

12-20-2021

## 'Conserere Sapientiam', To Engage in Wisdom: The Rhetoric of Philosophical Debate and the Speech of Caecilius in Minucius Felix's Octavius

Evan RW Dutmer  
*Culver Academies*, [evan.dutmer@culver.org](mailto:evan.dutmer@culver.org)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/necj>



Part of the [Classics Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Dutmer, Evan RW (2021) "'Conserere Sapientiam', To Engage in Wisdom: The Rhetoric of Philosophical Debate and the Speech of Caecilius in Minucius Felix's Octavius," *New England Classical Journal*: Vol. 48 : Iss. 2 , 12-30.  
<https://doi.org/10.52284/NECJ.48.2.article.dutmer>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in New England Classical Journal by an authorized editor of CrossWorks.

# ‘*Conserere Sapientiam*’, To Engage in Wisdom: The Rhetoric of Philosophical Debate and the Speech of Caecilius in Minucius Felix’s *Octavius*

EVAN DUTMER

**Abstract:** Here I will elucidate both the rhetorical and philosophical significance of the introduction to Minucius Felix’s *Octavius*—in effect, to give voice to what Minucius Felix hoped to do in having Caecilius and Octavius *conserere sapientiam* (‘engage in wisdom’). I draw special attention to the introduction to the dialogue because (i) Minucius’ rhetorical care in establishing an appropriate *otium* (in other words, a *locus amoenus*) for his dialogue participants has been underappreciated (ii) because Caecilius’ arguments have, in general, been given short-shrift, and, (iii) because the view that the introductory parts should, instead, be read with suspicion has found a recent prominent voice in an influential recent article (Powell 2007).

**Keywords:** Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, Skepticism, Fideism, Dialogue, Debate

## 1. Introduction: ‘To Engage in Wisdom’: The Aim of the *Octavius*

Minucius Felix (fl. late 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE), by ancient accounts an accomplished lawyer from Roman Africa, is known for one extraordinary work: a dialogue called the *Octavius*, perhaps the oldest apologetic dialogue extant in Latin, and one of the few genuine glimpses we have into direct, face-to-face pagan-Christian intellectual debate in Late Antiquity. In it, two legal advocates on holiday, the pagan Caecilius and Christian Octavius aim to *conserere sapientiam*. The very rare late Latin phrase means, literally, to ‘engage in wisdom’, (perhaps more figuratively) ‘to battle in wits’, and, more specifically, and according to most interpreters, to engage in philosophical dialogue. In fact, *conserere sapientiam* is contrasted with ‘friendly’ debates among friends in Minucius’ dialogue (i.e., *in contubernaliibus disputare*): the former is a decidedly serious, challenging academic exercise.

In the *Octavius*, the Roman pagan skeptic Caecilius is desirous of just such a serious intellectual debate (*conserere sapientiam*) between himself, on the one hand, and Octavius, his Roman Christian counterpart, on the other, when he asks that the two have a fair and comprehensive hearing on the matter of religion from both pagan and Christian perspectives, so that he might repay Octavius for religious offense rendered earlier that day when Octavius chuckled at Caecilius’ paying respects to a Serapis idol.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> For the (scant) ancient evidence for Minucius’ life, see Lactantius, *Div. Inst.* 6.1, and Jerome, *De viris illis*. 58, where he is said in both places to be a distinguished advocate. Eucherius mentions him at PL 50, 719. The *Octavius* and Tertullian’s *Apologeticum* may have a common source, or one may draw from the other (the question is open); both Minucius and Tertullian are from Roman Africa and of indigenous North African origin. Cyprian and Minucius’ relationship and relative priority are similarly debated (see Cousins 1997 for a helpful summary of the disputes). Powell 2007 is an excellent introduction to the textual details (including the Renaissance rediscovery of the text) and summaries of the philological debates on the *Octavius*. For more on the African identities of Minucius and Tertullian and the early African Church in general, see Rebillard 2012 and Wilhite 2017. Minucius’, Octavius’s, and Caecilius’ Africanity has been associated with conjectural evidence in the *CIL*—Minucius at 8.1964 and 12499; Octavius Januarius at Saldae, 8.8962; Caecilius at Cirta 8.7097-7098, 6996. Minucius Felix, in all likelihood, stands at the beginning of the Christian Latin controversial dialogue tradition in antiquity, and the *Octavius* is the only direct Roman pagan-Christian dialogue in Latin extant. For an excellent introduction to it (with a stellar bibliography), consult Kuper 2017. A full commentary has appeared in German by Christoph Schubert in the last decade (Verlag Heder 2014). Hasenhiüt 2008 functions as a book-length commentary on Caecilius’ speech. For an introduction to the Greek and Syriac Christian dialogue traditions, see Rigolio 2019. Recent studies of major later figures in the tradition (Augustine and Boethius) are also helpful for navigating the personal, intellectual predicaments and conflicts faced by professional, ambitious Roman Christians throughout Later Antiquity: for Augustine, see Stock 2010, 2011, Miles 2008; for Boethius, see Moreschini 2014, Lerer 1985.

