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Grief and Conversion, Medicine and Food

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A Medical Science for the mind does exist: it is philosophy. And unlike medicine for the body, the help of philosophy is something we need not look to others to gain. Instead, we should make every possible effort to become capable physicians for ourselves.

- Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, Book III

## 1 Occasion and Image

This could have been a very different paper. It could have been a painstaking examination of how the punctuation in one passage changes how we should think of the relation between Cicero and Augustine. It could have been flooded with secondary literature, summoned like so many djinns to do the bidding of the researcher. Instead, I wished to write something that hovered over the text, looking down on it in the way a migratory bird sees the lakes and forests beneath him. When I was rereading *Tusculan Disputations* and *De Beata Vita*, I was struck by how dissimilar the tone and attitude of the authors were. And though I cannot speak with any certainty about the possible underlying reason why they would wish to write the way they did, I can show how a thematic concern, dressed up as a oft-revisited metaphor brings this dissimilarity into sharp relief. Using this observation, I could then find an avenue to talk about the texts instead of merely explain their meaning.

My observation is that each author's use of a metaphor of ingestion embodies their way of understanding the role of philosophy. Their choice of metaphors is linked, I believe, with the temporal occasion for philosophizing. Though this connection between occasion and image is fairly obvious in *Tusculan Disputations*, I am suggesting it as a possible reading for *De Beata Vita*, since Augustine does not explicitly make the same connection.

## 1.1 Historical Differences and Similarities from Cicero to Augustine

### 1.1.1 Form

Both *Tusculan Disputations* and *De Beata Vita* are written as dialogues that take place during a period of vacation or retreat. While the *Disputations* involves only two people and Augustine's work has a group of friends discussing these matters, they are both written in an intensely personal style that often suggests the kind of "good enough" that allows a dialogue to exist in a very different form than as a treatise. Both include digressions, statements of opinion, off-the-cuff remarks, as well as follow a program of discussion through a bodily metaphor.

### 1.1.2 Influence

Naturally, Augustine is indebted to Cicero. As a learner of rhetoric, he would have been trained in the techniques of the greatest Roman orator. Augustine also owes Cicero his original decision to study philosophy. The *Hortensius* gave Augustine new thoughts and desires; without it his life would have been very different (and soon forgotten). I am not aware of a serious attempt to deny the influence of Cicero on Augustine, however, there is much debate over to what degree their philosophies eventually overlap. This debate is similar to the one endured by those comparing Augustine and Plotinus. Part of the difficulty lies in Augustine's singularly subtle consciousness of language and allusion, making definitive answers about their relation nearly impossible. Also complicating the discussion of Augustine is that *De Beata Vita* was one of the dialogues written at Cassiacium, a period that Augustine later looks at with some embarrassment. While there are passages in *City of God* which return to more Ciceronian metaphors, the early dialogue does present an intriguing option.

### 1.1.3 The all-important Plato question for both authors

The Plato question is equally applicable to both authors. Cicero, as a New Academic, retains a close connection to Plato, though with more skepticism that is allowable with the “new” Academics. Even though Augustine acknowledges his own debt to Neo-Platonism often throughout his works, many argue (including myself) that he is doing something distinctively “Christian” and not a mere evolutionary step from his Greek and Latin forebears. However, this essay is not directly concerned with this connection, but will simply presume that both authors are at least somewhat Platonic, since their difference is not directly related to their understanding of Platonism. This concession is easier to accept for the reader not willing to equate their use of the same terms and shared Platonic history with agreement or (less impressive) reiteration.

## 1.2 Stoicism

Though both books are concerned with Stoicism, neither author is a stoic. Both authors continuously remove themselves from the stoic camp, even though Cicero seems much more inclined to accept some of their arguments. Augustine, throughout *De Beata Vita*, distances himself somewhat more directly than his predecessor.

If neither man is a Stoic, then why all the Stoic concepts? Likely the Stoics provided the most complete and readily accepted view of the soul and consequently of ethics as well. Unlike the dialogues of Plato, the Stoic’s vocabulary was precise enough to form a sharp distinctions and provide enough fodder for token-exchanging analysis. This is clear enough from both our authors utilizing a proof by definition throughout their works. In the playful “dessert” in chapter 2 of *De Beata Vita*, Augustine shows how often absurdities arise from conceding definitions and then arguing from them, and we do well to take his admonition to heart. If we can tokenize the relevant transcendentals so easily, then our definitions may be too impoverished to support LIFE, even if they support argument transparently enough. However, if only as a shared point of departure, the Stoic position is useful to understand.

