

## **Ancient Scepticism And The *Contra Academicos* Of St. Augustine**

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Are we ever justified in being convinced we know something and in acting accordingly? Does our happiness depend upon the possibility or impossibility of certain knowledge? Does the good life require a stable relationship to the truth or can it be had apart from this? Is the desire to apprehend truth our central concern as rational beings, the basis of our authentic existence? Is it rather an impediment to happiness, an illusory desire which we must dispel or condemn ourselves to a life of frustration and anxiety? One might simply dismiss this as a dead issue. After all, is not certainty a discredited concept in our supposedly post-philosophical era? Have not we all learned the finite and contingent character of all human discourse? Yet the signs of discomfort with these conclusions are evident in our culture as well. Certain foundations for our beliefs and actions, whether grounded in reason or the authority of revelation, can seem necessary antidotes to the pervasive loss of meaning in advanced societies. Indeed, the very distinction between civilized life and barbarity and cynicism is thought to rest on the capacity to draw clear moral conclusions. In support of this, it may be pointed out that contemporary relativism is often put forward on moral and socio-political grounds which betray it as clearly a dogmatism.

Nonetheless, it remains true that the human condition seems subject to a fundamental anxiety about the possibility of grasping the world we inhabit. Is reality as we perceive it to be or are we locked forever in our own subjective impressions? The problem can be put as follows: it seems always that in my effort to grasp otherness in nature, society, or beyond I rely upon some medium to bring the object before myself. But if this is the case how am I to know how much the perception before me takes its character from the object itself or from the medium which has delivered it to me?

In the ancient world Sceptical thinkers focused on the problem of sensation. Given that the senses are passible, and they need to such be to receive impressions from external objects, can they not be effected by external conditions in such a way that they do not register these objects as they truly are? And if this were not the case, or could be compensated for in some way, how could we be sure what characteristics of the object were contributed by the inherent operation of the sense organ? What is even worse, it is entirely possible to have sensations of objects which are not present. Far from guaranteeing that objects are as they appear, the senses do not even guarantee the

presence of an object at all. How, then, can we rely upon them in claiming to know how the world is?

In our own day, Sceptics have tended to focus less on the problem of sensation and more on the conditions for understanding and ordering the deliverances of sense. This is the problem of the so called hermeneutical circle. To give shape and meaning to the data which confront us requires a preset conceptual framework if we are to have more than a mere chaos of impressions. But, since we cannot grasp the world as it is apart from such frameworks how are we to determine whether they are part of the real structure of things? We cannot put things on one side and concepts on the other to determine whether they match. The same difficulty we noted with the senses appears here as well. It seems there is no way to determine what belongs to the object and what belongs to the medium through which it appears.

On the face of it these arguments can seem utterly persuasive and many have been persuaded by them. On the other hand, civilization and even life itself seem to depend on the capacity to distinguish what is from what is not and many others have impatiently denounced Sceptical arguments as destructive of human flourishing. Nonetheless, it is one thing to decry the evil consequences of Relativism and Scepticism and quite another to demonstrate their falsity. Indeed, if it is the case that all knowledge is mediated the sceptical argument is untouchable in both its ancient and modern forms.

In antiquity the Sceptical challenge was answered with the greatest thoroughness by Augustine. His dialogue *Contra Academicos* as well as several passages in his other writings vigorously oppose any effort to deny to human beings a sure foundation in their quest to apprehend the Truth. For him, self-consciousness itself provided this foundation. The fact that mind is, in the final analysis, unmediated self-presence puts knowledge grounded in introspection beyond the power of appearance and renders it impervious to doubt. On this basis, he proceeded to demonstrate that the Platonic tradition could surmount the challenge of the New Academy, which had raised in a new way the problem of thought's adequacy to being, by showing that self-consciousness itself was constituted by the Ideas (*De Vera Religione* xxix,73).

Augustine noted that the opposition of being and appearance, on which Scepticism of any kind thrived, is operative in any kind of knowledge in which something is known indirectly through the medium of something directly known. Thus, a sensible object external to ourselves is known, not by direct insight but through an image it produces in us from which we infer the being and nature of that object. While Augustine thought knowledge of this kind entirely adequate to its purpose and had no exaggerated suspicion of the senses, he also saw that the refutation of Scepticism involved something more than asserting this general fact. It involved cutting out the root of the Sceptical position by pointing to the direct presence of reason to itself in its own operations. As an example of the direct presence of being to thought, reason's knowledge of itself is immune to the critical fire of the Sceptics, who always assume that knowledge is through a medium capable of distorting the object known (see *De Trinitate* XV, chap.4).

Thus, against the tendency of ancient Scepticism to posit an absolute divide between subject and object, being and appearance, Augustine points to self-consciousness as uniting these oppositions. Moreover, because timeless and necessary truth constitutes the activity of thought revealed in judgement, even the judgement that I exist, this self-consciousness is not barren self-identity but inherently contentful. Its awareness of itself is simultaneously an intellection of the primary ideas. This being the case, the mind cannot fall completely out of its relation to being without ceasing to exist as a mind. Accordingly, any Scepticism which attempts to establish an absolute gulf between thought and being is defeated from the outset. The answer to the Sceptical question is the Sceptic himself inasmuch as in his own activity he directly unites the very terms, being and appearance, that he would hold forever apart.

