# Introduction
## *Back to the Drawing Board*

> Come to think of it, I should have mentioned this much earlier: even
> his ideas and arguments are just like those hollow statues of Silenus.
> If you were to listen to his arguments, at first they'd strike you as
> totally ridiculous; they're clothed in words as coarse as hides worn by
> the most vulgar satyrs. He's always going on about pack asses, or
> blacksmiths, or cobblers, or tanners; he's always making the same
> tired old points in the same tired old words. If you are foolish, or
> simply unfamiliar with him, you'd find it impossible not to laugh at
> his arguments. But if you see them when they open up like the statue,
> if you go behind their surface, you'll realize that no other arguments
> make any sense. They're truly worthy of a god, bursting with figures
> of virtue inside. They're of great – no, of the greatest – importance
> for anyone who wants to become a truly good man.
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> Alcibiades' Praise of Socrates (Plato, *Symposium* 221d–222a)[1]

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. Their habits of self-
reflection advance a project of thinking about thinking, which should
resonate with twenty-first-century audiences (Augustine coined the term
"*soliloquium*" to describe a dialogue between himself and "Reason"),[2] while
their embrace of ambiguity and perplexity is a breath of fresh air for those
suspicious of religious and philosophical claims to sure knowledge. Their
casts of characters include men and women, children and adults, elites and
illiterates, while the works themselves are page-turners akin to a good
mystery novel. One of the few times my students have knowingly read

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[1] Translation from Alexander Nehamas & Paul Woodruff, *Plato: Symposium* (Indianapolis: Hackett
Publishing Company, 1989). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
[2] See *Soliloquia* 2.14 and C.T. Lewis & C. Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University
Press, 1963), *ad loc*. In what follows, references to Augustine's work include book and paragraph
numbers but omit the somewhat extraneous chapter numbers. The one exception is *Retractationes*,
for which I present all three, given that this work restarts its paragraph numbering each chapter.

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beyond a night's assignment was to find out how *Contra Academicos* was
going to end. Ideally, we could simply read these texts, let ourselves get
caught up in them and apply their insights to our world today.

Unfortunately, the last 120 years of scholarship have reduced the dialogues
to a bewildering mess of fragmented ideas. Philosophers, theologians, histor-
ians and literary scholars have all engaged in extreme cherry picking: focusing
on individual passages, sentences or even words, while passing over the main
bulk of each text. Nor do specialists from these various fields talk much with
each other. As a result, the scholarly community has come to view Augustine's
dialogues as juvenilia, which rehash the same tired old points, engage in
extraneous exercises, wander off topic, advance flawed arguments, misunder-
stand Christian doctrine and in general fail to attain any substantial literary or
philosophical coherence. If we were somehow to lose all eight dialogues and
had only the scholarship to go on, few would likely mourn the loss. The
picture is particularly bleak for Augustine's earliest dialogues. In the months
following his conversion (386CE), Augustine gathered a community of
family and friends at a villa in Cassiciacum (outside Milan) to pursue
philosophy. The works depicting this community – *C. Acad., De beata vita*
and *De ordine* – have struck scholars as so badly composed that many have
preferred to see them as transcripts of real conversations rather than literary
works of a single hand. Opinions of Augustine's later works such as *De libero
arbitrio* (388–395/6CE) are generally higher, although, to judge by the
scholarship, even that work degenerates from a philosophically rigorous
discussion of the problem of evil to a dogmatic exercise in scriptural exegesis,
with the end having little to do with the beginning. What we lack is a sense of
how each of Augustine's dialogues functions as a unified whole.[3]

It is the contention of this study that, appearances to the contrary,
Augustine's dialogues are literary triumphs of sophisticated philosophy,
truly worthy of a god and bursting with figures of virtue inside. They
engage basic questions about philosophy, education and human life. To
see this, we must go beneath their surface and articulate the philosophical
method and rhetorical strategies that drive each work. By addressing these
basic questions of how the dialogues work and what they are trying to
accomplish, I hope to bring scholarly discussions of them back to the
drawing board. Doing so will help us recognize that Augustine's dialogues,
even the earliest of them, are Platonic in both their outlook and their

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[3]  We may, of course, assume that these works simply do not add up to anything very unified. Against
this assumption, however, I would point out Augustine's advice at *De ord*. 1.2, that if a mosaic looks
unorderly to someone standing too close, then the viewer should take a step back and look again.

