be happy simply by seeking wisdom, even though it was not something they thought they could obtain. Augustine's audience earnestly wanted to hear what Augustine had to say in response to that position, in light of the conversation they just had. Augustine's conclusion is that if they never obtain the truth they seek, they are not happy, and "no one is wise unless he is happy" (2.14).¹⁷ Licentius was unwilling to accept this conclusion and quibbles with Trygetius about it, but Navigius—who had raised a skeptical objection to the human capacity to know *anything*, let alone knowing what human nature was or what could satisfy it—laughingly accepts that the Academic position is untenable. Perhaps the analogy of hunger in the body to hunger in the soul has solidified Navigius's disavowal of the skeptical position: if hunger of the body can only be satisfied by the consumption of food, then likewise the hunger of the mind can only be satisfied by the reception of truth. Augustine fills his mother in on the position of the Academics, and she immediately calls them *caducarii* and the conversation breaks up. *Caducarii*, interestingly, are those with the "falling sickness," i.e., a medical problem now called epilepsy, or possessed by a demon.¹⁸ The latter, of course, is the very definition of one with an unclean spirit, and thus an unhappy person.

¹⁷ "At nemo sapiens nisi beatus" (2.14).

¹⁸ "Among the many names which were applied to epilepsy, one at least was taken from the most noticeable symptom, that of the fall of the patient. Apuleius used *caducus* as a synonym for epileptic, and St. Augustine informs us about the '*caducarii*, which by name,' he says, 'it is common among us to call those whom epilepsy has smitten.' The disease itself is designated as *passio caduca* and analogous names appear in the medieval literature of many European nations." There were three causes identified in the late Roman empire for this disease: possession (i.e., by an evil spirit, as the demoniacs in the Bible), lunacy (i.e., being affected by the moon periodically, because of either "a heathen deity" or a natural cause), or the falling evil (which

might be due to loose morals or simply having fallen ill). Owsei Temkin, *The Falling Sickness: A History of Epilepsy from the Greeks to the Beginnings of Modern Neurology*. JHU Press, 1994. 85, 95-96.

Chapter 3. Day 2

Introduction

When Augustine and his interlocutors pick up the conversation the following day, their focus is on what it means to possess God. He first harmonizes into one definition the three definitions offered the previous day, then addresses what it means to (1) have an unclean spirit and (2) live chastely. Then he distinguishes between seeking God and already having God. Monica reminds us also that God is omnipresent; even he who is seeking but has not yet found God has God present to him. The difference, however, is both the orientation of the seeker (what is my knowledge of God and disposition towards Him?) and God (is He propitious to me?). The discussion concludes at the difficult point of the difference between objective reality and the subject's experience of a relationship with God. Some people do not feel miserable when they meet the various criteria that would seem to make them miserable: not seeking God, not having found God, not living a chaste life in relationship to God, or placing their happiness in things other than God and encountering good fortune such that they do not realize their errors.

Section 1. Possession of God

The second day's conversation is brief but covers a lot of territory. First, Augustine takes the three definitions from the previous day and collapses them into one. To do what God wills is the same as to live well, and to live well doing what God wishes is indistinguishable from not having an unclean spirit. However, that "unclean spirit" gives them pause (3.18).¹ There are two ways to understand this: "either that which is extrinsic to the soul enters and disturbs the senses and inflicts a certain madness on men" or "being defiled by vices or errors" (3.18).² The former of these is the kind of unclean spirit that Christ casts out in the Gospel accounts, and in Augustine's time such an unclean spirit was removed by a rite of exorcism (3.18).³ The latter are the sins purified in baptism, the "rite of the purest sacred ceremonies" for which Augustine was preparing (3.18).⁴ Adeodatus, who had given this definition, says he meant the latter kind of unclean spirit. Living chastely, Adeodatus says, is doing what God wills and living well (3.18).⁵ In Adeodatus's mind, this seems to be a return or clinging to the state to which baptism restores a man, seeing the root of chastity in the ceremony which makes one most chaste or pure.⁶ In what follows, Augustine and Adeodatus determine what it means to live chastely. While refraining from illicit intercourse is one kind of chastity, Adeodatus prefers the broader positive statement of "pay[ing] attention to God and hold[ing] himself to Him alone" (3.18).⁷ This is the happy man, who possesses God. This inquiry is not simply pushing Adeodatus to articulate his position clearly, but also seems to be a deliberate distancing from a Manichean concept of chastity. In *The*

¹ "*spiritus immundus*" (3.18).

² "*uel ille, qui extrinsecus animam inuadit sensusque conturbat et quendam hominibus infert furorem... aliter ... quod est aliud quam uitii et erroribus inquinata*" (3.18).

³ *Exorcizare*, 3.18.

⁴ "*Ritu castissimorum sacrorum*" (3.18).

⁵ "*caste uiuit*" (3.18).

⁶ *Caste and ritus castissimorum sacrorum*, 3.18.

⁷ "*deum adtendit et ad ipsum solum se tenet*" (3.18).

Manichean Body: In Discipline and Ritual, Jason BeDuhn traces Manichean doctrine through both Manichean sources and Augustine's later polemical writings against the sect. The Manicheans had three "seals": the seal of the mouth restricts what and in what manner one eats; the seal of the hand is about the procurement and preparation of foods; the seal of the breast is the moral virtues with respect to sexual activities.⁸ In *De beata vita*, Augustine pushes Adeodatus to identify chastity not merely as a negative doctrine about food, drink, and sex, but as a positive virtue distinct from Manichean abstentions.

God wants men to seek him, Augustine continues, and everyone who seeks God lives in such a way. Augustine points out, however, that just because someone is seeking God and living chastely, it does not mean he already has God. One who seeks does not yet have that for which he is seeking. Thus, some who live well do not possess God (3.19). This seems an obvious point: there are virtuous pagans and those who are on their way to God but have not yet arrived. Their intentions are good but they have not yet attained their goal.

Monica has an objection to lodge: God is present to everyone and God is favorable to everyone who is seeking Him. Thus, even those who are seeking seem to have God, and He is favorable to them. Is this man who is seeking, and who has God present to him and favorable to him, happy? Navigius points out that if we call the man who is a seeker happy, then the Academics are happy—which position the previous day most of those present deemed absurd. Monica persists. God's presence is ubiquitous; even that man *in via* is not without God (3.21).⁹ Augustine agrees, but argues that God's disposition to the person varies. Augustine observes that

⁸ Jason BeDuhn, *The Manichaeon Body: In Discipline and Ritual* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2000): 33-38; citing particularly Augustine's *De moribus manichaeorum* of 390AD.
⁹ "non esse sine deo" (3.21).

there is an array of states with an important, previously neglected intermediary: that one who is seeking God does not necessarily already have Him.

At this point, we can see the various states in life: (1) the man with an unclean spirit, either by his free choices to sin or because he has been possessed by an unclean spirit; (2) the man with a clean spirit who is seeking God but does not yet have him; and (3) the man with a clean spirit who has God—and this last is the happy man. Continuing with the breakdown, then: God is hostile to (1), but propitious to both (2) and (3). Even though God is present and well-disposed to (2), that man does not have the fullness of God and of happiness that the final state holds. There is a brief dispute about whether God is neutral to that intermediate state, but in the end they agree that He is favorable to someone seeking Him. Monica relents: if reason compels this conclusion about the middle man, she will assent (3.21).¹⁰ “This then will be our division,” Augustine concludes. “Everyone who already has God within has God well-disposed to him and is happy; everyone, however, who is seeking God has God well-disposed to him but is not yet happy. Moreover, whoever is alienating himself from God by vices and sins is not only not happy, but he does not even live with God well-disposed to him” (3.21).¹¹

¹⁰ “*Si hoc cogit ratio non possum negare*” (3.21).

¹¹ “*Ista igitur, inquam, distributio erit, ut omnis, qui iam deum inuenit, et propitium deum habesat et beatus sit, omnis autem, qui deum quaerit, propitium deum habeat sed nondum sit beatus, iam uero quisquis uitiiis atque peccatis a deo se alienat, non modo beatus non sit sed ne deo quem uiuat propitio*” (3.21).

Section 2. The missing text

There is a portion of the dialogue missing at this point (there were no extant complete manuscripts even at the time when Augustine wrote his *Retractationes*; Ret. 2¹²), but it is in reference to a concession everyone agreed to on Day 1: everyone who is not happy is miserable (2.10). Such unhappiness is caused by a need for God, and therefore even the person in that intermediate state of seeking and having God well-favored to him, but not yet having God, is miserable. The question now arises: what is neediness, and what is its relationship to misery? If they are identical, then everyone in need is miserable and everyone who is miserable is in need. If they are not identical, then perhaps that person is not miserable. Likewise, some people who do not appear to be in need may indeed be miserable. This is a quandary Augustine leaves to the next day's conversation.¹³

¹² *Retractationes* 1.2.

¹³ Kenyon, in *Augustine and the Dialogue*, points to the end of this day's conversation as a deliberate aporia in Augustine's pedagogy, to be answered the following day with an extended speech given after a reflection on the progress to that point. This is part of a pattern he discerns in the first eight of Augustine's dialogues (those from Cassiciacum as well as the first five composed after his baptism). That pattern is one of dialectic that makes methodical progress, then a period of conversation that ends in an unsolved conundrum, and finally a speech in which Augustine reflects on the previous stages and brings them to a neatly rounded conclusion. While the pattern that may obtain across the dialogues is outside the scope of this dissertation, it is a helpful way of characterizing the conversation in *De beata vita*. See Erik Kenyon, *Augustine and the Dialogue* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2018): 13, 82-85.

Chapter 4. Day 3

In the final day of the dialogue, Augustine ties up loose ends by returning to his opening distinction between body and soul. True happiness is a good of the soul, not the body. The virtues are a good that have enduring reality which outstrips that of any good of the body. However, the queen of those virtues is wisdom, which is the measure of the mind and prevents a person from clinging to those things the loss of which would make them miserable. Here, the dialogue takes a clearly theological turn, as Augustine identifies that wisdom as Christ, with whom we are seeking union through the measure (the Father) and the work of the advocate (the Spirit). The dialogue draws to a close when Monica bursts into praise, and invokes the three theological virtues. Augustine gives thanks and admonishes all present to seek the happy life.

Section 1. Need, misery, consonance, and outstripping

The third day is the final, and longest, day of conversation. This final day of the dialogue transitions rapidly from Augustine's dialectical method to an extended speech. Augustine reflects on what they have determined thus far and brings the three-day banquet to its conclusion. While prior to this day they had determined necessary conditions for happiness, only on this last day do they also discover what is sufficient.¹ Augustine opens by saying, "Indeed it was said by mother that misery is nothing other than need, and we agreed that all who are in need are miserable" (4.23).² They are easily in agreement on the latter clause, but Augustine raises the question whether everyone who is miserable is also in need.

One aspect of this question hearkens back to Day 1: man is composed of body and soul. It is one thing to be in need of bodily goods and another to be in need of goods of the soul. The wise man can suffer the wants of the body without it disturbing his peace, Augustine says, but he should also "avoid death and pain, as much as he can and to the extent which it is proper" (4.25).³ This is a Stoic line of thought, which Cicero particularly develops in *Tusculan Disputations* 2;⁴ one should not act in such a way as to voluntarily be lacking certain bodily needs. The failure to meet bodily needs through one's voluntary actions makes the man miserable, but he is blameworthy because he has acted foolishly more than because he is now in a state of having his needs met insufficiently—that is, he lacks wisdom in his soul. If he is wise,

¹ Kenyon criticizes this move, and in so doing disregards Augustine's claim that what has been said so far met his expectations and raised the points he wanted raised (4.23). Kenyon: "In the end, though, the conversation fails to accomplish its main task of articulating the necessary conditions for human happiness. At that point, Augustine takes over and presents an uninterrupted speech." Kenyon, *Augustine and the Dialogue*, 83.

² "Dictum enim erat a matre nihil esse aliud miseriam quam egestatem conuenitque inter nos omnes qui egant miseros esse" (4.23).

³ "Vitabit... mortem ac dolorem, quantum potest et quantum decet" (4.25).

⁴ See below, Part III, Chapter 4.

that virtue is in his soul and cannot be taken away from him. Thus, the perfection of happiness is found in the soul, not the body (4.25).⁵ Failing to satisfy the needs of the body is not sufficient to make a man miserable.

Having all the needs of the body satisfied and all the external goods one could want, however, is not sufficient to make a man happy. Even a man who is “the richest, most charming, most pleasant, and who lack[s] nothing with respect to pleasure, influence, and good and sound health... who abounds in the most lucrative estates and the most delightful friends, as much as he wanted; and all of these things he used most suitably for the health of the body” is not happy (4.26).⁶ The young men dance around the conclusion that Monica eventually expresses: unless this man also has wisdom, he is still in need and the lack of this virtue makes him miserable (4.27). This is, as Kenyon points out, a refusal to accept “ignorance is bliss” as a serious position. This man may not realize what he lacks, or even care—but “what Augustine’s companions have felt, and Orata [the exemplar Augustine used] has missed, is their own desire for the truth, a desire which has been stirred up by rational inquiry.”⁷ In reflecting on the condition of this apparently happy man, they can see that his possessions are insufficient for his lasting happiness.

⁵ In his *Retractationes*, Augustine regrets this claim: “I regret ... that I said that during this life the happy life dwells only in the soul of a wise man regardless of the condition of his body” (Ret. 2)—but in the text of *De beata vita*, the “in this life” is only an implication insofar as Augustine says the wise man will avoid death; it is not explicitly stated with respect to this claim about the happiness being in the soul.

⁶ “*ditissimum amoenissimum deliciosissimum, cui neque ad uoluptatem quicquam defui neque ad gratiam neque ad bonam integramque ualeitudinem... et praediis quaestuosissimis et amicis iucundissimis, quantum liuit, abundauit et illis omnibus aptissime ad salutem corporis usus est eiusque*” (4.26).

⁷ Kenyon, *Augustine and the Dialogue*, 88. Scholars think that the example of Orata is from the *Hortensius*; it is otherwise unaccounted for. See, e.g., Jean Doignon, “L’enseignement de l’*Hortensius* de Ciceron sur les Richesses Devant la Conscience d’Augustin Jusqu’aux Confessions” in *L’Antiquité Classique* 51 (1982): 195.

Augustine is delighted because this was the conclusion he “had planned to bring out last, ... a great thing from the books of the philosophers” (4.27).⁸ Augustine’s diagnosis of why Monica was able to strike the heart of the matter is key: “Do you all see that a myriad of various doctrines is one thing, a mind utterly attentive to God, another?” (4.27).⁹ While this truth was available to those young men—for example, Licentius said he was not sure if he could say that a fortunate man desired nothing more if he did not have wisdom—they were lost in the various doctrines of the Academics or Platonists, or whomever, and lacked a clear vision of the core that held the doctrines together. Monica, who did not have that clutter present in her mind, spoke clearly from her practical wisdom: even if a man gave up all he owned, he could be happy. Licentius delights in Monica’s clear-sightedness and declares her answer divine.

It is insufficient to judge a man’s happiness by his degree of satisfaction of bodily needs. Instead, we must look to the goods of the soul. When the soul lacks wisdom, it “has” folly—which is a need, rather than the positive presence of some contrary. Every miserable person is foolish, whether he has need of bodily goods or not, because he needs wisdom. Everyone who is miserable is in need.

The contrary of this is where we find a happy person: someone who is not in need, i.e., a wise man, is happy (4.30). Augustine uses an etymological point from Day 1 to show that this distinction between the fruit [*frux*] of the mother of all virtues frugality [*frugalitas*] and the lack that is worthlessness [*nequitia*, derived as a portmanteau of *nec quicquam*, that which is not anything] is a distinction between being and non-being (4.30; cf. 2.8). While this is not a fully articulated “privation theory,” one can see the beginnings of Augustine’s development of his

⁸ “*quod pro magno de philosophorum libris atque ultimum proferre paraueram*” (4.27).

⁹ “*videtisne ... aliud esse multas uariasque doctrinas, aliud animum adtentissimum in deum?*” (4.27).

version of this theory in this text. The happy man is the one not deprived of wisdom. Calling frugality the mother of all virtues is not common to contemporary use, nor was it in 386 A.D. Therefore, Augustine calls to mind Cicero's description of *frugalitas* as being moderation and temperance, i.e., measure and right mixture to have a proper abundance (4.32). With respect to the mind in particular, this measure is called wisdom.¹⁰

What remains, then is to articulate more determinately what wisdom is, so as to know what the happy life is. Wisdom is the measure of the mind, "by which the mind balances itself, the result being that it neither runs over into excess nor is it constricted by what is less than full" (4.33).¹¹ The mind "contemplates" or "clings to" wisdom, and when it does so, it fears no misery (4.33).¹²

¹⁰ Wetzel addresses this measure, or *modus*, in a very Aristotelian manner in *The Limits of Virtue*. There, he argues that *modus* is finding the mean between excess and deficiency with respect to this thing (its object). Drawing on a principle that Augustine turns to later in life, Wetzel continues by saying this mean requires, in turn, the *ordo amoris* or recognition of the hierarchical relationship of goods. Knowledge and will both play essential roles, therefore, in choices governed by wisdom. The agent has to make that judgment against a standard, and that standard is God. James Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992): 59. Augustine refers to this measure as wisdom, whom he identifies as God, at 4.32.

¹¹ "*quo sese animus librat, ut neque excurrat in nimium, neque infra quam plenum est coarctetur*" (4.33).

¹² "*contemplatur, ad ipsam se tenet*" (4.33).

Section 2. The theological turn

In the concluding three paragraphs, Augustine moves beyond the particularly philosophical mode of interrogation into the territory of revealed theology. Wisdom is the wisdom of God, whom he works out to be a Trinity of the Father who is the Supreme Measure, the Son who is the Truth and Wisdom, and the Spirit who is the Admonition who “agitates us to remember God” (4.34-35).¹³ While we do not yet have union with God, the happy life is when we do so fully: “to know piously and perfectly Him by whom you are led to the truth, whereby you may thoroughly enjoy the Truth, through which you may be joined to the Supreme Measure” (4.35).¹⁴ This is the Trinity in Unity, and upon hearing her son offer this conclusion, Monica spontaneously sings a hymn of praise, one penned by Ambrose, and invokes the three theological virtues as that by which we are sped on our way to union with God (3.35). Augustine gives thanks to God, admonishes those present to keep and love this measure—Wisdom itself—and the dialogue concludes.

¹³ “*agit ut Deum recordemur*” (4.34-35).

¹⁴ “*pie perfecteque cognoscere a quo inducaris in veritatem, qua veritate perfruaris, per quid connectaris summo modo*” (4.35). There are echoes of Scripture in this section of the dialogue; cf. John 17:3, “Now this is eternal life: That they may know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.” DR; John 14:6, “Jesus saith to him: I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No man cometh to the Father, but by me.” DR; and 1 Cor. 1:24, “But unto them that are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.” DR.

Chapter 5. The Retractationes

De beata vita, which Augustine composed in 386, is the second work he treats in his *Retractationes*, reconsiderations of his works in catalog form that he wrote three or four years before his death. In part, his stated purpose in writing the *Retractationes* is that he wanted to rethink certain claims he made in order to correct errors (Prologue 1). Using Scripture as his measure, he wanted to make sure that he was not in error, so as not to offend God or his readers (2). He also wanted to have an orderly catalogue to show his progression of ability and thought to any considerate reader (3). He refers to his earliest extant works, which he “wrote while still a catechumen” as what “can be read with profit if some errors are overlooked,” although he laments that he was so “puffed up with [his] use of secular literature” (3).¹ That use of secular literature, however, was not something he completely abandoned in later writings, and in his consideration of *De beata vita* he does not make any such criticism.

Augustine retracts three things from *De beata vita*: (1) that he attributed so much to the dedicatee, Manlius Theodorus; (2) his use of the word “fortune” (*fortunam*); and (3) that he said happiness was possible in this life and was possible regardless of the state of the body. That last he elaborates by saying that Paul tells us in the life to come we will have perfect knowledge of God and will enjoy a resurrection of the body that suffers no ill (1.2).²

Augustine dedicated this dialogue to Manlius Theodorus, whom he calls a “man most cultured and great” (1.1) and who he expects has already attained the privileged place within the

¹ “Scribere... quae cathecuminus iam”; “et leguntur utiliter, si nonnullis ignoscatur”; “sed adhuc saecularium litterarum inflatus” (3).

² It is in the *Retractationes* that we get a repetition of the idea that Augustine was in the midst of composing another work, *Contra Academicos*, when he paused to write *De beata vita*. One of the long-debated questions regarding these Cassiciacum dialogues is the order in which they were composed. This debate is not important for this dissertation.

harbor of philosophy.³ Theodorus “was a particularly cultured and influential man” in the circle of Milanese Christians who were also well-read in the Neoplatonists.⁴ He had set the stage for Augustine’s philosophical retreat by doing likewise three years previously, when he left public life for the countryside and composed a treatise on classical meter and wrote books of philosophy.⁵ This circle of Neoplatonist Christians who were inclined to retiring to lives of leisure in which to pursue philosophy were part of a tradition: “Porphyry had done this a century earlier, but also many Romans did so—either out of particular desire or to escape undesirable political situations.”⁶ One can imagine that Cicero meets the latter description. Theodorus later became consul in 399;⁷ we are not given particular reasons why Augustine regrets having spoken so highly of the man, but a tentative identification has been made of him as that “man puffed up with unnatural pride” in *Confessions* 7.9.13.⁸

³ “*vir humanissime atque magne*” (1.1); cf. 1.5.

⁴ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2000): 90.

⁵ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 90; cf. Pierre Courcelle, *Les lettres grecques en Occident: de Macrobe à Cassiodore* (Paris: De Boccard, 1943): 119-129.

⁶ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 115-116; cf. Dennis Trout, “Augustine at Cassiciacum: *Otium honestum* and the Social Dimensions of Conversion.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 42, no. 2 (June 1988): 135.

⁷ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 90.

⁸ Pierre Courcelle, *Late Latin Writers and Their Greek Sources*. Trans. by H. Wedeck (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1969): 138; “...*quemdam hominem immanissimo typho turgidum*” (C7.9.13).

Part I Conclusion

In conclusion, this dialogue recounts a conversation in which Augustine as a pedagogue leads his interlocutors through the basic questions of human nature and its end, which we learn is not just wisdom *qua* intellectual virtue, nor just philosophical contemplation, but contemplation of the Triune God of Christianity. The possession of God is that unity of the mind of one fully converted in knowledge and will, with rightly ordered desires, with the Triune God who is Wisdom. Monica plays a particularly important role in this dialogue by connecting the philosophical arguments with Christian teachings, and by answering the questions Augustine asks as a faithful believer who has not been educated in the liberal arts, even though Augustine's questions are ones he expects to be answered from the philosophers he and his young students have read. While in retrospect Augustine regrets certain elements of this youthful work—composed for his 33rd birthday—his argument still rings true at the conclusion of his career. To be happy, man must possess what will fully satisfy him, and only God meets that description. Happiness is the possession of God, with God favorable to the person seeking him with chaste love.

Part II. Themes of the dialogue

Now that I have presented a reading of the dialogue following its narrative structure and the ebbs and flows in conversation, I turn to a thematic reading. In the dialogue, there are at least three major themes that wind their way through all three days' conversations: the image of a feast; the Neoplatonic duality of being and non-being; and the substantial contributions by Monica, as a Christian who is not liberally educated, nor pursuing a liberal education.¹ In this section, I will address each of those in turn in order to build toward a fuller interpretation of the dialogue as a whole.

¹ It is true that there are two young men present who are also uneducated, Rusticius and Lastidianus, but their roles in the dialogue are minimal.

Chapter 1. The Theme of a Feast

Augustine returns again and again to the theme that he is providing for his interlocutors a feast, which he is serving particularly for the occasion of his birthday. On the second day, he says that “there is someone else who does not cease to offer to everyone all feasts, but especially feasts of this sort [i.e., feasts of imperishable food for the soul], though we generally cease to eat because of weakness or satiety or some other concern” (3.17).¹

This imagery serves two purposes. First, it helps us to see Augustine’s anthropology: human beings are made up of body and soul. The body has particular needs that are hard to ignore; for example, hunger and tiredness have immediate and obvious effects. We satisfy those needs for the sake of the body, but the care given to the body is subservient, in our pursuit of happiness, to the activities of the mind and its nourishment. While this establishes a hierarchical relationship, and in the end it is through the satisfaction of the mind by a plenitude of wisdom that man is happy, it is an anthropology which still maintains the need for proper care of the body. Second, while the image of the feast does not begin in a Christian mode and need not be interpreted as particularly Christian, it is Scriptural language that lends itself to a Christological or sacramental interpretation. It is like the Wisdom that prepares a feast in the Old Testament, which is traditionally interpreted as prefiguring Christ.²

¹ “*Alius est enim, qui omnibus cum omnes tum maxime tales epulas praeberere non cessat, sed nos ab edendo uel inbecillitate uel saturitate uel negotio plerumque cessamus*” (3.17).

² Cf. Proverbs 9:1-6. See below, Part III, Chapter 2.

Theology of a meal

The image of the feast is introduced in the context of the discussion about human nature at the very beginning of the dialogue. The anthropology that Augustine and his interlocutors sketch on that first day is tentative but, as the dialogue progresses, is sufficient to demonstrate both man's natural orientation to happiness and the fittingness of man's happiness to his nature.

After the initial hesitation by Navigius to commit to man being only body and soul, they all agree that man is at *least* composed of these. Augustine then directs the conversation to ask about the purpose of our eating food: "On account of which of these [body or soul] do we desire food?" (2.7).³ As summarized above, it is in the body that we are able to observe gaining or maintaining health ("becoming fit") through the intake of food (2.7).⁴ While there is food proper to human beings generally, the individual body dictates what is proper to it for its particular health; the particular nature establishes the measure of food proper for the individual. Augustine compares this bodily appetite and health to that of a cow—much as a cow must eat what is proper to it and in proper measure to maintain bodily health, so too ought a human, lest one "grow lean" or overweight (2.7). The need to attend to nutrition is true for the natural constitution of any animal body.

What we eat, however, is not merely for the sake of bodily health, but also for the sake of life, which is proper to the soul. Bodily health is one thing, and a necessary thing, but not sufficient for man's full happiness. Augustine then draws an analogy: just as there is nourishment proper to the body, so also there is nourishment proper to the soul. It is here that we see the distinction between man and beast, in that man's soul is nourished by knowledge (2.8).

³ "*cibos propter quid horum appetamus*" (2.7).

⁴ "*robustioorem*" (2.7). See Part I, Chapter 2.

And here we see also that a man's eating a meal is distinct from a cow's grazing, and not merely because it is done in common or in groups. Monica observes—with a touch of reproach—that Trygetius was not paying attention to his food while he was eating lunch earlier. While that did not prevent him from consuming the material fare, his mind was meanwhile nourished by whatever he was thinking about. But additionally, this meant he was also being rude to those with whom he was sharing the meal, who observed his absent-mindedness. A cow's inattentiveness to her grazing companions would not draw castigation from her herd mates. Man's distinctive nature makes his approach to dining in community different from that of lower animals. Monica's comment also indicates his ability to receive nourishment that is not merely bodily but is proper for his intellectual nature.