In this way, Augustine showed that in thought itself lay the mediation between sensible appearance and its inner ground in the divine. Since self-consciousness holds together in itself the apparent and the real the theoretical life can involve more than the mere refusal to assent to appearances. The intelligible light, the bridge by which we return to our source from the shadows of the cave, is present, sustaining and illumining us even in the very effort to deny it. To return fully to ourselves is to return to this light and achieve final fruition and since we are present to ourselves by our very nature to return to ourselves is a matter of simply looking.<sup>1</sup>

Having said this however, it need not be denied that for Augustine Scepticism is not without a positive function. That any Scepticism which seeks to establish a sceptical discourse (rather than falling into silence) has of necessity a self-overcoming character will be a crucial point emerging from Augustine's argument. This fact represents both the limitation and the positive contribution of the Sceptical tradition. By undermining the claim of various dogmatisms to offer a certain grasp of our immediate sensuous environment by showing that our relationship to it is entirely mediated the Sceptics inadvertently pointed to thought itself as the immediate self-presence of Truth. In this way, their position constituted a possible route of return to the wisdom of Platonism insofar as it revealed, through its very denial of the light of truth, the presence of this light in the form of universal and objective laws of thought. Thus, Augustine can see Scepticism as moving beyond itself to a knowledge of the Ideas and as paving the way historically for the revival of the Platonic tradition in the school of Plotinus.

The present paper will examine the dialectical process by which scepticism can be converted to the ideas as dramatised by Augustine in the *Contra Academicos*. This is Augustine's most thorough treatment of the question and one which, to the end of his life, he regarded as having accomplished its aim (*Retractions*, 1, 1). Prior to this, however, it

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine held with the Platonic tradition that the light of the Ideas mediated to us the divine ground of all finite being and knowing. Augustine also saw Orthodox Christianity's identification of the Word, the primal thought in which the Ideas were held as a unity, with God, as the logical ground of this mediation. Thus, that which discloses the principle to us is the presence to us of that principle in its own act of self-disclosure. We speak the being of God in God's speaking himself to us. Insofar as this occurs in the timeless necessity of thought, Augustine speaks of Christ the inner teacher. Insofar as this occurs in the contingency of time and space, he speaks of the incarnation of the Word.

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will be necessary to give a general account of the Sceptical position and the background from which it emerges.

II

The Ancient sceptics had proposed a radical solution to the questions which animated philosophical discussion in the Hellenistic era.<sup>2</sup> This era was characterized by a number of dogmatic philosophical schools which claimed to offer human beings certain happiness in the midst of an unstable and fragmented world.<sup>3</sup> The period immediately following the conquests of Alexander and the spread of Greek culture across Asia was one of profound spiritual upheaval. The loss of the political independence of the Greek city states undermined the traditional civic virtues which had given meaning to the lives of their citizens. In this situation, the speculative daring and profundity of Platonic and Aristotelian thought gave way to a new pragmatic spirit for which the paramount concern was securing individual well-being in a vast cosmopolitan empire. Moreover, this spirit was anti-metaphysical in temper and tended to revert to the materialism of early Greek thought (Reale, 8-10). Seeking the immediate good of the individual in his worldly situation, the Hellenistic schools eschewed all idealisms and espoused a rigorous immanentism.<sup>4</sup>

Two of the most prominent of these schools, the Epicureans and the Stoics, sought to liberate humans from anxiety and disturbance by means of a dogmatic belief in the veracity of sense perception. For the former, clear and veridical sense perceptions were the foundation of an atomic theory which accounted for all things in terms of the fortuitous motion of atomic particles (Armstrong, 133-35). This knowledge was said to liberate us from the anxiety consequent on the belief in our responsibility to divine powers and allow us to pursue the tranquillity that results from the satisfaction of our basic natural needs (Armstrong, 137). In the absence of pain brought about by the

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<sup>2</sup> An exhaustive account of the Sceptical movement cannot be given here. Indeed, no unproblematic account could be given for its history must be reconstructed from secondary sources that are sometimes vague and fragmentary. Our main primary text, the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* by Sextus Empiricus, comes from the revived Scepticism of later antiquity and the picture that emerges from the accounts of earlier thinkers is not always consistent and clear. That being said, the lineaments of Scepticism as a way of life and the considerations that were taken to justify it are clear. This basic thought-form Augustine derived from Cicero and his critique of it goes more to this logical core than to the permutations of historical Scepticism. Accordingly, the following is offered as a crystallization of Sceptical doctrine as it would appeared to Augustine and his readers. This is adequate for the task at hand as historians are in basic agreement about those aspects of Scepticism on which Augustine's critique is focused.

<sup>3</sup> For a general account of Hellenistic thought see A.H. Armstrong, *An Introduction to Ancient Philosophy*, New Jersey, 1981 and A.A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, Berkeley, 1974. See also E. Zeller, *Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics* trans. O.R. Reichel, New York, 1962 and G. Reale, *The Systems of the Hellenistic Age*, trans. J.R. Catan, Albany, 1985. Citations from Cicero and Sextus Empiricus in this paper are from *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*, trans. Inwood and Gerson, Indianapolis, 1988. Sympathetic accounts of Ancient Scepticism are given by L. Groarke, *Greek Scepticism*, Kingston, 1990, and R.J. Hankinson, *The Sceptics*, New York, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> The most extreme expression of this immanentist spirit is undoubtedly to be found in the Stoic claim that the sage could be happy even in the bull of Phaleris. Paradoxically though, they also counselled suicide in cases of extremity. Book IX of the *City of God* presents Augustine's own view of the possibility of earthly happiness and forms an instructive contrast to the attitude mentioned above.

fulfilment of these needs, the Epicureans thought they had discovered a limitless good (Reale, 164,171). Moreover, the pursuit of this good was taken to require a withdrawal from all civic life into intimate private associations devoted to cultivating personal happiness (Reale, 120). Thus, the Epicureans found the end of man to lie, not in the theoretical life, but in a praxis which aimed at *autarchy* and *apatheia*, self-sufficiency and freedom from disturbance.