caliber. It will also help us recognize the rich resources they provide for contemporary debates on pedagogy, virtue theory, skepticism as a way of life and rational approaches to religion. The dialogues have useful things to say to the liberal academy at large, not just its religious institutions.[4]

## Obstacles to a Holistic Reading: Twentieth-Century Scholarship

In one sense, Augustine himself is the source of the obstacles to reviving a holistic approach to his dialogues today. The Cassiciacum dialogues are presented as conversations with the friends, family and students who accompanied Augustine on his philosophical retreat. The works proceed with an extreme realism, to the point of breaking off discussions because the notetaker (*notarius*) is running out of writing space. In 1895 Rudolf Hirzel questioned the dialogues' self-presentation as basically transcripts of actual conversations.[5] Ohlmann replied two years later by defending the works' historicity.[6] With this, the historicity debate was born. In the decades that followed, Ohlmann's arguments were improved by Van Haeringen, while Meulenbroek defended the claim that a *notarius* actually could accomplish the task of recording philosophical conversations as they unfold.[7] The debate reached something of a stalemate with O'Meara, who argued that the claim to historicity was itself a trope of the dialogue genre, and Madec, who argued that generic conventions found in the dialogues reflect the fact that the discussions that actually occurred at Cassiciacum were modeled after the dialogues of Cicero.[8] Along the way, opponents of

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[4] In focusing on questions of pedagogy, I build and expand upon the work of Ryan Topping, *St. Augustine* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), and *Happiness and Wisdom: Augustine's Early Theology of Education* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2012).

[5] Rudolf Hirzel, *Der Dialog, ein literarhistorischer Versuch* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1895), II, 377.

[6] Desiderius Ohlmann, *De Sancti Augustini dialogis in Cassiciaco scriptis* (Strasburg: Argentorati, 1897).

[7] Johann Hendrik Van Haeringen, *De Augustini ante baptismum rusticantis operibus* (Groningen: M. de Waal, 1917); B. L. Meulenbroek, "The Historical Character of Augustine's Cassiciacum Dialogues," *Mnemosyne* 13 (1947): 203–229.

[8] John O'Meara, "The Historicity of the Early Dialogues of Saint Augustine," *Vigiliae Christianae* 5 (1957): 150–178; Goulven Madec, "L'historicité des Dialogues de Cassiciacum," *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 32 (1986): 207–231. The current scholarly consensus prefers treating the works as basically literary. Foley is a notable exception, although the only grounds he offers for this is "Augustine wouldn't lie" about the works' being records of actual conversations. Michael Foley, *The* De Ordine *of St. Augustine* (PhD diss., Boston College, 1999). Whatever the status of the future saint's moral character, it seems implausible to me that Augustine himself would have seen engaging in generic practices as lying in the first place. Cf. *De mendacio* 2, where Augustine affirms as obvious that jokes do not count as lies, because no one expects them to be true.

the historicity thesis pointed out that cross-references internal to the dialogues, when combined with later sources' accounts of the dialogues' composition, create problems for situating the works into a single historical progression. In response, defenders of the works' historicity attempted to reconstruct the order of the initial conversations by rearranging the individual books (*libri*) that make up the longer works.[9] The practice became entrenched. Today even scholars who reject the historicity thesis still argue for arranging individual books in a philosophical or pedagogical order other than the one in which Augustine left them.[10] In treating this as an intellectually defensible project, the scholarly community has effectively given up on the idea that each of the longer dialogues might already have some robust structure binding its individual books into a whole.[11]

The scholarly search for points of doctrinal detail in the early dialogues has produced a second obstacle to holistic readings. Augustine is the ultimate source of this problem as well. In composing *Confessiones* (401CE) he takes steps to distance Christianity and Platonism on various points. The dialogues, by contrast, are happy to treat the two worldviews as compatible. These differing attitudes led Prosper Alfaric in 1918 to claim that Augustine's famous conversion was to Neo-Platonism rather than Catholic Christianity.[12] Since then, the period between Cassiciacum

