

[Book Review] Erik Kenyon, Augustine and the Dialogue

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Augustine and the Dialogue. By Erik Kenyon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. xi + 247 pages.

Augustine and the Dialogue by Erik Kenyon is part of a salutary project across the field of Augustinian studies. It is a project of renewal and refocusing, less a work of *retraction* than of *reconsideration*. We are learning to look past the old word-mines we've been reading for centuries. We are learning better to let the texts speak for themselves. We are learning to study Augustine without becoming enmired in the perennial discussion of his neo-Platonism or lack thereof.

Focusing on the still relatively underexplored Cassiciacum dialogues along with other early dialogues, Kenyon uncovers an Augustine a little more interested in the right method of searching for the truth—and a bit less interested in the final product—than scholars often think. Kenyon's strategy involves something we have seen more of lately (for instance, in Catherine Conybeare)—taking seriously the dialogue form. “Augustine's dialogues confront basic questions about the nature and purpose of philosophy. In the process, they develop an approach to philosophical inquiry that is centrally concerned with pedagogy” (1). Indeed. Of course, the pedagogical emphasis of Augustine's writings has been noted before. Eugene Kevane covered this in *Augustine the Educator* (1964) and Ryan Topping in *Happiness and Wisdom* (2012). Kenyon's contribution is to consider Augustine's pedagogy in reference to a particular reading of the early dialogues as orderly wholes and serious works of philosophy. Kenyon avoids the debate over how to read Augustine (von Harnack/Alfaric vs. Boyer/Courcelle/O'Connell vs. Madec/Harrison, etc.). His goal is merely to develop and defend “holistic readings” of the *dialogues*, and he notes that tensions between Platonism and Christianity “simply do not arise in these works” (5). In fact, his reading is most Platonic in its emphasis on “teaching methods”

rather than on a set of teachings (17); “Augustine presents the Platonist curriculum not as a body of principles to learn but as a process of reorienting the student” (49).

Let us look at this a bit more systematically. Kenyon, like Augustine himself as he reads him, is focusing on method more than results. Kenyon’s method has the following salient characteristics (a list which does not replace Kenyon’s own description of his method from pages 7 to 13). *First*, he is interested in reading the Augustinian dialogues on their own terms and considering each as a unified whole. *Second*, he is interested in knowing the point of each individual dialogue. *Third*, he seeks to uncover how that point is philosophical, where philosophy is itself understood as a practice not less than a set of theories. *Fourth*, he seeks to show how it involves continuous dogged pursuit of the truth. *Fifth*, Kenyon reconsiders skepticism, or, to be precise, the ancient tradition of Academic philosophy. That tradition is not, according to Augustine, the sort of non-commitment or universal doubt we associate with “skepticism.” Rather, it is, in public, doubt towards materialist dogmatism, especially Epicureanism and Stoicism; and, in secret, it is Platonism.

Sixth, Kenyon’s strategy here uncovers what he takes to be Augustine’s incorporation of Academic strategies, and Kenyon’s own approach for interpreting the dialogues. He calls it ARP: “Each work thus moves through three stages: (A) aporetic debate, (R) reflection on the act of debating and (P) the revelation of a final plausible conclusion” (13). The plausible (*probabile*) conclusion is the subject of the longer speech typically offered by Augustine as character in his own dialogue and towards its end.

There is much to appreciate in what Kenyon uncovers along the way. I will not summarize each chapter here, although I read, enjoyed, and recommend them. (Kenyon notes that they may be read by themselves as commentaries on the individual dialogues [18].)