Lest we think Augustine too ready to speak against his predecessors, he does concede, through the absence of a potential apologist for an opposing view, that the theories he attacks may have within them the resources to defeat his own arguments.<sup>1</sup> Too often have we written with our own Alypius missing.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 A glance at the text

### 2.1 Occasion

Both texts have an occasion, or perhaps better stated: the authors find themselves in need, or wish to fulfill a need. Analogies toward the body generally imply a lack - a need, for there is a sense in which this is how the body is present to us. What does the author see his audience, and himself, needing? If they are sick, they need medicine. If they are impoverished, they need riches. If they are hungry, they need nourishment. If lost, they need a map or better, a guide. If blind, they need vision. A philosophy from wine may look like Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. A philosophy from riches may look like *On Being and Essence* from Thomas Aquinas. What I am trying to call attention to is that the choice of need-based analogies is not neutral to the outcome of the text. It is not as if an author could simply take any analogy expressing need and make his ideas fit cleanly into such a discussion.

#### 2.1.1 Grief

Cicero begins the *Disputations* with a discourse on death. Cicero argues against Brutus, his interlocutor who suggests that all living and dead are wretched, and further, that the

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<sup>1</sup>*De Beata Vita*, chapter 2, 14.

<sup>2</sup>After a conclusion like "Academicians are not wise," Augustine subtly distances himself from his argument by having an interlocutor object by citing the absence of the one most capable of defending the Academician's wisdom. Though Augustine thinks he would agree, their "dessert" must remain unfinished, since Licentius was too reliant on Alypius's "absent authority." Whether Augustine means this passage to declare Alypius's presence as superfluous, or whether as dessert we are invited to be more playful where the expert may balk at a full measure of this kind of argument, rests on how one interprets the rest of the text.

dead no longer exist. Throughout the work, we are led toward virtue and fleeing misery. For Cicero, we do well to stay a step ahead of ignorance and disturbance. With a sincerity that Augustine will share when he later talks about the death of his friends, Cicero remarks:

But the amendment of this fault, as of all our other failings and offences, must be sought for from philosophy; to whose bosom I was driven from the earliest days of manhood by my own enthusiastic choice, and in my present heavy misfortunes, tossed by the fury of the tempest, I have sought refuge in the same haven from which I had first set sail.<sup>3</sup>

Without engaging in undue and unseemly acts of psychologizing, this work was not written without a context, but under the strain of a personal tragedy. And though we can use this final sea-faring image to connect *Tusculan Disputations* with *De Beata Vita*, the two works are written from a different location relative to the shore. Augustine writes after coming into the new lands through the port of Philosophy; Cicero is either still rushing into the port, or have just recently arrived again.<sup>4</sup>

### 2.1.2 Conversion

Augustine has a very different occasion for writing *De Beata Vita*. Though the pretense in the seafaring preface says he embraced philosophy for health reasons, he makes clear in the *Confessions* that this was a ruse to keep his friends from realizing the extent of his change due to conversion. This conversion sets in place the fundamental health of the soul which Cicero wished to gain through philosophy. The soul is not in need of a further cure, so medicinal analogies would only be relevant to the spiritual hypochondriac. Instead of mourning, the occasion is one of joy - a birthday celebration. The wisest among them prepares a delightful feast of thinking, spread over three days.

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<sup>3</sup>Disputations V, II, 5.

<sup>4</sup>A comparison of sea-faring analogies between the two authors would be similarly instructive.

## 2.2 Image

### 2.2.1 Medicine

In contrast, medicine is an unusually negative image. With such stock phrases as “take you medicine,” and “bitter pill,” one might wonder if there are positive aspects to the medicine itself. Its effects are generally praised (wellness), but the medicine itself is a kind of poison which kills the illness so that the body may live. Sometimes we even witness a cure that in the short term seems to ravage a person more than the disease could (some cancer treatments come to mind). However painful the cure may be, if health is what must be attained, then the pain must be endured first.

In Cicero’s image of the medicine of philosophy, there remains the same negative emphasis. A part of the soul must be killed (or at least rendered toothless) in order for the health of the soul to be preserved. Cicero defends the idea that the soul is in need of philosophy because it is sick, and its sickness has resulted in unhappiness. Using the most generous possible qualifiers to avoid negative reactions to Cicero’s model, the harmful emotions (passions/distresses) are the cause of unhappiness, and Reason, properly directed, can eradicate such impediments to health. In Book IV, he gives a few methods for doing so, all with the aim of restoring control of the mind to the rational/higher soul (a fine Platonic ideal).