In this essay I will discuss both the rhetorical and philosophical significance of the introduction to Minucius Felix's *Octavius* (both its setting and the first speech, that of Caecilius)—in effect, to give voice to what Minucius Felix hoped to do in having Caecilius and Octavius *conserere sapientiam*. I draw special attention to the opening sections of the dialogue because I think that (i) Minucius' rhetorical care in setting up an appropriate *otium* (a *locus amoenus*) for his dialogue participants (in keeping with ancient dialogue tradition) has been underappreciated (ii) because Caecilius' arguments follow in a clear philosophical skeptical lineage, and, (iii) last because the view that the introductory parts should, instead, be read with suspicion has found a recent prominent voice in an influential recent article.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, based on his own analysis of the rhetorical technique and philosophical exposition in the *Octavius*, Jonathan Powell concludes that Minucius Felix, while feigning philosophical impartiality for an intellectual debate between paganism and Christianity, in fact only sets up Caecilius (and so, the reader) for a hasty and unwarranted conversion to a sort of watered-down Christianity, himself failing to seriously consider an opposing point of view. At its noblest, he thinks, the dialogue mimics Cicero's own lost (but plausibly reconstructed) *Hortensius* in abandoning the neo-Academic commitment to impartiality by serving as unabashed Christian protreptic, as Cicero's dialogue supposedly dropped the veneer of principled skepticism for impassioned defense of philosophy. At its lowest, Powell characterizes the *Octavius* as consisting in Christian "propaganda" (180).

Contrary to this view, I suggest that Minucius Felix in fact introduces a skeptical position through Caecilius that, even if defective, is of a high philosophical pedigree and well-respected in antiquity. Indeed, the resonances of Caecilius' speech in the *Octavius* with Cotta's in Cicero's *De natura deorum* are well-attested. Further, suggestive similarities appear in fragments of the pagan polemicist Celsus' *True Doctrine* (contained in Origen's *Contra Celsum*).<sup>3</sup> Octavius's arguments, then, are not pitched against some sort of strawperson in Caecilius, but rather are well-suited to a particular line of typical 'urbane' skeptical line of argument, quite legible, I think, to Minucius Felix's readership among the Roman metropolitan elite.<sup>4</sup> Robert Wilken identifies this line of argument as belonging to 'profoundly' traditionalist thinkers in paganism's twilight, calling Celsus himself a 'conservative intellectual'. I think this an apt description of Caecilius as well.

Powell thinks that both the initial setting of the dialogue and the philosophical content of the speech of Caecilius help to confirm his insidious reading of the *Octavius*. My reading, on the other hand, will both (i) retrieve the skeptical-fideist philosophical center of Caecilius' speech and (ii) vindicate Minucius Felix's presentation of that speech in its rhetorical art—especially in its setting in the *locus amoenus*-topos.<sup>5</sup> My view, then, of the

<sup>2</sup> Namely, J.G.F. Powell (2007) "Unfair to Caecilius? Ciceronian dialogue techniques in Minucius Felix," in *Severan Culture*, Simon Swain, Stephen Harrison, and Jas Elsner, Eds., Cambridge University Press. Powell's skepticism regarding the 'genuineness' of Minucius' philosophical impartiality is anticipated by Anton Elter in his *Prolegomena zu Minucius Felix* (Bonn 1909), where he argues that the *Octavius* appears to have the elements more of a *consolatio* with an assumed Christian audience rather than a philosophical *disputatio*. For a more positive appraisal, see Von Albrecht 1987, whose casting of Minucius Felix as a 'Christian Humanist' more closely resembles my line of interpretation.

<sup>3</sup> For an exhaustive and at times side-by-side comparison of Minucius and Origen's *Contra Celsum*, with an excellent command of the nineteenth century scholarship on the *Octavius*, see Baylis 1928. For an excellent summary of the arguments of Celsus himself, see Bergjan 2001.