Augustine goes on to say that for his birthday, he is going to offer a feast for the soul (2.9). Not only is it possible for a person to consume too much, not enough, or the wrong kind of food and therefore bring about illness in the body, but also the mind can be famished or filled with worthless things (2.8). His birthday feast will be one that is nourishing and received virtuously, not junk food consumed absentmindedly. The liberal arts disciplines and a proper education, he suggests, offer proper nutrition for the intellect. Thus, the conversation that follows is imbued with references to philosophers, as well as the use of the liberal arts of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic. But again drawing on the analogy of body to soul, Augustine maintains that there is virtue in moderating one's consumption of intellectual "food." Thus, after he has introduced the topic of the happy life and they have reached the stage of thinking that happiness is the possession of God, variously construed, he puts off continuing that particular conversation: "This question will be sweeter to us tomorrow when we are hungry," he says (2.13).⁵ He then

⁵ "*melius nos haec quaestio cras esurientes*" (2.13).

renews their [elsewhere recorded] conversation about the Academics as a kind of dessert, seasoned “as if with scholastic honey” (2.13).⁶ That conversation as well involves constant reference to food and dining.

On the second day of the dialogue, Augustine accuses his interlocutors of a lethargy predicated on expecting a smaller feast of fewer courses (3.17). While the second day’s discussion is empty of obvious food imagery, Augustine again draws the conversation to a close before its completion as a moderating influence “lest they develop a distaste” for the consideration of the happy life, and then invites them to return for a third day (3.22).⁷ This indicates the work involved in developing virtuous habits; even for good ends it can be difficult to exercise the necessary control. This also indicates that one’s inclinations can be contrary to proper courses of action and therefore must be shaped. Augustine, as the teacher and leader of this conversation, is able to model for his pupils and interlocutors the virtue they are all seeking.

The final day, we learn that the minds of those present are intent on God (4.31). Augustine’s use of “mind” (*mens*) seems distinct from how he has used “soul” (*anima*) throughout.⁸ Here, however, we learn that the mind (*mens*) that contemplates wisdom is satisfied by it. It would seem, then, that the nourishment of the soul is attained by the activity of the mind by which man can come to possess God. And this God is the Trinitarian God (4.35), by whom all things are measured, including even this banquet (4.36), and who is filling up those seeking him, although they are not yet filled to complete satisfaction (4.35). They offer thanks for this banquet in concluding it.

⁶ “*Quasi scholastico melle*” (2.13).

⁷ “*ne fastidio*” (3.22).

⁸ In *Contra Academicos*, he identifies the *mens* as the ruling part of the soul (1.2.5).

This anthropology set in the theme of the feast, and particularly the analysis Monica makes of Trygetius's absent-minded eating, sets up for us the ontological basis for what Joseph Ratzinger calls primeval sacraments, i.e., fundamental and natural human activities that form "fissures through which the eternal looks into the uniformity of the human routine."⁹ Ratzinger observes that one of those sacraments is the action of eating a meal: he analyzes it as a biological action that simultaneously reveals man's participation in something more than a merely physical or biological existence. Man's partaking in a meal is distinguished from that of animals precisely in that it is not just the intake of food, physical nourishment for the physical body. Instead, it is particularly a meal, in three respects. First, man is participating in a "stream of life" that is the reception of gifts and nourishment that are "the gift of the earth's fertility,"¹⁰ and he is aware of this reality in a way that the beasts grazing in pasture are not. Second, he does this in the company of other people, such that "a meal creates community, ... [and so] there is a common interest in receiving the gifts of the earth."¹¹ While animals may gather in herds, it is more the physical necessity of an instinct or that of feeding time and availability of food that bring them together to eat simultaneously—but they do not eat together in the way that humans gather around a table. This twofold community of man with the fruits of the earth and man with fellow man reveals the third respect: man discovers that his very existence is the community of his body and his spirit: "his mind *is* only in communion with his body."¹² A meal nourishes and sustains his existence as something more than a biological creature, distinguishing him from the lower

⁹ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "The Sacramental Foundation of Christian Existence" in *Collected Works on the Theology of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2014): 156; paraphrasing Schleiermacher.

¹⁰ Ratzinger, "Sacramental Foundation," 156.

¹¹ Ratzinger, "Sacramental Foundation," 157.

¹² Ratzinger, "Sacramental Foundation," 157.

animals whose fully flourishing condition is simply living in peak physical condition, and for some animals, doing so in community.

In *De beata vita*, then, we see that humans are both body and soul, that nourishment is needed for both, and that the lower is ordered to the good of the higher. Augustine is establishing an ordering of relations: of body to soul, and of soul to God. By nature, there is a proper desire of both body and soul; the satisfaction of that desire is also something predetermined. The individual does not necessarily awaken to intellectual desire, or meet his physical and intellectual desires, without effort and aid. We also see that moderation is necessary for the proper pursuit to fulfill such desires. Virtues that are cultivated in pursuit of bodily health have a stable and lasting existence in the soul, are a more permanent part of the soul, whereas what is consumed for the sake of bodily health is variable and the body demands consistent replenishment. The good that is developed in the soul by means of moderation—this virtue—is itself a higher thing than the moderate acts of consuming meals.

Virtue is also necessary for the soul's nourishment. The ultimate good of the soul is God in his unity of substance and trinity of persons, but this object of desire is himself more stable than even the virtues developed in pursuit of him. Furthermore, even some aspects of those virtues are participation in the God being sought or imitation of Him: Wisdom, Truth, and the Supreme Measure are names Augustine uses for Christ and the Father (4.35-36); these can also name, of course, particular intellectual virtues as well as their proper object.

Both body and soul have a desire for their proper satisfaction, although an awareness of one's spiritual poverty is something—as the introductory image of the three kinds of mariners illustrates—to which one may need to be awakened. Furthermore, there are better and worse choices with regard to the foods of body and soul; proper nutrition is necessary for a bodily diet,

and proper nutrition is also necessary for the good of the soul. He who tries to maintain his happiness by a diet “of worldly possessions,” Matthews comments, “will be in want, since the source is unreliable.”¹³ Likewise, Augustine steers his interlocutors away from the Academics’ skepticism as inadequate to the proper satisfaction of the intellect. The virtues governing the body are in the soul; the virtues governing the soul are themselves dependent upon an outside principle, namely God. The diet of both body and soul must be solidly based on the true good of each.

¹³ Alfred Warren Matthews, *The Development of St. Augustine: from Neoplatonism to Christianity 386-391 A.D.*. (Washington, DC: Univ. Press of America, 1980): 44.

Chapter 2. The second theme: Neoplatonist metaphysics

Another theme Augustine employs is the distinction between being and non-being. This is a framework for reality that is first exhibited within the introduction of the body/soul distinction on the first day. The soul is the life of the body. The needs of the body, however, are met by the material world, and thus are constantly in need of being replenished. Those things in the material world are temporary in nature and can be lost or need replenishment, while the needs of the soul are met by things that have more stable reality. The good man seeks to be “ever abiding and not dependent upon fortune or subject to any accidents. For we cannot have whatever is mortal and perishable whenever we want it and for as long as we want it.”¹ The contrast between this stable good and its absence is Augustine’s focus. The neediness of the mind is satisfied only by what it desires and is proper to it, namely, wisdom. Folly is a lack of wisdom. To say one has folly, Augustine says, is to say one “has need” (4.29).² He offers a number of examples of this kind of relationship. Darkness is an absence of light. Folly is the absence of wisdom. Poverty is the absence of wealth. Augustine sums up these relationships as being various expressions of the principle that non-being is the absence of being.³ When a human being wants to be happy, he wants something that is good, that has enduring existence: he desires being itself, not non-being or something that passes out of being as a member of the in-between world of becoming (to invoke Plato’s way of speaking⁴).

This is an important theme in part because of the clearly Platonic elements in the dialogue, but also because it is an early formulation of the principle that evil is the privation of

¹ Augustine, *De beata vita* 2.11.

² “*habet egestatem*” (4.29).

³ Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.31.

⁴ As, for example, Socrates in the *Republic* 479c.

being. Augustine is not particularly concerned in this text with moral evil, except insofar as at the end of day one and into day two he introduces the idea that one must live an upright life in order to have God. He does not ask what it is to live a sinful life or to commit evil acts,⁵ but present in the dialogue are elements he later uses in the *Confessions* to make the argument that evil is a lack of good where good ought to be.

⁵ This is the question he picks up one year later in *De libero arbitrio*.

Being and non-being

This second theme makes a veiled appearance in the opening image of the dialogue. It is the fate of all three kinds of mariners to have to face the mountain of vainglory before entering the port of philosophy; some succumb to its deception while others do not. Augustine describes that mountain's appearance thus: "For in this way it flashes, so clothed in that deceitful light, that not only for those arriving, who have not yet entered, does it offer itself, and promise satisfaction for those about to satisfy their wishing for that happy land; but even from within that very harbor it invites men to itself" (1.3).⁶ This veiled appearance is in stark contrast to the solidity of the firm ground of the happy land. There is that which has the appearance of solidity and beauty, but the happiness it offers is empty of reality, and there is that which truly *is* and has lasting firmness. Non-being veils itself as being; it is perceptible insofar as it is like what is real.⁷ The mountain is empty; its surface cracks to reveal that it is mere artifice and does not offer genuine happiness. The image illustrates the relationship between that "most vain glory," which snatches men back "into the darkness," and the "bright home" of "sure and solid" joys, the "firm and solid ground" of happiness (1.3; 1.1).⁸ In the description of the mariners' experience as well, there is constant fluctuation between what *seems* real and true and good—the "beguiling seas" and the "captivating allurements"—and that which will truly satisfy the mariners' desires (1.2).⁹ Men are

⁶ "*Nam ita fulget, ita mentiente illa luce vestitur, ut non solum pervenientibus, nondumque ingressis incolendum se offerat, et eorum voluntati pro ipsa beata terra satisfactorum polliceatur; sed plerumque de ipso portu ad sese homines invitat*" (1.3).

⁷ The mountain of vainglory represents "the proud zeal for utterly empty glory... such zeal has nothing full and solid within it, so that it sinks and swallows up the puffed-up people who walk upon its cracking and brittle ground."["*superbum studium inanissimae gloriae, quod ita nihil intus plenum atque solidum habet, ut inflatos sibi superambulantes succrepante fragili solo demergat ac sorbeat*" (1.3).]

⁸ "*Unissimam gloriam*"; "*sorbeat eisque in tenebras*"; "*luculentam domum*"; "*plenum atque solidum*" (1.3); "*regionem solumque*" (1.1).

⁹ "*fallacissima facie maris... illecebris capti*" (1.2).

constantly confused about what is worthy of pursuit and what is not, what is a storm delaying them and what is one that puts them on the veritable gulf stream into the port of philosophy. Being and non-being, and the beguiling imitation of being by non-being, are a way of describing the relationship between happiness and misery. What is most desired is that which is most real, that solid ground that Augustine says he is striving to reach and from which he expects Theodorus, his dedicatee, to lend a helping hand (1.5).

The anthropological discussion of the first day progresses from desire for perishable goods to desire for higher, more stable goods. The body's natural desire is for proper food, through which it grows and becomes fit. The soul's natural desire is for its proper nourishment, which has a greater duration than material goods; proper pursuit of both lower and higher goods brings about virtue, "which always is" (2.8).¹⁰ Speaking particularly with respect to the pursuit of the higher goods, one who is uneducated in the liberal disciplines or who has been badly educated has a mind that is "full of defects and worthlessness," Trygetius says (2.8).¹¹ While they speak of it as being full of something, they observe that this is a nothingness, not anything, and is analogous to the starvation of the body that brings on illness and diseases. Only both wanting the right things and having the right things brings lasting happiness. This is Monica's contribution, and when Augustine invokes Cicero in support of this claim, he quotes Cicero as saying that "depravity of the will," that is, the will or desire for things that are not "decent," causes evil. In other words, natural desire can be turned to improper ends and this, not "fortune," is the cause of unhappiness (2.10).¹²

¹⁰ Augustine drives this home in the text: "*Est autem aliquid, si manet, si constat, si semper tale est, ut est uirtus*" (2.8).

¹¹ "*Plenos...uitiis atque nequitia*" (2.8).

¹² "*mali prauitas uoluntatis*"; "*non deceat*"; "*fortuna*" (2.10). Augustine is quoting *Hortensius*, and this is the source for that fragment.

While the theme of being and non-being does not obviously appear in the conversation on the second day, the explicit references to it on day three unite the appearance of the theme in the first day with the conclusions on the second day.¹³ On day one, we see that there is a neediness of both body and soul, oriented towards being. On day two, we see that there is preparatory work necessary for the soul to make room for that being. That is, if happiness is the possession of God, we need to know who possesses God. In the end, it is a necessary condition that he “has not an unclean spirit,” that is, one whose need is not filled with something worthless and ultimately unsatisfying (3.19).¹⁴ This is not sufficient—as Monica observes, one can be seeking but not yet have found God; such a person is not without God but does not yet have the happiness sought.¹⁵ Augustine does not draw attention to the theme of need as a lack associated with non-being again until the third day of the conversation.

Augustine begins the conversation on the third day by reminding his interlocutors that Monica had argued on the first day that “misery is nothing other than need and we all agreed that all who are in need are miserable” (4.23; cf. 2.11).¹⁶ His goal is to determine whether or not it is true that both all who are in need are miserable and all who are miserable are in need. While it seems like it is based on what they have already said, Augustine introduces an oddity through a parallel argument. Anyone who is not dead is alive; anyone who is alive is not dead. However, someone who has been buried for a year is dead, but not everyone who has not been buried for a year is alive. This argument is one that even he admits is difficult to grasp; in the text he says

¹³ Because of the consistency of both this and the theme of feasting on days 1 and 3, I am inclined to think they had a presence in the missing text of day 2, but that is speculation that cannot be proven due to the lack of an extant manuscript.

¹⁴ “*spiritum inmundum non habeat*” (3.19).

¹⁵ Cf. Augustine, *De beata vita* 3.21, and below in Chapter 3.

¹⁶ “*nihil esse aliud miseriam quam egestatem conuenitque inter nos omnes qui egeant miseros esse*” (4.23).

that he had to “explain and rephrase it in words suited to their understanding” (4.25).¹⁷

Unfortunately, he does not unpack it for his readers, which means that the precise implications of that argument are left unclear as well. Perhaps the best approach is to consider the time element that is introduced in the parallel argument as representative of the epistemological gap between reality and our knowledge of that reality. That is, when we are attempting to evaluate whether another individual is happy or miserable, or even looking at ourselves, while it is true that a person is either happy or miserable, it may be only in retrospect or perhaps not with certainty that one knows which is true of the individual. There is a gap between the reality and the knowledge, even with regard to oneself. Augustine’s argument attempts to establish this. There is no middle ground between being alive and being dead. Perhaps there is also no middle ground between being happy and being miserable. Augustine does not go so far as to say one cannot be happy in this life in this early dialogue, but that is the direction he takes later in the *City of God*, saying that in this life we are only happy in hope.¹⁸ In a brief interlude, Monica clarifies that happiness is not the possession of material goods that can be lost; rather, the soul that possesses wisdom is truly the soul that is not needy, because this virtue remains in the soul and does not fear loss (4.27). True happiness is not possible if there is fear that what is had can be lost.

Continuing, Augustine defines need as a synonym of folly and, in a grammarian’s tracing of etymologies, as “barrenness and lack” (4.30).¹⁹ Need is worthlessness and it is the opposite of frugality, which is an opposition, he says, of non-being and being (4.30). Misery is lack of being; happiness is fullness of being. This fullness, Augustine points out by appeal to Cicero, is the attainment of being through moderation and temperance. It is neither excessive nor deficient, but

¹⁷ “*Me id quibus potui uerbis ad eorum sensum adcommo-dat-is aperiente atque uersante*” (4.25).

¹⁸ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 19.4.

¹⁹ “*sterilitatem... inopiam*” (4.30).

rather a richness that is measured, and “the measure of the mind is wisdom” (4.32).²⁰ In later writings, Augustine will use the language of participation, but he does not employ that language here.²¹

Augustine then sums up their disputation: “Therefore, to be happy is nothing else but not to be in need, that is, it is to be wise. If, however, we ask what wisdom is, reason has already opened this up and brought it out, insofar as it could at the present time. For wisdom is nothing other than the measure of the mind” (4.33).²² This Augustine converts delightedly into a Trinitarian approach to God: Christ is the Wisdom of God, the Father is the supreme measure from whom Christ proceeds, and the Spirit admonishes us to seek Wisdom. Thus, Augustine ties this together with the conclusions of the first two days’ conversations. Happiness is having God, as they claimed on day one. God is “ever abiding,”²³ subject to no accidents or change,²⁴ ever-present,²⁵ and the fullness of wisdom that makes man happy.²⁶ He who seeks true happiness does *not* have an unclean spirit but rather lives chastely, which chaste man they identified on the second day as he “who pays attention to God and holds himself to Him alone.”²⁷ This God to whom he holds himself is Wisdom itself, the second Person of the Godhead, the plenitude of being itself.

The dichotomy of being and nonbeing, and the fullness of being and happiness as unity with being, is a theme seen frequently in the Platonists, as I will explore below in Part III,

²⁰ “*Modus ergo animi sapientia est*” (4.32).

²¹ E.g., *Confessions* book 7; *City of God* 12, *Eighty-Three questions* 46.

²² “*Ergo beatum esse nihil est aliud quam non egere, hoc est esse sapientem. Si autem quaeritis, qui sit sapientia, iam et ipsam ratio, quantum in praesentia potuit, evoluit atque eruit; nihil est enim aliud quam modus animi*” (4.33).

²³ “*semper manens,*” 2.11.

²⁴ “*nec ullis subiectum casibus,*” 2.11.

²⁵ Monica’s claim, 3.19.

²⁶ Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.32, 34.

²⁷ “*deum adtendit et ad ipsum solum se tenet*” (3.18).

Chapter 3. Without that particular relation in mind, this jump to the Trinitarian God as solution to the question of happiness seems out of place as an appeal to revelation to lift Augustine to where he wants the argument to end up. Of importance here, however, is that Augustine is making an explicitly Christian formulation. This formula is one that he makes knowing it bears similarities to Neoplatonic philosophy, but, as he says, one must “throw out the various superstitions” of non-Christian formulas to see that the Trinity is three persons in one substance (4.35).²⁸

²⁸ “*exclusis ... uariae superstitiones*” (4.35).

Chapter 3. Monica speaks

The third, and for my own interest in the relationship between philosophy and Christianity, the most important theme that is present throughout the dialogue are Monica's contributions, and Augustine's commentary—both to his interlocutors and as a narrator to his reader—about her contributions. As seen above, Augustine observes that although she is a woman, she speaks as though she were a “great man” (2.10);¹ although uneducated she is able to contribute to the conversation what Augustine intended to cite from great philosophers (4.27);² as the sole baptized Christian among the interlocutors, she is the first to recognize Augustine's attempt at identifying the Trinity and bursts out in praise, summoning the theological virtues to aid in the completion of their quest for happiness (4.35).

Monica's contributions are those derived from her theological and spiritual knowledge, her experience as a disciple of Bishop Ambrose, and her own Christian upbringing and life. She quickly and confidently gives the true answers to conundrums that philosophers approach with great effort. She does so not as one educated in pagan philosophy, but as one steeped in Christianity. Furthermore, she recognizes the problem of the philosophers—how do we grasp this happiness we see?—and knows that the answer is theological, namely, that we grasp it by the virtues that are a gift from the God upon whom she calls. Monica's contributions are Christianity's fulfillment of the aspirations of the philosophers. From the way he conducts the dialogue, we know that Augustine also knows these answers, but when he affirms Monica's claims, he does so from philosophical sources. Her contributions also demonstrate the consonance between faith and reason, as a two-pronged and interrelated pursuit of a unified truth

¹ “*ut obliti penitus sexus eius magnum aliquem*” (2.10).

² “*ubi cum alacri atque laeto, quod eam ab potissimam dictum esset, quod pro magno de philosophorum libris*” (4.27).

and wisdom.³ In her contributions to the dialogue, as Therese Fuhrer articulates, “she stands symbolically for a possible route to acquiring philosophically relevant knowledge, namely, through religious practice, that is, religion as practiced in the Church by the bishop, supported by the Scripture and accompanied in the church service—and there also through the performative power of hymn singing—by the down-flowing *fons veritatis*.”⁴

³ Conybeare and others have looked at Monica as a literary figure who speaks with “feminine” emotion in contrast to Augustine’s “masculine” reason; she also sets up a contrast between Monica as the *vita activa* and Augustine as the *vita contemplativa*. The evidence that we are to take the historical person of Monica as simply a typological functionary to that extent is slim. While I do read her as speaking for “revealed theology” or the wisdom that is attained through the piety of faith, and Augustine for “philosophy” and the wisdom that is attained through philosophizing, even those distinctions are blurred because the two are unified in a theological aim at the end, and Augustine draws Monica into the activity of philosophizing over the course of the dialogue. The two characters are historical figures who do not fit neatly into these categories. See more in Ch. 3. Cf. Conybeare, *Irrational Augustine*. For a nice overview of this position, see Kenyon, *Augustine and the Dialogue* 83-84.

⁴ Fuhrer, “Wife, Mother, Philosopher,” 229.

Faith and Reason

When Augustine introduces the characters of the dialogue, he introduces us first to “our mother,” Monica (1.6).⁵ As a woman—and particularly since women were typically uneducated—she is an unusual participant in this kind of conversation.⁶ Monica is the eldest person present, mother to two biologically, but perhaps by extension also the motherly figure for all present. She is the one who redresses Trygetius for his bad table manners, and she has no qualms about exercising a kind of authority to bring a day’s conversation to a close through a witty rejoinder and departure. Augustine is attentive to her, making a point to explain something that he and his students had discussed at a previous time when she had been absent. Augustine’s mother is the source of his natural life and also a key instigator and encourager in his spiritual life.

Monica first speaks in response to the question of whether—and what—the soul needed as its proper kind of food: “Obviously, I believe that the soul is nourished by nothing other than

⁵ “*nostra mater*” (1.6).

⁶ In *De ordine*, she herself draws attention to this fact: “*atque interea mater ingressa est quaesivique a nobis, quid promovissemus; nam et ei quaestio nota erat. cuius et ingressum et rogationem cum scribi nostro more iussissem: quid agitis? inquit; numquidnam in illis quos legitis libris etiam feminas umquam audivi in hoc genus disputationis inductas? – cui ego: non valde curo, inquam, superborum imperitorumque iudicia, qui similiter in legendos libros atque in salutandos homines irruunt. non enim cogitant, quales ipsi sed qualibus induti vestibibus sint et quanta pompa rerum fortunaeque praefulgeant. isti enim in litteris non multum attendunt, aut unde sit quaestio aut quo pervenire disserentes moliantur quidve ab eis explicatum atque confectum sit*” (1.31). Augustine says that the opinions of others are not important; instead, he is interested in the truth of what is said. Therese Fuhrer gives a list of examples of women being present in dialogues, although her list includes also women who speak by proxy: Diotima in Plato’s *Symposium*, Aspasia (*Aeschin. Asp.*), in the Roman world of Hortensius’ mother (*Cic. Hort. fr. 48 Grilli*), Seneca’s mother Helvia (*Helv. 17.3*) or Porphyry’s wife Marcella (*Ad Marc. 3*). However, it was not the norm, and in each of the cited examples the woman is special and plays a role that could not be filled by another woman. Fuhrer, “Wife, Mother, Philosopher,” 231, 238n39.

the understanding and knowledge of things” (2.8).⁷ Augustine supports this claim, saying that “the minds of those who have not been educated in any of the disciplines and who have not drunk deeply of any of the fine arts are hungry and famished, so to speak” (2.8).⁸ Monica, however, has not been formally educated in any discipline or fine art. But neither does she exhibit the other symptom of such a lack, intellectual vice. Augustine praises the ancients for saying that worthlessness, *nequitia*, as a portmanteau of *nec quicquam* or “not anything,” is the mother of all vices because it signals a barrenness in the mind (2.8). Augustine sharpens this point: “If this is too obscure for you to see now, at least grant that if the minds of the unlearned are also full, then two kinds of nourishment are found with minds as well as with bodies: one kind healthful and beneficial, the other diseased and destructive” (2.8).⁹ Furthermore, if someone with that kind of vicious barrenness of mind partakes of the “healthy” food for the mind, he will “spit it out” (2.9)!¹⁰ Augustine has created for himself a quandary that everyone else seems to feel. After that last statement, all agree in “expression” and “tones of voice” and eagerly await the birthday banquet (2.9).¹¹ He has set up a conditional: either one is hungry or one has been fed, and if one is hungry one is vicious; if one has been fed, one is virtuous. But his mother is virtuous, so it seems, without having been fed.

In the conversation that follows, however, we learn that Monica has knowledge and understanding of things that come through the disciplines and fine arts, despite her lack of

⁷ “*eorum animos, qui nullis disciplinis eruditi sunt nihilque bonarum artium hauserunt, ieiunos et quasi famelicos esse*” (2.8).

⁸ “*eorum animos, qui nullis disciplinis eruditi sunt nihilque bonarum artium hauserunt, ieiunos et quasi famelicos esse*” (2.8).

⁹ “*Sed si hoc obscurius est, quam ut id iam uos uidere possitis, certe illud conceditis quia, si animi imperitorum etiam ipsi pleni sunt, ut corporum, ita animorum duo alimentorum genera inueniuntur, unum salubre atque utile, alterum morbidum atque pestiferum*” (2.8).

¹⁰ *Respuunt*, 2.9.

¹¹ “*Omnes se uulto ipso et consentiente uoce quidquid praeparassem iam sumere ac uorare uelle dixerunt*” (2.9).

education. Her very next point, just moments later, is to say that not everyone who has what he wants is happy; “If he wants good things and has them, then he is happy; but if he wants bad things, then he is unhappy, even if he has them” (2.10).¹² Augustine’s response is to say that Monica has “mastered the very citadel of philosophy” (2.10).¹³ He cites Cicero: “to want what is not decent is itself the very worst misery” (2.10).¹⁴ This delights Monica just as much as it did Augustine, and all thought “some great man was sitting with us”¹⁵ because of her insight and joy at Augustine’s confirmation of her opinion (2.10).¹⁶ Augustine offers an editorial comment at that moment, that “in the meantime, I understood, insofar as I could, from what source and from how divine a source these things flowed” (2.10).¹⁷ Her love of wisdom has brought her to the apex of philosophy.¹⁸

This is our first glimpse of a unified truth as pursued by pagan philosophers and by Christian believers alike. That is, Cicero had attained to this truth about the need to want and to have *good* things, not just desirable things, for one to be happy, and he certainly was not the first.

