



## Augustine and Skepticism

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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# Augustine and Skepticism

STÉPHANE MARCHAND

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Augustine (354–430 CE) was certainly not a skeptic. He nevertheless played a crucial role in the history of philosophical skepticism. Three main reasons place Augustine at a strategic point in relation to skepticism. Firstly, he is the author of *Against the Academics* (*Contra Academicos*), a philosophical dialogue entirely devoted to the refutation of skepticism, where he discusses the arguments of the New Academy in order to go beyond skepticism. But, secondly, Augustine's contribution to skepticism is not limited to this work, for he never ceased in considering skepticism a problem of the highest order. His conception of belief in the Christian faith can also be interpreted as a response to the skeptical contention that one should live without belief. Finally, through his reflections on the problem of skepticism, Augustine conceived of a new form of it: skepticism as a thought experiment of the inner self, which exhibits a metaphysical and epistemological strength that from Descartes onward has remained vibrant.<sup>1</sup>

### 2 THE *CONTRA ACADEMICOS*

Augustine is a witness of great importance in the history of ancient skepticism under its Academic guise. First of all, his reading of Cicero played a crucial role in the education he received.<sup>2</sup> Augustine was probably the most important reader of Cicero's *Academica* in antiquity (Schmitt 1972: 29): he took the arguments put forward by Cicero in that book very seriously, to the point that he confessed having temporarily endorsed the skepticism of the New Academy in 383 CE, after giving up Manichaeism and before his conversion to Christianity (see *Confessiones* V x 19; cf. *De beata vita* 4).<sup>3</sup> Therefore, for Augustine skepticism was not just a theoretical hypothesis, but a real (albeit false) philosophical alternative for those who are disappointed by how difficult it is to find the truth. Since he felt that skepticism was a genuine problem, he wrote an entire dialogue with the sole purpose of refuting it, the *Contra Academicos*, written in 386, just after his conversion to Christianity.

*Contra Academicos* is presented as a dialogue in the style of Cicero and is composed of three books. The global aim of the work is to demonstrate, in countering

skepticism, that certain knowledge is possible and that happiness cannot be attained without believing that it is possible to find the truth (*C. Acad.* I ii 5). At the end of the dialogue, Augustine distinguishes between the real intention of Academics, who according to him were not true skeptics, and their arguments, which were genuinely skeptical. Augustine was convinced that the so-called skeptical Academy represented, in reality, an esoteric form of Platonism that used skepticism to hide its dogmatism during the Hellenistic period, when materialism was flourishing (see *C. Acad.* III xvii 37–xx 43; see also Letter 1).<sup>4</sup> Therefore, when Augustine criticized the New Academy, he was not attacking the Academy as an institution (indeed, he shared their Platonist conviction that spirit is superior to matter). Rather, he was trying to inoculate against skepticism anyone who might be tempted to take it as a serious philosophical option. Because there were people who believed the Academy's skeptical arguments to be valid, he considered it not only necessary to respond to those arguments, but to restore a genuine relationship to truth.

Augustine's line of argument in the *Contra Academicos* is somewhat tortuous.<sup>5</sup> However, it is possible to distinguish between two levels of refutation: (i) an epistemological and (ii) a moral level.<sup>6</sup>

- (i) The epistemological level is a direct response to the arguments presented in Cicero's *Academica*. Augustine purported to prove that it was possible to offer a rational response to the New Academy. Among the numerous arguments, Augustine made use of analytic or a priori knowledge: even if one doubts a proposition, this doubt cannot remove the true knowledge that this proposition is either true or false (*C. Acad.* III ix 21). Similarly, every disjunctive proposition is necessarily true (*C. Acad.* III ix 23: the world is organized either by a divine providence or by a body, it either has a beginning or does not, etc.; see also III xiii 29). These arguments function as counterexamples, showing that it is easy to have access to certainty and, therefore, that there is no reason to despair of knowing the truth: Augustine's contention against skepticism is that some things can be known.<sup>7</sup>

We can focus on a set of arguments that are similar to the dream argument in Descartes's *First Meditation*:

Therefore, I call the whole that contains and sustains us, whatever it is, the "world"—the whole, I say, that appears before my eyes, which I perceive to include the heavens and the earth (or the quasi-heavens and quasi-earth).