<sup>4</sup> This line of argument closely follows that of Cotta, one of the principal dialogue participants in Cicero's *De natura deorum*. For authoritative recent studies on Cotta and Cicero's philosophy of religion as a whole, see Wynne 2015 and 2019.

<sup>5</sup> I say 'skeptical-fideist philosophical center' as I will principally concern myself with the overarching significance and argumentative approach of Caecilius' speech in this essay. I am particularly interested in the skeptical-fideist bent of Caecilius' speech that puts it in conversation with other skeptical fideist approaches to religious or mystical belief in the history of philosophy. Certain specific claims and arguments against the Christians found

*Octavius* as a genuine attempt at a Ciceronian-style philosophical dialogue, recognizable as such to an ancient philosophical audience, is decidedly less dim.

Regardless of whether one agrees with the conclusion of the *Octavius* (i.e., Caecilius' intellectual conversion to Christianity), I maintain that, like Augustine's early Cassiciacum dialogues, they represent a genuinely philosophical attempt to overcome pagan religion and attendant philosophical attitudes and modes of thinking (particularly Academic Skepticism as filtered through Cicero) on intellectual grounds in a neutral dialogue setting.

## 2. The *Octavius*: Pagan and Christian in Dialogue

The *Octavius* is a remarkable text. It is one of the very few late antique Latin works we have that details intellectual debate between pagan and Christian in a familiar classical literary setting. It may be the *only* Latin text that does so in Ciceronian dialogue form (Augustine's later dialogues do not include a practicing pagan representative).<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, despite its deep situatedness in the intellectual culture of Roman late antiquity, the *Octavius* is not a widely-read text in Classics. Consequently, I shall endeavor in this section to provide a brief and clear overview of the dialogue for the purposes of this paper.

The dialogue begins in pensive, moody, heartfelt reflection of the narrator (presumably Marcus Minucius Felix himself) on the friendship of the deceased Octavius. The first words of the piece—*cogitanti mihi* ('as I was thinking')—are borrowed from Cicero's *De oratore* 1.1, initiating the Ciceronian allusiveness that permeates the beginning of the dialogue. I shall say more about the touching, deep resonances with the themes of friendship in Cicero's *De amicitia* in a moment, though, as Powell notes, they have been well-recognized.<sup>7</sup> Minucius' mind eventually fixes on a particular episode, a dialogue-debate between Octavius and Caecilius, which he recounts for us, where he played, in his words, the role of *arbiter* between the two sparring friends.

The scene opens during the late summer holidays, after the solstice as autumn has begun to cool the seaside landscape, on a retreat for the three lawyers (each of whom hail from Roman North Africa—see my note 2). The location is Ostia, port of Rome, that *civitas amoenissima* (2.3), where *lavacra marina* ('sea-baths') might soothe Minucius' unbalanced humors. The three wake up one morning for a brisk walk by the sea, and somewhere along their path the three come across an image (*simulacrum*) of Serapis. In the manner of the superstitious (*vulgus superstitiosus*) Caecilius blows a kiss to the image. Octavius rebukes him, saying that a friend ought not let a friend shipwreck on rocks in broad daylight, even if such stones are prettified, anointed, or crowned (3.1), making reference to Caecilius' perceived idolatry.

---

in Caecilius' speech will not be my subject here, though they would be important for a full philosophical analysis of Caecilius' speech. Many of these arguments have parallels with Celsus. Again see Bergjan 2001 for an excellent introduction into a large literature.

<sup>6</sup> Possible (extant or non-extant) Latin precedents to the *Octavius* (in dialogue form and pitched between Christian and pagan) are debated. Vigorous debate in Latin and a rich African Roman Christian culture near Carthage certainly flourished in Minucius' lifetime, with Tertullian's literary output nourished in similar fertile soils. (See again Rebillard 2012, Wilhite 2017) But clear literary precedents are less clear. Non-Latin philosophical or quasi-philosophical debates between Christian and pagan are intriguing possibilities, of which Minucius may have been aware and in which Minucius hoped to be included. The *Acta Archelai*, preserved only in Latin, contained a debate between Manes (of the Manichaean faith) and the Christian bishop Archelaus. Jerome thought the *Acta* was originally written in Syriac. (*De viris illis*. 72) *The Book of the Laws of the Countries* by a follower of Bardaisan, contemporary with Minucius, was written in Syriac, gesturing to the richness of interreligious dialogue occurring in Mesopotamia and the Roman East. The reputation for cosmopolitan learnedness (arrived at through philosophical debate) in Mesopotamia was well-attested in Late Antiquity and is found in both Cassiodorus and Junillus Africanus. For some of these non-Latin points of contact, I thank an anonymous reviewer for the *New England Classical Journal*.