Chapters 1 and 2 are especially important for introducing the ARP method and for analyzing Augustine's use of academic skepticism: "Augustine does not refute so much as appropriate the Academics' skeptical practices for his own purposes" (11). *c. Acad.* is not primarily a refutation of Academic skepticism; rather, it is "a study of pedagogical method, one whose relationship to Academic skepticism is more complicated than existing scholarship admits" (26). *c. Acad.* is a paradigmatic case of ARP. In its first phase Trygetius and Licentius debate epistemology and ethics, ending in confusion. In its second phase we learn something from the nature of this very debate—the reasoning process itself is guided by certain truths which are not learned from sensory perceptions. In its third phase we learn that this insight itself points towards Platonism. What Augustine is doing here may be understood as a combination of two methods used by Plato, which Plato himself combined in dialogues like *Meno*. There is the method of *elenchus*, in which we discover our ignorance. And there is the method of *hypothesis*, which suggests a likely theory as the truth (or an approximation of it). Between Plato and Augustine, however, philosophers tended to separate the methods, Cicero emphasizing *elenchus* and Plotinus *hypothesis*. Augustine's ARP harmonizes these strands of Platonism. However, Kenyon exegetes interesting passages in Cicero and Plotinus in order to show that the different elements of ARP were present in both writers, making it possible for Augustine to reconstruct the method from them. Even the familiar outer-inner-upper trajectory of Augustinian ascent (or the inward and upward turns) is linked to the ARP methodology and to Plotinian roots (72-77).

I applaud Kenyon's priority of "attempting to make sense of the Cassiciacum dialogues on their own terms" (9), something I myself have tried to do. Likewise the methodology of asking "What is the *telos* of each of Augustine's dialogues?" (11). There is solid commentary on how the Cassiciacum dialogues fit together, and how *Lib. Arb.* connects to them. Different

dialogues are insightfully linked to different virtues (*Sol.* to courage, *Lib. Arb.* to piety, and so on), and to Bible verses loved by Augustine. Kenyon's analysis of the dialogues as having historical sources to which Augustine gave a philosophical and rhetorical arrangement are lucid and seem very proper to me (231). Likewise the advice to contemporary laborers on the problem of evil to read Augustine as studying the problem in a way resembling Marilyn Adams and not merely in the fashion of an Alvin Plantinga. The ARP methodology uncovers insights I myself had previously missed regarding the unity and structure of the dialogues, such as how the aporetic debate in *c. Acad.* Book I functions not only as a training exercise in philosophical reasoning but also an example of the rules of reasoning themselves, rules which are truths known by contemplation rather than sensory perception. The commentary in chapters 1 and 2 on Augustine's thesis regarding the history of the Academic skeptics as closet Platonists, and on the historical origins of Academic philosophy, is excellent. I concur with the assessment that things are not so simplistic as *c. Acad.* undermining skepticism and *Ver. Rel.* Manicheanism; "the attack on materialism is *C. Acad.*'s more basic project," which also undermines Manicheanism (51).

On this note we must keep in mind that Augustine himself in *Retr.* suggested two titles for his earliest surviving writing: either *Contra Academicos* or *De Academicis*. There is a critique (*contra*) of the skeptics here, but also another aspect (*de*). There is an explanation of the Academics, and a favorable assessment of a portion of their philosophical agenda. It is easy to identify some of that portion: the rejection of materialism and the promotion of immaterialism. Kenyon identifies what was perhaps less easy: a seamless method of pointing to the immaterial truth through that very process of critiquing the materialist error.

I would venture to suggest two critiques of Kenyon's very good book.

First, I have some concerns with Kenyon's talk of Augustine and uncertainty. Kenyon claims that the dialogues manifest an "embrace of ambiguity and perplexity" (1). We read that Augustine is after a "middle way" between arrogant certainty and despair at achieving the truth (176). The dialogues display a "willingness to embrace perplexity and trade in provisional solutions" (232). Augustine "retains a skeptical worry about our ability to get the whole picture right" and "seeks not certainty but explanation" (174). Kenyon suggests that Augustine is a model for "Christian skepticism" (233), a "skepticism" which is into "embracing ideas as plausible in those instances when there is no clearly right answer, yet some position must be taken" (236).