¹² “*Si bona, inquit, uelit et habeat, beatus est, si autem mala uelit, quamuis habeat, miser est*” (2.10).

¹³ “*arcem philosophiae tenuisti*” (2.10).

¹⁴ “*uelle enim quod non deceat, id est ipsum miserrimum*” (2.10, quoting Cicero’s *Hortensius*).

¹⁵ Ernest Fortin looks at this and a parallel passage in *Contra Academicos* to show that although Monica is suited for the philosophic life, her interest is “more concerned with the integrity of Augustine’s faith than with adjusting its claims to those of philosophy. If it were up to her, many a stone would be left unturned. She is only interested in the conclusion of the argument and cares not a whit for the meticulous examination of the premises on which it is made to rest.” He argues that her quip about the epileptics was merely an effort to end the conversation rather than a natural conclusion to the discussion. Fortin, “Reflections”, 100. I hesitate to think that Monica’s humor about the epileptics was an expression of impatience, but Fortin’s observation about Monica’s concern with the rectitude of the claims made in the dialogue seems accurate. She is not concerned with Augustine’s claims that she speaks what he knows from the philosophers; Augustine is the one who cares about that.

¹⁶ “*magnum aliquem uirum*” (2.10).

¹⁷ “*me interim, quantum poteram, intellegente, ex quo illa et quam diuino fonte manarent*” (2.10).

¹⁸ In *Contra Academicos* 2.1, Augustine identifies the wisdom sought with Christ, quoting 1 Cor 1:24, “Christ the power and wisdom of God.” cf. Fuhrer, “Wife, Mother, Philosopher,” 231.

Monica, without a philosophical education, has also attained to this truth. Her source of nourishment is what she, as a faithful believer, has received in her religious education alone. While she seems to act at times like a “Christian oracle who can channel deep philosophical truths through inspiration alone,” she does not only speak in that way; instead, much of what she says are “truism[s] that would be accepted by any rational human being on a moment’s thought.”¹⁹ Thus, some of this is mere common sense (one might wish more people understood this without extensive reflection or experience!), but Augustine’s consideration of the source from which these things flow indicates that her virtue, her knowledge and understanding of things, are at least on occasion of divine origin. While a student of a good disposition—such as those Augustine desired and has at this banquet (2.9)—is prepared to receive the good food (he who does not spit it out, cf. 2.8), it seems as if even Monica is disposed to receive solid food even if not through the standard educational means.²⁰

Monica does not hesitate to contribute again on this first day of conversation when Trygetius and Licentius, Augustine’s students in his quasi-school at Cassiciacum, come up short of adequate answers for Augustine’s questions. Monica is the first to point out that man’s acquisitions for happiness have to be of the sort that cannot be lost, since he who has many possessions will be afraid of losing them and therefore cannot be satisfied by them (2.11). If he is happy while possessing those things, it is because of his virtue rather than the possessions, because he enjoys them “with a moderation of his mind” (2.11),²¹ which virtue is not something

¹⁹ Kenyon, *Augustine and the Dialogue*, 85.

²⁰ Foley puts a fine point on this when he claims: “The divine authority of the sacred mysteries and the simple power of prayer are, in the final analysis, more important than the perfection of reason through education.” While this is true, Augustine does not diminish his respect for education and the care with which one approaches it, as he outlines and describes a course of study in *De ordine* and in his treatises on the liberal arts written in the years that follow his conversion. Foley, “The Other Happy Life,” 180.

²¹ “*sed animi sui moderatione*” (2.11).

that can be lost as the material goods could be. And as Augustine had pointed out earlier, “something *is* if it remains, if it stays constant, if it is always the same—as virtue is” (2.8).²² “This”—Monica’s claim about man’s happiness owing to his virtue and not his wealth—“is the only answer that should be given to this question” (2.11),²³ Augustine says, and while he does not elaborate, we can suppose that Monica’s “uneducated” response as a woman of faith and not of letters is nothing short of the answer he hoped to receive from his liberal arts students. She is willing and able to offer this answer without—I reiterate—the education that shapes reason to be able to address big questions.²⁴

The only remaining substantial contribution Monica offers on the first day of conversation is to request an explanation of who the Academics are and what they thought, when Augustine and his students had digressed to that topic.

Monica’s contributions on the second day are, first, a clarifying question, and second, saying that God is omnipresent, but that one must still seek him in order to find him, and to live well to have that omnipresent God well-disposed to him. Augustine builds on her claims, saying that God is always present, such that one is never without God, but one does not necessarily “have” him (3.21). She has trouble drawing a distinction between those two states, the one in which the pilgrim is seeking God and thus God is well-disposed to him, and the other in which a person has God. But while she does not follow Augustine’s argument, she concedes that “if

²² “*Est autem aliquid, si manet, si constat, si semper tale est, ut est uirtus*” (2.8).

²³ “*Optime... nec huic interrogationi aliud nec abs te aliud debuit responderi*” (2.11).

²⁴ In *De ordine*, this is one of the reasons Augustine emphasizes the need for an orderly education. When his interlocutors are having a difficult time grasping the relationship between divine providence and the problem of evil, he digresses from the original topic into a consideration of the order of education one ought to undergo before engaging in more difficult disputations.

reason compels this conclusion I cannot deny it” (3.21).²⁵ Her claims are in concert with the rational argumentation, but derived from her life-long experience as a Christian.

The final day, Monica again astounds those present by her responses that defy their expectations. In their attempt to understand the relationship between need and misery, she reminds them that a person with material wealth can still be in need of wisdom. “Here, when all exclaimed with wonder,” Augustine editorializes, “I myself was also more than a little pleased, that it was mother who brought out the great thing from the books of the philosophers I had intended to offer at the end” (4.27).²⁶ He is not surprised, as the others were, and again attributes her wisdom to a divine source: “Do you all see that a multitude of varying doctrines is one thing, but a mind most attentive to God is another?” (4.27).²⁷ Augustine then has to re-hash the relationship between foolishness and wisdom, but his conclusion is that a person who has wisdom is not in need and therefore is not miserable, and this is the person who has God.

Having wisdom and having God are presented as being synonymous, in the conclusion of the dialogue. Augustine does not draw this conclusion immediately, but he does point out that the person who is wise lives well (he is opposed to the person whose “mind runs forth into luxuries, despotisms, conceits” and also the one “constricted by baseness, fear, sorrow, and desire” 4.33).²⁸ This person also does what God wants, if wisdom is the measure of the mind and God is the ultimate measure (4.34). And, finally, this person does not have an unclean spirit but is also filled by a “certain Admonition that pleads with us to remember God, to seek Him and ...

²⁵ “*Si hoc cogit ratio, inquit, non possum negare*” (3.21).

²⁶ “*Ubi cum alacri atque laeto, quod ab ea potissimum dictum esset, quod pro magno de philosophorum libris atque ultimum proferre paraueram*” (4.27).

²⁷ “*Videtisne... aliud esse multas uariasque doctrinas, aliud animum adtentissimum in deum?*” (4.27).

²⁸ “*excurrit autem in luxurias dominantiones superbias...sordibus timoriibus maerore cupiditate... confitentur*” (4.33).

to thirst for Him,” namely the Holy Spirit (4.35).²⁹ This *admonitio*, as Holte observes, is “not merely a moral exhortation.” Instead, it is a “message of liberation which awakens the joy and the desire for the beyond.”³⁰ We are admonished not just to turn away from disordered desires (an aversion) but to turn to God with the help of his admonishing Spirit (a conversion). The response of those present in the dialogue testify to this: Monica draws them to praising God, and seeking help to attain more surely to the possession of Him.

Thus, the person who has God has wisdom, and he also satisfies the three criteria identified at the end of the first day. Monica is the first to recognize these three—Wisdom, Measure, and Admonition—as the Trinitarian God, and she sings praise in the words she had learned from Ambrose, “Cherish those who pray, O Trinity” (4.35).³¹ This hymn is one she likely sang as a member of the faithful who had recently gathered in the basilica in Milan to hold it for the orthodox Christians against the Arians who were trying to take it over. This makes it something of not only praise but also a battle cry, the voice of martyrs (or those prepared to be martyred) who refuse to be separated from their God.³² Kenney takes this a step further; not only was she a witness speaking in a martyr’s voice, but “Monica was ... the irrefragable icon of

²⁹ “*Admonitio autem quaedam, qua nobiscum agit, ut deum recordemur, ut eum quaeramus, ut eum pulso omni fastidio sitiamus*” (4.35).

³⁰ “*admonitio n'est pas seulement une exhortation morale, mais un message de liberation qui eveille la joie et le desir de l'au-dela.*” Holte, *Béatitude et sagesse*, 319. Boone, in *Conversion and Therapy of Desire*, says that the theological virtues are a reordering of our desires, building on his interpretation of the allegory in the opening letter. Boone, *Conversion*, 81.

³¹ It is perhaps also possible, considering her earlier ready answers that are what Augustine wanted to say as drawn from the philosophers, that she also recognizes this wisdom as a philosopher’s desire; these are “words that dwelt deeply in her memory” but are not quite the Trinitarian formula she would know from liturgy. Cf. Therese Fuhrer, “Wife, Mother, Philosopher: On the Symbolic Function of Augustine’s Monnica,” in *Maternal Conceptions in Classical Literature and Philosophy*, ed. by Alison Sharrock and Alison Keith (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2020): 228. This hymn comes up also in *De Musica* and in the *Confessions* when Augustine recounts his mother’s death. *De Musica* 6.17.57; *Confessions* 9.12.32.

³² Fuhrer, “Wife, Mother, Philosopher,” 229.

Christian wisdom, wisdom born of sanctity not learning, wisdom conferred by the gift of God.”³³ She then encourages those present to strive for the happy life that is characterized by the pursuit of wisdom through the aid of “a firm faith, a lively hope, and an ardent charity” (4.35).³⁴ Monica, as the one who has a mind attentive to God and therefore speaks the truth in the Wisdom that is Christ, also knows that the theological virtues will bring them to the happiness that all men seek.³⁵

³³ John Peter Kenney, *Contemplation and Classical Christianity: A Study in Augustine* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013), 63. He notes that the process of Augustine coming to terms with the “spiritual meaning” of his mother culminates in *Confessions* 9, where his biography of his mother traces her spiritual life and influence on Augustine. *Contemplation*, 63n7.

³⁴ “*solida fide alacri spe flagrante caritate*” (4.35).

³⁵ Gary Wills argues in his biography of Augustine’s *Confessions* that at the time of the Cassiciacum dialogues, Augustine thought one could attain happiness by a mental ascent like the one he shared with Monica, and that the one he shared with Monica at Ostia was unique because she was not a learned Neoplatonist or one schooled in the liberal arts. This left her free from earthly constraints that Augustine overcame with the aid of his meditative ascent. While there is a common aim between the scene at Ostia and this dialogue, namely, contemplation of God along with a deeper understanding of His nature and our dependence upon him for happiness, there are some significant differences that make me think Wills overstates his case. At the scene at Ostia, the inquiry into what the life of the saints might be like was spontaneous, and the conversation quickly transcended dialogue. Here, the conversation is carefully directed by Augustine and his method is didactic, even if it does conclude in praise. Wills, *Augustine’s Confessions: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2011): 92.

Part II Conclusion

Augustine weaves the themes of feasting and Neoplatonic metaphysics through the dialogue, demonstrating his rhetorical abilities and his comprehension of philosophy. Both add a richness to the conversation and give his interlocutors—and us, his readers—additional ways to understand the pursuit of the happy life. His mother’s contributions illustrate for us the consonance of the truth pursued through the liberal and philosophical means with the truth she knows from her practical wisdom of a life well lived and her faithfulness as a Catholic Christian. In the following section, I look beyond the interlocutors and their particular contributions to the sources they draw on in their conversation, and at the sources that Augustine appears to have patterned the dialogue after, both as a whole work and in subsections of the conversation.

Part III. Augustine's sources and influences

Having read the dialogue (Part 1) and examined primary themes of the work (Part 2), I now turn to examine Augustine's sources and influences. This examination contributes to a deeper understanding of the dialogue itself, and articulates the relationship between philosophy and Christianity in the dialogue as Augustine may have conceived of it as he was conducting his school at Cassiciacum. These influences can be divided only roughly into categories of "philosophers" and "Christians." Not only is there not a clear distinction between the two for Augustine, but even in his sources such a distinction can only be a messy and partial division, as will be seen in the first influence I examine, Ambrose of Milan. After a consideration of the Catholic bishop, I look next at Scriptural influences, and then the more clearly philosophical influences of non-Christian authors, especially Cicero and Plotinus, but also Porphyry, Seneca, Terence, Sallust, and Virgil. The purpose of this section is not only to bring to light historical influences by engaging in source criticism, but also to show that Augustine takes a kind of egalitarian approach in his pursuit of the truth. He does not care if an idea or image comes from a Christian or a non-Christian source as long as it is true or can be used for the truth. This is consonant with his conversion to philosophy as recorded in 2.6 of the *Confessions*, when he read Cicero's *Hortensius*, as well as with my interpretation of Augustine's thinking that the truths of philosophy and Christianity are unified in his mind.

Chapter 1. Ambrose

Introduction

I turn my attention first to Ambrose. In the fall of 384, “I came to Milan, and to Ambrose, its bishop,” Augustine recounts in the *Confessions*.¹ This man, Augustine also says, was renowned for his eloquence, devotion, and moral character. Ambrose’s influence came to Augustine in a variety of ways: through those of Ambrose’s hymns and sermons he may have heard or read, as well as through the celebration of the liturgy and in the catechumenate, in conversation with the man—though Augustine found it difficult to get an audience with him, as recounted in the *Confessions*²—or indirectly through the devotion and admiration his mother had for Ambrose. One should not underestimate the influence of Ambrose through the celebration of the liturgy: we know from the *Confessions* that Augustine attended liturgy in order to hear Ambrose preach.³ That influence, however, is more difficult to trace than what we receive through writings.⁴ Ambrose himself taught those entering the Church at the Easter Vigil, and Augustine and the majority of his companions were preparing for just that—although it is unclear how much formal preparation for the Sacraments he had received by the time he wrote this dialogue. He would have received the bulk of that formation closer to the Easter rites.⁵ It is

¹ Augustine, *Confessions* 5.13.23.

² “Yet I was unable to ask of [Ambrose] what I wanted and in the way I wanted, for crowds of busy men, to whose troubles he was a slave, shut me away from both his ear and his mouth. When he was not with them, and this was but a little while, he either refreshed his body with needed food or his mind with reading,” *Confessions* 6.3.3.

³ Augustine, *Confessions* 5.14.24.

⁴ Brown emphasizes the variety of ways in which Ambrose influenced Augustine. See Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* pp. 84-86, 125-126. Harmless, likewise, addresses this variety but claims that Augustine never became intimates with Ambrose and so the publicly presented sermons were more influential. William Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995): 83.

⁵ When catechumens petitioned for baptism under Ambrose, they underwent a Lenten catechumenate that was primarily moral and involved twice-daily meetings at which Ambrose

also the case that catechumens were dismissed after the sermon, so Augustine would not have experienced the second half of the liturgy in person yet.⁶

Like Augustine, Ambrose pursued a career in the Roman Empire prior to his episcopacy. Ambrose had an unusual life, and his education and upbringing give a context in which his unusual literary styles as a bishop gain coherence. He was born into a Christian family, but he was educated in rhetoric and jurisprudence for a public career in the Roman Empire. As part of his civil career he was tasked with pacifying the factions of Nicene and Arian Christians in Milan.⁷ While in Milan, he was made bishop of the Nicene Christians by popular acclaim. He initially refused election, but was powerless against the demands of the Nicene Christians. At the time, he was not yet baptized and was certainly not a trained theologian—his engagement with the disputes was as a civil authority.⁸ However, he undertook intensive study under the tutelage of Simplicianus and rapidly became a respected bishop.⁹

Because of his education, he was literate in Greek as well as in Latin, and made a practice of reading eastern theologians and Greek philosophers, in addition to those of the Roman empire and the west. In Milan, the educated citizens were influenced significantly by the Greek philosophers. From his arrival in Milan, Ambrose was involved with the group of what are now referred to as the Milanese Platonists. The influence of these writers is seen in his sermons; for example, in *Isaac, Or the Soul* he offers a retelling of the Phaedrus myth, with some fantastic

taught them based on some Old Testament figure primarily. There was little time spent on the creed (in contrast to Eastern catechumenates). Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenates* 84.

⁶ Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenates* 97.

⁷ I use “Nicene” here instead of “Catholic” because the secondary literature on Ambrose’s role as a peacekeeper identifies the two factions as Nicene and Arian. Ambrose and Augustine both referred to the Nicene Christianity as Catholic.

⁸ Benedict XVI, “St. Ambrose,” trans. L’Osservatore Romano, in *Church Fathers: From Clement of Rome to Augustine* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017): 121-122.

⁹ Augustine, *Confessions* 8.2.3.

additions, in an effort to influence the desire for virtue within his audience.¹⁰ Benedict XVI observes, when commenting on *On the Mysteries*, that Ambrose taught that learning the “art of a well-ordered life,” that is, an education in the liberal arts and virtue, was appropriate preparation for the sacraments.¹¹ He was skilled in rhetoric and employed this to good use, clothing the truth of the Catholic Christian faith in beauty, both in the letter and in setting those truths to music. He had a major opponent in the Arian heretics at the time Augustine met him, and used his hymns and his sermons to catechize and strengthen the faith of his followers. His work was also an attempt to convert the hearts of those in Milan who found following Arius’s teachings attractive, either for what was taught or for the political favor one might gain by ascribing to the religion to which the Roman Emperor Valentinian II and his mother Justina were adherents. The eastern fathers, especially Origen, influenced his study and exegesis of Scripture, but also imbued him with a love for the sacred word. Ambrose developed and taught what we now know as *lectio divina*.¹²

By looking at some of Ambrose’s hymns and sermons, one can see the impact that Ambrose’s exegesis, theology, and eclectic source-material had on Augustine. In particular, I will point out those things that appear in Augustine’s *De beata vita* from the written records we have of Ambrose’s hymns and sermons.¹³

¹⁰ Ambrose, *Isaac, Or the Soul*, trans. Michael P. McHugh, in *Saint Ambrose: Seven Exegetical Works* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2003): 8.65-67.

¹¹ Benedict XVI, “St. Ambrose” 124.

¹² Benedict XVI, “St. Ambrose” 123.

¹³ Ambrose’s complete writings include several other works written prior to Augustine’s baptism but which do not seem to bear directly on the concerns of *De beata vita*. His early works, such as *On Cain and Abel* and *On the Incarnation as a Sacrament* do not delve into themes that come up in *De beata vita*. It is thought that during Lent of the year Augustine was baptized—and thus during the period when he was receiving more intensive catechesis and formation in preparation for the reception of the sacraments—that Ambrose preached the sermons that are the basis of his *Hexameron*, which is a work heavily influenced by St. Basil’s work on the same topic, namely, the six days of Creation. The ongoing mutual influence between Ambrose and Augustine is an

interesting and underexplored subject, but does not come within the scope of this dissertation. See Roy J. Deferrari, Introduction to *Saint Ambrose: Theological and Dogmatical Works*, trans. by Roy J. Deferrari (CUA 1963) xvii-xx. and John J. Savage, Introduction to *Hexameron, Paradise and Cain and Abel* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1961): v.

Section 1. Hymns

At the end of *De beata vita*, when Augustine proposes that the wisdom that is our happiness is to know and love the Trinity (4.35),¹⁴ his language reminds Monica of the line of a hymn written by Ambrose. She sings: *Fove precantes, Trinitas*—Cherish (or protect, or guard) those who beseech you, O Trinity (4.35). The concluding line from *Deus creator omnium* is particularly appropriate for the conclusion of Augustine’s dialogue, as seen below. All of Ambrose’s hymns attested to by Augustine are teaching dogmatic Catholic truths, but their inner logic and content were retained sufficiently by Monica that she brought the appropriate praise to bear in the dialogue.

During his time as bishop in Milan, Ambrose initiated a new style of hymns that are now known as Ambrosian hymns. They were written in a plainer style, with vocabulary and images designed to help simple believers grasp theological truths.¹⁵ Because Christians so easily learned his style of hymn and lyric, there arose immediately imitators of his style. Moreschini sorts through the many hymns attributed to Ambrose and concludes that “only four are surely authentic, all of them attested by Augustine: Eternal Creator of Things (*Aeterne rerum conditor*);¹⁶ The Third Hour is Already Here (*Iam surgit hora tertia*);¹⁷ God, Creator of the

¹⁴ *cognoscere* and *perfruaris*. Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.35. This thorough enjoyment of God brings to mind Augustine’s later argument about the proper use (*uti*) and enjoyment (*frui*) of good things in *De doctrina christiana*, where he says God is to be enjoyed supremely. Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* I.5.5.

¹⁵ Claudio Moreschini and Enrico Norelli. *Early Christian Greek and Latin Literature: A Literary History, Volume Two: From the Council of Nicaea to the Beginning of the Medieval Period*, trans. by Matthew J. O’Connell (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005): 273.

¹⁶ A hymn for Lauds. Augustine quotes two lines from this hymn in his *Retractationes* and names Ambrose as the author. *Ret.* 1.20.1. A complete collection and translation of Ambrose’s hymns and select ambrosian hymns are available in *The Hymns of Saint Ambrose: Latin and English*, trans. by Gordon Jackson (Lincoln: Asgill, 2007).

¹⁷ A hymn for Terce and the preparation for Mass. Augustine cites two lines of this hymn and attributes it to Ambrose in *De natura et gratia* 65.74.

Universe (*Deus creator omnium*);¹⁸ Come, Redeemer of the Nations (*Veni, redemptor gentium*).¹⁹ Others attributed to him are very probably, if not certainly, his work.”²⁰ A brief survey of these four hymns reveal certain patterns, content, and imagery that appear also in *De beata vita*.

¹⁸ A hymn for Vespers or Compline. Cited in *De beata vita* 4.35.

¹⁹ An Advent or Christmas hymn, translated loosely into German by Martin Luther and now sung in English translation as *Savior of the Nations, Come*. Augustine quotes the fifth stanza of this hymn in Sermon 372, “On the Lord’s Nativity” in *Sermons III/10 (341-400) on Various Subjects*, trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 1995) 318.

²⁰ His primary criteria for certainty of these four seem to be Augustine’s testimony and an examination of the rhetorical style; other scholars attribute up to twelve hymns to Ambrose with confidence. Moreschini, *Early Christian Greek and Latin Literature, Vol. II* 273.

In Outline

Speaking generally, all these hymns of Ambrose meet the criteria Augustine identifies in his commentary on Psalm 73 for a hymn: “to call it a hymn, it must have these three elements: praise, and that praise is of God, and singing.”²¹ The text is written for a particular time of day or season: Lauds, Terce, Vespers or Compline, and Christmas. The first stanza orients the singer to the significance of the time and the presence of God in that moment. The first three are intensely Christological, drawing on Scripture passages about the birth, life, and death of Jesus. The first is subtly anti-Arian, in uniting the praise in the opening line of God the Father to the praise throughout of God the Son. The second and third each contain a focus on the human and divine natures of Christ, through the virgin birth and his own testimony and miracles as proof that he is “a giant in twofold substance one,” contra the Arian heresy denying Christ’s divine nature.²² Doxologies have been added to the first two as they have since been included in breviaries for liturgical use, but Ambrose himself concluded the latter two with Trinitarian praises. Each contains not only praise of the Creator, but also an exhortation to the singer to engage in necessary battles against the weaknesses of the flesh (sleepiness,²³ original sin,²⁴ the “weakness of our mortal state,”²⁵ and the “snares of the senses”²⁶) in order to maintain the faith. Each was set by Ambrose to music, and Monica easily sings just the final line of *Deus creator omnium* in the dialogue.

²¹ “*Oportet ergo ut, si sit hymnus, habeat haec tria: et laudem, et Dei, et canticum.*” Augustine, *Ennarationes en Psalmum 72 (73)*.

²² Ambrose, *Veni, Creator Gentium*, trans. Gordon Jackson, st. 4, line 3.

²³ Ambrose, *Aeterne rerum conditor*, st. 5.

²⁴ Ambrose, *Iam surgit hora tertia*, st. 3.

²⁵ “*infirmi nostri corporis,*” Ambrose, *Veni, redemptor gentium*, trans. Gordon Jackson, st. 5, line 3.

²⁶ “*Exuta sensu lubrico,*” Ambrose, *Deus creator omnium*, trans. Gordon Jackson, st. 4, line 1.

One can draw broad parallels between *De beata vita* and this style of hymn, and this structure lends a cohesiveness to the three days of dialogue beyond the development of conversation: Augustine's dialogue likewise is shaped by the time—of life and of year—when he is writing, the development of a concentrated theme explicated over several days of conversation, and concludes in praise of the Trinity. His dedicatory letter establishes the significance of the moment not just for himself but for everyone, because everyone seeks happiness. The dialogue itself is for his own birthday, but a birthday marks a time when any mortal might reflect on where he has been and where he is going in his quest for happiness. While Augustine's dedicatory letter is written in extremely lofty prose, the dialogue itself is primarily in a plain style as he leads his interlocutors through an important exercise in understanding the basics of the happy life. His moments of Trinitarian theology in conclusion are also subtly fighting a heretical understanding of God taught by Neoplatonists and, potentially, the Arians. One can also see there is a fundamental tie between one's moral life and both happiness and right praise.

In Content

Each of the four hymns contains some content that appears also in *De beata vita*, but here I will only look briefly at the second and at the quoted fourth hymn, as those which can substantially contribute to understanding *De beata vita*.²⁷

The second hymn, *Iam surgit hora tertia*, is written for the third hour of the day as that at which Christ was hung on the cross. The text speaks of Christ's redemptive work to save man from both his actual sins and from original sin. This now-standard twofold identification of sin is not clearly present in *De beata vita*, but the description maps onto the of distinction of the two ways in which one can have an unclean spirit from the second day of the dialogue.²⁸ One is of extrinsic source and the other is intrinsic: "either that which is extrinsic to the soul enters and disturbs the senses and inflicts a certain madness on men" or the soul becomes unclean by "being defiled by vices or errors" (3.18).²⁹ This could be interpreted as a distinction between original sin, which is due not to one's own actions but rather is received through one's parents, and actual sin, which is the defilement of vice and errors.

Living well and doing God's will are indistinguishable, Augustine and his interlocutors think, from being free of an unclean spirit. He who lives this way is the one who is able to possess God.³⁰ Ambrose likewise draws this connection: "He who takes Christ into his heart / controls his thoughts all free of blame; / by constant prayers deserves to win / the Holy Spirit's

²⁷ The first hymn uses the imagery of the morning star leading a pilgrim to safety; see *Aeterne rerum conditor*, st. 4, lines 1-2; st. 5, lines 1-2, and compare to *De beata vita* 1.4. The third hymn, *Veni, redemptor gentium* is a particularly anti-Arian Christological hymn which uses an interplay of light and darkness that I will address in the following section.