The Stoics too sought freedom from anxiety and disturbance, but rather than doing so by denying divine providence they sought to offer a path whereby human beings could identify themselves directly with the will of God. The Stoic sage, with his imperturbable grasp of sensible objects, was thought to be able to know the rational order expressed in the causal nexus of natural events (Long, 108). With this knowledge, he could live a life perfectly in accord with nature through identifying himself with and submitting to the divine *logos* (conceived as a fiery material substance permeating the *cosmos*) which governed all things (Armstrong, 124).

The Stoics, like the Epicureans, sought to ground their claims to knowledge of the *Cosmos* on the immediacy of sense impressions. They held that it was possible to identify a class of self-authenticating perceptions which they termed 'kataleptic' impressions (Long, 126-7). By means of these self-evident impressions, the 'wise man' could perceive with certainty extra-subjective events and discern through these the operations of the universal reason with which he sought to identify himself. A kataleptic impression was defined as one "... stamped and moulded out of the object from which it came with a character such as it could not have if it came from an object other than the one which it did come from." (Cicero, *Academica* 2.18). Thus, the Stoics held that certain sense impressions impressed upon the percipient a form or shape which was the form or shape of an external object.<sup>5</sup> They held too that these impressions were recognizable as such by their clarity and persuasiveness. If a certain impression had the character of a kataleptic impression, it could compel assent to the objective reality of that which was conveyed in the impression (Reale, 223). On this basis all forms of conceptual knowledge were thought to rest. Secure in his grasp of the physical *Cosmos* the Stoic was secure as well in his grasp of the divine *Logos* which was identical with it and thus could transcend the limitations of his particular existence through his love of fate.

The Academic Sceptics, however, saw a more direct path to tranquillity which did not rest on a shaky dogmatic realism. They began from two premises accepted by the Stoics: (1) that the 'wise man' does not assent to opinions but to true knowledge and (2) that true sense perceptions can be distinguished from false by a 'mark' of their authenticity<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> It should be remembered that, as materialists, the Stoics tended to take this formula literally; the object perceived left a physical impression on the soul that matched its own physical shape. Zeno described this in terms of eminence and depression while Chrysippus spoke more vaguely of 'qualitative alteration'. In doing this, he seemed to be responding to the criticism that Zeno's theory could not account for the simultaneous presentation of distinct shapes to the mind, as when a geometer thought at one and the same time of a circle and a square (Reale 221-222).

<sup>6</sup> The Stoics held that a sense impression was veridical if it possessed a character such as it could not have if it came from an object other than the one from which it did come. This they termed a 'cognitive impression'. As to how one knew an impression to be cognitive the Stoics were vague. Zeno appears to

(Cicero, *Academica* 2.40). The Sceptics then pointed out that the Stoics had never been able to give a clear explanation of this mark, and could not for it did not exist. Consequently, nothing could be perceived in such a way as to preclude the possibility of error. This being the case, concerning sensible things (the only things considered real in themselves by the Stoics) it was possible to hold only opinions. Since, however, the 'wise man' did not assent to opinions, it followed that he suspended all assent (Cicero, *Academica* 2.66).

The main effort of the Sceptics went into undermining the doctrine of the kataleptic impression. Here they argued very effectively that no sense perception, no matter how vivid, could guarantee its own correspondence to an external object.<sup>7</sup> As Long puts it "Sense perceptions do not possess characteristics that mark off one that is certainly reliable from another that is not. In no particular case is any sense impression self-evidently true to the object it purports to represent. It may and often will be true, but it cannot be known to be true." (Long, 95-6) Thus, no matter how many true perceptions we have, the fact that a vivid dream or hallucination can appear to us in such a way that nothing marks it as such precludes us from saying that any one of our perceptions is unmistakably veridical. As far as sense experience is concerned, the true and the false are forever confused and as all other truth claims rest ultimately upon sensation, no secure foundation for philosophical knowledge exists. As Sextus Empiricus puts it "And if there is no presentation capable of judging, reasoning too would not be a criterion, for reasoning is based on a presentation. And this makes sense, for that which is to be judged must first be presented to someone, and nothing is presented to someone apart from non-rational sense perception."<sup>8</sup> (*Adversus Mathematicos* 7.164.)

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have held that an impression was cognitive if it was so clear and forceful as to compel immediate assent. To this, the Sceptics could easily reply that many dreams and hallucinations would, on this account, have to be counted as veridical. Later Stoics attempted to fend off criticism by arguing that the cataleptic impression itself was not sufficient to compel assent apart from circumstances favorable to its reception. Thus, the evaluation of particular impressions came to depend more on an analysis of the context in which the impression occurred. Even in antiquity the striking convergence between this view and the 'probabilism' of Carneades was remarked upon. Galen is even said to have remarked that in epistemology the doctrines of the Stoics and Sceptics were identical. For a useful account of this argument see A.A Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy*.

<sup>7</sup> It is important to note the distinction between Scepticism and Relativism. The Sceptics claimed that there was an unbridgeable gulf between things as they appear to us and things in themselves. The suspension of judgement makes sense only on the presupposition that there is in fact an objective world which may differ from our perception of it. A perspectivalist who holds that there is no thing in itself apart from the appearance of that thing for a subject has no problem with assent to perceptions since, for him, what is is identical to what appears. Being and appearance are one and error impossible. In antiquity this position was represented by Sophists such as Protagoras and Gorgias. The Sceptics, then, held that subject and object were distinct and that there could be no mediated relationship between them.