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[9]  *Sol.*, also written at Cassiciacum, presents a conversation between Augustine and Reason, which seems to happen within Augustine's head and is thus left out of this discussion. The question is what to do with *C. Acad.*'s three books, *De beata v.*'s one and *De ord.*'s two. *C. Acad.* 2.1 refers to a "seven-day break from debate" (*septem fere diebus a disputando fuimus otiosi*), which provides enough time for all of *De beata v.* and *De ord.*, while at *Retract.* 1.2, Augustine reports that he wrote *De beata v.* "not after but between the books of *C. Acad.*" (*non post libros de Academicis, sed inter illos*); likewise at *Retr.* 1.3.1, he reports that *De ord.* was written "*inter illos qui de Academicis scripti sunt.*" Internal cross-references are provided at *De beata v.* 13, which clearly refers to the debate of *C. Acad.* 1, and at *De ord.* 2.1, which refers to the birthday feast recounted in *De beata v.* Ohlmann gives the order *C. Acad.* 1, *De beata v.*, *De ord.* 1, *C. Acad.* 2–3, *De ord.* 2; Van Haeringen distinguishes between the order in which the conversations occurred, viz. *C. Acad.* 1–3, *De ord.* 1, *De beata v.*, *De ord.* 2, and the order in which their literary accounts were composed, viz. *C. Acad.* 1, *De beata v.*, *De ord.* 1–2, *C. Acad.* 2–3.

[10] Phillip S. Cary, "What Licentius Learned," *Augustinian Studies* 29/1 (1998): 141–163, argues that we should "read Augustine's dialogues the way we read anyone else's," but proceeds to argue for the order *C. Acad.* 1, *De beata v.*, *De ord.*, *C. Acad.* 2–3. Joanne McWilliam, "The Cassiciacum Autobiography," *Studia Patristica* 17 (1990): 14–43, leaves the three dialogues whole but situates them between the two books of *Soliloquia*, which never figured in the historicity debate in the first place.

[11] I take this project, which has no parallel in the works of any other author, to be an artifact of the scholarship that has done more harm than good. I argue in "The Order of Augustine's Cassiciacum Dialogues," *Augustinian Studies* 42/2 (2011): 173–188, for a cross-reference that has gone unnoticed between *C. Acad.* 2.27–28 and *De beata v.* 13–16. The result is that the only viable ordering is the one that does not split up individual works and follows Augustine's review of the set at *Retract.* 1.1–3, i.e. *C. Acad.*, *De beata v.*, *De ord.*

[12] Prosper Alfaric, *L'évolution intellectuelle de saint Augustin* (Paris: Émile Nourry, 1918).

and the writing of *Conf.* has been minutely scrutinized, as scholars attempted to reconstruct Augustine's development or lack of development over the first few decades of his literary career.[13] Peter Brown's biography of Augustine, first published in 1967, has been the most influential statement of the developmentalist reading. According to Brown, Augustine moved from an early "classical optimism" about the capacities of unaided human reason to a "Christian pessimism" about the extent of human sin and the need for God's grace.[14] The most recent round has come with Carol Harrison, who defends a Unitarian reading, arguing that all the elements of Augustine's mature theology are to be found within the early works,[15] and Brian Dobell, who defends Developmentalism, arguing that it was only over the course of several years that Augustine came to appreciate the implications of his own early ideas about Christ, ideas that he would later identify with the Photian heresy.[16] While the dialogues make significant forays into Christian theology, the issues that Augustine would later use to divide Christians from non-Christian Platonists simply do not arise in these works.[17] The end result is a series of somewhat procrustean readings as one of the most active scholarly debates over the

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[13] On Augustine's sources for Platonism and an attempt to gauge his debt to them, see Charles Boyer, *Christianisme et néo-platonisme dans la formation de saint Augustin* (Paris: G. Beauchesne, 1920); Willy Theiler, *Porphyrios und Augustin* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1933); John O'Meara, "Neo-Platonism in the Conversion of Saint Augustine," *Dominican Studies* 3 (1950): 334–343, and "Porphyry's *Philosophy from Oracles* in Eusebius' *Praeparatio Evangelica* and Augustine's Dialogues of Cassiciacum," *Recherches Augustiniennes* 6 (1969): 107–138; Pierre Courcelle, *Recherches sur les Confessions de saint Augustin* (Paris: de Boccard, 1968); Robert O'Connell, *St. Augustine's Early Theory of Man* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968); Michele Cutino, "I Dialogi di Agostino dinanzi al *De regressu animae* di Porfirio," *Recherches Augustiniennes* 27 (1994): 41–74. In a related vein, Solignac goes so far as to critique the accuracy of Augustine's knowledge of the pre-Socratics. Aimé Solignac, "Doxographies et manuels dans la formation philosophique de saint Augustin," *Recherches Augustiniennes* 1 (1958): 8–148. For more theologically oriented attempts to critique the state of Augustine's orthodoxy in the dialogues, see Ragnar Holte, *Béatitude et Sagesse: Saint Augustin et le problème de la fin de l'homme dans la philosophie ancienne* (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1962); Eugene TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).