²⁸ Augustine, *De beata vita* 3.18, making reference to 2.12.

²⁹ "uel ille, qui extrinsecus animam inuadit sensusque conturbat et quendam hominibus infert furorem... aliter ... quod est aliud quam uitii et erroribus inquinata" (3.18).

³⁰ Augustine, *De beata vita* 3.18.

presence there.”³¹ The following stanza reminds its singers also that “This is the hour that brought an end / to that long-standing grievous sin.”³² If this unclean spirit is the result of sins which are subsequently washed away in baptism (*DBV* 3.18), then that sacramental cleansing is the freedom from that ancient sin.³³

In this hymn, Ambrose also describes the virgin Mary’s role as an exemplar of chastity. Augustine questions Adeodatus closely in the dialogue about his use of “chastity” in order to be sure of what he meant. In his hymn, Ambrose tells us that Christ’s words to Mary on the cross reveal that her “bridal pact” and the virgin birth by the conception of the Holy Spirit did not violate her chastity.³⁴ The core reason for her preservation of that chastity is her having clung to God in belief and in her obedience to the commands of God and, in the hour of Christ’s death, the commands of her Son. She is the prime exemplar of the one who takes Christ into her heart, and through her constancy is holy and inviolable, a *sanctum* for the Holy Spirit.³⁵ Mary’s chastity is clinging to God and thereby not having an unclean spirit. Adeodatus, in the dialogue, says, “He is truly chaste who pays attention to God and holds himself to Him alone.”³⁶ This hymn provides an example of the kind of person Adeodatus describes. This provides evidence that Adeodatus’s concept of chastity is not idiosyncratic to him; it also helpfully illustrates that

³¹ “*Qui corde Christum suscipit, / Innoxium sensum gerit: / Votisque praestat sedulis, / Sanctum mereri Spiritum.*” Ambrose, *Iam surgit*, trans. Gordon Jackson, st. 2, lines 1-4.

³² “*Haec hora qua finem dedit / Diri veterno criminis,*” Ambrose, *Iam surgit*, trans. Gordon Jackson, st. 3, lines 1-2.

³³ Ambrose, *Iam surgit*, trans. Gordon Jackson, st. 3, lines 2 and 4.

³⁴ “He on high from his triumph’s peak / addressed his mother with these words: / “O mother, here behold your son”; / to John: “Behold your mother here,” // Thus teaching that her bridal pact / concealed this mystery profound: / the virgin’s sacred birth would not / impair the mother’s chastity.” (“*Celso triumphi vertice, / Matri loquebatur suae: / En filius, mater, tuus; / Apostole, en mater tua. // Praetenta nuptae foedera / Alto docens mysterio; / Ne virginis partus sacer / Matris pudorem laederet.*”) Ambrose, *Iam surgit hora tertia*, trans. Gordon Jackson, st. 5-6.

³⁵ Ambrose, *Iam surgit*, trans. Gordon Jackson, st. 2, lines 1, 3-4.

³⁶ “*Ille est vere castus, qui Deum attendit, et ad ipsum solum se tenet.*” Augustine, *De beata vita* 3.18.

concept for contemporary readers of *De beata vita* for whom “chastity” is often merely associated with “not engaging in sexual intercourse.”

The fourth hymn on the list of those certainly composed by Ambrose and attested to by Augustine is the one quoted in *De beata vita*, the *Deus creator omnium*. This is a hymn for the close of the day, praising God for his blessings during the day and asking for his protection and for a restful sleep that night. In the dialogue, when Monica sings the final line of this hymn, Augustine and his interlocutors are concluding their three-day conversation. Augustine gives the summation of the happy life: “to know piously and perfectly Him by whom you are led to the Truth, whereby you may thoroughly enjoy the Truth, through which you may be joined to the Supreme Measure.”³⁷ This Trinitarian conception of the possession of God is the culmination of Augustine’s drawing together three things: the desires and knowledge of the individual seeking the happy life, this seeker’s moral virtue, and the substance of what he has sought being present to such a degree that the seeker has gained union with God.

Deus creator omnium is making the same basic claim, but presenting it as a prayer. The opening stanza expresses that the desire of the singer has been aroused and oriented to the Creator by wonder at his creation, and in the fourth stanza the singer acknowledges “Thou hast stirred our hearts to sing.”³⁸ God, as Augustine says, is necessary for happiness, himself has led us to himself.³⁹ The singer’s concern is also with remaining free from sin and attached in chaste love to God (as described by Adeodatus in 3.18 and above, the second hymn). The fourth stanza

³⁷ “*Pie perfecteque cognoscere a quo inducaris in veritatem, qua veritate perfruaris, per quid connectaris summo modo.*” He continues, “*Quae tria unum Deum intellegendibus unamque substantiam, exclusis vanitatibus variae superstitionis, ostendunt.*” Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.35.

³⁸ “*Te cordis ima concinant,*” Ambrose, *Deus creator omnium*, trans. Gordon Jackson, st. 4, line 1.

³⁹ Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.35.

continues by saying that the singer must put to rest all of “earth’s vain loves,”⁴⁰ in the next stanza he asks God to keep his mind free from sin overnight,⁴¹ and in the next asks that the dreamer might remain free from attachment to sins of sense.⁴² The hymn does not, however, go so far as to say the singer’s sleep is union with God. Rather, he wants his thoughts to remain directed heavenward in his sleep,⁴³ and for the rest granted by God to be warm, peaceful, and uninterrupted.⁴⁴

It is fitting that Monica should conclude the multi-day search for happiness with the same conclusion as this evening hymn’s concluding desire: that God would hold close those who seek him: Cherish, O Lord, those who pray. Those seeking the happy life have come to know the God they sought (*cognoscere*) and in praising him are properly enjoying this happy life (*perfruaris*, 4.35).

⁴⁰ “*vox canora concrepet*,” Ambrose, *Deus creator*, st. 4, line 2.

⁴¹ “In sleep sin may no entrance make (*Dormire mentem ne sinas*),” st. 5, line 1.

⁴² “From snares of sense, Lord, keep us free / and let our hearts dream but of thee (*Exuta sensu lubrico / te cordis alta somnient*)” Ambrose, *Deus creator*, trans. Gordon Jackson, st. 7, lines 1-2.

⁴³ “That our sleeping minds may Thee adore (*te mens adoret sobria*),” Ambrose, *Deus creator*, trans. Gordon Jackson, st. 4, line 4.

⁴⁴ Ambrose, *Deus Creator*, trans. Gordon Jackson, St. 6, line 4; st. 7, lines 2 and 4.

Section 2. Sermons

Ambrose also wrote a series of treatises that probably originated as sermons. These sermons are on the patriarchs of the Old Testament, and several of the sermons have as a subtitle a philosophical title. Like many of the early bishops and in keeping with the common understanding of the episcopal office at the time, Ambrose took preaching and interpreting Scriptures very seriously. He preached “on all Sundays and feast days, and daily in Lent,” resulting in a significant number of sermons;⁴⁵ extant are only those he appears to have edited, perhaps combining a series of sermons, for publication and distribution.⁴⁶ In the sermons, generally speaking, the variety of influences in Ambrose’s writing are striking. He is considered Alexandrian in his exegesis, following Philo and Origen in identifying three levels of Scripture: literal, moral, and spiritual.⁴⁷ He makes reference to Greek Christian theologians as well as to Plato, Plotinus, and Porphyry.⁴⁸ His primary literary influence seems to be Vergil.⁴⁹ Most scholars identify the time frame of his sermons on the patriarchs to be the period around the time of Augustine’s conversion, 386/387. There is no clear record, however, of dates of composition.⁵⁰ Of particular interest here is the sermon *Jacob, or on the Happy Life*. It is not essential to prove that Augustine knew this sermon or text in particular so much as it is useful to see the potential influences and the common conclusions drawn by Ambrose and Augustine. Some of the conclusions to the arguments that Ambrose makes and that Augustine and his

⁴⁵ McHugh, General Introduction to *St. Ambrose: Seven Exegetical Works 2*.

⁴⁶ Ambrose did not produce a catalogue or reconsiderations of his published works like Augustine’s *Retractationes*.

⁴⁷ McHugh, “Introduction” 3.

⁴⁸ McHugh, “Introduction” 3.

⁴⁹ McHugh, “Introduction” 4. Cf. Mary Dorothea Diederich, *Vergil in the Works of St. Ambrose* (Washington, DC: Catholic Univ. of America Patristic Studies, 1931).

⁵⁰ Marcia Colish, *Ambrose’s Patriarchs: Ethics for the Common Man* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Univ. Press, 2005): 8-9. See also Moreschini, *Early Christian Literature*, 276-277.

interlocutors come to are strikingly similar. Additionally, in *Jacob* and in another sermon, *The Prayer of David and Job*, Ambrose employs the same image that Augustine uses, namely, that of the sailors seeking the port of philosophy. Thus I look first at *Jacob* and then at the other sermons that seem to fall in the same timeframe and contain similar images and conclusions.

1. Jacob, or On the Happy Life

Jacob, or On the Happy Life and Augustine's *De beata vita* both, as their titles indicate, examine the requirements for the happy life and the means to it, as well as an identification of the substance of that happiness. *Jacob* is a longer work than *De beata vita* and a treatise rather than a dialogue, and so in comparison to Augustine's treatment of the same topic, there is more substance in his discussion of the virtues and their role in the embodied life of a person as well as a greater abundance of examples. This elaboration on the question of virtue, however, almost reads like a supplement to the first day's conversation in Augustine's *De beata vita*. In his identification of the happy life as friendship with God, Ambrose does not explicitly tie this to the Trinitarian nature of God as Augustine does, but there is a common recognition of the possession of God as the source of man's happiness.

Ambrose's *Jacob* is in two books. In the first book, Ambrose discusses "the precepts of the virtues" and their role in the happy life.⁵¹ In the second, he turns to "examples of famous men who were placed in the greatest dangers and yet did not lose happiness of life but gained it instead."⁵² These examples are primarily Scriptural.⁵³ Ambrose lays out didactically his understanding of the role of reason, using Jacob and other Old Testament figures to illustrate the way reason can both resist and overcome concupiscence. Consistent with his threefold interpretive scheme, he offers an extended interpretation at (1) the literal level in order to make

⁵¹ Ambrose, *Jacob* 2.1.

⁵² Ambrose, *Jacob* 2.1.

⁵³ The "primarily" caveat refers to the fact that Ambrose draws extensively on the story of the woman with seven sons from Maccabees, but uses the version found in the apocryphal 4 Maccabees. The canon of Scriptural texts was not formally defined until 382. There is considerable overlap between the versions of the story in 4 and 2 Maccabees. In his *De doctrina christiana* (395?-426/7), Augustine includes 1 & 2 Maccabees, but not 3 & 4. Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* 2.8.26-29. Ambrose's use of 4 Maccabees is predominately in the last part of Book 2 of *Jacob*, 10.43-12.58.

(2) the moral claims about reason, virtue, and happiness. Then in the second book he extends his interpretation beyond this moral level to (3) the spiritual, seeing the stories of Job with his friends, Joseph and the wife of the pharaoh, and the woman from Maccabees, whose seven sons are killed for refusing to violate the law, as all illustrating faith in God, conformity to his will, and love of God who conquered death. The “spiritual” level appears here quite simply as an acknowledgment that embodied life with all its pleasures is subservient to man’s highest good, love of an immaterial God.

Ambrose makes unambiguous claims about what he thinks his explanations of the narratives from Scripture are doing: leading the mind of his listener to reason, so that a mind thus led “excels in virtue and restrains its passions.”⁵⁴ However, it is not sufficient simply to give a moral command, e.g., “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” because “discourse alone is helpful by way of admonition but weak by way of persuasion.”⁵⁵ Thus Ambrose strengthens his case by leading his listener or reader through reflection so that the one listening can freely and with understanding incline to virtue. Ambrose does not anticipate that one can eradicate concupiscence, the “most severe of the guilty passions,” but that with time the “soul capable of reason ... can restrain” the passions.⁵⁶ Ambrose is also unapologetic about the role God plays in this dynamic: “When God created man and implanted in him moral laws and feelings, at that time He established the royal rule of the mind over man’s emotions so that all his feelings and emotions would be governed by its strength and power.”⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Ambrose, *Jacob* 1.1.

⁵⁵ Ambrose, *Jacob* 1.1.

⁵⁶ Ambrose, *Jacob* 1.1.

⁵⁷ Ambrose, *Jacob* 1.4.

Ambrose gives pride of place to temperance among the virtues, identifying moderation and control as allied or partial virtues⁵⁸ over the passions of pleasure and pain.⁵⁹ This distinction between moderation and temperance is a bit unusual, but it appears that Ambrose is primarily drawing attention to the same aspect of moderation that Augustine finds important, namely, that it is a kind of measurement. Temperance, for Ambrose, is necessary, particularly in the curtailment of “excess in regard to food and abundant banquets.”⁶⁰ It serves to “open a path for the use of reason through the consideration paid to the restricting precept.”⁶¹ That is, temperance combines the measuring element of moderation with control over one’s actions in order to create the possibility of acting rationally despite concupiscence.

Ambrose’s concern in interpreting the Scripture passages in this sermon is to show that the development of temperance has allowed key Biblical figures to act rightly in situations where the temptation to give in to concupiscence is strong. Ambrose does not anticipate that one will master concupiscence, but rather only learn to restrain it and give the agent freedom to follow the direction of right reason. Succumbing to concupiscence is what Ambrose identifies as the initial failing in the Garden of Eden. Because this fallen state is the condition in which man finds himself, he must cultivate the virtue of temperance first to be able to choose rightly in the face of those concupiscible appetites. The virtue of temperance can be taught, and is to be followed by learning in wisdom and discipline. We know that all the moral virtues can be taught, Ambrose

⁵⁸ Ambrose does not actually give a name to these virtues to describe their relationship with moderation; Aquinas refers to the sub-virtues of the cardinal virtues as parts or partial virtues, and describes some related virtues as virtues that are aligned with but less prominent than the cardinal virtues. This vocabulary seems helpful in describing the effective relationship that Ambrose employs between these virtues. See, for example, *Summa Theologiae* IIaIIae 143.1.Reply.

⁵⁹ Ambrose, *Jacob* 2.5.

⁶⁰ Ambrose, *Jacob* 2.5.

⁶¹ Ambrose, *Jacob* 2.5.

says, because Scripture says so; he cites Leviticus, Job, and occasions in the life of Joseph.⁶²

Furthermore, he says, “what did [the disciples] learn from Christ other than to practice the precepts of the virtues?”⁶³ The practice of the virtues is in order to enable one to be more fully a disciple of Christ. The practice of virtue allows man to make free choices, such that he voluntarily submits to Christ. In following Christ, he also freely chooses to practice virtue.

Man ends up serving someone no matter what his condition, Ambrose thinks: “Christ chooses for Himself the volunteer soldier; the devil buys for himself at auction the volunteer slave.”⁶⁴ The law teaches man both his need for virtue and how to acquire it, and Christ extends grace for salvation.⁶⁵ The coming of Christ is not a guarantee of salvation for all, Ambrose points out. Some are condemned, rather, because they choose to persist in their vicious ways and reject the grace of salvation.⁶⁶ Ambrose summarizes:

[T]hat mind is good which has the control of the reason and is directed toward the teachings of wisdom; but it endures a grievous strife with the body of death, and often the enticement, which is of the flesh, conquers the reason, which is of the mind. Accordingly, the Lord first gave the law; the mind of man devoted itself to the law by way of compliance and began to serve it so as to be subject to it. But the flesh was not subdued, because the wisdom of the flesh was not subject to the law and opposed its teachings. For the flesh could not have been obedient to virtue, since it had been given over to its own desires and enveloped in its own panderings. Accordingly, we must work to keep the grace of God. Therefore the mind is good if it is directed toward reason, but not at all perfect unless it enjoys the rule of Christ.⁶⁷

This, then, is the happy man according to Ambrose: the virtuous man who has exercised temperance so as to be able to follow right reason, has been taught discipline and wisdom, and

⁶² Ambrose, *Jacob* 1.1.

⁶³ Ambrose, *Jacob* 3.9.

⁶⁴ Ambrose, *Jacob* 3.10.

⁶⁵ Ambrose, *Jacob* 4.14.

⁶⁶ Ambrose, *Jacob* 4.14.

⁶⁷ Ambrose, *Jacob* 5.17.

has freely submitted to the yoke of Christ. This man is undisturbed by loss of loved ones or of inheritance,⁶⁸ but rather is in a “tranquil harbor” and “does not know shipwreck.”⁶⁹

That concluding statement immediately ties this sermon of Ambrose to Augustine’s own treatment of the happy life. The image of the pilgrim-mariner on the open seas as man experiencing the turbulence of disordered desire, ignorance, or disordered reason is a trope with which both Augustine and Ambrose would have been familiar from their knowledge of rhetoric and oratory. But the broad similarities so far are unmistakable: both undertake their inquiry while engaging with similar understandings of anthropology and similar difficulties in each person’s search for happiness. Ambrose and Augustine engage the question of the happy life with a meditation on the human condition insofar as one is struggling with concupiscence and ignorance. Both build on an anthropology of man as a composite being whose bodily health and activities are properly oriented toward the good of the soul.⁷⁰ They also each recognize that both right desire and right reason are necessary for progress. Augustine’s three classes of sailors illustrate the different kinds of imbalances and disorders that can obtain. The disordered condition of one’s desire and ignorance are the two categories Augustine gives in his dedication letter describing men on the open seas outside the port of philosophy.

Both authors agree that right reason and good habituation lead one to virtue, which sets one on the trajectory towards happiness. The contrast between the authors is largely in emphasis and source material. Ambrose is drawing primarily on Scriptural accounts to make his argument; Augustine’s sources are mixed but are primarily pagan philosophers (as we will see later). Ambrose’s exemplars are Old Testament patriarchs; Augustine names the otherwise-unknown

⁶⁸ Ambrose, *Jacob* 6.24.

⁶⁹ Ambrose, *Jacob* 6.24.

⁷⁰ Ambrose, *Jacob* 1.7.

Roman Orata. Ambrose uses only examples of success stories, of proper orientation of desire and reason, but like Augustine's, his examples cover an array of ages and situations such that the average reader might identify more easily with the examples in order to imitate their good actions.⁷¹ Both think that the practice of moral virtue is essential in coming to know and love God.

In contrast to Ambrose, Augustine does not make any claims about the fall of man particularly, but his conversation with Adeodatus about unclean spirits on day two is a point at which we can consider the origins of the disordered desires that the mariners face in the opening letter, and that Augustine attests to having faced in the autobiographical section.⁷² In that exchange, Augustine indicates that people have to deal with the unclean spirit that may be caused by something external coming into the soul or may be due to vices and errors.⁷³ He does not make clear whether this uncleanness of spirit is a universal affliction to be overcome by each individual; he and Adeodatus are focused rather on seeing and eliminating obstacles to the possession of God. Only if a person does *not* have an unclean spirit can he possess God.

This illustrates a difference between Ambrose and Augustine not necessarily in opinion, but in emphasis. Augustine quickly moves beyond the question of moderation of the body to the desires of the mind. One eats well for the health of the body, but that health is in turn subordinated to the good of the soul, he and his interlocutors determine on day one. For both authors, moderation of concupiscible desires is a gateway to the more important activities of the soul. This can be seen particularly in the second day's conversation. As Augustine and his interlocutors agree, it is not enough to be free of an unclean spirit to say that someone is happy.

⁷¹ Ambrose claims in the opening sentence, in fact, that "virtue is teachable" and that "necessary for the training of all men is good discourse, full of prudence." *Jacob* 1.1.

⁷² Augustine, *De beata vita* 1.4.

⁷³ Augustine, *De beata vita* 3.18.

It is Monica who clarifies that “[h]e who lives well has God, but God is well-disposed to him; he who lives badly has God, but God is against him. However, he who is still seeking God and has not yet found Him has God neither well-disposed to him nor against him, but he is not without God.”⁷⁴ God is not apart from any man, but he is well-disposed only to the one who is living well, *and* that person has to have found God, not just be seeking him. “Living well,” or the virtuous life as Ambrose styles it, is a necessary but insufficient cause of happiness. One has to make room for higher things by cultivating virtue.

The two pictures are alike in two particular respects, however: one can only be unified with God if one has been purified of every stain of sin,⁷⁵ and that purified soul’s happiness “should consist in nothing else but the possession of the true and the good.”⁷⁶ Ambrose characterizes this possession of God as one of friendship: the purified soul is drawn into friendship with the God who is himself free of any corruption.⁷⁷ Such friendship is all-encompassing, such that loss of material goods cannot disturb one from this happiness; this brings to mind Monica’s observation that a man who finds his happiness in his wealth lacks wisdom and cannot be happy for fear of loss, but he who wants what he should (i.e., God) and has that desire, cannot be unhappy.⁷⁸

It is also worth noting that Ambrose is heavily influenced by Plotinus’s *Ennead* I. In his translation, McHugh’s footnotes make clear the parallels in sections of the sermon where Ambrose follows the argumentation of *Ennead* I.4 closely.⁷⁹ The volume of overlap is

⁷⁴ “*Qui bene uiuit, habet deum, se propitium, qui male, habet deum, sed aduersum, qui autem adhuc quaerit nondumque inuenit, neque propitium neque aduersum, sed non est sine deo,*” Augustine, *De beata vita* 3.21.

⁷⁵ See above.

⁷⁶ Ambrose, *Jacob* 7.32; cf. Augustine, *De beata vita* 2.11.

⁷⁷ Ambrose, *Jacob* 7.29.

⁷⁸ Augustine, *De beata vita* 2.11.

⁷⁹ See especially 7.28 to the end of Book 1, pp. 137-148.

significant, enough that some scholars claim all of Augustine's Neoplatonism was mediated by Ambrose.⁸⁰ However, Augustine's own attestations to having read Plotinus⁸¹ and "the books of the Platonists"⁸² make that an improbable claim. I look at the parallels between Augustine and that tractate from the *Enneads* below.⁸³

⁸⁰ See, for example, Goulven Madec, *Saint Ambroise et la Philosophie* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1974).

⁸¹ Augustine, *Contra Academicos* 3.18.41.

⁸² Augustine, *De beata vita* 1.4.

⁸³ Chapter 3, Section 1.

2. Other sermons

Ambrose's other sermons of note are *Isaac, or the Soul*, as well as *Death as a Good* and *The Prayer of David and Job*. These are all from roughly the same period. *Isaac, or the Soul* is a retelling of the relationship of Isaac and Rebecca in terms of the *Canticle of Canticles*, and interpreted as the mystical union of Christ with his Church. This sermon is dated between 386 and 391;⁸⁴ there is a case to be made for dating it early enough that Augustine could have read or heard a version of it, because the work opens with the same inquiry into human nature as *De beata vita*: "What, then, is man? Soul, or body, or a union of both?"⁸⁵ Ambrose is posing the question for himself, and his answer to the question is similar to Augustine's: "the soul rules and gives life to the body," and therefore the body and what one does with the body ought to serve the good of the soul.⁸⁶ This, however, is not a claim about anthropology unique to Ambrose, given its Platonic roots. In fact, the image of the soul seeking its homeland while being drawn by both orderly and disordered desires is a retelling of the Phaedrus myth; Ambrose employs this image in multiple works. Ambrose uses this work as an opportunity to show that the desire of every soul is union with God.⁸⁷ However, the soul is not drawn infallibly. It is moved by both orderly desires which are shaped by virtue and disordered desires which are developed as vices.⁸⁸ The pleasures of the body are strong and take root in the person early in life. Spiritual pleasures are much greater, but because they are intangible, they are often unnoticed, unknown, and not

⁸⁴ McHugh, "Introduction" to *Isaac, Or the Soul*, 9.

⁸⁵ Ambrose, *Isaac* 2.3. Holte claims that this image of man is the source for Augustine's later claims about man in God's image. Holte, *Béatitude et sagesse* 167.

⁸⁶ Ambrose, *Isaac* 2.4.

⁸⁷ Ambrose, *Isaac* 3.8.

⁸⁸ Ambrose, *Isaac* 8.65-8.69.

pursued. It takes good pedagogy,⁸⁹ the cultivation of virtue,⁹⁰ and the action of God⁹¹ for the soul seeking its homeland⁹² to attain that which is most desirable.

Death as a Good is thought to have been written as a companion to *Isaac*. Ambrose refers to *Isaac* in the opening lines of *Death* as both a “written... homily” and as a “book.”⁹³ Thus, scholars suppose it to have been written between 387-391, and if delivered as a sermon, it may have been heard by Augustine during his Lenten catechesis before baptism.⁹⁴ If it was composed that late, then Augustine would *not* have read the written text prior to the events of *De beata vita*. There are a couple of points that Ambrose makes that are similar to points in *De beata vita*, however. Ambrose also argues several times about the insufficiency of material wealth for happiness. “If he is sated with riches,” Ambrose says, “he loses the enjoyment of his rest, because he is forced to guard the possessions he has acquired through his wretched greed.”⁹⁵ This is the point Monica makes: even a wealthy man is unhappy because he lacks virtue, and it would be through virtue that the man would be happy.⁹⁶ This is, of course, consonant with the Platonic teachings about virtue. Ambrose also appeals to the banqueting of both body and soul: man as an embodied soul must eat and drink to sustain the body, but the “soul was filled from the seeds of those words” of Christ giving himself in the Eucharist. Ambrose also says that the soul’s being “filled with food and drink” in Proverbs 5 and Canticle of Canticles 5:1 is the source of the Platonic claim that the gods feast in everlasting life.⁹⁷ It is unclear from the text whether he

⁸⁹ Ambrose, *Isaac* 7.57.

⁹⁰ Ambrose, *Isaac* 8.65.

⁹¹ Ambrose, *Isaac* 8.75.

⁹² Ambrose, *Isaac* 8.78.

⁹³ Ambrose, *Death as a Good* 1.1.

⁹⁴ McHugh, Introduction to *Death as a Good* 69.

⁹⁵ Ambrose, *Death as a Good* 2.4.

⁹⁶ Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.27.

⁹⁷ Ambrose, *Death as a Good* 6.21; cf. Plato, *Symposium* 203B.

thinks that Plato drew his images in the *Symposium* from Biblical origins, or if Ambrose is appealing to the truth that the origin of all spiritual goods is God.⁹⁸ Likewise, regarding the effects of virtue and vice on the soul, he says, “I have used the writings of Esdras so that the pagans may know that the marvelous content of their philosophical works has been taken over from ours” but, he adds, the pagans took it a step farther and erred by mixing these ideas “with superfluous and useless matter,” teaching about the reincarnation of souls into lesser animals if the human failed in life.⁹⁹

The stock image of tranquil harbors and tempestuous seas wends through the cited passages above and reappears in the fourth and final book of *The Prayer of Job and David*. Citing Isaiah 41:1, Ambrose says, “And so, then, the one who enters into the mercy of the Lord, goes in untroubled.” He continues:

Therefore Scripture rightly says, “Be you renewed, O islands,” because, just like islands, we are surrounded on the sea of this world by waves of sin. Those islands were renewed by the forgiveness of sins through the coming of the Lord. That is, men at baptism found themselves, like islands, in the midst of the waters. Like islands, they were pounded by masses of water as the booming waves of their sins rebounded. They were like the islands on which the innocent earlier suffered many a shipwreck on the cliffs of deceit, for guilt was on their heart and flattery on their lips. But then the Lord Jesus, in whom there is no guilt, came into the world. By this setting forth of heavenly teaching, He calmed the depths of human hearts and poured forth tranquility upon the passions of every man Thus every man may anchor the vessel of his own repose in the love of neighbor or of brother and may remain by the shore in the recess of a devout heart, as it were.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ “And from this source are derived from the wine and the honey of the psalmist, the sleep too, and the everlasting life that Plato said his gods spent in feasting, because ‘Christ is the life.’” Ambrose, *Death as a Good* 5.20.