If you say nothing seems to be so to me, I'll never be in error. It is the man who recklessly approves what seems so to him who is in error. You do say that a falsehood can seem to be so to sentient beings. You don't say that nothing seems to be so. Every ground for disputation, where you Academicians enjoy being the master, is completely taken away if it is true not only that we knew nothing, but also that nothing seems to be so to us. However, if you deny that what seems so to me is the world, then you're making a fuss about a name, since I said I call this "world."

You'll ask me: "Is what you see the world even if you're asleep?" It has already been said that I call "world" whatever seems to me to be such. (*C. Acad.* III xi 24–25)<sup>8</sup>

Thus, whatever we might think about the existence of an external world (the knowledge of which is mediated by our senses and can actually be false), it remains indubitable that there is something in one's mind (even if I am dreaming or suffering from a hallucination) that I can call "world" and about which I can form true knowledge. Admittedly, Cicero's *Academica* (II 47–48) already planted the seeds of this argument. But Cicero glanced over that hypothesis without any clear formulation of a world composed only of inner states. Augustine's own reflection on the Academic arguments produced a clearer formulation of the hypothesis of external world skepticism which will be a fundamental feature of modern skepticism.<sup>9</sup>

- (ii) As for the moral level of refutation, as Heil (1972: 109) has claimed, in *Contra Academicos* the core of the refutation is not epistemological. Augustine was aware that the truth and certainty he was looking for was not of the kind we find in mathematics or analytic knowledge (see *C. Acad.* II iii 9), but concerned instead knowledge of the soul and of God, the sole objects of worth for Augustine (see *Soliloques* I 7). Indeed, this skepticism is dangerous because it can discourage anyone from being on the path of the truth, i.e., on the path of God. Hence, the real danger of skepticism is moral, and it becomes essential to demonstrate that skepticism as a philosophy is essentially defective.

This demonstration consists in showing that skepticism is not what it seems to be for Cicero, namely an open-minded stance that earnestly seeks the truth (see, e.g., *Acad.* II iii 7), but rather a renunciation of truth and philosophy:

"Therefore," I continued, "don't you know that up to now there is nothing I perceive to be certain? I'm prevented from searching for it by the arguments and debates of the Academicians. They somehow persuaded me of the plausibility—so as not to give up their word just yet—that man cannot find the truth. Accordingly, I had become lazy and utterly inactive, not daring to search for what the most ingenuous and learned men weren't permitted to find. Unless, therefore, I first become as convinced that the truth can be found as the Academicians are convinced that it cannot, I shall not dare to search for it. I don't have anything to defend." (*C. Acad.* II ix 23)

Here is the danger: by their arguments, the Academics deviate from the natural path that leads from the desire for truth to knowledge and then to God. And since the knowledge of God is the only means of achieving our natural desire to be happy, the moral refutation of skepticism consists of demonstrating that it cannot be considered a serious philosophical option to achieve happiness. Rather, for Augustine, the skeptics' excessive prudence hides existential despair (the despair of truth, the *desperatio veri*: see Letter 1, 3; *C. Acad.* II i 1; *Confessiones* VI i 1). In fact,

the skeptic is frightened by the possibility of error. By privileging the criterion of plausibility (as King translates the Latin *probabile*, which is itself a translation of the greek word πιθανόν), he is trying to avoid risk. But, as Augustine shows, this position cannot provide any quietude and does not prevent anyone from error:

I seemed to see an entrance through which error would rush in upon those who felt safe. I think that a man is in error not only when he follows the false path, but also when he's not following the true one. (*C. Acad.* III xv 34)

Therefore, a person can avoid giving his assent, follow the criterion of what is probable—in sum, a person can act exactly as Carneades recommended—and still be wrong: being guided by the criterion of what is probable does not prevent anyone from sinning, and therefore can lead them to err from a moral point of view (*C. Acad.* III xvi 35–36). Rashness can be useful and necessary in order to allow an individual to believe something doubtful that will nevertheless lead to truth. Even if to doubt can prevent many of our errors, one cannot find the true path without having a belief.