There appear to be three different propositions being touted here: that Augustine recognizes the uncertainty of human knowledge, that he opts to seek for likely but uncertain answers, and that he is not really interested in certainty at all. There appears to be an argument for the third proposition based on the first two. This argument puzzles me. A philosophical dialogue might place great emphasis on ambiguity and perplexity, but this hardly amounts to an embrace. Consider how much uncertainty stresses Augustine out in the *Soliloquies*, and his dogged pursuit of truth here and in all his works. He *wants* certainty. He will not rest until he finds something *solid*, and even then he will not rest long unless he also adds to it *certainty*. Consider, again, that his reliance on faith (*c. Acad.* 3.20.43, *Ord.* 2.5.16) is meant to be temporary and to yield ultimately to full comprehension. There is something here to please "those suspicious of religious and philosophical claims to sure knowledge" (1), but it seems to me that this is merely a *recognition* of uncertainty, not an embrace or approval of it. I think it unlikely that Augustine would agree that "uncertainty is liberating" (100) in religion. If it is unavoidable, then *admitting* so is liberating; but that doesn't make uncertainty itself liberating.

To clarify how the argument puzzles me, allow me to employ an example inspired by Kenyon's charming references to Plato's *Symposium*. *Symposium* vividly displays human moral weakness, most vividly in the character of Alcibiades. This is something to be lamented and, if possible, overcome. That Plato vividly portrays moral weakness provides no support for the proposition that he embraces or welcomes it; neither does Augustine's vivid portrayal of uncertainty support the theory that he embraces or welcomes *it*.

Let's consider one more passage; while acknowledging that "*C. Acad.* treats certainty as a kind of 'holy grail,' the ultimate object of all philosophical striving" (55), Kenyon suggests that Augustine is not really after certainty and gives as evidence that the Academics were not after certainty either: "the early Academics looked on the Stoic demand for certainty and were not terribly impressed. Certainty played no part in early Academic epistemology . . ." The reason the Academics were not impressed was that the Stoics insisted on certainty derived from sensory perception and concerning the physical world. It does not follow that they would not (or that Augustine would think they would not) desire or pursue certainty concerning *non-physical* reality. Kenyon concludes that "the ultimate concern of *C. Acad.* is not certainty" but rather "to model the search for wisdom and articulate a method for undertaking this search."

I think it would be more correct to say that the goal of *C. Acad.* is to model and articulate a method of searching for a wisdom which ultimately includes certainty. Kenyon's descriptions of the "middle way" (176) may be precisely correct regarding the *way*, but the whole point of the way is its destination, wherein certainty may ultimately be found. Augustine recognizes uncertainty, seeks plausible explanations in the short term, and seeks certainty in the long term. (This is all a bit nuanced, of course, and I wonder whether my own concerns might possibly have less to do with substance and more with word choice.)

Second, and more briefly, I have some concerns with the idea that rhetorical and pedagogical strategies are necessary to find a holistic reading of the text. I concur that they are a proper way to find a holistic reading, and I think ARP is a (perhaps even *the*) right way to do it. My concern is with the idea that a harmonious reading *cannot* be found by studying the content. (See, for example, pages 10-11, 25-6, 83, 103, and 160, where Kenyon seems to suggest as much.) I accept ARP as “the key to understanding how each of these dialogues function as a single, unified whole” (56), but I am not convinced nothing else can fit that lock.

For example, it is not the case that the topic of desire first turns up in *b. Vita* (138). Desire is central to *c. Acad.* Book I’s challenge that we can be happy without having the wisdom we seek. A central theme in *c. Acad.* is its vindication of the common-sense principle that perfect happiness is inconsistent with unsatisfied desire, coupled with a defense of the possibility of this satisfaction. The arguments against the public position of the skeptics, the unveiling of their secret position, the triumphant appeal to the Incarnation, and ARP itself all may be linked to this study of the desire for wisdom, a study visible in the content of the dialogue.

Similarly, in his conclusion Kenyon considers the question of “continuity in Augustine’s writings” and suggests “reframing the discussion around issues of philosophical method and rhetorical strategy” (232). I concur. However, I would not counsel altogether abandoning the more common strategy of considering continuity “in terms of Augustine’s doctrinal commitments.”

This is a very good book, and deserves a wide readership.