⁹⁹ Ambrose, *Death as a Good* 10.45; cf. Pierre Courcelle, “Anti-Christian Arguments and Christian Platonism: from Arnobius to St. Ambrose,” in *The conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, ed. Arnaldo Momigliano (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963): 183 n. 123.

¹⁰⁰ Ambrose, *Prayer* 4.9.34.

Christ, because he is without deceit, is a sure guide to avoid vainglory, but Augustine does not use that image. He appeals instead to reason: “reason want[s] them to understand [that the mountain of vainglory] is to be feared.”¹⁰¹

Chapter 1 conclusion

One can see that any effort to consider the bishop Ambrose as an exclusively Christian influence in contrast to a philosophical influence is impossible. Ambrose was immersed in the Platonic school of philosophy that Augustine encountered in Milan. A brief survey of some of those influences, as seen in his sermons, especially *Jacob* and *David and Job*, reveal that Ambrose had read widely from among Neoplatonist authors, was competent in Greek and had read several of Plato’s dialogues. However, Ambrose is immersed in Scripture as the primary basis for his examples in *Jacob*. After Monica, Ambrose was Augustine’s second teacher of the faith, so it only makes sense that Ambrose’s influence stands out. Regardless of whether Ambrose is mediating Scripture or the Neoplatonists, however, his influence on Augustine in *De beata vita* is obvious, even though Augustine does not explicitly identify Ambrose in the conversation.

¹⁰¹ “*Nam quem montem alium uult intellegi ratio propinquantibus ad philosophiam ingressisue metuendum,*” Augustine, *De beata vita* 1.3.

Chapter 2. Scripture

Augustine quotes Scripture very rarely in *De beata vita*—in fact, he quotes it only once. He additionally directly refers to it without denoting it as a quotation only in his description of the Trinity, although he possibly quotes it without acknowledgment two other times. His possible Scriptural allusions are also few in number. This is true actually of all the Cassiciacum dialogues. In the *Soliloquies* he makes more references, but even then only a handful. There and in the other dialogues he makes clear reference to Genesis, Matthew, John, Galatians, 1 Corinthians, and 1 John. In *De beata vita*, he quotes only the Gospel of John. This is a stark contrast to his later writings, and especially the *Confessions*, which is replete with Scriptural language and in which the reader is immersed in his prayer through that vocabulary and mode of thinking. There, Scriptural language seamlessly interpenetrates Augustine’s language seamlessly as he appropriates it as his own.¹ This is also in contrast to Ambrose, whose vocabulary is not particularly Scriptural, but who is commenting directly on Scripture and whose examples are drawn almost exclusively from Biblical stories. Augustine is much more prone to rely on his philosophical sources. In part, it may be because of his lack of ready familiarity with Scripture at this point in his life, but the presence of those quotations only in his formulation of the Trinity and not elsewhere indicate the special nature of this dogma as derived properly from Christian sources.

Augustine may also be reticent to make references to Scripture when it seems like he is defending particular Catholic doctrines that are on display in the liturgy due to the practice in the contemporary church of the *disciplina arcani*. For instance, while he may be deliberately using

¹ In his translator’s introduction to *Confessions*, Thomas Williams has an excellent discussion about this, as it leads into the difficulties of translating and citing the references to Scripture in *Confessions*. See “Introduction,” xvii-xxiv.

language to evoke thought of the Eucharist when talking about feasts and especially those provided by God, he may be unwilling to address it directly because he was still only a catechumen. The *disciplina arcani*, which is a more recent name employed to describe the old methods, was a practice of withholding substantial catechesis from catechumens on “the mysteries” as well as the Creed. Only those who had received the sacrament of initiation—that is, baptism—would remain for the Eucharistic liturgy.² Ambrose addresses this in a letter to his sister Marcellina, where he says that instruction on the Creed was given to those who had been baptized, and not before.³ Only after baptism were they introduced to a theology and explanation of the Eucharist as well.⁴ Therefore, while Augustine knew some of the teachings of the Catholics in this regard, he may have been reluctant to discuss them even among those preparing for baptism alongside him. Thus, all the more must allusions to Scriptural images that relate to particular doctrines be identified only tentatively where Augustine does not draw the explicit connections.

² For a good overview of this, see Edward Yarnold, “The Awe-Inspiring Rites,” in *The Origins of the RCIA* (Edinburgh: T&T Press, 1994): 55-66.

³ “The day after, which was Sunday, after the lessons and the sermon, when the Catechumens were dismissed, I was teaching the creed to certain candidates in the baptistery of the basilica.” Ambrose, *Letter 20.4*.

⁴ Ambrose, *De mysteriis* chapters 8-9.

Section 1. References

Augustine's direct references to Scripture appear only in the final day of the dialogue, in the context of identifying the God who is the cause of happiness with the Trinity of Catholic Christianity. Augustine draws on Christ's Last Supper discourses from John 14 in his description of the Trinity in order to identify Jesus with God and to attribute both the names "Wisdom" and "Truth" to Jesus. He says, "But what is to be called wisdom other than the wisdom of God? We have also learned by divine authority, however, that the Son of God is none other than the Wisdom of God, and the Son of God is surely God... But what do you think wisdom is, if not the truth? For scripture also says, *I am the truth.*"⁵ This last sentence quotes John 14.6:⁶ "Jesus saith to him: I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No man cometh to the Father, but by me."⁷ Augustine is not only drawing on Christ's self-referential statement, but seems to be deriving his Trinitarian formulation *in toto* from this section of John. Just after this passage, in response to Philip's inquiry, Jesus says, "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me?"⁸ The Holy Spirit—which Augustine calls the "admonition" or "warning"⁹—is promised in what follows: "But the Paraclete, the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he will

⁵ "*Quae est autem dicenda sapientia nisi quae dei sapientia est? Accepimus autem etiam auctoritate diuina dei filium nihil esse aliud quam dei sapientiam, et est dei filius profecto deus. ... Sed quid putatis esse sapientiam nisi ueritatem? Etiam hoc enim dictum est: ego sum ueritas,*" Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.34.

⁶ Foley again points to Scripture and Plotinus as sources: "Wisdom and Truth, then, are identical to the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity. And Truth is also *intellectus*, the Divine Understanding of Intellect (see Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.5.1, 5.5.3)." Foley, "Commentary," in *On the Happy Life*, 149n138.

⁷ Quotations of Scripture are drawn from the Douay-Rheims translation of the Latin Vulgate, which Latin text is the closest we come to what Augustine was working with.

⁸ John 14.10; cf. John 10.30, "I and the Father are one."

⁹ "*Admonitio*," which is, as Foley points out, the Latin variant translation used for Greek *parakletos*. Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.35; Foley, "Commentary" 149.

teach you all things and bring all things to your mind, whatsoever I shall have said to you.”¹⁰

Augustine draws his quotation from a context in which the Trinity is implied in order to develop his own description of the Trinity in *De beata vita*.

The reference that is not explicitly quoted comes in this same section, when Augustine remarks, “But what is to be called wisdom other than the wisdom of God? We have also learned by divine authority, however, that the Son of God is none other than the Wisdom of God, and the Son of God is surely God.”¹¹ This is a reference to 1 Corinthians 1:24: “[We preach] Christ, the power [*virtus*] of God and the wisdom of God.” We know that Augustine was familiar with this scriptural passage because it features in his famous moment of moral conversion portrayed in *Confessions* 8.¹² It is possible that Augustine has this same passage in mind earlier in the day’s conversation when he says that whatever the wise man does, he does only if it is in accord with “some precept of virtue and by the divine law of wisdom,”¹³ although Augustine did not make it obvious that Scripture was being alluded to in the earlier passage. However, similar language is used by a number of pagan philosophers. In context, the earlier allusion follows a direct quote from Terence, which does not put one in mind of Scripture. Its content could also have been drawn from Stoic philosophy. We see this declaration of a kind of divine law as an interior

¹⁰ John 14:26.

¹¹ “*Quae est autem dicenda sapientia nisi quae dei sapientia est? Accepimus autem etiam auctoritate diuina dei filium nihil esse aliud quam dei sapientiam, et est dei filius profecto deus,*” Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.34.

¹² There is another possibility, that this is a reference to Romans 2:14-15, “For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts.”

¹³ “*non agat nisi ex uirtutis quodam praescripto et diuina lege sapientiae,*” Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.25.

direction of man's action in Cicero's *De finibus*,¹⁴ and *De legibus*.¹⁵ And, as Foley points out, "The divinity of 'wisdom and true virtue [*virtus*]' are also mentioned in Plotinus."¹⁶

The book of Wisdom, one of the books counted among the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, is one Augustine will quote quite frequently even as soon as 388 when he writes *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae*. It is thought, however, that he was not familiar with Wisdom at the time of his conversion.¹⁷ Of particular note is this verse in Wisdom: "Thou hast ordered all things in measure, and number, and weight."¹⁸ It is possible that Augustine was familiar with this verse and was thinking of it when he identifies God the Father with "Supreme Measure."¹⁹ The admonishment of God appears in the following chapter of the Vulgate's division of Wisdom: "Therefore thou chastisest them that err, by little and little: and admonishest them, and speakest to them, concerning the things wherein they offend: that leaving their wickedness, they may believe in thee, O Lord."²⁰ The Holy Spirit is identified as the Admonisher also in this part of *De beata vita*.²¹ I am more inclined, however, to maintain that this similarity is accidental rather than

¹⁴ "The exercise of the noblest part of man's nature, the divine element within us (for so we must consider the keen edge of the intellect and the reason)." Cicero, *De finibus bonorum et malorum*, trans. Harris Rockham (London: Loeb, 1931): 5.57.

¹⁵ "Moreover, what is more divine than reason... When it has grown up and been fully developed, it is rightly named wisdom. Therefore, since nothing is better than reason, and since it [is] in both human being and God, the primary fellowship of human being with god involves reason; and among those who have reason in common, correct reason is also in common. Since that is law, we should also consider human beings to be united with gods by law." In the dialogue, this is Marcus Tullius Cicero speaking. Cicero, *De legibus*, trans. David Fott (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2014) 1.22.

¹⁶ Plotinus, *Enneads*, trans. Makenna and Page, 4.7.10. Foley also suggests the allusion to 1 Cor. 1:24. Foley, "Commentary," p. 146, n. 113.

¹⁷ Foley lists the writings Augustine is thought to have been familiar with in his introduction to the Cassiciacum Dialogues, and Wisdom is not included on that list. It is not a book he cites by name until later in life. Foley, "General Introduction to the Cassiciacum Dialogues," in *On the Happy Life* xli.

¹⁸ Vulgate: Wisdom 11:21, modern translations: 10:20.

¹⁹ "*summo modo*," Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.35.

²⁰ Wisdom 12:2.

²¹ Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.35.

an intentional allusion, in part because neither of these passages plays a significant role in Augustine's later work *De Trinitate*, where one finds an extensive survey of what Augustine thinks are Trinitarian passages in the Bible.

I will discuss below the Plotinian influences on this section of *De beata vita*'s formulation of the Trinity. In particular, I point out moments of divergence in which Augustine uses the particularly Christian understanding of the Trinity.

Section 2. Allusions

As said above, tracing allusions—not quotations—to Scripture is a difficult business. Augustine’s use of Scripture is particularly ambiguous, in large part because we do not know just how much of it he was familiar with at the time of this dialogue. There may be as little as what is indicated in the previous section, or there may be much more. Scripture has a lot to say about man’s pursuit of the happy life (and of his many failings along the way!), and so one could very well find some scriptural reference for every premise in *De beata vita*. However, Augustine seems to be avoiding the use of Scripture up until the very end of the dialogue. Indeed, earlier in the dialogue, when Monica suggests answers derived from her practical wisdom and life-long devotion as a Catholic, Augustine counters them with passages from philosophers, although he could have turned to Scripture. Hence, it could be a betrayal of Augustine’s authorial intent to dredge up all possible scriptural references in *De beata vita*, if he was deliberately avoiding quoting Scripture up until the Trinitarian passage at the very end.²²

For these reasons, I will only suggest one allusion from the text: the meal imagery.²³ In Proverbs, we are told that “Wisdom has set forth her table” and that to those invited she says, “[E]at my bread, and drink the wine which I have mingled for you. Forsake childishness, and live, and walk by the ways of prudence.”²⁴ Here we have the analogy of a physical meal for the truly substantial meal of wisdom. It is also a persistent theme in the wisdom literature, that wisdom is not an independent virtue but that the wise man also cultivates other virtues. In *De*

²² The *disciplina arcana*, or the practice of holding secret certain teachings until one has been fully initiated may have also influenced his reluctance to use Scripture. This is discussed above.

²³ This allusion struck me immediately upon reading the dialogue, and afterwards I discovered that Michael Foley, in his commentary on *De beata vita*, has a lovely parallel discussion of this Eucharistic imagery. See “Commentary,” pp. 111-113. See also above, Part 2, Chapter 1.

²⁴ Proverbs 9:2, 5-6.

beata vita, Augustine has asked his interlocutors to a banquet at which he is serving a meal not for the body, but for the soul.²⁵ This rich food is intended to satisfy him and his interlocutors in a way that is more lasting than any physical meal as they continue in their quest for happiness. For the first two days of the dialogue, that which satisfies and makes a person truly happy is spoken of as God, but on the third day, it is Monica who says that the person who is satisfied must have wisdom.²⁶ This is what instigates Augustine's extended consideration of folly and wisdom, or need and satisfaction. The substance on which the soul is fed is wisdom, and Augustine exhorts them all to virtue, not some separable intellectual virtue of "wisdom." Monica tells us that the wealthy man's unhappiness is due to the lack of virtue, particularly the lack of wisdom. Augustine tells us that moderation is foundational in the pursuit of wisdom.²⁷ Wisdom is seen to be built on lower virtues, all of which contribute to the flourishing of the individual—to his ability to delight in wisdom's banquet, in fact.

Augustine's familiarity with Proverbs at the time of his conversion is unknown. However, the tradition of interpreting that passage in Proverbs as a prophecy of Christ and the Eucharist lends credence to Augustine's familiarity with it in this context, where he also identifies that Wisdom with Christ. The analogues of physical, intellectual, and spiritual nourishment are clearly relevant to the overall concern of the happy life. Finally, although the ritual of the Eucharist is particular to Christianity, the importance of meals in common seems to be an accessible image to believers and non-believers alike. The passage from Wisdom, as a possible Scriptural allusion in *De beata vita*, draws together the meal imagery with the pursuit of happiness culminating in wisdom.

²⁵ Augustine, *De beata vita* 2.9.

²⁶ Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.27.

²⁷ Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.27.

Chapter 3. The Platonists

We turn now to a consideration over which much ink has been spilled: which Neoplatonists did Augustine read? In the dedication letter of *De beata vita*, Augustine recounts having read “a few books of the Platonists”¹ or of Plotinus, depending on the manuscript tradition.² In the text of *De beata vita* there are echoes of Neoplatonist, and particularly Plotinian, doctrines. The majority of scholars believe Augustine read some of the *Enneads* by Plotinus. Others argue that he probably read Porphyry’s *Isagoge* and *Philosophy from Oracles*.³ One scholar even makes the argument that Augustine read Porphyry’s *Against the Christians*, but deliberately did not name the work until writing the *City of God* many years later.⁴ An even smaller contingent says he got all his Platonism secondhand from Ambrose.⁵ This last claim seems unlikely because Augustine does not hesitate to name Ambrose when speaking about him

¹ “*Lectis autem Plotini paucissimis libris,*” Augustine, *De beata vita* 1.4.

² See above, Part I, Chapter 1

³ Several scholars over the decades have created a helpful breakdown of the debates in their own contributions. See Robert J. O’Connell, “The *Enneads* and St. Augustine’s Image of Happiness,” in *Vigiliae Christianae* 17, no. 3; September 1963): 129-164, for scholars’ opinions on which *Enneads* Augustine read, as well as O’Connell, “Augustine and Plotinus: A Reply to Sr. Mary Clark,” (*International Philosophical Quarterly* 12; 1972): 604-608; see Ronnie J. Rombs, *Saint Augustine and the Fall of the Soul: Beyond O’Connell and His Critics* (Washington, DC: Catholic Univ. Press, 2006): 1-22, for a breakdown of scholars in each position from its beginnings with particular attention to those authors’ positions with respect to the fall of the soul. See Boone, *Conversion and Therapy of Desire*, pp. 3-4, for a characterization of more recent (i.e., since 2016) contributions especially as those authors’ positions with respect to the authenticity of Augustine’s conversion to Christianity (vs. to Neoplatonism).

⁴ Rombs, *Saint Augustine*, 256.

⁵ For example, see Madec, *Saint Ambroise et la Philosophie*. In surprising contrast, Gary Wills argues that Ambrose was *not* Neoplatonist; this seems to ignore the literal quotations of Plotinus in some of Ambrose’s sermons. Wills, *Augustine’s Confessions*, 56.

in particular, but in *De beata vita* he refers more generically to the Platonists, and in *Contra Academicos* he says that Plotinus was like Plato reincarnated.^{6,7}

I am not particularly concerned with the exact identity of the works Augustine read, although the scholarship establishes a helpful limited number of works as likely candidates. I hold that Augustine and the Neoplatonic authors he read were pursuing the truth and seeing something true about the ontological structure of reality. No one has a monopoly on that truth. Rather than entering the fray of the debates, I will attend to a small number of particular points in the dialogue at which Neoplatonic influence is detectable. These comparisons will allow us to gain a deeper comprehension of *De beata vita* as a work of philosophy that is distinctly Christian. The parallels are themselves quite fascinating, particularly in the way that Monica is a “fount” of wisdom despite her lack of familiarity with the writings of the philosophers.⁸ The divergences are of particular note, however, in showing the ways in which Augustine is particularly Christian in his philosophy. Here, then, I will investigate Neoplatonic themes in *De beata vita* insofar as they can be elucidated by reference particularly to Plotinus, Porphyry, and Ambrose. The bulk of these themes and passages are from Plotinus.

We know from Augustine’s *Confessions* that one of Ambrose’s colleagues, Simplicianus, approved of Augustine’s reading of the Neoplatonists. Simplicianus was a teacher of doctrine

⁶ Augustine, *Contra Academicos*, 3.18.41. This is his only textual reference to Plotinus in that work.

⁷ On this point, I am in agreement with Kenney that it seems almost as though Augustine does not *want* us to know: “He does not identify the books he read; he does not quote them at Cassiciacum (where he quotes scriptural texts and Vergil explicitly); he does not make them the objects of explicit discussion with quotation; he does not write commentary upon them (the way he comments upon scripture); they never become part of his explicit, spontaneously quoted literary life.” Kenney, *Contemplation*, 41.

⁸ Once, after Monica speaks, Augustine marvels and tells his readers he “tried to understand from what divine source” this knowledge flowed. “*Ex quo illa et quam diuino fonte manarent,*” *De beata vita* 2.10.

under Ambrose and succeeded him as bishop of Milan (C8.2.3). I argue that Ambrose and Simplicianus's comfort with the Neoplatonists—as part of a broader community of Platonist Christians—makes more plausible in its context my argument presented in Part IV that Christianity encompasses true philosophy.

Section 1. Plotinus

The discussion about which of Plotinus's writings Augustine read prior to his conversion has shifted back and forth over the years between asking what Augustine's sources were (source criticism) and a more serious inquiry into the honesty of his conversion to Christianity. There are detractors from both discussions who think the arguments are unimportant.⁹ But since this project is explicitly concerned with how Augustine sees the relationship between philosophy and Christianity, the question of the authenticity of his conversion has a bearing. There are four distinct positions for which various scholars argue. One claims that Augustine converted to Neoplatonism and only later in life (roughly by the time he wrote *Confessions*) did he convert to Christianity.¹⁰ A second position is that Augustine converted solely to Christianity and was not a Neoplatonist at the time he was at Cassiciacum. For example, Catherine Conybeare, in her *Irrational Augustine*, argues that "instead of discovering later in life that the neo-Platonic, rationalist quest for the happy life is doomed to failure and needs to be rethought [...] Augustine was developing this critique immediately after his conversion and wrote about it at

⁹ See, e.g., Fortin's discussion of this in "Reflections on the Proper Way to Read Augustine the Theologian," 95-114, particularly p. 99. Fortin does not think that the question of what Augustine read is essential: "it contributes little to the enhancement of his stature as a thinker." Ernest Fortin, "Reflections on the Proper Way to Read Augustine the Theologian," in *The Birth of Philosophic Christianity: Studies in Early Christian and Medieval Thought. Ernest L. Fortin: Collected Essays, Volume 1*, ed. J. Brian Benestad (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996): 95-114. Oddly, in a 1989 article, Beatrice asserts (without supporting his claim) that the authenticity of Augustine's conversion is a false problem and that scholars are only interested in the literary question. The secondary literature of the last thirty years defies his claim. Pier Franco Beatrice, "Quosdam Platoniorum Libros: The Platonic Readings of Augustine in Milan," *Vigiliae Christianae* 43, no. 3 (September 1989): 248.

¹⁰ This seems to originate in the secondary literature in an old article by Bossier, published in 1888, and has retained adherents periodically since. Boone, in *Conversion and the Therapy of Desire*, summarizes this argument and the variations of it up until the 2016 publication of his work. See especially pp. 3-4.

Cassiciacum.”¹¹ A third position is a claim that Augustine was both a Neoplatonist and a Christian, because the two are not essentially incompatible.¹² And a fourth position is that Augustine is a Christian who takes the insights of Neoplatonism seriously, while always giving preeminence to the claims of Christianity.¹³ My arguments stand in support of this fourth position, but contributes with respect to this dialogue particularly in my reading that *De beata vita* illustrates that Christianity is inseparable from philosophy, insofar as Christianity encompasses true philosophy. This argument is elaborated in Part IV.

The concern about the authenticity of Augustine’s conversion is part of a larger question about what *De beata vita* reveals more generally about the relationship between Christianity and philosophy. In this section, I will be looking at a selection of texts by Plotinus, but not with an eye to ascertaining whether Augustine did read these particular texts (and not others).¹⁴ Rather, these chapters from Plotinus help explain the conclusions Augustine comes to in making his arguments about happiness and the possession of God in *De beata vita*. There are puzzling moments in the dialogue that make greater sense in light of Plotinian doctrines. There are other parallels of doctrine that Monica suggests. I also examine these points of contact while also maintaining the awareness that, as Rombs puts it, “even if Augustine can be shown to be

¹¹ Boone, *Conversion*, 2.

¹² This position is held most notably by O’Connell, in various works (see bibliography). See also Boone, *Conversion*, 3.

¹³ Boone, *Conversion*, 4. Boone lists scholars who make variations on this argument, including (but not limited to) himself, Carol Harrison, Goulven Madec, Eugene Kevane, Paul Kolbet, Ryan Topping, Etienne Gilson, Mary Clark, John Rist, Gillian R Evans, Joanne McWilliam, Ernest Fortin, and Michael Foley. The extent to which each of these authors provides textual evidence and analysis from *De beata vita* varies, but none engage in the concentrated textual analysis I undertake here. The relevant works by these authors are listed in the Bibliography, below.

¹⁴ Primarily, I base my selections on the “moderate list” proposed by O’Connell, but have not limited myself to those where it seems appropriate to draw from others. Robert J. O’Connell, “The Enneads and St. Augustine’s Image of Happiness,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 17, no. 3 (September 1963): 129. See my Introduction.

borrowing images and terms from Plotinus, it does not follow that Augustine meant by those terms exactly what Plotinus formerly had meant ... [T]he meaning of those images and phrases are transformed by the new context.”¹⁵ By analyzing these shared images and phrases in their new Augustinian context, these chapters of Plotinus help clarify and deepen a reader’s understanding of Augustine’s anthropology, his understanding of the happy life (which includes his uncertainties in the opening nautical image about the origin of the soul, as well as the *exitus-reditus* schema of the soul and the material world in relation to God), and his attempt at formulating the Trinity at the end of *De beata vita*. While there are clear parallels between Augustine and Plotinus, what becomes obvious is that Augustine is being distinctly Christian, either substantially or by virtue of the method of presentation, when it comes to points on which Augustine is silent and/or diverges from Plotinian teaching regarding the nature of God.

¹⁵ Rombs, *Saint Augustine*, 11.

§1. Anthropology: *Ennead I.1*

One of the significant ways in which Augustine's thought seems to have been influenced and sharpened by Plotinus is with respect to the nature of the human being, especially inasmuch as a thinker's anthropology figures into his concept of happiness.¹⁶ For Augustine's school of family and friends at Cassiciacum, understanding the nature of the human being was a significant concern in order to live out their (for some of them newfound) Catholic faith. Augustine begins this dialogue on happiness with an anthropology, which moves later into ethics. Plotinus's anthropology involves a very peculiar understanding of the nature of soul and the relationship of soul to a particular individual's body, which anthropology figures into an ethics. I argue here that Navigius had the Plotinian anthropology in mind when he dialogues with Augustine in the beginning of *De beata vita*. Augustine's dismissal of that concern indicates two things. First, a Plotinian understanding of the nature of a human being is not necessary for a person to engage in the activities proper to a happy life. Since those activities do not hinge upon knowledge of Plotinus's complicated anthropology, we can see one of the ways Christianity is accessible to anyone, not just a specially educated or intelligent elite group. Second, his silence regarding his lack of confirmation of Plotinus indicates that he will not condone a position that shares in common with Manichaeism a dualism and denigration of the body. It is unnecessary for Augustine to refute this position in order to complete his current task of identifying the happy life, and the position is false—but showing that it is false is not necessary if Navigius is willing to let the issue pass as he pursues the truth instead.

¹⁶ There is also a similarity in the two thinkers' concepts of happiness, as I discuss in the next section.