### 3 HERMENEUTICS AGAINST SKEPTICISM

If something skeptical remained in Augustine's position, it should be sought in connection with his thoughts on the weakness of pure reason.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Augustine was an acute critic of the arrogance of philosophers, who claimed that it was possible to know everything through the use of reason alone. Against this claim Augustine insisted, in a skeptical manner, on the difficulty of finding any indubitable truth by itself through reason, at least on any theological or metaphysical level.

Thus, Augustine tried to find an escape path between two excesses: an excessive rationalism that claims to know God by reason (as the Manicheans claimed: see *De utilitate credendi* I 2) and an excessive skepticism that will lead to the despair of truth. Augustine frequently agreed that it is reason—or intellect—whose function it is to understand the truth; but the problem is knowing whether such an understanding can begin with reason alone or must instead begin with belief and, more precisely, with faith.

To introduce the necessity of faith (*fides*) as a condition for understanding, Augustine made frequent use of Isaiah 7:9: “Unless you believe, you will not understand.” Hence, Augustine's position did not entail fideism in the sense that faith should replace reason, but rather stressed the necessity of believing in order to understand and know theological truths, according to the principle *crede ut intelligas*: you must believe to understand (see e.g. *De libero arbitrio* I 4). As Augustine said, “Faith prepares the ground for understanding” (*De ut. cred.* XVII 35);<sup>11</sup> in the end, it is reason that understands, but reason needs to begin with some form of belief (Rist 2001: 27).

Hence, to attain knowledge of the truths that really matter to Augustine, knowledge of God and of our soul, it is impossible to rely on pure reason; unlike

formal knowledge, this kind of knowledge concerns objects that are hidden and requires one to begin with belief. Since there is no direct access to this knowledge,

it is necessary to believe in some authority in order to be on the path of truth. This contention does not entail, as fideism does, the confusion between knowledge and faith, but rather the distinction between two epistemological processes: “We must hold what we understand as coming from reason, what we believe as coming from authority” (*De ut. cred.* XI 25).<sup>12</sup>

Actually, it seems that, in Augustine’s view, belief is necessary not only in theological or metaphysical matters, for almost all aspects of the human condition are determined by our confidence in propositions that we cannot verify through scrutiny; propositions about our relation to the world and to other men, even to our own history, rely on belief. Belief is a necessary feature of the human condition: without believing witnesses, we could know nothing of history or about the thoughts and feelings of another mind.<sup>13</sup>

So it was, Lord, that you began little by little to work on my heart with your most gentle and merciful hand, and dispose it to reflect how innumerable were the things I believed and held to be true, though I had neither seen them nor been present when they happened. How many truths there were of this kind, such as events of world history, or facts about places and cities I had never seen; how many were the statements I believed on the testimony of friends, or physicians, or various other people; and, indeed, unless we did believe them we should be unable to do anything in this life. With what unshakable certainty, moreover, did I hold fast to the belief that I had been born of my particular parents, yet I could not have known this without believing what I had heard. (*Conf.* VI v 7; Boulding’s translation in Rotelle 1997)

Augustine offers a rationalist approach to the problem of believing. To believe (*credere*) is not necessarily to be credulous. On the contrary, Augustine (again at *De ut. cred.* XI 25) stresses the difference between believing and having an opinion (*opinari*). To have an opinion consists of having a belief without the consciousness that it is a mere belief. To opine entails the ignorance of the difference between the things we can know (*intelligere*) and those we can only believe (*credibilia*); in sum, opinion is rash belief. But to believe is not wrong per se. We can have true belief, if we keep in mind that this very belief remains a mere belief, and if we have good reasons to believe. Hence, the quality of the belief depends on the awareness that belief is not certain knowledge and on the authority followed for believing.