[14] Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). See also Robert Markus, *Conversion and Disenchantment in Augustine's Spiritual Career* (Villanova, PA: Villanova University Press, 1989).

[15] Carol Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[16] Brian Dobell, *Augustine's Intellectual Conversion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[17] Explicitly Christian language is almost entirely absent from the early dialogues. At *Conf.* 9.7 Augustine attributes this to his companion Alypius, who saw such language as inappropriate for their philosophical context. Be that as it may, the Incarnation features prominently at *C. Acad.* 3.42. *De beata v.* culminates in an account of the Holy Trinity at 34–35. *De ord.* is centrally concerned with questions of providence, but it is unclear what if anything is specifically Christian about its discussion. *Conf.*, by contrast, revolves around issues of humanity's fallen nature, our need for grace and Christ's role as Mediator.

early dialogues sets them within the preoccupations of a work written over a decade later.[18]

The final obstacle to a holistic reading of the dialogues is that parts of them are simply so interesting in their own right that they distract readers from the larger structures to which they belong. *C. Acad.*, for instance, presents antiskeptical arguments that are regarded as milestones in the history of philosophy.[19] Philosophers thus assume that the goal of the part is the goal of the whole, while those portions of text that do not contribute to this goal – which end up constituting most of the work – are dismissed as so many warm ups and spiritual exercises. Thanks to accidents of history, *De lib. arbit.* has encountered its own special version of this problem. John Mackie's 1955 article, "Evil and Omnipotence," sparked a vigorous debate among a circle of Anglo-analytic philosophers over the problem of evil, which set the agenda for readings of *De lib. arbit.* for the next fifty years. Alvin Plantinga presents the most influential reading of the work's "free-will defense," which he reconstructs using the full resources of contemporary modal logic.[20] Given these philosophers' preoccupations with questions of logical consistency, the more philosophical arguments of books 1 and 2 have been given pride of place, particularly those bits that lend themselves to formal reconstruction, while the scriptural explorations of book 3 are glossed over or ignored. As with the Cassiciacum works, there is no generally accepted sense of how, or even whether, *De lib. arbit.* functions as a unified whole.

This kind of philosophical attention, together with the debates over the Cassiciacum dialogues' historicity and the status of Augustine's conversion, has occupied the bulk of twentieth-century scholarship on the dialogues. Together, these scholarly preoccupations have conspired, however unintentionally, to reinforce an increasingly fragmented view of the works. While Augustine's antiskeptical arguments and theological reflections might be more worthwhile subjects of our attention than Socrates'

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[18] It is also worth mentioning Jason BeDuhn, *Augustine's Manichaean Dilemma 1: Conversion and Apostasy, 373–388 C.E.* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010) who shifts the focus of this debate by approaching Augustine not so much as a convert to Platonism or catholicism as an apostate from the Manichees. While BeDuhn provides a useful new perspective on Augustine's biography, he is not interested in making sense of the dialogues on their own terms. From the standpoint of finding a holistic reading of these texts, he merely offers a variant on the standard problem.

[19] For an excellent discussion, see Blake Dutton, *Augustine and Academic Skepticism: A Philosophical Study* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016).

[20] Alvin Plantinga, "God, Evil, and the Metaphysics of Freedom." In *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Marilyn McCord Adams & Robert Merrihew Adams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 83–110.

musings about pack asses and blacksmiths, the same basic point stands: By focusing on what sits on the surface of the text, scholars have stopped asking what bigger project might be at play beneath.

## The Way Forward: Recent Scholarship and a Revised Methodology

Over the last ten years, scholars have started turning toward more holistic readings of the dialogues. Catherine Conybeare takes a literary approach, addressing the Cassiciacum dialogues' seeming lack of order by looking to the role of "irrationality" within them.[21] Finding a tension between rational argument and emotional outburst, Conybeare sets concerns for argument to the side and seeks an "emotional logic" as what ultimately gives the texts their unity. In effect, Conybeare simply accepts that these dialogues are bad philosophy and works from there. While this approach has various uses, identifying the holistic structure of a philosophical dialogue is not among them. Simon Goldhill approaches the matter at a more fundamental level by calling into question the modern assumption that dialogue is an open, democratic process carried out between equals.[22] By building on Goldhill's suggestion and holding Augustine's dialogues up to a different set of expectations, we could start working toward a fresh, holistic reading of them. Unfortunately, Goldhill calls modern assumptions into question but offers no clear alternatives to work from.[23] Brian Stock does better on this score.[24] Like Conybeare, Stock sees emotion as the key to understanding