In *Ennead* I.1,¹⁷ Plotinus addresses the nature and identity of human beings. He argues that a human being is capable of two kinds of reasoning, discursive and intellective. The former is associated with man insofar as he is embodied, while the latter is separate from man's bodily existence.¹⁸ This latter capacity for intellective thought is the essential characteristic of a human being and is proper to man's immaterial soul. This soul is the form of an individual, sometimes referred to as the "Existent," and is "supremely free, dwelling, unchangeable, within its own peculiar nature."¹⁹ For something to be supremely free and unchangeable, it must be somehow distinct or separable from matter and time. Thus human beings have to have a soul that is distinct and separable from their body. However, the body itself has certain powers only possible through another form Plotinus also calls a soul, but a soul of a lesser kind: "[s]ense-perception, discursive reasoning, and all our ordinary [mental activities]" are proper to man's embodied existence because they all involve to some degree sensory experiences of material things.²⁰ This means that in Plotinus's estimation man is made up of three things: two souls and a body; that is, man has an immaterial soul capable of intellective reason which is most properly man, and a soul capable of sense perception and discursive reason that is the form of the body. Elsewhere, Plotinus makes this even more definite: "The combination [of body and soul] is not the man, and especially not the *spoudaios*" or serious man.²¹ A lesser man may seek to identify with his lower

¹⁷ This is the first in the Porphyrian ordering of the *Enneads* but probably one of the last written by Plotinus. See Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 24. I retain the capitalization scheme of the Mackenna and Page translation of the *Enneads*, with the exception of references to *Ennead* I.4, where I make use of a more recent translation and helpful commentary by McGroarty. Kieran McGroarty, *Plotinus on Eudaimonia: A Commentary on Ennead I.4* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006).

¹⁸ Plotinus, *Ennead* I.1.8.

¹⁹ Plotinus, *Ennead* I.1.2.

²⁰ Plotinus, *Ennead* I.1.2.

²¹ Plotinus, *Ennead* I, trans. McGroarty, 4.14.

soul and body, but Plotinus thinks that ties to matter are “foreign” to man and his higher, intellectual soul.²²

Plotinus is deliberately distinguishing himself from two other possible ways of understanding the soul and human nature: Aristotelian and Stoic. The Stoic aspect becomes important for the question of the happy life, as discussed in the next section. In an Aristotelian hylomorphic understanding of man as a body-soul composite, the soul is the substantial form of the body, and therefore man has his identity only as it is found in that very composite being. Plotinus’s position is what he calls a “philosophical separation” of body and soul, but by that he does not mean this is merely a conceptual distinction,²³ which one could also make of the hylomorphic compound. Rather, he reasons that because intellection is a higher capacity for reason in man that does not involve the material body, man should be identified with that higher capacity and its separation from the body. Those lower powers that *do* involve the body are not appropriate to the true identity of man, whose activities function primarily as distractions. He concludes there has to be a real separation between the two in their identity in order to properly locate the reality and identity of the person as being his higher soul. While the human being receives sensations and is affected through the body, and that body is properly disposed to receiving those by virtue of its being a human body, this is distinct from the man as an Existent.²⁴ This human body is what Plotinus calls the “Animate,” a body shaped and made alive by a form distinct from the intellectual soul.²⁵

On the first day of conversation in *De beata vita*, when Navigius asks whether there might be more than two somethings to man—more than just body and soul—he demonstrates an

²² Plotinus, *Ennead* I.1.2.

²³ Plotinus, *Ennead* I.1.3.

²⁴ Plotinus, *Ennead* I.1.7.

²⁵ Plotinus, *Ennead* I.1.6.

awareness of the Plotinian tri-elemental human nature, which seems to be motivating his question.²⁶ Strangely, Augustine is not concerned with resolving this question in the moment. His response is that they are agreed that there are in man a certain “two,” body and soul, and in what follows he demonstrates that this is sufficient to explain the pursuit of the happy life.²⁷ For this question, he does not think he needs to seek some third thing to come up with a Plotinian “joint-entity” of lower soul and body, or two different kinds of soul in one individual.²⁸ He uses interchangeably in this portion of the text “life” (*vita*) and “soul” (*animam*), whereas for Plotinus the question of life and soul are distinct. Soul is not the principle of life, but of desire; intellect is the principle of life.²⁹ But as Augustine understands it, man has life and a body. Man needs material food for the body, and the soul is fed on understanding and the knowledge of things.³⁰ There is no third thing. He leaves Navigius’s concern unanswered, and in his own working out of the happy life it seems that he does so because he disagrees with Plotinus.

The question in *De beata vita* of happiness as it relates to the nature of the human soul is important when we look at Augustine’s audience for this dialogue. Not only is this a record of a conversation, but Augustine decided after the dialogue took place that it would be appropriate to dedicate this work to Theodorus, who is another Christian Platonist in Milan. Theodorus is himself concerned with the nature and origins of the soul. Augustine has a chance to affirm a Plotinian position about the soul and to relate that to another philosopher investigating the question. But he does not, and he sends that silence off to Theodorus. The Plotinian claims further complicate the question unnecessarily.

²⁶ Augustine, *De beata vita* 2.7.

²⁷ Augustine, *De beata vita* 2.7.

²⁸ Augustine, *De beata vita* 2.9.

²⁹ Plotinus, *Ennead* I.1.4.

³⁰ As Monica points out, *De beata vita* 2.8.

Note, however, that while an extensive consideration of the nature of the soul is not important for Augustine in *De beata vita*, it is something he takes up later and thoroughly in *De immortalitate animae* (387) and *De animae quantitate* (388).³¹ Furthermore, there are other reasons why the question of human nature is important, particularly considering the Incarnation as well as the identity of the individual after death and in the resurrection. A more thoroughly examined anthropology is not a moot point, but the Plotinian position is not one Augustine is willing to endorse.

³¹ In *Retractationes* 5.1, Augustine tells us that *De immortalitate animae* was intended to be the completion of his *Soliloquies*. The *Soliloquies* is one of the Cassiciacum works, which was left unfinished in two books. Augustine's notes for the third were circulated before he worked them into the form he had intended, so the work survives independently and is a very difficult work to read, obscure even to Augustine at the time of the *Retractationes*. Augustine, *Retractationes* 5.1.

§ 2. Happiness: *Ennead* I.4

Augustine and Plotinus investigate the cause and attainment of happiness following a pattern that is common to many ancient philosophers in the generally Platonic tradition. However, there are three parallels in particular between Augustine and Plotinus worth pointing out. The first of these is about the power with which one attains to the good. The second is about the need to desire the proper object or good for man and not any other good. The third is the virtue most properly associated with happiness, wisdom. I point here primarily to the similarities between the two authors and their approaches, but their differences make it obvious that they mean different things in the details, even though both *De beata vita* and the *Enneads* lead us to the conclusion that happiness is in some sense the possession of God.

Plotinus, in writing about happiness or *eudaimonia* in the *Enneads*, ultimately locates happiness in the noetic or intellectual activity of the higher soul.³² It cannot, he says, be tied simply to life or living well. This would grant *eudaimonia* to plants and all living things insofar as they live according to their natures; this is his particular disagreement with Aristotle.³³ Additionally, it is not merely attaining “the primary things according to nature,” a Stoic position.³⁴ He observes that for a human being, reason is necessary to determine what those things are, to work to obtain them, and to recognize when one has them, and this would put the higher power of reason subservient to many things “according to nature” that are for the good of the lower nature of man.³⁵ The serious man, who is striving to be happy as a man, must pursue

³² Plotinus, *Ennead* I.4.5. The word “*nous*” is translated by McGroarty as “noetic”; the Mackenna and Page translation employs “intellection.”

³³ Plotinus, *Ennead* I.4.1.

³⁴ See, for example, the character Cato’s arguments in Book III of the *Tusculan Disputations*. Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 3.

³⁵ Plotinus, *Ennead* I.4.2.

the highest good for himself through his highest power. This highest good is *the* Good itself, which is the “transcendent cause that is [the cause] of the good in him.”³⁶ Thus, and as we can see building on the anthropology detailed in the previous section, because we know that Plotinus distinguishes between two souls in man, lower and higher, it follows that man’s happiness is attained through the use of his higher soul, which activity is perfected by wisdom.

Augustine’s approach to the happy life follows a similar pattern. In asking about the nature of a human being, what nourishes each part of him, and the relationship of those parts, he is orienting his interlocutors to locating happiness in the soul rather than the body. Food is the proper nourishment of the body, and understanding and knowledge of things is proper nourishment for the soul.³⁷ It is Monica who points out that there is a nourishment appropriate for the soul that is different from what the body needs. Commenting on the eating habits of Trygetius, she says, “Didn’t you yourself teach us today whence or where the soul is fed? For only after taking some lunch did you say that you noticed what dish we were using, since you had been thinking about I don’t know what else. . . . From this consideration, believe me that the mind is fed on courses such as these—that is, on its own contemplations and thoughts.”³⁸ Unless man nourishes his intellectual soul, he is famished³⁹ and unhappy.⁴⁰ Augustine clarifies that it is not just the contemplations and thoughts, but the solid knowledge and understanding that satisfies.⁴¹ Augustine says later that “the happy life is situated” in “the soul itself.”⁴² But

³⁶ Plotinus, *Ennead* I.4.4.

³⁷ Augustine, *De beata vita* 2.7.

³⁸ “*Hodie, inquit illa, tu ipse nonne docuisti, unde aut ubi anima pascatur? Nam post aliquantam prandii partem te dixisti aduertisse, quo uasculo uteremur, quod alia nescio quae cogitasses ... Inde, mihi crede, et talibus epulis animus pascitur, id est theoriis et cogitationibus suis.*” Augustine, *De beata vita* 2.8.

³⁹ Augustine, *De beata vita* 2.8.

⁴⁰ Augustine, *De beata vita* 2.11.

⁴¹ Michael Foley highlights this in his “Commentary,” 68.

⁴² Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.25.

Augustine does not distinguish between a lower and a higher soul; instead, the “you” to whom Monica refers is Trygetius, and he is nourished bodily by his meals but becomes happy by what his intellect comes to possess. Both Augustine and Plotinus point beyond merely “living well.” At the beginning of day two, Augustine found the proposal that the man who lives well has God to be inadequate.⁴³ It is not sufficient to live well; a measured life of a healthy diet and justice to one’s neighbors will not make a man happy. It is also necessary for that man to be directed to his proper object.

For both Augustine and Plotinus, the proper object of man’s happiness is God, that is, that which is the complete fulfillment of the intellect’s desire as the only object or being who is perfect and perfectly stable. The “possession of God”⁴⁴ for Augustine, or “union with [the divine hypostasis] *Nous*” through noetic activity for Plotinus,⁴⁵ is attained through the activity of man’s intellectual nature, and so lack of the goods of the body or external goods is not necessarily a hindrance to happiness for either author. Plotinus thinks that one ought to care properly for the body, not because it is desirable in itself, but because one does not want to allow the body to get into a distemper that frustrates the activity of *nous*. “In general, we avoid evils [of the body, i.e., pains, illnesses, etc.], but of course such avoidance is not the goal of the will; for rather the goal of the will is to not have been in need of such avoidance.”⁴⁶ But the purification of the man in pursuit of the good is a “disengagement with the body.”⁴⁷ As McGroarty says, this is “Plotinus’ fundamental metaphysical position: the body lives its own life, which does not impede the life of the *spoudaios* who has reascended to [the divine hypostasis] *Nous*, wherein lies the source of his

⁴³ Augustine, *De beata vita* 3.18.

⁴⁴ *Deum habet*, at e.g., 2.11.

⁴⁵ Plotinus, *Ennead* I.4.15.

⁴⁶ Plotinus, *Ennead* I.4.6.

⁴⁷ Plotinus, *Ennead* I.2.6.

eudaimonia.”⁴⁸ Man wants to possess the true good, and that is the sole will of the happy man.

Plotinus permits avoiding bodily ills, but the presence of illness or pain does not take away from a happy man’s happiness because his happiness is not the happiness of the body.⁴⁹

Augustine is strikingly similar in his discussion of the relationship of the body and the soul in the pursuit of happiness:

The soul itself, in which the happy life is situated, has no need of [external goods]. ... [T]he soul will, however, take what is apparently necessary for the body if it’s at hand. If it isn’t, a lack of these things won’t break it... The wise man doesn’t fear either the death of the body or the pains that are to be gotten rid of, avoided, or deferred by those necessities that are susceptible to becoming scarce for him. Nevertheless, if these goods are available, he won’t stop using them well.⁵⁰

Those external goods and the health of the body are useful in service to the wise man, but the wise man’s happiness is dependent upon his wisdom and not those external goods. As with Plotinus, illness and pain do not take away from a happy man’s happiness because his happiness is not in the body.

Finally, for both Plotinus and Augustine, the man who has attained happiness has wisdom, a stable virtue of the intellectual soul that both orients him to his proper good and makes him good and discerning regarding what he needs to be happy. For Plotinus, however, the cultivation of that virtue is necessarily the life of the mind and the pursuit of an extreme ascetic’s intellectual life. In the *De beata vita*, however, Monica is a wise woman who is not an intellectual. Yet she is still praised as one whose “mind [is] utterly attentive to God”⁵¹ and is the

⁴⁸ McGroarty, *Plotinus on eudaimonia*, 95.

⁴⁹ Plotinus, *Ennead* I.4.7.

⁵⁰ Augustine, *Confessions* 4.25.

⁵¹ “*animum adtentissimum in deum*,” Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.27.

person who has the insights that the intellect is nourished by understanding of things,⁵² and that the happy man is happy because of his wisdom and not because of any external goods.⁵³

From this, I conclude that although Augustine's thinking was shaped in some ways by a Plotinian understanding of happiness, it is built on a slightly different anthropology and is apparently open to persons that would be excluded from happiness in the Plotinian schema. Augustine is not being merely Neoplatonist. His points of divergence have implications which are distinctly Christian. The Incarnation, an idea foreign and indeed repugnant to Neoplatonism, indicates that the body is not itself bad and that the proper identity of the human being cannot be solely with his intellectual soul. Further, Christianity is a catholic proposition in being open to persons who are not devoted particularly to the intellectual life. It is true, we read in Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus* that there were female students among those gathered around Plotinus, but those students are described as having "devoted themselves assiduously to philosophy."⁵⁴ Monica, however, is only a sometime participant in the academic life at Cassiciacum. We read in *De beata vita* that she had not been present for the conversation about the Academics, and so had to be briefed on their arguments in order to follow the digression on day one of the dialogue.⁵⁵

⁵² Augustine, *De beata vita* 2.8.

⁵³ Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* 9.

⁵⁴ Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* 9.

⁵⁵ Augustine, *De beata vita* 2.16. Foley draws attention to this in his "Commentary," 88-89. He remarks that Monica's impatience with the position of the Academics as described by Augustine indicates that she is not and never will be a philosopher (89), which seems contrary to Augustine's claim that Monica had attained to the very pinnacle of philosophy (Augustine, *De beata vita* 2.10).

§ 3. The Fall and return of the soul

While the text of *De beata vita* does not reveal Augustine's settled opinion on the nature of the soul, there is one additional point of contact with Plotinus in that regard that demands our attention. In the dedication letter Augustine describes the image of people who find themselves out at sea, cast there by uncertain causes, and desiring to "return" to the port of philosophy.⁵⁶ To think of the person as having been cast out and desiring to return to philosophy is an odd thing, but this appears to be an allusion to the very point on which Augustine remains silent in the dialogue regarding the origin of the human soul. For Plotinus, the soul is fallen from the divine hypostasis Soul, which is itself an emanation of the hypostasis Nous. The differentiated souls of individuals have "fallen" and are ensnared in the body, and in their pursuit of happiness they are trying to "return" to that from whence they came.⁵⁷ For Plotinus, the fall of the soul is an ontological fall: the soul has gone from equal to the divine hypostasis of Soul to being a fallen, lesser being trapped in a body.⁵⁸ In this text, it does not seem clear for Augustine whether the wandering mariners are of a different ontological status, but they are clearly morally separated from their happiness by their attachments to honors and physical pleasures. Augustine is non-committal on why the soul is tossed about on the sea, but they continue in their wanderings because of moral failings. Augustine does not use the language of a "fall," although the things he lists as possibilities (God, nature, necessity, willing, or some combination of these⁵⁹) are also

⁵⁶ "Redeundum," Augustine, *De beata vita* 1.1.

⁵⁷ Plotinus, *Ennead* VI.7.5.

⁵⁸ An ontological fall is a change of status regarding the kind of being; a fallen soul is a lesser kind of being than an unfallen soul. The suffering of a moral fall is still a fall, but the being retains its metaphysical reality and goodness as the same natural kind of being. Ronnie Rombs expends considerable effort to identify the differences between an ontological and a moral fall of the soul in *Saint Augustine and the Fall of the Soul*, Part I.

⁵⁹ Augustine, *De beata vita* 1.1.

possible causes of the fall of the soul according to Plotinus.⁶⁰ However, the sailors do not have to know why they have been cast out into the open sea for them to awaken to their state of unhappiness there and pursue the happy life.

⁶⁰ Plotinus, *Ennead* III.8.8, IV.8.6.

§ 4. Three Hypostases and the Trinity: *Ennead V.1, VI.8*

In the previous section, I mentioned that for both Augustine and Plotinus, the only possible satisfaction of man's desired happiness is God. What they mean by that God is, for both, a three-something, and the language that Augustine uses draws heavily on Plotinian metaphysics. However, in the end, Augustine and Plotinus have different deities. Their deities' different natures also influence what happiness looks like for the pilgrim soul.

At the end of *De beata vita*, Augustine gives his formulation of the Trinity: God the Father is the Supreme Measure, God the Son is the Truth and Wisdom of God, and the Holy Spirit is an Admonition which flows to us from the Fount of Truth. The processions here are Spirit from Son and Son from Father.⁶¹ Together, these “three show one God and one substance.”⁶² These three are co-equal to one another. The Spirit is “none other than God, perfect without the impediment of any corruption.”⁶³ The Son is “surely God. ... [T]here is never truth without measure or measure without truth.”⁶⁴ The processions in Augustine's Trinity are neither temporal nor indicative of a loss. In the context of the action of the dialogue, the person who is seeking happiness is drawn by the Admonition: the Spirit expels disdain and lead us to thirst for Truth. That is, the Spirit is present anywhere there is truth and his help to the person is twofold: to drive out distaste for the truth, and to turn the whole self around to behold the whole of the

⁶¹ This is not a procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son. The filioque clause was added to the Creed in 381 when that dogma was clarified, which is prior to Augustine's conversion. However, it is possible that Augustine did not know or did not thoroughly know the creed at this time; he would have been instructed on it until after baptism. See above.

⁶² “*Tria unum deum ... unamque substantiam*,” Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.35.

⁶³ “*nihilque aliud etiam hoc apparet esse quam deum nulla degeneratione impediante perfectum*,” 4.35.

⁶⁴ “*Est dei filius profecto deus... neque igitur ueritas sine modo neque modus sine ueritate umquam fuit*,” 4.34.

truth.⁶⁵ He is capable of drawing the soul to conversion (*conversio*) even if the soul is not fully healthy in that moment and the turning is painful.⁶⁶ This converted man delights in the truth, and only when he has the fullness (*plenitudo*) of truth—that is, its measure—has the man found happiness and taken possession of the Triune God.⁶⁷ Thus, the Spirit draws man to the Son, and in turn they draw man fully into communion with all three persons of this Trinity. Man’s response to that—or at least, Monica’s response that is emulated by those present—is to sing praise and to pray for the theological virtues to aid our progress to that possession of God.⁶⁸

The God that Plotinus describes is also a “triplicity,”⁶⁹ and he speaks of the soul’s desire to return to its origin in that deity from which it has fallen. Some of the vocabulary is strikingly similar, but the triplicity of Plotinus forms a hierarchy of three beings, and the third emanation is not an admonishing drawing man back to God but rather is simply like in kind to the individuated soul and the source of the individuated soul’s nature as a being that desires.⁷⁰ For Plotinus, the ultimate Being is One and transcendent, but emanates its Intellect. This intellect (called the Intellectual-Principle) thinks the various forms which are in its Divine Mind.⁷¹ That is, it is in some way an image of the One.⁷² However, they are not together one, but rather fundamentally two.⁷³ The first emanation of the second hypostasis is also a falling away from the goodness and perfection of the Being of the One. The second emanation and third hypostasis is the Soul, an “offspring” of the Intellectual-Principle.⁷⁴ This Soul is an image of the Intellectual-

⁶⁵ Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.34.

⁶⁶ Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.35.

⁶⁷ Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.35.

⁶⁸ Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.35, 4.36.

⁶⁹ Plotinus, *Ennead* V.1.8.

⁷⁰ Plotinus, *Ennead* V.1.1.

⁷¹ Plotinus, *Ennead* V.1.4.

⁷² Plotinus, *Ennead* V.1.7.

⁷³ Plotinus, *Ennead* V.1.7.

⁷⁴ Plotinus, *Ennead* V.1.7.

Principle, which is itself an image of the One, or Being.⁷⁵ These three are referred to by Plotinus as a Triplicity, which he attributes to Plato.⁷⁶

The human soul has fallen from that All-Soul into the body and lacks satisfaction until it returns to its origin.⁷⁷ Soul, as hypostasis, is not just life, because the Intellect is paradigmatic of life. Rather, soul is the desiring thing. In a human, soul's desire manifests itself as desire which can direct one either towards externals that distract him from his origin or back to the Intellectual-Principle. The soul is forgetful of its origins, Plotinus says, and is inclined to pursue "externals"⁷⁸ that are inferior to itself. This is like the wandering sailors in the dedication letter of *De beata vita*. Plotinus's understanding of soul is that it needs to be "brought back to [its] origins" by coming to know itself and learning to disdain those external things, such as food, sleep, and sex, which it finds attractive.⁷⁹ This, too, sounds like the things that keep those mariners from returning to the port of philosophy in the dedication letter. A remembering of its origins is described by Plotinus as a conversion or a turning around. The method of conversion via contemplative ascent that Plotinus describes bears marked similarities to Augustine's ascent in *Confessions* VII:⁸⁰ it begins by the individual turning away from the external world to the internal self, "not merely [bringing] the enveloping body [to] peace, [the] body's turmoil stilled, but all that lies around, earth at peace, and sea at peace," and on through all material things.⁸¹ This is in order to "let the great soul be conceived to roll inward" where an intellectual light

⁷⁵ Plotinus, *Ennead* V.1.3. These three are paralleled in man: he ontologically first exists, then thinks, and finally desires, in accordance with these three. Plotinus, *Ennead* V.1.10. While one might think this is man in god's image—and it is, in a way—Augustine does not discuss man's being in the image of God in *De beata vita*, so this likeness is merely a curiosity here.

⁷⁶ Plotinus, *Ennead* V.1.8.

⁷⁷ Plotinus, *Ennead* V.1.1, cf. IV.3.12.

⁷⁸ Plotinus, *Ennead* V.1.1.

⁷⁹ Plotinus, *Ennead* V.1.1.

⁸⁰ Augustine, *Confessions* 7.17.23.

⁸¹ Plotinus, *Ennead* V.1.2.

illuminates the soul's nature and power.⁸² The great soul will see by that inner light that the soul is "precious" and "divine," and over the divine soul there is something still more divine, the "upward neighbour of the soul, its prior and source," the Soul from which it has fallen.⁸³

One can see, then, that there is a triplicity to Plotinus's deity, but where the emanations might seem like the processions of Augustine's Trinity, they are instead distinct "phases"⁸⁴ that do not form a unity or indicate equality of persons. Plotinus does establish a "fatherly" relationship between the "Divine Mind" and other beings with souls: "for [the soul's] perfecting it must look to that Divine Mind, which may be thought of as a father watching over the development of his child born imperfect in comparison with himself."⁸⁵ This fatherly relationship does not lead him to refer to the relationship between the first and second emanations as expressing something essential being predicated of father and son, however; it is, rather, merely a metaphorical way of speaking. Furthermore, it is not Being, or the One, the first of the triplicity, that Plotinus refers to as father, but rather Being's first emanation, the Divine Mind or Intellectual Principle. Each "offshoot" or emanation of the One is also of a lower rank,⁸⁶ unlike the Trinity described by Augustine, in which even the Spirit is "clearly God, perfect and

⁸² Plotinus, *Ennead* V.1.2.

⁸³ Plotinus, *Ennead* V.1.3.

⁸⁴ Plotinus, *Ennead* V.2.1.

⁸⁵ Plotinus, *Ennead* V.1.3.

⁸⁶ Plotinus, *Ennead* V.2.2.

without any impediment of perfection.”⁸⁷ And as cited above, the begotten child is imperfect, a lesser being than its father.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ “*nihilque aliud etiam hoc apparet esse quam deum nulla degeneration impediante perfectum.*” Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.35. O’Connell engages in irenicism in his approach to this Triplicity’s relationship to Christianity in the writings of Augustine, looking broadly at the Cassiciacum dialogues. Neoplatonism fulfills Stoicism, he says, and this “other-worldly Truth that Neoplatonism reveals to the purified mind is none other than the Logos of St. John’s Gospel, Second Hypostasis of a Divine Trinity in which, *pace* Neoplatonists, no subordination of Son to Father can be found. And the Way to the beatific possession of that Truth is none other than Truth itself become Incarnate [as the] Way.” O’Connell, *Art and the Christian Intelligence* 12-13.

⁸⁸ Plotinus, *Ennead* V.1.3.

§ 5. Conversion: *Ennead VI.9*

The conversion of the soul described by the two authors is comparable as well. There needs to be a full turning of the self towards the truth; the soul desiring happiness cannot remain in a half-hearted desire for truth. Both authors find that fullness of truth in the divine. For Augustine, the Truth is embodied by the Son of God; for Plotinus, the truth is the Intellectual-Principle. However, their differences in anthropology lead to a difference in understanding conversion.

For Augustine, man is soul and body; for Plotinus, man is soul and a body-form composite, and the soul is “enveloped” by that body or trapped in it, and the only proper relation to it is as an instrument until he has again escaped it.⁸⁹ While for both, conversion manifests itself in a revoking of disordered attachments and a growth in virtue as a means by which to cling to wisdom.⁹⁰ In *De beata vita*, there is no clear understanding of the period of man’s being embodied as a period of being entrapped. Augustine does, however, refer to God as the “liberator of souls” in the concluding lines of the dialogue, and what he means by that is unclear.⁹¹ For Plotinus, the soul must be freed from the body for happiness because of the relation it bears to Soul,⁹² even if it is not directly oriented towards that task (i.e., he does not promote suicide even

⁸⁹ Plotinus, *Ennead VI.1.2*.

⁹⁰ See this especially in Augustine, *De beata vita* 3.18, 4.27, 4.33.

⁹¹ “*Domino liberatori animarum*,” Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.36.

⁹² Plotinus, *Ennead V.3.4*.

though that would expedite the separation).⁹³ If we are not ever seen as entrapped in bodies, however, “liberator of souls” cannot mean one who sets us free from the body.⁹⁴

The conclusion that Monica, and subsequently Augustine, draw from their discussion of the Trinity is praise. Monica suggests that the three theological virtues are necessary to aid them in continuing their pursuit of the happy life.⁹⁵ Augustine follows this up with a prayer. The Plotinian version of the soul wishes to return to its Principle and to “lift a choral song full of God,”⁹⁶ but is in the “present state... weighed down by the body.”⁹⁷ The “mysteries” of the Plotinian cult are intended to foster an ascent to the inner sanctuary of the One.⁹⁸ While *Ennead* VI.8 suggests that one might be drawn to praise the divine, there is no evidence that one would pray to the One or seek its help.