Thus, just as reason needs faith, so too does faith need reason. More precisely, faith is the belief in an authority that has—by rational means—been recognized as being reliable. In the end, this is the very reason that compels us to decide whether to believe or not:

If, then, it is reasonable that faith precede reason with respect to certain great truths that cannot yet be grasped, however slight the reason is that persuades us to this, it undoubtedly also comes before faith. (Letter 120, 3; Teske’s translation in Ramsey 2004; see also *De vera religione* XXIV 45)

This rationalistic approach to faith is based on reflection on the authority of the Bible as a holy book that defines what it is to believe. This view makes it possible to

differentiate between Christian faith and credulity: if faith is not blind and irrational assent, it is necessary to have reasons to assent to facts that are, for the most part, unbelievable, such as the resurrection of Christ.

For Augustine, the Bible gives an account of God's manifestations in the world, which are signs to be interpreted. In this sense, the Bible is like a history book that requires the evaluation of the reliability of the witnesses and their idiosyncrasies, etc. Since there can be no direct knowledge of history, we have to rely on accounts and testimonies, and Augustine tries to offer some sort of method to acquire a rational approach to the Bible as God's book, by defending its reliability and overall coherence, despite the fact that God has chosen different prophets who use a variety of styles and images to pass on the testimony of his actions on men. The Bible therefore contains, on the one hand, reasons to believe its contents, and on the other, truths enabling readers to understand once a method to read and to interpret it has been provided.<sup>14</sup>

Hence, there is a connection between Augustine's reflection on belief and his thoughts on reading and hermeneutic theory, and this reflection shares some common features with the problem of skepticism, and more precisely with the problem of understanding someone else's thought.<sup>15</sup> This feature of Augustine's thought has been related to the hermeneutic circle. Augustine's reflection on belief shows that, in many things, understanding entails, firstly, making the hypothesis that there is something to understand (a kind of principle of charity, cf. *De ut. cred.* VI 13), and secondly, holding preliminary beliefs in order to be on the path of understanding (or a pre-understanding principle). This circle comes from Augustine himself (*Conf.* I i 1; *De Trinitate* XV ii 2) and is perhaps one of the most important theses of Augustinian thought (see, for instance, Pascal *Pensées* Laf. 919): we cannot seek God (or truth) without having already found him. Thus, neither the excessive rationalism of the Manicheans nor any skeptical reading of the Bible is able to understand the truth of Christianity, because both lack faith.

Augustine conceived this circle through his thinking on the mysteries of the Bible and the search for a method to read and understand it against the skeptical objections. As he said in the *Confessions*, the Bible—and especially the Old Testament—appeared to him a weak and poor book in comparison with the sophisticated prose of Cicero (*Conf.* III vi 9). The comprehension of the full sense—or at least of a true sense—of the text supposes giving credit to its author and to his intention by way of some belief.

This circle helps us to understand more precisely Augustine's stance on faith: although he emphasized the fact that there are reasons to believe, his stance was not purely rationalistic. Faith and religious belief can be fed by reason and intellectual reflection on the meaning of the Bible and, more generally, on God's manifestations in the world. But faith does not depend on the sole decision of the will. More precisely, the will itself is not the result of a purely individual decision, but presupposes the grace of God without which nobody can really find the path of truth.