<sup>8</sup> The Sceptics did not confine their critique to sense knowledge and the claims based up on it. They claimed as well that logical truths were susceptible to the same arguments advanced against perception. Thus, for any inference claimed to be valid, they thought they could produce a fallacious one identical in form. As well, they made use of the notorious Liar's Paradox to undermine such general logical definitions as the assertion that a proposition was a statement either true or false (Cicero, *Academica* 2.95-98). In the field of Ethics too, the Sceptics thought that all accounts of the good life could be shown to be equally plausible and equally implausible. This was the point of Carneades famous demonstration in Rome, in the

If this was the case, then the Stoics' own premises committed them to the view that the 'wise man' could not assent to any perception as true (Long, 90-91). The Stoics held that the distinction between the wise and the foolish lay in the fact that the former acted only from certain knowledge and the latter from mere opinion (Zeller, 269-70). If certain knowledge did not exist, then it followed that concerning all things, the 'wise man' must suspend judgement. If he did not but assented rashly, he would expose himself to the possibility of error which would cause him to lose his purchase on that by which he was called wise in the first place, his possession of truth. Thus, if to be a sage it is necessary to be free of all error, then it is necessary as well to suspend judgement.

This withholding of assent was thought by all Sceptics to liberate human beings from the fear of error and to bring about a state of imperturbable self-sufficiency and happiness. "The Sceptics hoped to attain a freedom from disturbance by judging the inconsistency of appearances and ideas, and not being able to do this, they suspended judgement. Being in this suspensive state, freedom from disturbance followed fortuitously, as a shadow follows a body."<sup>9</sup> (Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 12.25). Thus, the Sceptic succeeds by failure. Discovering the inadequacy of all attempts to distinguish being from seeming and the impossibility of judging between rival philosophies and, moreover, knowing the insufficiency of opinion to satisfy our desire for knowledge, he simply renounces the fruit of his search and finds in this renunciation freedom and peace.

In this way, the Sceptics found in their own subjectivity, the suspensive state of thought resting in its own formal self identity, the abiding term of all discourse [However, they did not go beyond this to ask whether this subjectivity itself was intelligible in itself or whether it too possessed its stability in relation to a prior principle].<sup>10</sup> The Academic Sceptics in particular emphasized the practice of a negative dialectic which could undermine any given content by showing its contrary to be equally plausible. In this practice, the 'wise man' attained inner freedom from all appearances and impressions and in this negative fashion displayed his will to truth.

In certain Sceptics this doctrine appears to have produced an austere quietism which led inevitably to the accusation that it was a doctrine which rendered human life

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course of which he argued with great force in favor of justice and then, with equal force, in favor of injustice (Long, 94).

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that Sextus speaks of the Sceptics' *apatheia* as the fortuitous outcome of their position. This is to avoid any suggestion that they had a preconceived notion of the good life. Having suspended all judgement, they simply found this a satisfying way to live. Moreover, Sextus criticises the Academics for failing to make this distinction. In his view they erred in speaking of *apatheia* as a good in itself and thus as an object of rational choice.

<sup>10</sup> In spite of their reverence for Socrates himself the Sceptics distinguished the state of *epoche* from Socratic ignorance. The latter, they rightly saw, was a form of self knowledge. Socrates knew that he knew nothing for he knew himself as seeking an object, the Good, which transcended the finitude through which he sought it. This elusiveness of the transcendent principle of discourse is what is uncovered by his own negative dialectic. Arcesilaus, on the other hand, claimed that he did not even know that he knew nothing. By this he meant to point out that he did not know, in any positive sense, his relationship to truth as being one of ignorance. Rather, he concluded from the fact of universal ignorance that his own particular state was unknowable to himself and that even the self knowledge of Socrates was closed to him.

impossible.<sup>11</sup> After all, the physical necessities of animal life, to which human beings are subject, seem to demand the assent to certain appearances. If I am hungry, I must judge that the object in front of me is edible as opposed to poisonous. Suspension of judgement in this case would result in my starvation. What is more, as individual human beings are, by and large, too feeble to survive in complete solitude, the fact that they must live in society with others also places them in situations where assent to appearances seems unavoidable. How then could the Sceptic's way of life be anything more than an unobtainable ideal?

It fell to the Sceptic Carneades to work out a doctrine of plausibility by which, without giving full assent to anything as true, the Academic Sceptic could nonetheless function as a denizen of the realm of appearances (Hankinson, 111-12). Keeping his mind free from error he could still proceed to make the cave a somewhat comfortable place to inhabit if he were a careful enough observer of the shadows on the wall. Conceived in this way, the life of the Sceptic could, as far as appearances are concerned, be outwardly indistinguishable from the life of common men and women. Indeed, he could combine his seemingly austere doctrine with the highest degree of worldliness if only he kept himself inwardly free from assent. This could seem a plausible step to take. It is notable, however, that the Sceptics could never quite abandon a concern for the theoretical life. However successful the Sceptic might have been at navigating around the cave he did not seem to have ever wanted to call it home.<sup>12</sup>

How, then, does the Sceptic judge plausibilities? Sextus Empiricus gives a lucid account of Carneades' views on this question. He notes that for Carneades and the Academics who succeeded him, it was possible to distinguish among different types of perceptions. These types he describes as follows:

They regard some as simply plausible; some as plausible and tested; and others as plausible, thoroughly tested and uncontroverted. For example, when one suddenly enters a darkened room wherein is lying a coiled-up rope, it is simply plausible that the presentation coming from this is as if it were that from a snake, but to the man who has looked carefully and

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<sup>11</sup> In antiquity, numerous stories circulated about the supposed indifference of the Sceptics to even the basic necessities of life. Pyrrho, for instance, is said to have won the praise of one of his companions for not stopping to rescue him from a ditch. He himself was said to have been kept alive by the constant attention of others, who prevented him from being run over by wagons or from walking off cliffs. It is hard to say what kernel of truth might lie in these stories, though Diogenes Laertius, who reports them, seems to take them with a grain of salt (see Hankinson, 111).