While there are parallels here with Plotinus’s deity, it becomes obvious that from this very early work that Augustine’s “concept of the deity was distinctively his own and the deep logic of his theology was orthodox and Christian.”⁹⁹

⁹³ Plotinus, *Ennead* I.4.6; cf. Dillon, “Singing without an Instrument,” for a good discussion of Plotinus’s views on suicide. Presenting strong textual evidence, Dillon concludes that Plotinus is not fully opposed to suicide; he does present it as a possibility at times. However, he does not promote it even for the sage. See also McGroarty, *Plotinus on eudaimonia: Appendix 2*. John M. Dillon, “Singing without an Instrument: Plotinus on Suicide,” *Illinois Classical Studies* 19 (1994): 231-238.

⁹⁴ Augustine, *De beata vita* 1.1.

⁹⁵ Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.35.

⁹⁶ Plotinus, *Ennead* VI.9.8.

⁹⁷ Plotinus, *Ennead* VI.9.8.

⁹⁸ Plotinus, *Ennead* VI.9.11.

⁹⁹ Kenney, *Contemplation* 47.

Section 2. Porphyry

There is a slight possibility that Augustine's familiarity with the Neoplatonists was mediated by Porphyry. Some scholars, most prominently O'Meara and Beatrice, attribute the majority if not all of the Neoplatonic doctrines that Augustine employs or critiques to what he learned from Porphyry. This is a difficult position to justify and maintain, for two reasons. First, Augustine does not name Porphyry until writing *De civitate Dei* some 30 years after *De beata vita*.¹⁰⁰ However, he does name Plotinus particularly in another of the Cassiciacum dialogues, *Contra Academicos*.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, our ability to consult and compare themes and vocabulary between Augustine and Porphyry is complicated because of the fragmentary nature of what remains of the particular work by Porphyry in question, *Philosophy from Oracles*. In fact, Augustine's later works are a significant source for these fragments, but not his earlier works. It is speculated that what he quotes from Plotinus may actually be drawn from a text in which Porphyry is quoting Plotinus; this is a speculative claim that cannot be sufficiently substantiated.¹⁰²

The parallels that are claimed for the influence of Porphyry himself are detailed by O'Meara in "Porphyry's *Philosophy From Oracles* in Eusebius's *Praeparatio Evangelica* and Augustine's Dialogues Of Cassiciacum." In that article, O'Meara identifies three relevant terms or phrases that Augustine uses: *oracula* from 4.31; relatedly, *diuino fonte* at 2.10; and the *spiritus immundus* from 2.12, 3.18, and 3.19. While these are all key words or phrases, drawing on what we know of Porphyry from Eusebius and Augustine, there does not appear to be any highly

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Beatrice, "Quosdam," 255.

¹⁰¹ Augustine, *Contra Academicos* 3.18.41.

¹⁰² Beatrice argues for this in "Quosdam," esp. pp. 252-266.

technical use of these phrases that carry over into Augustine. Furthermore, they can be just as equally sourced from Plotinus or Cicero as from Porphyry.

For Porphyry, oracles are simply those who receive supernaturally revealed knowledge, but oracular utterances can be received from both good and bad sources, and more often bad than good. Eusebius quotes Porphyry as saying: “the philosopher ‘will have no need of oracles nor of the entrails of animals,’ and such like, as being part of the evil craft of daemons.”¹⁰³ This generic reference to oracular capacities is also not unique to Porphyry; a similar use appears in Cicero’s *De divinatione*.¹⁰⁴ There, man’s mind can receive revelation from God either in mad frenzies or in dreams, one of the characters claims. The character Cicero responds with a syllogistic tangle arguing that revelation through oracular dreams is entirely in keeping with the nature of the gods.¹⁰⁵

The only use of the term ‘oracle’ in *De beata vita* is at the end of the dialogue, in the midst of the effort to discover the proper term for the opposite of ‘need.’ Augustine suggests that perhaps it is not an important inquiry, but because he cracks a joke when referring to Sallust and brings smiles to the faces of his interlocutors, he changes his mind. “Since your minds, when attentive to God, are like oracles, I’ll not ignore them,” he says, and they continue their lexicographical inquiry.¹⁰⁶ The reference to someone as a “divine font” is when Monica speaks on the first day: she claims that a person has not only to have what he wants, but also to want good things, in order to be happy. Augustine declares that she has attained to the summit of

¹⁰³ Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica*, trans. EH Gifford, 4.19.

¹⁰⁴ Michael Foley points this out in his translator’s footnotes to *De beata vita*, n. 131. Cicero, *De divinatione* 2.48.

¹⁰⁵ Cicero, *De divinatione* 2.49.

¹⁰⁶ “*Ergo quia mentes vestras, inquam, cum intenti estis in deum, uelut quaedam oracular non contemnere statui...*” Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.31.

philosophy and tries to understand from what “divine font” these things flowed.¹⁰⁷ This seems to be a case where it is as though Monica has relayed something revelatory, in keeping with the oracular theme; however, this claim is one Augustine links not so much to special knowledge imparted by God as to recognition of the rectitude of will and right desire. This sort of direct drinking from the font illustrates the way the chaste mind receives the presence of God whom Monica knows to be everywhere. Furthermore, he cites *Hortensius* as having likewise made this claim and having been the source from which he had intended to draw had not his mother spoken first.¹⁰⁸

The second identified key term is *spiritus immundus*. I have already spoken several times about the two kinds of evil spirit Augustine identifies in the second day of the dialogue.¹⁰⁹ The proper fragments from Porphyry do not shed any new light for our comprehension of Augustine. Evil spirits play the same role in the Porphyrian fragments as in Plotinus.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Augustine, *De beata vita* 2.10.

¹⁰⁸ Augustine, *De beata vita* 2.10.

¹⁰⁹ Augustine, *De beata vita* 3.18.

¹¹⁰ Eusebius, *Praeparatio*, 5.2, referring to a fragment from 190a1 Porphyry, *Of the Philosophy to be derived from Oracles*.

Chapter 4. Cicero

Augustine's debt to and imitation of Cicero is well-noted by scholars, most recently and notably by Michael Foley.¹ The dialogue form that Augustine employs in this and the other Cassiciacum dialogues more nearly imitates a Ciceronian than a Platonic dialogue. There are clear parallels between each of the Cassiciacum dialogues and one or more works by Cicero. Augustine acknowledges in *De beata vita*, and again reiterates that acknowledgment in the *Confessions*, that reading Cicero's *Hortensius* inspired his first "conversion"—a conversion to philosophy, the love of wisdom. *De beata vita* draws not only on ideas from Cicero's works on happiness, that is, the *Tusculan Disputations* and *De finibus bonorum et malorum*, but from the *Hortensius* (which work has been lost except for fragments, primarily preserved by Augustine), *De divinatione*, and *De natura deorum*.

Cicero's relevant writings are from a period of philosophical leisure when he was living in the country outside of Rome, grieving the death of his daughter. *De divinatione* and *De natura deorum* are both relevant primarily insofar as they provide a basis for understanding oracles, but they also have passages on superstition that can help unfold the claim of Augustine in the dedication letter about rejecting a childish superstition.² The *Hortensius* sheds even more light on the interjection by Monica that has been declared divinely inspired; it is the *Hortensius* that Augustine cites as the philosophical text that makes the same claim that Monica made. The

¹ See especially "Cicero, Augustine, and the philosophical roots of the Cassiciacum Dialogues," *Revue des Études Augustiniennes*, 45 (1999), and the translator's "Introduction" in *On the Happy Life*, pp. xxxvi-xxxvii, 8-9. For a slightly different emphasis, placing nearly equal weight on Cicero and the Platonists, Maurice Testard argues that although *Hortensius* was a direct influence and Augustine was familiar with other writings of Cicero, they worked in conjunction with the books of the Platonists to produce an intellectual freedom ("*libération intellectuelle*"); the books of the Platonists echoed the truths learned in *Hortensius*. Maurice Testard, *Saint Augustin et Cicéron*, v. 1, (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1958): 131.

² Augustine, *De beata vita* 1.4.

Tusculan Disputations offer in greater detail the arguments that form the philosophical foundation for Augustine's *De beata vita*, as seen in the parallels between the introductory dialogue on day one with the five books of the *Disputations*. While *De finibus bonorum et malorum* is an excellent work on the need to discern the proper end of man, there are only tangential points of contact with that work and *De beata vita*, which are also claims I identify in my discussion of the *Tusculan Disputations* below.

Section 1. On the Nature of the Gods and On Divination

De divinatione and *De natura deorum* are both relevant primarily insofar as they provide a basis for understanding oracles, as discussed in the Porphyry section (see above, Chapter 3, Section 2). In *De natura*, the Stoic Balbus argues for the particular providence of the gods because they offer divine aid, send revelations, and permit successful divination.³ This position is one that Cicero—as author and character in the dialogue—does not respond to directly, but in concluding the dialogue the narrator says that “Balbus’s case [overall] seemed to come more closely to a semblance of the truth” than the others presented.⁴ There are tenuous connections between Balbus’s presentation of the relationship between the gods and man and Augustine’s own conception of it in *De beata vita*, especially in that moment where he refers to Monica’s contribution as one that is like an oracular claim, and that there is a divine font from which her claims originate.⁵ The God whom Augustine and his interlocutors are seeking is one who does have concern for the particular individual, in that for the person to be happy God has to be favorable to them;⁶ he is not merely present but present in a special way for the person who possesses him (and that person is not merely “not without” God⁷). This also makes possible the appeal to God in the concluding prayer for the gifts of faith, hope, and charity, which gifts enable the one seeking and petitioning God to draw to him.⁸ Balbus’s Stoic position holds that “virtues are the basis of the blessed life,” but those virtues he names are justice “and the other virtues [that] are closely linked,” discovered by reason and the investigation of nature.⁹ He does not,

³ Cicero, *De natura deorum*, trans. P.G. Walsh 2.164-167.

⁴ Cicero, *De natura deorum*, trans. P.G. Walsh 3.90.

⁵ Augustine, *De beata vita* 2.10.

⁶ Augustine, *De beata vita* 3.21.

⁷ Augustine, *De beata vita* 3.22.

⁸ Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.35.

⁹ Cicero, *De natura deorum*, trans. P.G. Walsh 2.153.

however, attend to the value of prayer beyond recognizing it as part of the existing religious practices. In *De divinatione*, brothers Marcus and Quintus Cicero return to the subject of divination because it was inadequately treated in *De natura deorum*.¹⁰ Quintus argues in favor of divination.¹¹

Both texts, however, also contain passages that involve the speakers distinguishing true divination from superstition. Superstitious and true religious practices can be distinguished in part by their end. Superstitious practices are the performing of various rites seemingly for human ends, or directing those rites appropriate only as worship of God to one who is not God; religious practices properly are performing rites that worship God for His sake. The former kind of superstitious practices seem to be those Cicero condemns. Careful acknowledgment of religious practices that were superstitious seem to be what fuels Augustine's claim about the Manicheans in the biographical parallels of the dedication letter of *De beata vita*. There he rejects a position he held for a time as a "childish superstition," which I think is a reference particularly to the Manicheans.¹² Augustine does not seem to have in mind there a single particular practice, but rather characterizes the sect generally as being superstitious.¹³ He is careful to point out, however, that the rejection of superstitious practices is not a rejection of all religious practices. Nor does he reject the possibility of an oracular proclamation, like Monica's, which may function in a mode distinct from human reasoning.

¹⁰ Cicero, *De divinatione* 1.5.

¹¹ Cicero, *De divinatione*, trans. William Armistead Falconer 1.18.

¹² "superstitio quaedam puerilis," Augustine, *De beata vita* 1.4.

¹³ See, for example, *De divinatione* 2.36, where Marcus Cicero says some kinds of augury are performed by art with success, whereas others are merely a superstition. In *De natura*, the Stoic Balbus argues that both their ancestors and philosophers "distinguished superstition from religion"—careful attention to the reasonable religious practices was "something praiseworthy" and "the word 'superstitions' came to note something deficient." Cicero, *De natura deorum* trans. P.G. Walsh, 2.71-72.

Section 2. *Hortensius*

Like *De beata vita*, Cicero's *Hortensius* is concerned with happiness. The work, a protreptic modeled after a lost work by Aristotle, is an exhortation to philosophy as the best life. Augustine read it as a late teen, and its continued significance is indicated by the fact that "at Cassiciacum he continues to treat the *Hortensius* as foundational" for the education of his young students.¹⁴ It comes up in the autobiographical section of the *De beata vita* as well as in the main text. In the same passage we have just examined with respect to the use of 'oracle,' Augustine tells us that the claim Monica made brought her to "the very citadel of philosophy" and could also be found in Cicero's *Hortensius*. Monica had said that a person must "want good things and have them" to be happy; wanting bad things will make him unhappy "even if he has them."¹⁵ The passage Augustine quotes from *Hortensius* in response is slightly more detailed in its manner of addressing this claim, but Monica has found the heart of it. Only those who are "quick to argue" would say that getting whatever a person wants is enough to make him happy; philosophers know both that it is "the very worst misery" to want what is not decent and that those disordered desires or "depravity of will" leads to evil that cannot be outweighed even by the goods of fortune.¹⁶

This passage in *De beata vita* illustrates the way in which someone can have intuitive knowledge of something, or even practical experience of it, while the philosopher can explain the underlying causes and reasons for the truth of the matter. One can imagine that Monica, as

¹⁴ Foley, in his various writings on the Cassiciacum dialogues, draws attention to the pervasive influence of this work and of Cicero more generally. See, e.g., his introduction to *De beata vita*, p. 4.

¹⁵ "Si bona, inquit, uelit et habeat, beatus est, si autem mala uelit, quamuis habeat, miser est," 2.10.

¹⁶ "prompti ad disputandum," "ipsum miserrimum," "mali prauitas voluntatis," Augustine, quoting *Hortensius*, in *De beata vita* 2.10.

mother and woman of a household, had many occasions of seeing someone want and get what was not good for them, and knowing from that experience that unless someone wants something good, obtaining what they desire will not make them truly happy. Her having reflected upon that and drawn the conclusion she does and in the context she does is distinctive, however. Cicero points to the fact that the good desired needs to be appropriate and decent, and that one's desires also need to be properly ordered towards that good for the satisfaction of that desire to be good. By accidental factors, fortune may allow one to obtain the wrongly desired good. While fortune may temporarily be pleasing, the underlying reality of disordered desires will ultimately be the deciding factor in the happiness—or rather, unhappiness—of the person. This ordering of desires towards proper ends becomes the foundation of Augustine's ethics in his later works;¹⁷ his discussion of the virtues in the third day of the dialogue at hand is more oriented towards virtues, and indeed (as the next section will show) virtues as conceived by Cicero.

Doignon additionally suggests that the way in which Augustine treats wealth in *De beata vita* is drawn from a lost portion of the *Hortensius*. Doignon connects the treatment of wealth by Monica at the beginning of the third day of the conversation, which Augustine applauds as something he had planned to bring out from the books of the philosophers, to Cicero's.¹⁸ Testard characterizes the argument of the *Hortensius* on the whole as not only an exhortation to convert to philosophy, but an explicit effort to conduce its readers to aversion or detachment from wealth, ambition, rhetoric, and the pleasures of the body.¹⁹

¹⁷ See especially *Confessions*, Book 2.

¹⁸ Doignon, "L'enseignement de l'*Hortensius*," 199. Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.27.

¹⁹ Testard, *Saint Augustin et Cicéron*, v. 1, 162.

Section 3. *Tusculan Disputations*

There are many ways in which the opening exchange on the first day of conversation in *De beata vita* seems patterned after Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*. Augustine opens by looking at man as body and soul, with proper goods for each. The soul is fed properly when it has that which always is and never changes, and the stability of virtue fits the soul for that end. Without the proper goods, man's soul is "diseased."²⁰ The liberal arts are fit exercise for the education of the soul in not just giving the student knowledge of things, but also in growth in virtue. Everyone wants to be happy, which involves the desire for and possession of the highest of goods, namely, God. All five of these points find a correspondence in *Tusculan Disputations*, and additionally Augustine engages in the same investigation of the etymological roots of the virtues to understand their fundamental meanings.

The *Tusculan Disputations* is a work by Cicero in five books that is an extended conversation about happiness. Cicero's own summary of the work, given in the introduction of Book 2 of *De divinatione*, is that the *Tusculan Disputations* take as their theme "the means most essential to a happy life."²¹ The five books treat of, respectively, indifference to death, enduring pain, alleviation of sorrow, spiritual disturbances, and the claim that "virtue is sufficient of itself for the attainment of happiness."²² We see in *Tusculan Disputations* the pattern already commented upon above, that a philosopher's understanding of happiness depends upon his anthropology. Like Augustine, Ambrose, and Plotinus, Cicero's characters expound their understanding of the human person in order to show how man should live and be happy.

²⁰ Augustine, *De beata vita* 2.8.

²¹ Cicero, *De divinatione*, trans. W.A. Falconer 2.1.

²² Cicero, *De divinatione*, trans. W.A. Falconer 2.1.

However, the dialogue is set up as a set of disputations, and so the anthropology is developed in the midst of responding to a particular thesis.

Beginning with the first disputation: the liminal event of death leads us to see man as body and soul, with—following the first half of the *Phaedo*—the soul being immortal because it is not composed of parts.²³ (Cicero clarifies in the third disputation that man is not just his soul, nor is he two separate entities, but that he is a composite of body and soul.²⁴) The second book continues to focus on the soul by recognizing that philosophy is particularly about the cultivation of the soul, weeding out vices and sowing the seeds of virtue. The focus in this book is on the virtue of fortitude to face pains of the body and recognize that though they may be an evil, they are not the worst of evils.²⁵ While fortitude is the proper virtue for overcoming fear of death and susceptibility to pain,²⁶ man's virtue is completed when he has crowned reason with wisdom, perfecting the higher part of his soul.²⁷

This outline has its parallel in Augustine on the first day of the dialogue, where he establishes man's composite nature and that there are needs for both the lower and higher elements of that composition. Man's happiness will only be attained if he is nourishing his soul. Each point in that opening introductory exchange Augustine has with his interlocutors about man's composite nature has its parallel in *Tusculan Disputations*.

The thesis up for debate in the third disputation is about the susceptibility of a wise man to distress.²⁸ Cicero's basic answer is that wisdom can overcome all species of distress. Wisdom includes all the virtues; while courage particularly makes us not susceptible to feelings of distress

²³ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 1.29.71.

²⁴ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 3.1.

²⁵ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 2.4, 2.18.

²⁶ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 2.18.

²⁷ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 2.21.

²⁸ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 3.4.

such as fear,²⁹ frugality is foundational to all the virtues since it is necessarily the first of the virtues acquired.³⁰ The passage in which Cicero—Marcus as a character in the dialogue—explains why bears quoting in full, as it is very similar to Augustine’s own explanation:

Therefore I count ‘frugality’ (*frugalitas*) by itself as left to be the fourth virtue. For it seems to be its special function to guide and compose the eager impulses of the soul and, by a constant opposition to lust (*libidini*), to preserve on every occasion a tempered firmness: and the vice which is its opposite is ‘worthlessness.’ ‘Frugality,’ as I think, is derived from ‘fruit’ (*fruge*) and nothing better comes from the earth: ‘worthlessness’ (*nequitia*) is derived (the derivation, it may be, will be somewhat harsh; but all the same let us make the attempt; let it be taken as a jest if it should come to nothing) from that which is *nequidquam*, ‘for nothing,’ in a man of that kind.³¹

Thus we see that frugality is the basis by which the soul is able to attain to moderate or self-controlled actions, and from that basis it is able to acquire the other virtues.³² Without frugality, the soul has nothing and the man’s efforts come to naught; he is—Cicero continues his joking play—a “good for nothing.”³³

This very play on words is what comes after Augustine’s introduction of the basic anthropological tenets in *De beata vita*: body and soul are both sick in their own ways, and the sickness of soul is “worthlessness.” Augustine holds forth:

The ancients considered ‘worthlessness’ [*nequitia*] itself, which is the mother of all vices, to be named from ‘not anything’ [*nec quicquam*], that is, from that which is nothing. And the virtue that is contrary to this vice is called frugality [*frugalitas*]. Just as this virtue is named after ‘fruit’ [*frux*], that is, after a ‘fruitful enjoyment’ [*fructus*] on account of a certain fecundity of the mind, so too is worthlessness named after barrenness, that is, after nothing.³⁴

²⁹ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 3.7.

³⁰ This is a claim repeated in *De finibus*, 2.14.

³¹ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 3.8.

³² This is a claim repeated in *De finibus*, 2.14.

³³ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 3.8.

³⁴ “*Etenim ipsam nequitiam matrem omnium vitiorum, ex eo quod nequidquam sit, id est ex eo quod nihil sit, veteres dictam esse voluerunt. Cui vitio quae contraria virtus est, frugalitas nominatur. Ut igitur haec a fruge, id est a fructu, propter quamdam animorum fecunditatem; ita illa ab sterilitate, hoc est a nihilo, nequitia nominata est.*” Augustine, *De beata vita* 2.8.

Augustine is practically repeating Cicero, though in reverse order, to show that anyone who wants to be happy has to learn to convert his governing desires from mere satisfaction of only bodily pleasure to higher goods, but his pursuit of the fullness of wisdom builds upon and is fostered by his initial development of temperance. It is by this means that we are spring-boarded into the larger question of everyone wanting to be happy, both in Augustine and Cicero. After a very brief paragraph of recapitulation, the following paragraph in Augustine is where he claims, “We want to be happy,” establishing it as the thesis for disputation in the birthday banquet.³⁵ Augustine comes back around to this wordplay again later in the dialogue; such etymology is a favorite trope of Cicero’s and is one that Augustine occasionally imitates.

In Book 4 of the *Tusculan Disputations*, Cicero establishes that philosophy is the proper method by which one seeks happiness. He says that the “oars of dialectic” are slower but more effective than the “sails of eloquence” in freeing the soul from distress and showing that virtue is sufficient for happiness.³⁶ In the dedication letter of *De beata vita*, Augustine also talks about a “small push and gentle pulse of the oars” by which the first group of mariners easily enter the port of philosophy, in contrast to the winds that blow men about on the open seas.³⁷ Those winds are of two kinds, one which seems gentle but is deceitful, and one which is salubrious but is thoroughly raging as it takes them from their pleasurable but unhappy lives to the happy land accessed through the port of philosophy.³⁸ This sets up a nice contrast between eloquence, which

³⁵ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 4.4.

³⁶ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 4.4.

³⁷ “*Parvo impetu pulsuque remorum de proximo fugiunt.*” Augustine, *De beata vita* 1.2.

³⁸ “*Hos si nescio quo et nimis latente modo a puppi ventus, quem prosperum putant, fuerit prosecutus, penetrant in altissima miseriarum elati atque gaudentes, quod eis usquequaque fallacissima serenitas voluptatum honorumque blanditur. His profecto quid aliud optandum est, quam quaedam in illis rebus a quibus laeti excipiuntur, improspera; et, si parum est, saeviens omnino tempestas, contrarieque flans ventus, qui eos ad certa et solida gaudia, vel flentes gementesque perducatur?*” Augustine, *De beata vita* 1.2.

is a double-edged weapon, and philosophy, which pursues truth relentlessly and wherever it may be found.³⁹

Cicero also helpfully gives a definition of the philosophy in which he is engaging: a “collection of rational arguments” that lead to a good and happy (*boni et beati*) life, and again “the discovery of things sacred and human, as well as the beginnings and causes of every phenomenon.”⁴⁰ The ultimate end of this philosophy, for Cicero, is contemplation of the nature of the gods and reality, drawing man to union with the divine mind:

To the soul occupied night and day in these meditations, there comes the knowledge enjoined by the god at Delphi, that the mind should know its own self and feel its union with the divine mind, the source of the fullness of joy unquenchable. For meditation upon the power and nature of the gods of itself kindles the desire of attaining an immortality that resembles theirs, nor does the soul think that it is limited to this short span of life, when it sees that the causes of things are linked one to another in an inevitable chain, and nevertheless their succession from eternity to eternity is governed by reason and intelligence. As the wise man gazes upon this spectacle and looks upward or rather looks round upon all the parts and regions of the universe, with what calmness of soul he turns again to reflect upon what is in man and touches him more nearly! Hence comes his knowledge of virtue.⁴¹

This contemplation is done in leisure by the man who has attained to wisdom, and is the satisfaction of his natural inclinations and desires. This is Cicero’s understanding of the Stoic idea that to live in accord with nature is the highest good, because this is what it means to live

³⁹ Augustine, in the *Confessions*, says that reading *Hortensius* converted him to a philosophy that does just that: to seek wisdom not from just this or that sect, but wherever he could find it. Cicero engages in eclecticism of that variety in the *Tusculan Disputations*, arguing for mostly the Stoic conception of philosophy but also drawing on the Peripatetics and others as applicable. He describes philosophy as the “collection of rational arguments” and he does mean that: collect the truth from wherever it can be found. Augustine, *Confessions*, 3.4.8. Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, trans. J.E. King 4.38.

⁴⁰ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, trans. J.E. King 5.3.

⁴¹ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* trans. J.E. King 5.25.

according to nature.⁴² It is always in the power of man to lead a happy life, and because happiness consists in this alone, nothing more is needed beyond wisdom for happiness.

Cicero's considerable influence on Augustine's philosophical formation and inclinations is clear, and in *De beata vita* those influences show the philosophical context in which Augustine is raising his own inquiry into the happy life. The concerns Cicero highlights as primary to philosophy are also those Augustine takes up in this dialogue and his other early Cassiciacum dialogues.

⁴² See also *De finibus* 4.15 for a more explicit connection of this to the Stoic and Academic position.

Chapter 5. Other classical authors

Finally, I will mention the other classical authors Augustine references, alludes to, or was likely influenced by in his approach to this birthday conversation. Jaspers once noted, commenting on the whole of the Cassiciacum corpus, that the “medium [of the retreat’s discussions] was the world of classical culture.”¹ The Vergilian allusions, mostly within the opening dedication letter of *De beata vita*, are nautical. Augustine was teaching the *Aeneid* to his young students while at Cassiciacum, and that imagery was fresh on his mind in his birthday dialogue.²

Seneca’s epistle *De vita beata*, which has ship imagery as well, is another noteworthy classical work in this genre of philosophical works on happiness, though parallels between it and Augustine’s work of the same name are lacking. Seneca also wrote a short essay by the same name. While at some point Augustine did read Seneca, and so one should not discount the possible influence, it simply is unknown if he was familiar with Seneca’s writings on the happy life when Augustine wrote *De beata vita*.³ Notably, however, Augustine’s claims in *De beata vita* do privilege wisdom, but not to the same degree to which Seneca does. His Stoic position is that the virtuous man is stable because his *virtue* is stable,⁴ but for a Christian the good man’s

¹ Karl Jaspers, *Plato and Augustine: From the Great Philosophers, Volume I*, trans. Ralph Manheim, ed. Hannah Arendt (San Diego, CA: Harvest Books, 1966): 66. Boersma also points to Augustine’s level of familiarity with the classical authors as one which orders the liberal arts to their “proper use” of “praise [and] confession.” Augustine’s employment of the language and images of the ancient authors are “models appropriate ‘use’ with intricate Latin rhetorical flourishes.” Gerald P. Boersma, “Exquisite and precious vessels: ‘doctrina’ in book I of Augustine’s *Confessions*,” *Augustiniana*, Vol. 61, No. 3/4 (2011): 189, 187.