[21] Catherine Conybeare, *Irrational Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Her approach is new, in that it is primarily concerned with these texts as texts, and she approaches them in primarily literary ways. TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian*, while primarily concerned with reconstructing Augustine's theological perspectives and practices, also offers numerous insights into how these texts work as texts. Michael Foley, De Ordine, presents various literary motifs and features running through *De ord.*, although when it comes to explaining how the three dialogues work as a set, he looks beyond the texts themselves, invoking Cicero's dialogues as providing the pre-Christian model to which Augustine gives a Christian reply through a series of "antiphonal-referents."

[22] Simon Goldhill, ed. *The End of Dialogue in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4 and Alex Long, "Plato's Dialogues and a Common Rationale for Dialogue Form," 45–59, in the same volume.

[23] While two essays in Goldhill, *The End of Dialogue*, deal centrally with Augustine, they treat dialogue as a kind of cultural practice and focus on those instances when Augustine did not write literary dialogues, e.g. the Pelagian controversy, rather than those times when he did. See Gillian Clark, "Can we talk? Augustine and the possibility of dialogue," 117–134 and Richard Miles, "'Let's (not) talk about it' Augustine and the control of epistolary dialogue," 135–148. In discussing "Why Christians don't do dialogue," Goldhill himself, 5, acknowledges that Augustine did write dialogues, yet he claims that Augustine "explicitly rejected the form for serious theological undertaking."

[24] Brian Stock, *Augustine's Inner Dialogue: The Philosophical Soliloquy in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Augustine's works, in particular the petty rivalries that may arise during discussions with others. Stock argues that Augustine's habit of ending dialogues via an uninterrupted speech (*oratio perpetua*) dramatizes the short-comings of "open dialogue" between multiple human individuals and demonstrates the need for "inner dialogue" or soliloquy, which Stock finds in the *orationes* that conclude six of Augustine's eight dialogues. In this, Stock is one of the few scholars to offer a holistic reading of the dialogues that finds a clear motivation for the entirety of each text. Yet, so far as I can tell, Stock's characterization of the works' discussions and concluding speeches simply does not fit the texts very well. For reasons that will become clear in the chapters to follow, I take Stock to be asking the right question but giving the wrong answer.[25] Ryan Topping has made further headway, using the dialogues to reconstruct Augustine's pedagogical theory.[26] While Topping's interest is in pedagogy, he raises issues at the heart of what the dialogues are up to. Yet Topping follows a certain scholarly narrative, grounded in a certain reading of *Conf.*, that pits Christianity and Academic skepticism against each other in ways that sit ill with key portions of the dialogues, especially *C. Acad.*'s closing suggestion that the Academics weren't really skeptics but dogmatic Platonists in disguise (see later in this chapter).[27] Joseph Pucci likewise looks to the pedagogical project of the Cassiciacum dialogues, focusing on characters' attempts to "recuperate" classical authors such as Virgil for philosophical uses. While this approach provides useful context for *Conf.*, it merely scratches the surface of Augustine's project at Cassiciacum.[28] Simon Harrison, finally, presents *De lib. arbit.*'s three books as pursuing a single, graded course, intended to lead readers gradually into Augustine's ideas about the human will.[29] In terms of holistic readings, this is a great improvement on existing scholarship, as it uncovers a single overarching project for this work. His analysis is, however, tied up in the details of this particular text. It is thus unclear what bearing Harrison's reading of *De lib. arbit.* has on Augustine's other dialogues or, for that

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[25] See Chapter 5.

[26] Ryan Topping, *Happiness and Wisdom: Augustine's Early Theology of Education* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2012).

[27] For a focused example, see Ryan Topping, "The Perils of Skepticism: The Moral and Educational Argument of *Contra* Academicos," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 49/3 (2009): 333–350.

[28] Joseph Pucci, *Augustine's Virgilian Retreat: Reading the* Auctores *at Cassiciacum* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2014). See my review in *Augustinian Studies* (forthcoming).

[29] Simon Harrison, *Augustine's Way into the Will: The Theological and Philosophical Significance of* De Libero Arbitrio (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

matter, what bearing Augustine's other dialogues have on Harrison's reading of this one.