This *Medicina Animi* is very much an artifice, or at least a set of methods, and this strikes me as being unfit to describe philosophy. I find it unlikely that anyone as learned as Cicero would suggest that Philosophy is like medicine in that we can take the proper treatment for whatever ails us and that is all that is to be done. The methods cannot be their own cure, but they can show that one is in need of a cure. If a rich man is in the grip of fear because he is anxious of the safety of his material possessions, coming to realize that he had mis-assigned “good” to that which was only advantageous would make him desire to have the ailment of which he is now aware, removed completely. But, can it be fairly said that philosophy properly applied can actually take away the ailment?

### 2.2.2 Food

Quickly after the philosophy-as-harbor image, Augustine enters fully into the extended metaphor of philosophy-as-nourishment:

I said: "Will everyone at least concede that the souls of educated men are something greater than the souls of ignorant men, as if this kind of thing admits of fuller and greater?"

"That is clear" they said.

"Then, we would say correctly that the souls of those who have learned no discipline, and have absorbed nothing of the good arts, are lacking what they need and as it were, suffering hunger."<sup>5</sup>

This lack, hunger, is maintained even through the objection that the ignorant soul is full, but full of the wrong things. Augustine's response is that without food, the body becomes "full" of disease and death, but this is a result of hunger, not eating forbidden fruits. The analogy of food is strikingly different from that of medicine. Augustine, true to his Neo-Platonist roots, sees the ignorant man, not as having something that must be removed (as a virus might be fought by the body aided by medicine), but instead as withered and wretched because it does not have something that it requires for health (as a deficiency in certain nutrients can create a crippling and even fatal condition). Not wishing to require too much from his interlocutors, he allows them to retreat into the two forms of fullness instead of the contrast between fullness and hunger.

Even though Augustine was hesitant to be too explicit in his newfound Christian beliefs, he hints at them:

Let me clarify what this meal should consist of, if you are willing to eat it. For if you are unwilling and turn up your nose when I try to feed you, I would uselessly waste my effort. In that case, rather, prayers should be said, so that you would desire such dishes of the soul instead of those of the body. For if your souls were healthy, you would desire such dishes; for sick souls, like we see with bodily diseases, refuse and spit out their food.<sup>6</sup>

The means by which a soul becomes ready for nourishment (is healed) is through prayers. Like his treatment of Plotinus, Augustine is willing to use his familiarity with the texts of

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<sup>5</sup>*De Beata Vita*, Chapter 2.

<sup>6</sup>*De Beata Vita*, Chapter 2.

his forebears, often using the same images and alluding to them freely. And just as he does to Plotinus, Augustine refers to something Cicero would never accept (who actually rebukes those who would turn to the gods in prayer, calling them effeminate in Book V, 3 of *Tusculan Disputations*).

Many other contrasts between medicine and food are apparent. Medicine must be administered and accepted with a fixed dose. While any number of techniques may be used to coax the sick into becoming well, the end result is the same: the distresses of the soul are fully eradicated. Our experience of food is one of a variety of portions, spiced differently, and while pleasant to some, others find certain dishes too sweet or too bitter. Food is taken in at its own pace, and sometimes even nibbled. In the jesting attack on the Academics, Augustine proposes an argument that could not be accepted by any devotee of their teaching. One of his interlocutors “tastes” it, though does not eat his full share, and others not so well-versed in those debates were not able to partake at all.

### 3 Introductory Thoughts

With these concerns put forward, it is now fitting to make an introduction. Suggestive philosophy continues to find itself ever-introducing, ever-qualifying, but leaving the work of details to others. Whether we find ourselves in need of medicine, nourishment, guidance, or a seaworthy vessel, philosophy meets us there and offers us its service. This is true not only of dialogues, but in texts, contemplation, and teaching. The role of the teacher may alternately be physician, chef, bartender, and navigator. Still, the choice of metaphor for philosophy can determine the philosophy that springs forth.

Some might object that I have said nothing, that I have been simply restating the obvious. However, if philosophy is a food appropriate for the soul, then it can be a delight in a way that no medicine can. If wisdom is nourishment, then it can be relished for its own sake, rather than for the good which it will accomplish – itself being unpleasant. If our souls

are diseased by privation, then why should our action toward the disease be one of further removal? If we hunger for wisdom, our response should be one of giving to the soul, not taking from it.

I make no apology for my view that the philosophy-as-food metaphor is far more generous and instructive than the more sterile philosophy-as-medicine approach, if taken in isolation. Certainly Augustine sees himself as superior to his Academic predecessors - enough to describe them in a way that causes Monika to think them quite out of their minds. Yet there remains a power of healthy food to cure ailments. As those already healed, we partake with joy the feast of wisdom and become whole, each according to his appetite.

And with this in mind, the time is right to begin reading.

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