This feature takes on great significance given that Augustine was at that point involved in the debate with the Pelagians, who defended the possibility for men to save their souls by themselves. For this reason, even if it remains true that faith is

conditioned by rational reasons, the very fact of believing relies on a movement that originates in God himself. Contrary to what the skeptic seems to believe, assent is not a completely voluntary act; rather, it is influenced by God's love and concern for us.<sup>16</sup>

## 4 AUGUSTINE AND THE *COGITO*

An overview of the relationship between Augustine and skepticism would be incomplete without a survey of Augustine's texts that anticipate Descartes's famous experience of the *cogito*. We saw that as early as the *Contra Academicos*, Augustine presented arguments that are similar to those employed by Descartes in his *First Meditation*, where he showed that some kinds of knowledge (such as mathematical knowledge) resist the dream argument. But Augustine also deployed some thought experiments that can be compared to Descartes's discovery, in the *Second Meditation* (AT VII 25), of the indubitable truth of the proposition "*ego sum, ego existo*." In opposition to skepticism, Augustine emphasized the certainty of the existence of the individual's own thought as a fundamental experience. It is worth noting that this very experience is mentioned in the first dialogues (see *De vita beata* II 7, *Soliloques* II 1, *De libero arbitrio* II iii 7) and appears in later masterpieces like *De Trinitate* (e.g., XV xii 21) and *De civitate dei* (XI, 26).

Putting aside the highly debated question of whether Descartes took his inspiration from Augustine,<sup>17</sup> what is important is determining in what sense Augustine's stance is connected to solipsism, which is nowadays deeply connected to skepticism.

In the *De civitate dei*, the indubitable fact of the existence of the individual's own thought takes the form of an anti-skeptical argument—the Academics cannot affirm that men are always mistaken because there is something indubitable: the very fact that one does exist, and that one does know that he exists—"for if I am mistaken, I exist" (*si fallor, enim sum*, XI 26).<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, as in Descartes, doubt cannot be universal because something within the inner experience of my mind provides resistance to all skeptical scenarios.

Yet, Augustine's aim is not to use the skeptical hypothesis in order to reconstruct knowledge, for one can see that such a methodological doubt does not appear in Augustine. And, as we saw, as far as knowledge is concerned, he considered rather the necessity of relying on an external authority. Nevertheless, the discovery of the inner knowledge of the individual's own existence as a mind is also fundamental in Augustine, not in the sense that it could have the function of a first principle, but rather in the sense that it reveals the distinctive nature of human thought. Not only does the inner knowledge discovered by Augustine offer a formal criterion of truth and an instance of an indubitable truth (cf. *De Trinitate* XV 21), but it also, and more fundamentally, gives us knowledge of the individual's own substance:

Now properly speaking a thing cannot in any way be said to be known while its substance is unknown. Therefore when mind knows itself it knows its substance, and when it is certain of itself it is certain of its substance. But it is certain of itself, as everything said above convincingly demonstrates. Nor is it in the least



certain whether it is air or fire or any kind of body or anything appertaining to body. Therefore it is not any of these things. The whole point of its being commanded to know itself comes to this: it should be certain that it is none of the things about which it is uncertain, and it should be certain that it is that alone which alone it is certain that it is. But if it were one of these things [sc. if mind were a material thing] it would think that thing differently from the others, not that is to say with a construct of the imagination as absent things are thought that have been contacted by one of the senses of the body, either actually themselves or something of the same kind; but with some inner, non-simulated but true presence (nothing after all is more present to it than itself), in the same way as it thinks its living and remembering and understanding and willing. It knows these things in itself, it does not form images of them as though it had touched them with the senses outside itself, as it touches any bodily things. If it refrains from affixing to itself any of these image-bound objects of its thoughts in such a way as to think it is that sort of thing, then whatever is left to it of itself, that alone is what it is. (*De Trinitate* X x 16; translation by Hill 1991)

Thus, for Augustine, a special knowledge comes from the mind: the mind is present to itself in a totally different way from that in which other things can be present to it. Book X of the *De Trinitate* precisely demonstrates this distinctive characteristic: by knowing itself, the mind knows that it lives, that it exists—it knows itself entirely (*De Trinitate* X iv 6). In this work, references to similar skeptical arguments probably no longer refer to the skepticism of the New Academy; Augustine has extracted from this skepticism a new picture of skepticism as an inner experience,<sup>19</sup> the experience of solipsism through which he discovered the peculiarity and the substance of an inner world. Hence, skepticism is not only something that any rational thinker should refute for the sake of argumentation; it has also become a gateway to a crucial feature of knowledge in Augustinian philosophy: interiority.