<sup>7</sup> See Powell 2007, 182.

Caecilius stews but remains quiet; the three continue their walk to the seaside and come upon a remarkable scene of quietude. The sea gently plays at their feet, prompting a meditation on its curls; the shore curves gently as their stories about Octavius' sea adventures meander calmly; boats rest from long sea journeys above the sand, held up on oaken planks. Last, in the most arresting image, a group of boys partake in a game of skipping stones, prompting again a meditation on their game and the peace it brings to the scene.

I shall have more to say on these striking, enduring images from the dialogue in a moment. This stage-setting then brings about the abrupt outburst from Caecilius, who at 4.3, at Octavius' asking why he has remained so quiet, requests a sort of quasi-hearing and philosophical debate (a *conserere sapientiam*), hoping to both defend the traditional pagan religion and cast doubt on the new Christian one. Caecilius chooses Minucius as arbiter, even though Minucius himself is acknowledged as a convert—one who has experienced both ways of life (*diligenter in utroque vivendi genere*, 5.1).

Caecilius' speech treats several topics, but is rooted in a skeptical defense of the ancestral pagan religion and a polemic against Christianity, the relative upstart. Caecilius first doubts humankind's ability to know the ultimate truth in matters divine (5.2-3), then discourses on the nature of creation and of a unitary god, the multiplicity of religions and the importance of ancestral, indigenous religions (6), the peculiar strength and usefulness of the Roman religion (evidenced through the growth and success of the Roman empire) (*religionem tam vetustam, tam utilem, tam salubrem*, 8.1), the secrecy and vices of the Christian sects, in particular their libidinous religious practices (9.2)—for example, their rumored adoration of the genitalia of the priest—the absurdity of the doctrine of the resurrection, and so on. The charges range from inventive legitimate critique to typical anti-Christian slander of the late antique period.

Octavius responds with an elegant apologetic speech, addressing Caecilius' points with learned assurance, showing facility in both Greco-Roman learning and Christian apologetics. He especially hopes to make the new Christian religion compatible with the best of secular learning and with the arts of rhetoric, logic, and philosophy, in this way anticipating Augustine and, later, Cassiodorus. Early the speech focuses on the rational defense of Christian creationism in the face of Caecilius' skepticism. Octavius eventually meets paganism's supposed idolatry head-on with an enigmatic, staccato-style passage describing the Christian god's incorporeality (e.g., [*deus*] *visu clarior est*, 18.8). He then defends monotheism with an appeal to the Greek philosophers, especially Plato. He meets each charge of Caecilius one-by-one and refutes it, even claiming that Rome's expansion proved crime and terror, not divine providence (25).

When Octavius finishes, Caecilius and Octavius are silent, stupefied (*ad silentium stupefacti*, 39.1). Eventually Caecilius admits that he has been won over on some of the main points, and wants to call himself a Christian, though the details of the religion still prompt questions from him. The dialogue ends with the three advocates in friendship and good humor (*laeti hilaesque*) agreeing to discuss more the following day.

### 3. Powell's *Octavius: Captatio benevolentiae*

Caecilius' conversion by the end of the dialogue provides a good transition to introducing Powell's main criticisms of the *Octavius*.

First, he thinks the Ciceronian styling of the dialogue, both in setting and composition betray ill intent on the part of Minucius Felix. They are literary deceptions, lacking the impartiality characteristic of a Ciceronian philosophical dialogue. He writes:

To a modern reader, indeed, the *Octavius* is prone to seem bland, perhaps so bland as to cast doubt on either the convictions or the capabilities of its author, but against a background in which Christians

had evidently been feared ... and in which not much was generally known or publicised about their doctrines, the blandness itself is surprising and noteworthy, and invites interpretation as a deliberate strategy rather than an unthinking effect of literary convention or a sign of failure in conception (180).<sup>8</sup>

On Powell's reading, the quiet and pleasant setting of Ostia by the ocean, the unhurried, organic chatting and banter between the dialogue participants as they stroll on, the careful Ciceronian style and diction employed by Minucius, all have a certain insidious lulling effect, helping to lower the pagan reader's defenses for Octavius' eventual Christian proselytization. Indeed, Powell emphasizes Minucius' adeptness at creating the *appearance* of pagan respectability, sophistication, and "urbanity" solely for the purposes of *captatio benevolentiae* (179, 181).

