

Erik KENYON (*Skeptical*) *Academics & the Surprise Ending of Augustine's Contra Academicos*

Augustine's dialogue *Contra Academicos* (CA) presents a lengthy refutation of the Skeptical Academy's two basic principles: the truth cannot be known (*akatalepsia*) and one should universally withhold assent (*epoche*). Yet Augustine concludes this three-book refutation of Skepticism by suggesting that the Academic Skeptics were not actually Skeptics. This surprising claim is presented in a revisionist history of philosophy, which argues that the Academy never strayed from Plato's doctrine of immaterial Forms; but with the rise of Stoic materialism, the Academics chose to protect their beliefs by putting up a skeptical facade and adopting Stoicism's materialist assumptions *for the sake of refuting them*. Once Stoicism fell from favor, Plotinus brought Platonism back out into the open.

The suggestion that the Academics were not actually Skeptics calls the status of CA's many anti-Skeptical arguments into serious question. At best, reconstructions of CA's overarching argument treat this surprise ending as a curious coda (e.g. Kirwan 1989; Harding 2006). The history of the Academy is presented in a passage of *oratio perpetua*, and some suggest that the switch from philosophical debate to uninterrupted pronouncement reflects the "Augustinian" dichotomy of reason and authority (Voss 1970; Foley 1999). Others find this to be a major flaw of the work (e.g. Claes 2007). Yet the formal element most relevant to the present problem is the position of Augustine's suggestion, not its mode of delivery.

I argue that by delaying the suggestion of Academic crypto-Platonism until the end of CA, Augustine invites his reader to consider his dialogue's arguments from two fundamentally different perspectives: at first glance these arguments underline the flaws of Academic Skepticism, but on reflection these same arguments highlight the strengths of Academic Platonism. CA2's discussion of the *apraxia* argument provides a prime example. The Stoics argue that by universally withholding assent the Skeptics would be left in a state of complete inactivity (*apraxia*). The Skeptics escape this criticism by claiming that they refrain from assenting to impressions as true (*vera*) since this leads one to form beliefs about the world; nevertheless, they are able to act by assenting to impressions as truth-like (*veri similia*). Augustine himself points out that only those already acquainted with *vera* would be able to recognize *veri similia*. If the Academics are actually Skeptics, then their commitments to both *akatalepsia* and *epoche* lead them into self-contradiction. Yet if we view the *apraxia* argument from a Platonist perspective, we find a neat set-up for a theory of action in which individuals judge material objects (*veri similia*) against immaterial paradigms (*vera*). Augustine develops such a theory in *De Musica* VI.

But what is the point of creating such an elaborate literary structure? The answer to this question, I suggest, sits with Plotinus. *Enneads* 5.1 sets out a program of philosophical purification in which a teacher *first* convinces students of the material world's poverty and *then* helps them to see the splendor of the immaterial Forms. The end of CA presents the Academic Skeptics as Platonists, who through their anti-Stoic endeavors engaged in the first phase of this strategy. But the cure outlasts the sickness, and by Augustine's day the materialist assumptions that Skepticism had adopted *for the sake of argument* had become a hindrance to philosophical inquiry (Augustine reiterates this in *Epistle* 1).

By creating two radically different ways of approaching the Academics, Augustine pursues this two-part Plotinian strategy of purging his readers of the materialism preserved in the (Skeptical) Academics' anti-Stoic arguments and underscoring the attractions of the (Platonist) Academics' world of immaterial Forms. The literary structure which allows Augustine to pursue these goals *simultaneously* is a work of genius. I suggest that similar considerations explain the puzzling conclusions of Augustine's other dialogues *De Beata Vita*, *De Ordine* and *De Quantitate Animae*.