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Book Review:
FOLEY, Michael P. (ed. & transl.)

Against the Academics: St Augustine's Cassiciacum dialogues, Vol. 1

(New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2019), xli + 307 pp.
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Augustine's dialogue *Against the Academics*, the first of the four Cassiciacum dialogues, is particularly important as being (in the editor's words) its author's "first written venture into ... philosophical theology" (p. xxiv), even though he was only a catechumen. In the autumn of 386, Augustine and eight of his relations and friends stayed in a villa in Cassiciacum, north of Milan. The main reason for Augustine's having ceased to teach rhetoric, about a month before the Cassiciacum gathering, was probably not poor health, but joining the Church, which withheld membership from professional teachers of rhetoric (who were tasked with teaching about pagan legends and gods). Augustine's company prayed every day, as well as discussing God the Father and Christ; indeed, Augustine explains the power of Christian prayer (*Against the Academics* 2.1.1; numbers not otherwise identified refer to this text) and also speaks, at 2.1.1-2, of his ongoing prayer to Christ for Romanianus, the father of one of the company, Licentius; the latter publicly prays in 2.7.18.

The Academics against whom Augustine and others dialogued were the members of the New or Third Academy, established by Carneades (c. 213-129 BC). A good deal of the New Academy's philosophy was a reaction to Stoic thought about knowledge; the reader finds, at 3.5.11, the classical Academic position on knowledge, namely that "nothing is ever grasped" and "assent should

be given to nothing." Countering Stoic objections, the Academics thus developed a sceptical system which the Stoics considered deeply injurious to morality, since one would not be able to know right from wrong if nothing could be known. In answer, Carneades worked out a theory of probability whereby one could conditionally (as it were, more or less) approve of certain concepts in such a way as to work out a basic morality – even though, in thinking up Academic teaching on probability, he maintained Academic esotericism.

Augustine's summary of his convincing arguments against the Academics is found from 3.7.15 to 3.20.43. In 3.16.35-36, Augustine uses the simile of a courtroom trial to show that the Academics' theory of probability is inadequate for moral (also legal) reasoning. Attempts to state facts and pleadings are made after the Academic manner and do not adequately distinguish between appearance and reality. Developing this, Augustine shows the Academics to be knowingly setting forth falsehoods (3.18.40), in a way which strikes this reviewer as recalling Plato (*Republic*, III, 389, 414). Also, instead of believing that a wise man has found truth, the Academics believed that a wise man was doomed to pursue truth without attaining to it. Those outside the Academy thus believed that the Academics' supposedly wise man was not wise. Furthermore, as Augustine writes elsewhere, "if assent be taken away, faith also is taken away, because without assent nothing is believed" (*Enchiridion* 7.20); therefore, scepticism in philosophy, and orthodox Christianity, are radically opposed. In addition, mysteries, in orthodox Christianity, are veiled truths, not hidden obscurities as in much pagan thought. In sum, Augustine gives a valuable treatment of God's saving work and all schools of philosophy are outranked by Christian philosophy as fully expressed in the incarnation of Christ, whose authority Augustine stresses (3.19.42 to 3.20.43).

Even so, while Augustine was teaching rhetoric, he believed for some time that the Academics could well be correct, as he notes in *Confessions* 5.10.19 & 5.14.25. Their scepticism was important in making him give up Manichaeism, mention of which calls for further consideration of Romanianus, Augustine's relation and benefactor, not present at Cassiciacum. As Foley puts it, "Augustine had led Romanianus into Manichaeism, which ridiculed Christianity as lowbrow and absurd" (p. 144). One reason why Augustine wrote *Against the Academics* was to lead Romanianus, by way of expelling bad thinking and beliefs by good philosophy, to Christianity. In fact, the main debaters in much of Books Two and Three of this dialogue are Augustine and his friend Alypius, who decided to become Christians almost simultaneously.

In Foley's edition, the two Introductions, general and specific, are well-written, well researched and informative. Between the Preface and the General

Introduction, Foley provides a "Translation Key" which, if sometimes overheavy, at least fulfils its purpose. Completing the critical apparatus, pp. 115-215 provide a scholarly commentary and pp. 217-223 provide a well-researched chronology of the philosophical work undertaken at Cassiciacum between November 386 and January 387; a "glossary of select names" is given at pp. 225-230, while pp. 231-276 give the endnotes for the whole book and a learned and thorough bibliography is provided (pp. 277-299); meanwhile, the index is excellent except that an entry for "Prayer" would have been useful. Such slang idioms as "discombobulated" (p. 53), '"zaps"' (p. 182), "sneak preview" (p. 186) and "peanut gallery" (p. 187), presumably meant to make Foley's translation and commentary seem more racy, are not helpful and could be considered trivializing. However, Foley is to be congratulated on providing a good critical edition and not least a readable translation of the text.

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