Second, he thinks that the position that Caecilius is made to defend in the *Octavius*—namely, that anything divine is uncertain but the traditional gods should nevertheless be believed in and revered—is so inconsistent on its face that Octavius, in his speech, is given a quick and total victory from the start. This, he says, is in contrast to a traditional Ciceronian dialogue, where "the integrity of the interlocutors' positions is generally respected and conversion is a rare event," and in which "the supreme values are rational examination of all sides of a question and the reader's freedom of judgement to make up his or her own mind (182)".<sup>9</sup> For Powell, then, the resemblance between the *Octavius* and a genuine Ciceronian dialogue is superficial. Again, he writes:

These literary techniques are also a way of giving an impression of fairness and impartiality in philosophical debate which, when one examines the actual positions attributed to the characters, turns out to be quite unjustified. The impression we are meant to have is that Christian Octavius has won in a fair contest; but in fact, although Caecilius the pagan is given some reasonable individual points to make, it is clear enough by the end that the dice have been loaded against him from the start. (181)

I think Powell's reading of the opening parts of the dialogue, if it is to convince us that Minucius Felix is knowingly being deceptive in crafting his introduction, needs both of these points to turn out to be right. But I think both fail to be convincing. We will take up my criticisms and motivate my alternative reading in the next section.

#### **4. A New Interpretation of the Introduction to Minucius Felix's *Octavius*: The Rhetoric of Philosophical Debate and Caecilius' Urbane Skeptical Fideism**

##### **A. The Rhetoric of Philosophical Debate**

In this section I will reproduce some relevant passages from the Latin text of the first sections of the *Octavius* and, for each, give a short explication. In so doing I hope to argue against Powell (and others who, in my view, unfairly doubt the intentions of Minucius Felix in his commitment to free inquiry) by constructing plausible alternate readings of both the initial set-up of the *Octavius* and the philosophical point Caecilius is trying to make in his speech on behalf of the traditional Roman pagan point of view.

I will start, then, with the introduction of the dialogue. Minucius, the narrator, recalls a conversation he had between his two friends, Caecilius, a pagan, and Octavius

<sup>8</sup> Blandness, of course, figures prominently here. Beaujeu 1964 anticipates Powell in finding the staging of the *Octavius* insidiously 'bland'.

<sup>9</sup> For an authoritative summary of the elements, aims, and *Nachleben* of the Ciceronian dialogue form, consult Schofield 2008.

(now deceased), a Christian, in which Octavius ‘remade’ (*reformavit*) Caecilius so that he would accept ‘true religion’ (*veram religionem*), and he did so by serious argument (*disputatione gravissima*) (1.5). Minucius begins his narration of the dialogue by telling of the vacation the three took together to Ostia, where the discussion (and conversion) took place. Minucius then takes pains to describe the setting by the sea, resulting in the aforementioned stunning passage:

cum hoc sermone eius medium spatium civitatis emensi iam liberum litus tenebamus. Ibi harenas extimas, velut sterneret ambulacro, perfundens lenis unda tendebat: et, ut semper mare etiam positus flatibus inquietum est, etsi non canis spumosisque fluctibus exibat ad terram, tamen crispis tortuosisque ibidem erroribus delectati perquam sumus, cum in ipso aequoris limine plantas tingeremus, quod vicissim nunc adpulsum nostris pedibus adluderet fluctus, nunc relabens ac vestigia retrahens in sese resorberet. (3.2-5)<sup>10</sup>

Passing through the middle of the city in conversation, we were now coming upon the open beach. There was a gentle wave stretching over the outlying sands, as it lay out like a promenade: and, as the sea is always restless even with still waters, it was driving at the earth with light waves, not white and crested sprays; nevertheless we were delighted thoroughly by its curled, coiled wanderings, as we touched our feet at the very limit of the water—as now the advancing wave played around our feet, now it slips back and, retracing its steps, absorbs into itself.

I think Powell underestimates the literary quality of these opening passages when he lumps them in with just so much “bland” stage-setting.<sup>11</sup> More importantly, to miss the point of these introductory passages risks Minucius’ attempts to connect his dialogue with well-worn, legible rhetorical tropes meant to signal to his reader the aims and intent of this *disputatio gravissima*.