<sup>12</sup> Carneades is reported to have said that he suspended judgement concerning all matters discussed by philosophers and was indifferent to the rest (*Contra Academicos* 3.10.22.) This would seem to indicate that for him it mattered little that a certain degree of plausibility was possible in practical matters that could not be attained by theoretical reason. Only in the employment of the latter was the ethical good to be found, the freedom and self-possession of the happy man. Thus, the utility of plausible presentations would appear to lie in the fact that the 'wise man' can use them to secure the goods necessary to pursue a life of theoretical freedom. Scepticism, after all, is a kind of witness to the love of truth. For the Sceptic, error is an alienation from our true selves and this is why it must be avoided even at the cost of suspending all judgement. In this it is recognized that our true freedom and dignity lie in the ordering of our thought to the truth of things, even if this is expressed only negatively.

thoroughly tested the circumstances, for example, by ascertaining that it does not move, that its colour is of a certain sort, and so on, it appears to be a rope according to the plausible and tested presentation. An example of an uncontroverted presentation is this. It is said that Heracles brought Alcestis back from Hades when she was dead and showed her to Admetus who received a plausible and thoroughly tested presentation of Alcestis. But since he knew that she was dead, his intellect recoiled from assent and inclined to disbelief. So those of the new Academy prefer a thoroughly tested and plausible presentation to a simply plausible one and an uncontroverted, thoroughly tested and plausible one to either of the other two. (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 33.226-9)<sup>13</sup>

Depending on the importance of the matter at hand or the urgency of his situation the Sceptic could use any of these criteria. In a matter of little importance, or in an emergency when a careful evaluation was not feasible, he would be justified in acting on the plausible presentation. If more was at stake then the tested and uncontroverted presentation could be employed. In matters judged to be of greatest importance, the Sceptic would employ the uncontroverted and thoroughly tested presentation (Long, 98).

It must be emphasized however that none of these precautions could guarantee the truth of any perception. The possibility of a false perception meeting even the most rigorous evaluation remained. In spite of this, careful observation and experience allowed the Sceptic, as much if not more than any other man, to secure for himself such natural goods as need compelled him to seek. In matters concerning anything beyond sensible experience, such as the nature of God or the happy life, the Sceptics simply opposed all existing views to each other and showed none to be more plausible than the next. It appears though, that Carneades may well have allowed a judgement of plausibility to be made concerning some matters other than sense impressions, such as courses of action or, indeed the plausibility of Scepticism itself. Augustine, we shall see, takes Carneades to be claiming this. (Groarke, 115).

Thus, Ancient Scepticism produced an outlook somewhat akin to modern positivism in its resolute empiricism. They differed however in that they never advocated, as far as we know, a complete immersion in the world of common experience. While recognizing

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<sup>13</sup> The predominance of the dialectical element over ethical has by some been used to differentiate Academic Scepticism from Pyrrhonism. Augustine himself understood Academic Scepticism as ethically motivated and among modern commentators Groarke is of the same view (Groarke 107). It need not be denied however that, in the sources that we possess, the ethical concern is more prominent among the Pyrrhonians. The reason for this is not far to seek. For the followers of Pyrrho, the Academics lapsed into dogmatism insofar as their epoche was based on a positive claim about the impossibility of knowledge. They saw no way to acquit the Academics of the charge of performative self-contradiction so often urged against Scepticism. Thus, they themselves made no claim about the knowability or unknowability of things but simply reported their own suspensive state of mind and their satisfaction with it. This ethical fact is the sum and substance of their scepticism. Even the arguments by which they attacked the dogmatists were taken simply as therapeutic and, their subjective purpose being fulfilled, were kicked away like a ladder. In this way, they avoided the contradiction inherent in a Scepticism which is at the same time a wisdom, that is, a rational criticism of life. They did so, however, at the cost of aphasia and final arbitrariness.

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that we are bound by our physical existence to involve ourselves with the physical realm and all its attendant illusions they did not abandon the ideal of a theoretical freedom from it. This is due to the common ethical concern which, with varying degrees of emphasis, all the Sceptics shared (Groarke 107-8). The Sceptics knew that the good life for human beings was to be found in and through thought as it attained to some stable object above the flux of experience. This is why they refused to give assent to anything in the sensible realm. The fact that they did not find any such object outside of their own subjectivity should not be allowed to obscure the point that Scepticism possessed within its own assumptions both a speculative and practical relationship to the idea of truth and as such possessed an intelligible content.

This is why, for Augustine, Scepticism is a self-overcoming project the immanent critique of which will bring to light the objective truth that it rightly says cannot be identified with the sensible. That Scepticism itself does not come to see this is due to the fact that in freedom from error it thinks it has found our proper relation to the good. Thus, it is as much a problem of will as of knowledge. After all, if the Sceptic possesses the Good through suspension of judgement then any further argument would be beside the point. What else can interest someone who thinks he has the Good? To cut away the root of the Sceptical doctrine it is necessary to ask, with Augustine, whether *apatheia* and *autarchy* properly satisfy the will or are simply goods as limited as any other. It would be no exaggeration to say that the ultimate answer to Scepticism is conversion; for the Sceptic to see what lies before his own eyes requires that he have the will to see it. This will to turn to the light which enlightens every man born in this world, while not in anyone's power to produce save the Father of lights, can nonetheless find its human occasion in the demonstration that the Sceptic does not truly possess the good he seeks and does not realize that if he thinks at all about his own position it is only because of the light that illuminates the wall of the cave. The *Contra Academicos* is intended to show us how the Sceptic can be turned to see this light.