There is much more that could be said about all of these studies. Yet if we limit our scope to the problem of providing holistic readings of the dialogues, then Conybeare sidesteps the problem; Goldhill asks the right questions but without answering them; Stock, Topping and Pucci provide answers, just not the right ones; Simon Harrison makes progress but does not engage with the entire corpus. This is the current state of the scholarship.[30] In order to make real progress toward a holistic reading, we must first move out of the corner that twentieth-century debates have backed us into. This study's methodology is designed to pursue this end. In what follows, I respond to the existing debates and propose ways around the obstacles they pose for a holistic reading.

The debate over Augustine's conversion and to a lesser extent the historicity debate are both concerned with recovering "Augustine's view" on various matters. My considered response to both debates is that I simply don't care what the man himself thought. In one sense, that is merely to say that I am not writing an intellectual biography after the manner of Brown's. Still, in making their primary object of interpretation "Augustine," the historical individual, whether at a certain point or over the whole of his career, historians and theologians have managed to avoid making sense of difficult passages within their immediate contexts. My focus, thus, will not be on what Augustine *thinks* as a historical individual, but on what he *does* as an author: how he arranges the various components of his works to pursue greater ends. To avoid the pitfalls of existing scholarship, I will be studiously ignoring *Conf.* and what it has to say about Augustine's early life. I will begin by attempting to make sense of the Cassiciacum dialogues on their own terms.[31] This, in turn, provides a

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[30] If this seems somewhat bleak, I should stress that the present survey is focused on obstacles to holistic readings. That is not to say that good work is not being done on other questions. For an overview, see the commentaries of Fuhrer, Simon Harrison, Schlapbach and Trelenberg listed in the bibliography.

[31] It is, of course, impossible to compartmentalize one's thinking completely: In all likelihood, my reading of the dialogues is in various ways colored by my understanding of *Conf.* Yet my argument at no point depends on evidence from *Conf.*, and I do not treat agreement with *Conf.* as a *desideratum*. The connections between *Conf.* and the dialogues are, of course, numerous: If anything, my focus on method shows more connections than the normal focus on points of doctrine does. While I do not explore those connections here, I hope that readers of *Conf.* will find the present study useful for approaching that later work in new ways. In a similar vein, I make use of *Retract.* in the process of reconstructing the never-written third book of *Sol.* from its sketch, now known as *De immortalitate animae*. While my reconstruction is in accordance with *Retract.*, it does not depend on it.

context for approaching Augustine's later dialogue, *De libero arbitrio*, though here too my reading should be judged primarily by how well it makes sense of that text in its own terms.

When it comes to philosophical cherry picking, we need not replace current discussions of specific passages, so much as set them within broader questions of philosophical method and the overarching argument of each work. Following the example of Vlastos' work on Socratic elenchus and Benson on Plato's method of hypothesis,[32] I will focus on these broader questions and engage individual arguments only insofar as doing so helps us address these broader questions. The philosophical payoff of setting the part within the whole, in some cases, is a fresh perspective on what individual arguments are meant to accomplish. This is particularly true for *De lib. arbit.* The work's free will defense has been carefully scrutinized during the debate sparked by Mackie in 1955. Yet at the turn of the twenty-first century, Marilyn Adams declared the "generic theism" of the twentieth-century debate a dead end and called for a turn to the particulars of lived religious traditions for conceptual enrichments.[33] In this, she sets a new agenda, one as concerned with explanatory power and flexible resources as with formal rigor and airtight proofs. Accepting this new agenda, I suggest that *De lib. arbit.*'s combination of philosophical argument and scriptural exegesis is ripe for reconsideration.

In keeping with both this approach to broad argument and the literary turn of the last ten years, I prefer readings of the dialogues that can attribute a clear motivation to *every* part of a text. When it comes to works such as *De ord.*, which starts with a discussion of providence and ends with Augustine laying out a curriculum of liberal arts study, we must move beyond questions of particular content to find the single thread running through a work. Malcolm Heath's discussion of textual unity in classical Greek literary theory provides a useful point of departure.[34] Drawing on ancient literary criticism and works such as Plato's *Phaedrus*, which yokes discussions of love and rhetoric, Heath contrasts modern assumptions about literary unity, which tend to focus on thematic content, and ancient conceptions of a text as an organic whole whose various parts serve some

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[32] Gregory Vlastos, "Socrates' Disavowal of knowledge," *Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1985): 1–31. Hugh Benson, *Clitophon's Challenge: Dialectic in Plato's* Meno, Phaedo, *and* Republic (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). I discuss these works in Chapter 2.

[33] Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

[34] Malcolm Heath, *Unity in Greek Poetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), especially chapters 1, 2 and 9.