Far from lulling the reader into some sort of daze, the colorful wordplay here invites the reader to read on—in a state of relaxation, admittedly—moved as she might be by the description of the gentle lapping of the waves on the seashore. The poetry and rhythm of the above passage is apparent; the liquidity of the diction also plain to see. Minucius, we might think, is not just describing a pretty sunset or the meandering chats of a few friends without legitimate philosophical purpose: he is preparing us for philosophy—i.e., the readers—via rhetoric for leisure that is conducive for intellectual activity and refinement. In a word, for *otium*.<sup>12</sup>

I call this literary set-up the “rhetoric of philosophical debate” to emphasize its role in providing the enabling conditions for philosophical-scholastic activity, but in so doing I draw on a well-worn rhetorical topos literature. This setting is clearly within the *locus amoenus* topos, given its classic formulation in Ernst Robert Curtius (1953/2013, 195). But rather than its being solely grounded in literary allusion or in persuasion for persuasion’s sake, I hold that this rhetorical setting has philosophical grounds: namely, it follows from a belief widely held in ancient philosophy regarding the interrelation between *otium* and *philosophia*.

Indeed: the setting of the *Octavius* seems to be consistent with the ancient belief

<sup>10</sup> My translations throughout. The Latin text matches the Loeb Classical Library edition of 1931, with reference to the standard critical edition (Kytzler 1981).

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, in the words of an anonymous reviewer for the *New England Classical Journal*: “Minucius’ scene-setting, in my opinion, is one of the most striking of any Latin dialogue from any period.”

<sup>12</sup> For the meditative aspects of ancient dialogue form, see Hadot 1995. See also Stock 2010, 2011.

(shared nearly universally across Greek and Roman philosophical sects, and a good number of religious traditions, besides) in the importance of relaxation and unbothered attention in providing the material conditions for *otium*, namely, learned leisure aimed at intellectual refinement and truth-seeking.<sup>13</sup> Augustine later goes to similar lengths to provide for leisurely conditions for the philosophical investigations of his Cassiciacum dialogues (especially in the *De beata vita*) so that he might be able to effect for himself a genuine *Christianae vitae otium* (*Retractions* 1.1.1).<sup>14</sup>

The setting is no doubt alluring and picturesque (as is the further description of the boys skipping stones at 1.6), but it would seem that we would need our minds already made up to think that the careful stage-setting Minucius has chosen suggest he merely means to bore or stupefy his reader. It rather seems the opposite is true, that the introduction to the dialogue effects a kind of spiritual exercise to awaken and arouse the mind of the reader through meditation, rendering it more plastic and fluid as it encounters new philosophical ways of thinking and being in this world; and that deceptive, insidious “blandness” (to make up for the explosive, counter-cultural truths of Christianity) would seem far from Minucius’ plan.

And while Powell acknowledges that this opening setting adds to the “respectability” of the Roman Christian participants by placing them in a “comfortable social setting” (179) such as Ostia, I think he fails to appreciate how this passage fits in with a long tradition of similarly dreamy settings (themselves sparkling examples of the *locus amoenus*) in Platonic and Ciceronian philosophical dialogues (and which speaks to Minucius’ *genuine*, good-faith appropriation of the Ciceronian dialogic genre to a Christian subject matter).

To be sure, Platonic dialogues are often set in scenes of tranquillity and repose, removed from the business and commotion of the city. The tense drama of a Platonic dialogue—the exchange of ideas between participants in philosophical cross-examination—is often juxtaposed with a scene deliberately fashioned to be mundane or ordinary, or secluded and set apart. The *Republic* starts off famously with its simple “I went down to the Piraeus,” and depicts a house party *during*, but set apart from, the commotion of the Panathenaea. The *Symposium* takes place during a hangover. The *Phaedrus* outside the city walls near a stream. The *Laws*, of course, on a long trek, only interrupted by occasional natural sights. Cicero too takes pains to set his dialogues in secluded villas and during country walks, making room for leisure and philosophy. Augustine’s later Cassiciacum dialogues, similarly inspired by Ciceronian dialogic conventions as Minucius Felix, take place in a country villa, far away from the business and bustle of Imperial Milan. In short, given that the rhetorical precedent of a leisurely setting for a philosophical dialogue already existed in the Platonic and Ciceronian dialogue forms, and given that the description of Ostia is, as we have seen, carefully crafted and appealing and has a plausible legitimate philosophical purpose (i.e., to prepare the mind of the reader for philosophy), it appears a stretch for us to suspect that Minucius Felix is, rather, being deliberately deceptive when he opens the *Octavius* in the idyllic surrounds that he does. We may do so: but it risks being inadmissibly uncharitable.