### III

It is Augustine's contention that, historically, Scepticism paved the way for its own overcoming in the revival of Platonism (*Contra Academicos* III 3.18.41 40-45). For him, it was evident that the Academics had forgotten (or appeared to forget) the very Platonic doctrine with which they were historically associated. While knowing the negative side of the Socratic dialectic, they sought to stabilize this process through the suspension of assent without seeing the completion of it in the Platonic dialectic. Owing to their dialectical relationship with Stoicism and Epicureanism, which were materialist positions, the Sceptics were forced to take over the assumptions of their opponents in order to achieve a sceptical result. Because of this they did not take sufficient account of the fact that the objectivity of their critique rested, in the end, upon the Ideas as the

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ordering principles of thought and being and the Word as the unity of the Ideas (at least as far as their exoteric teaching is concerned).<sup>14</sup>

As a Platonist, Augustine thought it possible to know both God and the self through a consideration of what was directly available to the mind in its own reflexive activity. For him, the scepticism of the Academy, far from abolishing the quest for truth, actually pointed to the true way of finding it by purging us of a dogmatic reliance on the senses.<sup>15</sup> The negative result of the Sceptics displayed the nullity of sense experience conceived, in Stoic fashion, as in itself primary. Past this it simply remains to ask about the mind that can so dissolve the sensible into pure appearance what is presupposed in its activity, before seeing that what one has actually uncovered is a knowledge of the absolute priority of the Ideas and the derivative character of the sensible.

The Sceptic, then, by turning from appearances toward his own subjectivity, in fact comes closest of all, if he would only see it, to the locus of objective truth. As Augustine says, it is by returning to the inner chamber of the mind that one returns to the realm of spiritual substance in which immutable and incorporeal truth can be perceived (*Confessions* 'wise man' VII,x(16)). Since the process of recollecting this truth is primarily, for Augustine as for his Neo-Platonist predecessors, a process of self recollection that turns inward on itself and upwards to its source, some way must be found to turn the soul's attention to itself so that it can perceive its own character and destiny.

The first step in this process is curing the soul of its tendency to confuse itself with the sensible appearances that are the primary object of its attention (*Ibid.* 'wise man' VII,i(2)). The mind that does this, through the apprehension of its own true inwardness and hence its immateriality, becomes free to train its eye on the incorporeal realm that lies behind the veil of appearance and is in itself the proper object of knowledge. The

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<sup>14</sup> Augustine derived from Cicero the notion that The Academics concealed a pure Platonism from the threat of Stoic vulgarisation by means of their polemic against dogmatism. Modern scholars are almost unanimous in dismissing the possibility. Be that as it may, it serves Augustine well enough as a convenient fiction if all it means is that, as D.K House argues "it is theoretically sound that one can come to Platonism from a refuted Scepticism." ("A Note on Book III of St. Augustine's *Contra Academicos*", *Studia Patristica*, vol. XVIII) Perhaps it is not so unlikely that in the end Augustine regarded it as no more than this. For our purposes, it is not necessary to go any further than to say the Scepticism witnesses negatively to what the Platonists show positively and that this fact finds poetic expression in the notion of a secret doctrine.

<sup>15</sup> In his *83 Different Questions* Augustine confirms that, as regards the senses, the Sceptics are correct. Speaking of the problem of hallucinatory experiences he says "In such experiences we cannot at all tell whether we are aware of the sensible objects by the senses themselves or whether they are the images of sensible objects. If, therefore, there are false images of sensible objects, and if they cannot be distinguished by the senses themselves, and if nothing can be perceived except what is distinguished from the false, then there is no criterion for truth resident in the senses" (Question 9). Of course, this is to say that there is no certain knowledge of sensible things. Opinion about sensible things is entirely justified and indeed necessary both for self preservation and the exercise of justice towards others. Also, it the ground upon which we possess what God has revealed to us of himself in history. To the soul inspired by charity, opinion even approximates to a kind of certainty, as in the acts of faith and trust that constitute friendship. Moreover, if it is precisely the function of the senses to furnish us with the material on which to form opinions, then it cannot be denied that they do this reasonably well and need not be rejected or condemned. For this side of Augustine's thought, one should consult his short but highly engaging treatise.

catalyst for this movement lies in the questioning subjectivity that seeks the unifying ground of the sheer externality of events in time and space in memory and the unity of memory in God. Thus, in seeking the unity of its experience, the mind discovers its own character as self-presence, the character of matter as the self-external, and the Good as the ground of both ( *Confessions X*).

The Sceptic, having found the sensible inadequate to the inwardness of thought, has already begun this movement. Moreover, he moves also toward a Good beyond the mobility of sensible nature. However, the Soul that seeks its good must know the good it seeks and if it cannot find a true and knowable good among material things, it must then ask itself by what measure it reaches this conclusion. It must ask itself what the Good and the True are in their logical character. To ask this question is to realize that one has ceased altogether to speak about material things and is moving in the realm of Ideas that nothing spatio-temporal can adequately exemplify and to which subjectivity must submit as its own law.<sup>16</sup> The discovery that the Good and True are, in their primary meaning, super-sensible and immutable completes the movement away from the sensible begun by the Sceptic by attaining a unity prior to the division of subject and object. Thus, both the externality and dividedness of the sensible and the emptiness of thought's formal self-identity (in which the Sceptic would rest) are transcended.

However, this turn to the incorporeal and hence intelligible is in no way possible to one who remains in the grip of materialist illusions. In this way, the Sceptical destruction of Stoic and Epicurean dogmatism can be granted to have a certain positive function. If then, the mind can be forced to look away from the sensible and into itself, it can discover within itself the Truth.

In his dialogue *Contra Academicos* Augustine dramatises the dialectical overcoming of Scepticism through depicting a series of conversations between himself, his friend Alypius, and two of his young students. The present paper will concern itself with the third book in which Augustine demonstrates to Alypius the self contradictory character of Scepticism. It is here that Augustine gives dialectical expression to the movement noted above in a formal refutation of the Sceptical position. As it adequately illustrates the process by which the Sceptic can be brought to a state of aporia which forces him to recognize the priority of intelligible truth I shall focus primarily on this refutation. It should be noted though, that this refutation assumes Augustine's demonstration in Book I that the Sceptic cannot coherently claim to be happy simply through a negative relation to truth. Scepticism presupposes a relation to truth that can be fulfilled only through the possession of it. Once the Sceptic has been shown this he can be drawn into the argument for he can no longer pretend that he possesses the Good.