² Cf. *Contra Academicos* 3.1.1.

³ E.g., Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 6.10.

⁴ Boone, *Conversion* 79.

stability in goodness is because, as Boone says, his “interests are directed *to God* and... because *God* is stable.”⁵

Augustine also quotes the comic poet Terence at least three times. His use of Terence in the third day of dialogue is aphoristically in support of his Stoic argument that the wise man is not afraid of anything, but rather treats all things other than virtue with a cautious disdain, using them to grow in virtue when they are available and not wishing to hold onto those things outside of his control.⁶ Likewise, Augustine uses a line from *Lady of Andros* as a popular adage, that everyone knows that moderation is a virtue, in support of his claim that even wisdom has its proper measure.⁷ The effect of these three quotations of the popular comic poet seem in some way to be making Augustine’s argument more accessible to a non-academic audience; Terence was a popular poet and his plays commonly known.⁸

Sallust comes up merely as another voice in trying to find the perfect word for the opposite of need (*egestas*); Sallust liked opulence (*opulentia*), but Augustine tossed that out and then made a joke about their worry after the right word.⁹

These frequent references of Augustine’s to various pagan authors illustrate what Outler calls a “middle way” of using classical sources:

⁵ Boone, *Conversion* 79.

⁶ Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.32.

⁷ Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.32.

⁸ Asiedu, in “The Wise Man and the Limits of Virtue,” draws attention to the out-of-context use of these quotations. F. Asiedu, “The Wise Man and the Limits of Virtue in *De beata vita*: Stoic Self-Sufficiency or Augustinian Irony?” *Augustiniana* 49 (1999): 222-225, 227. Pucci, in *Augustine’s Virgilian retreat*, goes even farther to say that Augustine is consciously inverting the lines to say the opposite of what Terence uses them to mean in context. Joseph Michael Pucci, *Augustine’s Virgilian retreat: reading the auctores at Cassiciacum* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2014): 73-76. Augustine himself, in *De Trinitate*, says that his use of Terence is uncovering what Terence truly meant to say, the truth apart from the dramatic context. Augustine, *De Trinitate* 13.7.10.

⁹ Augustine, *De beata vita* 4.31.

Augustine understood the tendencies of the Christian “Ciceronians”—men like Lactantius, Eusebius Pamphili, and Jerome—who treasured the classical heritage so much that they were loathe to subject it to a really radical criticism. He also knew the Christian “secessionists”—Tatian, Tertullian, Arnobius—with their testy denunciations of pagan philosophy: “Away with all attempts at a mottled Christianity, that mixture of Stoic, Platonic and dialectic rubbish!” Augustine refused both these extremes and sought to harmonize his learning and his delight in learning with his faith in God as Creator and his delight in exploring His creation.¹⁰

This seems very much the case and very much in keeping with Augustine’s own words in the *Confessions*, that he sought wisdom “not in this or that sect,” but wherever he could find it.¹¹

¹⁰ Outler, “Augustine and the Transvaluation of the Classical Tradition,” *Classical Journal* 54, no. 5 (February 1959): 215; quoting Tertullian, *De Praes. Her.* 7.

¹¹ Augustine, *Confessions* 3.4.8.

Part IV. Philosophy and theology; philosophy and Christianity

Augustine's *De beata vita* is a work of philosophy, but it is also—simultaneously—a Christian work. Not only is this a work that falls in both categories, but it also demonstrates for us early Augustine's understanding of the relationship between Christianity and philosophy. At the time of writing this, Augustine conceived of Christianity as encompassing the one true philosophy, because it encompasses all truth of both reason and revelation. Reason and revelation are not at odds with each other, as Augustine demonstrates in this text. Not only does Christianity encompass all truth, but philosophy finds its fulfillment in the person of Christ, Wisdom incarnate.

This is a work of philosophy. What I am calling philosophy in this context is the loving pursuit of wisdom through the activity of reason. 'Love of wisdom' is the etymology of the word, and it is the understanding of the word that Augustine first seized at the time of reading the *Hortensius*. While the exercise of reason in this pursuit is apparently unaided, it is attested to in the dialogue that God is always present. While it is not obvious that he is actively influencing the course of events, it cannot be ruled out. There is not a conscious effort on the part of those participating to seek God's help deliberately until the final paragraphs of the dialogue. In concert with ancient philosophy, however, this work of philosophy is not merely a rational endeavor but part of a life choice that engages the whole person, not just his intellect.¹ Philosophical discourse takes place within an intellectual and spiritual community,² and those who participate in it are

¹ See Hadot, who describes philosophy as an "existential option" and a "way of life." Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2004): 3.

² Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* 100.

often living together and taking common meals together—much as Augustine and his interlocutors are doing.³

Christianity encompasses the one true philosophy and can in some sense be identified with true philosophy. There is no philosophical truth that is not encompassed by Christianity, and therefore any true philosophy is also encompassed by Christianity. All arguments based on reason make prior assumptions, making philosophy a moment within the more encompassing realm of truth and reality.⁴ I deliberately choose to style this in terms of “Christianity” and not “Christian theology” or “Christian philosophy.” Theology is a term that covers both revealed theology and natural theology, i.e., the theology discovered and developed by a philosopher through the exercise of reason. Augustine is not here trying to be a theologian of revealed theology, since he does not begin his reasoning from premises held by faith given by God. He does, however, engage in questions of natural theology not unlike what pagan philosophers have done. While a philosopher *qua* philosopher is not afraid to entertain what comes through revelation—as demonstrated in Porphyry, but also in the discussion about oracles and divination in works by Cicero—it is not their proper territory. I likewise avoid calling this “Christian philosophy,” not because that is an incorrect designation, but because the term “Christian philosophy” has been adopted in the 20th century by certain philosophers with whom this dialogue does not engage.

Christianity encompasses this philosophy and completes it by identifying the truth being pursued with God as a personal deity, who is not only the object of desire but also aids those seeking him. Christianity encompasses true philosophy because the truth and wisdom sought for

³ Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* 100.

⁴ As noted in Introduction, n.1, this language of philosophy being an “inner moment” of theology comes from Pieper, “The Philosophical Act,” 130.

by the philosopher are Christ himself, the second person of the Godhead. ‘Wisdom’ and ‘truth’ are largely conflated in Augustine’s own approach to philosophy as the term for that which is lovingly pursued. The dialogue takes place in the “port of philosophy,” as Augustine and his companions prepare to enter the Catholic Church at the Easter Vigil in the spring. The image illustrates my claim that Christianity encompasses true philosophy; Christianity is the solid ground of the happy life, and a port or a harbor is embraced, as it were, or protected by arms of land.

The consonance of the truth as discovered through reason and the truth as revealed by God are illustrated in the dialogue by Monica. Augustine is very carefully approaching the subject of the happy life through reason, dialectic, and argumentation. Augustine cites authorities, but his authorities are non-Christian philosophers. Monica interjects her claims not by virtue of her education, but by virtue of her lifelong pursuit of the truth through the practice of the Catholic faith.

This is a Christian work. In the dedication letter, Augustine remarks to Theodorus that the dialogue ended up more religious than he had anticipated. I think that the “more religious” is in reference to the turn to Scripture at the end, along with the praise of the Trinity and invocation of the theological virtues. The Christian character of this work is attested to by that Trinity, and nothing that the interlocutors settle on in the progress towards the end is contrary to Catholic Christianity.

Christianity is, however, more than an extension of natural reason or true philosophy. While a conclusion in praise of the Trinity marks this as a particularly Catholic Christian work, all of the philosophical arguments and conclusions drawn in the course of the dialogue are in agreement with what Christianity teaches. More than that, the discovery of the truth in

Christianity as the person of Christ makes the truth personal and unites all truth as originating from and directing us to Christ. The catholic or universal character of the dialogue and its conclusions are demonstrated by Monica. She speaks that same truth not as an educated philosopher, but as an uneducated woman who has been nourished not just by her life experiences and native intelligence, but by lifelong practice of the faith, participating in the mysteries into which Augustine and Adeodatus are preparing to enter through the sacrament of Baptism.

Chapter 1. From the dialogue itself

Evidence for these claims is derived, first, from my reading of the dialogue itself. The relationship between Christianity and philosophy is illustrated by the nautical image in the dedication letter and then borne out in the text of the dialogue. Beginning with the dedication letter, Augustine places us squarely in the territory of philosophy. Augustine dedicates the letter to Manlius Theodorus, who was also a member of the Neoplatonist circles in Milan and was one in a line of men who had gone on a retreat—like Augustine’s at Cassiciacum—at which they wrote books of philosophy. In the dedication’s nautical image, all men are in a state of unhappiness, out on the open seas of life, and everyone wants to be happy but not all are aware that their current state is unhappy or, alternatively, how to move from their current state to the tranquility of the harbor to the solid ground of happiness.

In this, his first completed work as a believer in Christianity, Augustine advances claims that he holds his entire life. “We have no other reason to study philosophy,” he says in *De civitate Dei*, “than to be happy.”¹ This claim is in concert with the history of Western philosophy, as every student quickly learns. “The unexamined life,” Plato’s character Socrates tells us, “is not worth living.”² “Every man desires to be happy,” both Aristotle and Cicero claim.³ That we find ourselves in the situation of not yet being happy is likewise well-attested to in the writings of the philosophers and, indeed, in the experience of every human being.

In his nautical image, Augustine does not immediately reach for a definitive, dogmatic reason for why we are unhappy (i.e., both original and actual sin); instead, he offers a list of things that is an enumeration of a broad list of possibilities. The movement to happiness that he

¹ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 19.1.

² Plato, *Apology* 38a.

³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1095a19; Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 4.38.

describes the mariners taking is directed by reason and desire; again, this lands Augustine solidly within the tradition of philosophers inclined to a virtue ethic as the means by which man attains to a happy life. His autobiography also points us through a series of stages in his love of wisdom, each marked by a particular school of philosophy or religion, by which circuitous means he has entered the port.

Augustine does not limit us to philosophy, however. As I pointed out, he refers to the port of philosophy by which one attains to the happy life, but does not explicitly say that philosophy is the only means by which one comes ashore. Nor does he interpret those seemingly adverse storms that drive one in towards true happiness as excluding the possibility of grace or divine action as an aid to happiness. Nor does he say that philosophy is the sure means by which one comes ashore. Vainglory is a trap for philosophers in particular, it would seem, men puffed up with pride at their knowledge or their amassed following of disciples. Furthermore, the happiness he and his interlocutors seek is not attained by the simple reorienting of desire and growth in understanding. Augustine is still in that port of philosophy, having not yet received baptism into the Church that he anticipates at the coming Easter.

In the autobiographical portion of the opening letter, we begin to see that Augustine's journey to the port of philosophy, though influenced by many different schools of philosophy, was only completed in this final stage of having recently discovered the truth of Christianity. His initial turning towards philosophy was occasioned by reading the *Hortensius*, but he encountered delays both intellectual and moral in his return to the port of philosophy. The moral disorders—his desire for a wife and honors—were the last he had to overcome, but he describes his detachment from those things keeping him from entering the harbor as a moment of finally fleeing into this “tranquil harbor,” the “port of philosophy.” This points to his seeing his

approach to Christianity as including a turn to true philosophy, the philosophy that is the tranquil harbor.

Within this harbor of philosophy, Augustine is writing the dialogue *De beata vita*. Gathered about him, as Fortin aptly observes, is a varied group of people: young and old, male and female, educated and uneducated, well-born and rustics alike.⁴ True philosophy—the philosophy that welcomed these mariners into her tranquil harbor—is encompassed by the solid ground of Christianity.

Day one of the dialogue

As I have observed in looking at the writings of Cicero and Plotinus, the beginning salvos of Augustine’s birthday dialogue are establishing a firm philosophical foundation for the disputation on happiness to follow. A philosophical anthropology is a necessary prerequisite to any philosophical investigation of happiness. The approach that Augustine takes is, again, clearly philosophical. He does not reach for dogmatic answers with a basis in Scriptural exegesis from, for example, the Genesis creation account, the Psalms, the Pauline epistles, or the like, some of which he was familiar with.⁵

In determining that happiness is the possession of God (2.11), Augustine is again not deviating from the consensus of philosophers. This is another claim which he could have pulled from a Scriptural source, such as the Psalms, or 2 Corinthians 3. Instead, he again aligns himself with the Platonic and Ciceronian tradition. Monica’s claim about the happiness of the wealthy

⁴ Fortin, “Reflections” 101.

⁵ See above, Part III, Chapter 2, on Scripture.

man being attributable not to his material goods but to his virtue is a page out of Cicero's book, Augustine tells us (2.11).⁶

There seems to be a play on the term happiness in the conversation about the unclean spirit. If, as I have suggested, this classical use of *beata* is a closer relative to *eudaimonia* than to blessedness, then we can look at the etymology of *eudaimonia* and see that one possibility is that it means having a good (*eu-*) spirit (*-daimonia*). In order to have a good spirit, one needs to live well, which is to live virtuously. Augustine says this is none other than doing God's will. This also amounts to not having an unclean spirit (*spiritum immundum*).⁷ Adeodatus draws together both a Neoplatonic and a Christian position into one here which is affirmed by Monica the next day.⁸

Day two of the dialogue

The chaste love of God—"pay[ing] attention to God and hold[ing] [one]self to Him alone" (3.18)—remains a central tenet in the Catholic Christian tradition. As I pointed out in the section on Ambrose's hymns, Mary is the primary human exemplar of this. However, this single-mindedness—this directing of one's desires entirely to God and therefore transforming all of one's virtues by directing them to their end in God and not just the natural realm of human flourishing, is a theme seen in the writings of Plato and his successors, as the Plotinian pursuit of happiness shows.

⁶ Augustine tells us this is from the lost *Hortensius*.

⁷ Augustine, *De beata vita* 3.18.

⁸ If philosophy is a moment in theology, then the interlude where Augustine and his younger interlocutors engage in continued debate about the Academics is a meta-moment within the broader context, a pocket of philosophy within the natural theology that is within theology writ large.

On this day, two additional claims are raised that are ubiquitous in Christianity and the different schools of philosophy in play in the dialogue, thus showing the consonance of philosophy and Christianity. The omnipresence of God is a theme from the Neoplatonists that prepared Augustine to accept the Christian understanding of God's omnipotence; the question of whether one can be happy while still seeking but not yet having attained to God is a theme in the Academics. The latter question is one that develops for Augustine later in life into a question not just about happiness but more directly whether one can be happy in this life or must wait for the life to come; here they simply determine that one needs to have God in order to be happy, and it is not determined whether that is in this life or the next. But both the omnipotence of God and the need to attain to what one desires in order to be happy are raised not—as they could have been—by direct appeals to Christian teaching, but through argumentation. While Monica chafes a bit at the direction in which the argument leads them at one point, she relents. This is not a relinquishing of a Christian belief, but rather Monica showing us that there is no disagreement between the truth seen by reason and that revealed in Christianity.

Day three of the dialogue

On the third day, the conversation includes several distinctly Stoic elements. Augustine takes the Stoic approach that one should avoid death and pain as much as one can, using language very similar to Cicero's in *Tusculan Disputations* 2. One should not act in such a way as to want for bodily needs (4.25). The etymological concerns are also very Stoic in nature. In the Cicero section, I drew attention to the roots of concern about fruit (*frux*), frugality (*frugalitas*), and worthlessness (*nequitia*), which also appeared on the first day.⁹ This is also a

⁹ Augustine, *De beata vita* 2.8; Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 3.8.

passage that one could amplify with Scripture; the Gospel parables of the vine-dresser pruning the vine, or the fig tree that Jesus curses, or Isaiah 5:2, or Habakkuk 3:17. Each of these involves the same play on fruit and worthlessness. But Augustine does not reach for any of these.

On this day, Augustine also points to a divine origin of the truths that the group discovers in their conversation (3.17). This is again something that the Neoplatonists argue for, but the identification of that truth with a person is uniquely Christian. Augustine does not extend this to its particularly Christian implications, but we can see hints of it when he identifies Jesus as the Truth during this same day's conversation.

It is not until the very concluding paragraphs of the entire dialogue that Augustine turns definitively to Scripture to mark out the Trinitarian God—this in contrast to false religions (Manicheanism and the Arian heresy) as well as to Neoplatonism's Triplicity. Here, while he seeks to understand and comprehend this particular approach to the Trinity as Measure, Wisdom, and Admonition through his reasoning capacities, it is these three Persons as one God, each person equal in majesty, that are known properly through revelation.

The feasting

The imagery of a feast, introduced on the first day and sustained throughout the dialogue, nicely points to the nourishment of the body being for the sake also of the soul (2.7), and the nourishment of the soul for the happiness of the person as a whole (4.31). That the soul is further ordered to God, as the body is ordered to the soul, is not a claim Augustine explicitly makes. However, we know that the nourishment of the soul is, ultimately, union with God.

Being and non-being

While Ciceronian and Stoic influences abound, the metaphysical structure seen throughout the work is Neoplatonic. As we know from Augustine's autobiography in the dedication letter—and as is supported in his *Confessions*—Neoplatonic metaphysics uncovered the existence of immaterial reality and taught Augustine that God's omnipresence and immutability are corollaries to his immateriality. That which is most distant from God's reality is successively less real; evil is itself not a reality at all but a privation of good (where good ought to be). This is in concert with an interpretation of God's creation in Genesis, in which He declared all that He had made to be "good." It is also in keeping with God's declaration that He is the "I am." While Augustine could have reached for a Scriptural basis for these points, he did not. Instead, he used the Neoplatonic language of being and non-being, of light and darkness, of plenitude and emptiness. Ciceronian etymologies come into play in support of this, but the metaphysics is drawn from Augustine's exposure to Neoplatonism.

Monica's role

Monica is an intriguing character in the dialogue, but most importantly she represents the happy figure of one who has attained the "citadel of philosophy" without any of the formal education that is typically associated with philosophers of the ancient schools. It is she who tells us that it is knowledge and understanding of things that satisfies the hunger of the soul (2.8), whose divine font of wisdom reminds us that we need to seek what is truly good for us in order to be happy (2.10), and she who reminds us that it is with virtue that we can be said to properly enjoy external goods, but our happiness is not from the goods themselves but for the stable virtue in the soul of one enjoying those goods properly (2.11).

Monica's claim that God is present to everyone on day two (3.20) is another instance that shows that her understanding is consonant with what the philosophers say, though not derived from familiarity with them. Indeed, Augustine tells us in the *Confessions* that God's omnipresence, by virtue of His immateriality, was one of the key truths he learned from the Neoplatonists (3.19). And indeed, Monica is even drawn to say that if reason compels that they respond in a particular way, then indeed that is the truth (3.21), in concert with Christianity.

On the third day, Monica brings forth the conclusion that without wisdom the man who has all the goods that fortune could bestow upon him is not happy without wisdom, another conclusion that Augustine intended to bring forth "from the books of the philosophers" (4.27). Monica's clear-sighted answer, which solved the quandary the boys found themselves in with too many different concerns from different philosophers, was not separable from philosophy, even though it was not informed by philosophical knowledge.

Monica's knowledge is wisdom, wisdom that is not different from philosophy's wisdom. But here knowledge is not derived through study of pagan philosophers; it is through her own life as an uneducated Christian. I do not want to downplay her native intelligence; Augustine and Adeodatus are, after all, her descendants. But she is in her own person a testimony to the harmony of truth obtained through reason and truth derived from revealed knowledge. She shows us that Christianity encompasses true philosophy.

Chapter 2. From Augustine's sources

Further evidence for my claims that this is simultaneously a work of philosophy and a Christian work, and that Augustine sees Christianity as embracing the one true philosophy, is found in the influences on Augustine, starting with Ambrose.

Ambrose

While Augustine's dialogues are Ciceronian in style, his mother's spontaneous singing of *Deus creator omnium* ensures that it concludes with Trinitarian praise, following the tradition of the Ambrosian hymns. Ambrose's hymns and sermons are, like *De beata vita* itself, steeped in the philosophical language of Neoplatonism and the mutual concern of philosophers and believers alike in moral development. However, Ambrose's hymns are particularly theological, serving as catechesis in right doctrine for the Nicene Christians. They provide for us particularly theological complements to Augustine's philosophical approach. Sin is that which prevents man from having Christ in his heart, that *spiritus immundus* that prevents man from possessing God.¹ We are given Mary as an exemplar of chastity, described particularly as obedience to God, both Father and Son.² The concluding hymn situates the dialogue's inquiries in the midst of prayer, asking God for help in the process of seeking and praising God.

The sermons provide an even greater Scriptural complement, but there Ambrose also simultaneously draws on the philosophical traditions in which he was educated. We see especially the parallels with the Plotinian concept of happiness between *Jacob*, *Ennead* 1.4, and *De beata vita*. However, the same general understanding about the need for growth in virtue or

¹ Ambrose, *Iam surgit*, st. 2, lines 1-4; Augustine, *De beata vita* 3.18.

² Ambrose, *Iam surgit*, st. 5-6.

the purification of the soul leads to the possession of God; Ambrose illustrates this amply from Scripture, while Augustine's examples are extra-Biblical. Both Ambrose and Augustine exhibit the consonance of Christianity with the truth that pagan philosophers taught.

Scripture

While Augustine's entire argument is in consonance with Christianity—with the possible exception of his “frequent use of ‘fortune’” that he regretted at the time of the *Retractationes*³ it is not until he arrives at the doctrine of the Trinity that he cites Scripture explicitly. In that reference, he particularly draws attention to Christ as the Truth and Wisdom. In other words, he makes the truth and wisdom that the philosopher is pursuing a divine Person, not an abstract concept or a simple attribute of the divinity with which he seeks union.

Plotinus and Porphyry

That Augustine embraced the particularly Christian beliefs in the fall of 386 seems clear, in that his Trinitarian God is distinctly the God of Catholic, Nicene Christianity. This is not the Triplicity of Neoplatonism, nor the Arian understanding of God, nor a Manichean dualism. However, he is not afraid to accept the truth where he finds it, and the Plotinian concept enriches his ability to describe the Trinity. Furthermore, he was not merely a Neoplatonist in disguise, if his anthropology that opens the dialogue is self-consciously not committing to a Plotinian concept of the human being. What is true in Neoplatonism, however, is still true even if inadequate; Augustine is not afraid to make use of what he has learned from various philosophical systems if it contributes to his argument on the happy life.

³ Augustine, *Retractationes* 1.2.

What the investigation into possible Porphyrian references in the text shows, however, is that it is not antithetical to philosophy to attend to what is revealed. While Augustine is not deliberately engaging in exegesis from sources of revelation, he is attentive to Monica's oracular claim from the "divine font," whereby she spoke something he already knew from the *Hortensius*. This is a common trait among philosophers of the ancient world, however. While they did not privilege divine revelation, they were unafraid to survey and investigate what was commonly said, whether it was mere hearsay or myth or revelation.

Cicero

Cicero, along with the dedicatee Theodorus, both produced examples of the genre in which Augustine's *De beata vita* is properly classified: this is a philosophical dialogue, undertaken in philosophical leisure, inquiring into the proper concern of philosophy. That is, the dialogue is Ciceronian in form: the author is a character, it is highly dialogic in nature, and yet it concludes largely with a single speech by the main character. These, as I argued above, are all signs of the Ciceronian dialogue style. Augustine is on retreat in Cassiciacum, at his tranquil port of philosophy; Cicero likewise wrote from a villa outside the city where he found external tranquility to foster interior reflection.⁴ The topic of the happy life is one Cicero took up, as did other philosophers, as well. Perhaps one could point to an earlier source for the concern of philosophers with happiness: just look at Plato's *Republic* or the *Symposium*, where inquiries into justice or love are for the sake of human happiness (*eudaimonia*).⁵

⁴ Of course, as I also argue in the introduction, I think Augustine is genuinely recording a conversation that took place whereas Cicero is constructing fictions. Augustine is practicing the activity of philosophy in the manner of the ancient philosophers, and this practice finds its true end in Monica's praises.

⁵ See, for example, Plato, *Symposium* 205a.

Cicero's considerable influence on Augustine's philosophical formation and inclinations is clear. Cicero argues, in his *Tusculan Disputations*, for what becomes the philosophical foundation that Augustine establishes in the opening of his own dialogue. Cicero is the philosopher who also provides Augustine with the substantial parallels for two of the claims Monica makes in the dialogue. When Monica says man has to want what is truly good in order to be happy, Augustine delights that she knows what the philosophers have argued for centuries (2.11). When Monica sees that the wealthy man is not happy if he lacks virtue, she is again unconsciously echoing Cicero (4.27).

There is additionally an intriguing biographical parallel between Augustine and Cicero which, I think, is more accidental: Cicero's output of philosophical writings came after he was forced by circumstances to forsake his active life in the Roman Republic, and was suffering also from the grief of his daughter's death. Augustine, too, was forced—but not entirely contrary to his desires—to leave his position teaching rhetoric in Milan, both for reasons of health and because he had left the Manichean sect, a network within which had obtained his teaching position. It is at junctures like this in life that man is compelled to inquire into the happy life, as if forced by a storm that seems adverse.

Conclusion

Man has no reason for philosophizing other than to be happy, and that *beata vita* is found in union with God. Augustine's *De beata vita* is a philosophical inquiry into the happy life that concludes with praise of the Trinitarian God of Christianity. The pursuit of happiness by means of apparently unaided reason and the claims of the uneducated Christian Monica lead to the same Truth, identified by Christian teaching as Christ, the second Person of the Godhead. This dialogue is simultaneously a work of philosophy and a Christian work, and exhibits the manner in which Augustine understands Christianity to encompass true philosophy. While this moment of philosophy does not claim to satisfy all the questions one may have—Augustine says in the dedication letter himself that he still is uncertain about the nature of the soul—it is sufficient for him on his birthday celebration and for the companions in the port of philosophy he has gathered around him.

An unresolved tension remains at the conclusion of this dialogue: is this happy life, as described by Augustine and his interlocutors, possible in *this* life? Later, Augustine says no; man's happiness is only in eternity.¹ The Platonists did not think a man could be happy in this life, while the Stoics thought it possible. Augustine does not obviously conclude in this dialogue that one is happy in this life, although in his *Retractationes* he suggests that he should have said man is only happy in the life to come. Here, however, he and his interlocutors rejoice in having discovered this new way of life and they also rejoice together as they embark upon it.

¹ Augustine, *Retractationes* 1.2.

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