In addition to its above purposes, I think the stage-setting of the *Octavius* serves even deeper philosophical and formal ends in the dialogue’s plan. I bring attention in particular to the remarkable use of water, naval, and marine imagery (including possible

<sup>13</sup> See Andre 1966, Sadleir 2004. For ancient Roman exempla, see Seneca’s *De otio*, Cicero, *De officiis* 3.1-4, and *Pro Sestio* 45.98 for an influential formulation of the ideal of *otium liberale*: *Id quod est praestantissimum, maximeque optabile omnibus sanis et bonis et beatis, cum dignitate otium* (that which stands first, and is most to be desired by all healthy, good, and happy people, is leisure with dignity).

<sup>14</sup> For a growing, fine literature on Augustine’s adaptation of classical dialogue techniques to his own intellectual journey in his early works, see, to start, Foley 1999, 2019, Clark 2008, Kenyon 2018, Miles 2008. For this period in his life, see Brown 2000, 2.11: “*Christianae Vitae Otium*: Cassiciacum,” for the classic treatment.



allusions to ritual washing and healing), the description of the boys' game of tossing stones as a possible metaphor for the contest of philosophical debate itself, the theme of retracing one's steps, and the possibilities for a metatextual interpretation for the dialogue's introduction.<sup>15</sup> Throughout the introductory stage-setting there is a repetition and rhythm that are highly suggestive of careful and intentional literary craft; in Powell's words, they should catch the attention of the 'alert reader'. I end my rhetorical analysis with a suggestion that the introductory setting may serve a metatextual purpose—that conversion for a pagan skeptic may take just such a ritualistic repetition, wanderings even (*erroribus* is Minucius' word), through both life and a text like the *Octavius*. In this way the *Octavius* can remind us of Socrates in the *Phaedo*, where ritualistic 'chants' are needed for the aspirant philosopher-in-training's overcoming the fear of death.

I first begin with the purpose of the repeated uses of water, marine, and naval imagery. In 2.3 Minucius introduces the healing properties of the sea (and especially the famous sea-baths at Ostia). At 2.4 the sea breeze promises to reinvigorate and refresh each of the participants. But then Octavius alludes to the great destructive power of the sea at 3.1 when he chides Caccilius' veneration of the Serapis idol by comparing his doing so to a shipwreck.

The sea returns as a restorative, renewing force in the next passage. We saw above the delicate, rhythmic, supple prose Minucius employs to suggest water's cool receding and returning embrace. Octavius' 'adventures' at sea are discussed as the three enjoy the walk along the shore at 3.5. For Minucius and Octavius, the sea performs its medicinal rites, cooling and calming their humors. For Caecilius, overwhelmed with jealous anger at Octavius' affront, the sea fails to bring calm and repose.

In 3.5 great ships await their next voyage, suspended in air on oak planks. Octavius, too, and his companions find themselves 'suspended', just before the action of the rest of the dialogue. The seaside setting proves to be the place not just for philosophical debate, but another sort of 'game', the description of which immediately precedes the rest of the dialogue.

In 3.5-6 we see young boys playing a game of stone skipping on the shore. I reproduce the passage below to bring attention to its noteworthy features:

... pueros videmus certatim gestientes testarum in mare iaculationibus ludere. Is lusus est testam teretem iactatione fluctuum levigatam legere de litore, eam testam plano situ digitis comprehensam inclinam ipsum atque humilem quantum potest super undas inrotare, ut illud iaculum vel dorsum maris raderet vel enataret, dum leni impetu labitur, vel summis fluctibus tonsis emicaret emergeret dum adsiduo saltu sublevatur. Is se in pueris victorem ferebat, cuius testa et procurreret longius et frequentius exsiliret. (3.6)

We saw some boys eagerly playing a game by tossing stones into the sea. The game is to choose a stone from the shore, one smoothed down by the tossing of the waves, grab hold of the flat side, then bow and stoop low so that the stone spins as far as it can above the waves, so that the little projectile either skims the surface of the sea and swims on, gliding on gently by the impulse, or shaves the tops of the waves, leaping and emerging as it is raised up in its regular skips and hops. The boy whose stone went out longest and made the most jumps was proclaimed the victor.

<sup>15</sup> I owe my treatment here of the theme of 'retracing one's steps' to an anonymous reviewer at the *New England Classical Journal*. I am thankful for this suggestion.