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<sup>16</sup> Augustine himself recounts in *Confessions VII,1-6*, how he freed himself from materialist notions of Divinity (reminiscent of Stoicism) by considering how the Good was, in its logical character, simple and incorruptible. This meant that the Good could not be identified with anything material. As the presupposition of all his activities he could not coherently deny its super-eminent reality and this forced him to recognize the Ideal as the primary reality underlying the secondary reality of material things.

WILLS: ANCIENT SCEPTICISM AND THE *CONTRA ACADEMICOS*  
OF ST. AUGUSTINE

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Augustine's critique of the academic position proceeds in two phases. From 3.35 to 3.511 Augustine engages in the dialectical refutation of the sceptical argument, that is, he seeks to undermine its internal consistency. This section, then, is in dialogue form. Having accomplished this task, Augustine switches to the style of direct address in order to develop thematically a phenomenology of our basic forms of knowledge which even a Sceptic would be forced to acknowledge (3.10.23-3.14.30) and to demonstrate the impossibility of realizing the practical ideals of Scepticism (3.15.34-3.16.36).

I will now focus on the first phase and expound Augustine's account of the internal incoherence of Scepticism. His basic argument will be that if, as it must, Academic Scepticism claims to be a form of wisdom, that is, a valid reflection on our epistemic and moral condition, then it is in the hopeless position of trying to claim that it possesses this wisdom without 'knowing' it; that it is the case and can be validly affirmed to be the case that no concept can be connected to an objective state of affairs and that happiness lies in the *apatheia* consequent upon realizing this. Augustine contends that the appearance of contradiction here cannot be resolved and that Sceptical arguments are performative self-contradictions.

He proceeds by a pair of assumptions crucial to Scepticism. These are as follows: (1) wisdom must be conscious of itself as wisdom; and (2) knowledge, if it exists, must be of the true and not of the false. Now any Sceptic who holds that his position is a product of critical reflection upon our epistemic condition and what can be hoped for within it must hold that he possesses a description of that condition which corresponds to what that condition is; that is, he must claim that he possesses wisdom. If not, his scepticism cannot be distinguished from the simple ignorance of a fool. Sceptical ignorance is not 'simple ignorance' but ignorance derived from an account of our epistemic condition that is accurate. Now to know our condition is to know our knowledge of our condition, one cannot know without knowing that one knows by knowing one's own knowledge. Thus, a 'wise man' must know himself as wise and if a Sceptic claims to be such a man and not a fool then he must also claim to be conscious of his own wisdom as wisdom, that is, he must know the wisdom whereby he is wise.

The second presupposition, that knowledge is of the true and not of the false, is in fact the linchpin of the Sceptical position. The Sceptic claims that perception is impossible just because, while the true and the false are distinct in themselves, they cannot be distinguished in our experience. If this were not the case, and knowledge was of the false and the true equally, this confusion would present no obstacle to our knowing anything. Thus, since, according to the Sceptic, one must distinguish the false from the true in order to know and this cannot be done, knowledge is impossible and judgement must be suspended.

Augustine thinks these two concessions, which any Sceptic must make, are sufficient to wreck the Sceptical position. His argument, stated at 3.3.5.15-25, is straightforward. Suppose a man possessed wisdom and did not merely seek it. In other words, suppose he had learned what wisdom is. In doing so he has learned either something, a falsehood, or nothing at all. Now a man who has learned wisdom has not learned nothing for wisdom is

not nothing or there would be no difference between being wise and not wise. Nor has he learned a falsehood for a falsehood cannot be learned (ie, is not a genuine discovery). In learning wisdom, then, the 'wise man' has not learned nothing, nor a falsehood, but has learned something, the wisdom whereby he is a 'wise man' and not a fool. Thus, if he is wise and knows wisdom he must perceive the wisdom he possesses to be wisdom. But, if he claims that the content of his wisdom is that nothing can be perceived he is claiming to perceive and not perceive at the same time and in the same respect. Either he is wise and knows his wisdom, in which case his wisdom is not true wisdom, or he is not wise at all and cannot claim to know whether perception is impossible or not.

Augustine, then, has shown that the reflexive character of wisdom, that it is of necessity self-knowing, refutes the claim that wisdom lies in non-perception and the suspension of assent. He has also shown that even the supposed wisdom of the Academics must be 'about' something; that it must make some claim about our epistemic state and thus that we must know something to be the case. After all, the Sceptic is not claiming that he personally has never known anything but that it is not possible for anyone to know anything. Thus, Augustine has shown the key assertion of the Sceptics to be inherently contradictory; that one can, at the same time and in the same respect be both ignorant of truth and wise. Once the law of non-contradiction is admitted, and the Sceptic must admit it if he says the true and false are distinct, it becomes evident that he cannot claim at one and the same time to perceive and not perceive (since he claims that the content of his wisdom is that nothing can be perceived, he cannot claim this as wisdom unless he claims to perceive it).

Alypius, however, does not back down. He claims that the 'wise man' only seems to himself to be wise through knowing wisdom on the grounds of plausibility (3.3.5.25-27). Augustine counters that this only deepens the problem (3.3.5.35-40). If it seems to the Sceptic that he knows wisdom, it does not seem to him that he does not know it. This means that it will seem to him that he knows something. But Scepticism, if it is accepted as plausible, must be accepted on the grounds that it seems to be the case that nothing can be known. Thus, the contradiction remains; the Sceptic seems to himself to know that his position is true while at the same time his position states that we do not seem to ourselves to know anything. If we seem to ourselves to know something, Scepticism will not seem to be the case. But this means that Scepticism fails its own criterion of judgement; it will no longer appear plausible, and since the Sceptic follows what is plausible, his own position commits him to cease being a Sceptic.