Skeptical scenarios show that knowledge of external reality is not of the same character as knowledge of the inner self. But even in this context, this experience cannot be understood as a kind of solipsism that is an experience where one is alone (*solus ipse*) and where each thing can be reduced to a subjective representation. It is for this reason that Augustine perceives this experience revealed in the individual as the presence of the “interior master”—the presence of God in each of us—thanks to whom any propositional content can be recognized as a truth.<sup>20</sup> The inner self has the privilege of being an image of God; accordingly, skeptical scenarios are an efficient means of going inside and finding an inner world. Skepticism remains a means (however, not the only means) of revealing the inner self and performing Augustine’s advice: “Do not go outside, come back into yourself. It is in the inner self that Truth dwells” (*De vera religione* XXXIX 72, translation by Hill in Ramsey 2005).

Thus, even though Augustine was not a skeptic and devoted a part of his work to refuting skepticism, in reality it seems that skepticism played a significant role in the constitution of his philosophy. And despite the fact that skepticism entered

Augustine's work through his knowledge of the Academic skeptical tradition, the vivid discussion he entertained with this philosophical tradition gave rise to new skeptical problems and to new functions of and uses for skepticism.

## NOTES

1. Augustine's view of skepticism has also had an important influence on the medieval conception of Skepticism: see Grellard (2011) and Bouton-Touboul (2013).
2. On Augustine's life and education, see Marrou (1939) and Brown (2000).
3. Some scholars have doubted that Augustine earnestly espoused skepticism: see Alfari (1918: 352–358), Testard (1958: 129), and Besnier (1993: 91). However, there is no doubt that Augustine considered skepticism a very serious problem.
4. That hypothesis is already mentioned by Sextus, *PH* I 234. For a critical approach to this hypothesis, see Lévy (1978).
5. For a precise analysis of the argumentation in *Contra Academicos*, see Mosher (1981), Kirwan (1983), and Curley (1997).
6. For this distinction, see Catapano (2006), who also provides useful references.
7. For an accurate analysis of the function of those analytic counterexamples in Augustine's strategy, see Heil (1972: 108–111).
8. All translations of the *Contra Academicos* are taken from King (1995).
9. See Burnyeat (1982: 28). This paper has been recently challenged by scholars who denied that Augustine entertained the hypothesis of an external world skepticism: see Bolyard (2006). One can also consider that the medieval interpretations of Augustin's treatment of skepticism were a crucial influence on the modern form of skepticism: see Grellard (2011: 18).
10. It is worth noting that Augustine was confronted by accusations of skepticism: see *Contra litteras Petilianus* III xxi 24. Cf. Bermon (2009).
11. For the *De ut. cred.* I follow the translation of Kearney in Ramsey (2005).
12. *Quod intellegimus, debemus rationi: quod credimus auctoritati.* Cf. also *Revisions* XIV 3.
13. Cf. *De fide rerum quae non videntur* II 4: *De ut. cred.* XII 26.
14. The definition of such a method is the goal of the second book of *De Doctrina Christiana*.
15. According to Stock (1996: 283), the reading theory building upon the experience of the Bible is an “adaptation of scepticism.”
16. For an accurate analysis of this point, see Koch (2013).
17. Descartes himself was forced to explain the differences between both arguments: see Bermon (2001: 9–15). The bibliography on the topic is extensive, see Gilson (1930), Gouhier (1978), Taylor (1989), Matthews (1992), and Menn (1998).
18. For an accurate explication of this argument, see Matthews (1972; 1992: 29–34).
19. Scholars question whether this new picture should be connected with the Plotinian treatment of skepticism that can be found in Plotinus's *Ennead* V 3 [49].

20. On this crucial doctrine, see the *De Magistro* and *De Trinitate* XII. An accurate explanation of the doctrine of illumination can be found in O'Daly (1987: 199–207).

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