Augustine has now shown two things: (1) that one cannot be wise and ignorant at one and the same time; and (2) that one cannot appear to oneself to be wise and ignorant at the same time. Implicitly, he has shown the dependence of appearances on the Ideas and that any assertion of an appearance entails the assertion of an intelligible content that governs that appearance, there cannot be mere 'seeming' without the objective reality of the ideas implicated in that 'seeming'. The next part of the argument will show Alypius that this has been uncovered.

Alypius does not yet see this crucial point. He still thinks that no knowledge claim is involved in the assertion that the Sceptic merely appears to himself wise and that the open investigation he engages in has no inherent content. This is because he still holds to a greater separation of being and appearance than Augustine and does not see that the Ideas in their objectivity are implicated in the positing of any appearance. Thus, he still thinks that Augustine's objection can be avoided by speaking in terms of appearances. This is crucial to his defence of Scepticism for the Sceptics claim that pure appearance can be present to our consciousness without a grasp of the real and indeed, through our dependence on the senses, is all that is present to us.

This problem appears in Alypius' inability to comprehend the question with which Augustine resumes the argument at 3.4.9.60. Augustine asks Alypius a simple question, does it seem to the 'wise man' of the Academics that he knows wisdom; that is, does it seem to Alypius that the academic is an instance of a 'wise man' who knows wisdom. Alypius, not getting the sense of the question, answers that it seems to the Academic that he knows wisdom. Augustine, however, is not asking whether the 'wise man' seems to himself wise but whether what he seems to himself to be is a 'wise man'. Thus, it is irrelevant whether he thinks himself wise or merely opines that he is wise or whether Alypius thinks or opines the same of him. His question, rather, is, what is a 'wise man' and what does a man who claims he is an instance of a 'wise man' claim that he is. The clear answer is that he appears to himself to be a man who knows what wisdom is. To be wise is to know wisdom and if I seem to myself to be wise then I seem to myself to know wisdom. Alypius finally grasps the distinction and the argument proceeds as follows: the Academic seems to himself to be an instance of the 'wise man', yet claims that he knows nothing. Yet a 'wise man' must know wisdom (for this is the definition of wisdom) and wisdom cannot be nothing for nothing cannot be known. Nor can it be a falsehood for there can be no knowledge of the false. Therefore, either wisdom is nothing and the Academic is no different from the fool, or there can be knowledge of the false, in which case the grounds for Scepticism disappear, or the Academic is not the 'wise man' reason describes and if he claims to be such a man he contradicts himself (3.4.10.85-100).

Thus, Augustine has shown that for the Sceptic to claim that he seems to himself wise involves combining two ideas, wisdom and ignorance, which cannot be combined either in reality or in appearance. Thus, in saying that he seems to himself wise the Sceptic is positing a contradictory appearance. What is more, this argument has brought to light something which will be thematically elaborated in the subsequent discourse; that the Sceptical argument assumes an intellectual intuition of the Ideas. To seem to himself to be anything at all, the Sceptic must grasp the intelligible character of what he appears to himself to be. Thus, if he says to himself "I seem to myself to be a 'wise man'" he has grasped an essence of which he holds himself to be an instance. Appearance depends upon the reality of what appears. Seeming cannot be without the being of what seems. Thus, the Sceptic cannot coherently claim that the power of appearance is universal for some objective content must condition any appearance and be present to any mind that beholds and judges it. In this case, we can see that if the Sceptic claims that he is wise in being ignorant and that the 'wise man' is he who knows wisdom, then he is combining in

his judgement ideas which cannot in fact be combined in either appearance or reality and thus his views have no claim to our assent as either true or plausible.

Having shown the Sceptical position to be incapable of coherent statement, Augustine can then proceed to a positive phenomenology of consciousness; that is, he can show what knowledge is inherent in the structure of any subjective experience and thus demonstrate that the Sceptical denial of knowledge is impossible and contradictory above all because we are inescapably knowers, if we exist as self-conscious beings at all. Thus, he demonstrates what any and every one of us must at any time know. He does not, and need not, go any farther than this in his argument for the root of sceptical indifference to claims concerning God, the soul, or the nature of the good life lies not in anything specific to inquiries into those objects but in a general denial that thought can be adequate to being through the medium of sense. To cut this root, as Augustine does here, by showing that being and thought belong together in the reflexivity of consciousness, is thus entirely adequate to the task of defending the pursuit of wisdom from the Sceptical challenge.

In a general way this argument recapitulates the movement in Neo-Platonism to complete the reduction of the sensible to finite subjectivity in Scepticism by reducing the subject to the objectivity of the Good. Augustine here has given formal expression to the validity of this move. But something else appears here as well which shows that in another way Augustine has taken more seriously than the Neo-Platonists the starting point of Hellenistic thought in the concerns of concrete historical individuality. The *Contra Academicos* ends pointedly with a reference to the incarnation, the unity of sensible human nature with the divine (3.19.42-15). Stoic pantheism and realism thought it had possessed this unity through the relation of sense perception to a divinised natural realm. The Sceptics were able to demonstrate that this was an illusion and the Neo-Platonists in turn that this demonstration rested on a prior intuition of the ideas. But Plotinian ascent, while valid as far as it goes, does not offer the possibility of salvation for finite individuals as finite individuals, and as such does not respond to the deepest concern animating Stoic and Sceptic alike, that is, how the individual can be free for himself in the world. Thus, Augustine sees the need for a further completion of the argument that comes full circle back to the sensible world in order to know concrete personality as one with the divine in Jesus Christ. This, however, he knows not by any Stoic pretence to an indefeasible grasp of sensible particulars but by the illumination of faith.