I bring attention to this passage as it immediately precedes the main action of the dialogue, the philosophical conversation between Octavius and Caecilius. In fact, Minucius notes that they were wrapped in the joy (*voluptate*) of looking at this spectacle (*spectaculi*) before Caecilius himself leaps into his first speech. Here the sea serves again as the neutral, ambivalent setting for the two sides, bringing restorative and pleasant effects to Octavius and Minucius, while allowing Caecilius to fester in his anger and offense (the seas of error batter Caecilius again later in Octavius' speech, 16.4).

But again, far from serving as only just so many merely literary fireworks, I think Minucius' placement of this meditation on the contest of skipping stones directly before the succeeding philosophical exchange suggests a comment from Minucius on those very episodes. The game of skipping stones, I think, is meant to serve as a metaphor for the philosophical debate Caecilius himself requests. The 'game' of philosophy (if the metaphor is to line up) consists in picking up an argument (in the metaphor, the *testa*), one smoothed and refined by a philosophical or religious tradition (the successive waves—*fluctibus*), and finding a victor once one's speech or argument has gone on longest (*longius*) and made the most flashy splashes (*frequentius exsiliret*). Caecilius wrongly suspects he has the most refined and smoothed stones (supported by the traditions of the Roman religion and the antiquity of Greek philosophy); Octavius shows him in the course of the dialogue that the stones at the disposal of the new Christianity are in fact the most refined and smoothest of all, themselves being more effective than the missiles of the philosophers (*philosophorum telis*), while being easier (*facilem*) to use and more pleasant (*favorabilem*). (39.1)

Last, water features prominently in an enigmatic comment made by Octavius amid his philosophical speech, where spirit and water find their place among the oldest of the pre-Socratic philosophers. Octavius mentions Thales of Miletus, famous for his priority among the philosophers and his view that water was the organizing principle of the universe:

Sit Thales Milesius omnium primus, qui primus omnium de caelestibus disputavit. Idem Milesius Thales rerum initium aquam dixit, deum autem eam mentem, quae ex aqua cuncta formaverit (cp. Cic. *Nat. deor.* 1.10.25). Eo altior et sublimior aquae et spiritus ratio, quam ut ab homine potuerit inveniri, a deo traditum; vides philosophi principalis nobiscum penitus opinionem consonare. (19.4-5)

Let us begin with Thales of Miletus, the first of all philosophers, who was first to discuss heavenly matters. Thales said that water was the beginning of everything, and that god was the mind that formed everything from water. This is a theory of water and spirit too deep and sublime to have been invented by a human being—it was passed down by god; you see that the opinion of the first philosopher is fully consonant with ours.

This theory (*ratio*) of water and spirit that Octavius mentions is, it would seem, a reference to Genesis 1.2, when God's 'spirit' or 'wind' hovers over the face of the primordial waters of creation ("the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters" Gen. 1.2 NRSV). This interpretation of the opening to Genesis—where the waters represent a primary formless substance—is a familiar one (see, e.g., Philo's *On Creation* 11.38, Augustine's *Literal Commentary on Genesis* 4, also Tertullian's *Adversus Hermogenem*; for Thales in a discussion of Genesis in particular, see Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 2.14.2). Octavius expresses himself in an extremely compressed way, but means to point out to us the importance of this consonance between

Thales' and Moses' respective cosmogonies. Breath and water in both combine to create order and understanding. Octavius' and Caecilius' seaside philosophical dispute may be just that sort of creative, generative dialectical microcosm.

Retreading rhetorical flourishes from across the dialogue may seem overwrought. Did Minucius intend for us to read the *Octavius* in this way? I think there are strongly suggestive clues to such a hermeneutical approach in the stage-setting of the dialogue. As mentioned above, treading, steps, retracing one's steps, and making circles permeate the beginning of the *Octavius*. I here show a few places that point to the importance of this for the dialogue as a whole.

Again, retracing and retreading figure prominently in the start of the philosophical exchange.<sup>16</sup> At the very start, Minucius remarks on the memory of Octavius (now deceased) and the incredible power it has on his mental faculties. Thinking about him makes him seem to return to the past itself (*in praeterita redire*) rather than just to remember him (*revocare*) long gone. Octavius, Caecilius, and Minucius' seaside walk is cast as *inambulando* (walking up and down). Minucius' memorable description of the curling and repeating waves at 3.3 includes the waters' retracing steps and finding their way back into themselves (*nunc relabens ac vestigia retrahens in sese resorberet*). Again, the party goes back the way they came (*viam rursus versis vestigiis terebamus*). Caecilius' speech notes the great difficulty of *investigation* of truth (itself an *in-treading*) (*taedio investigandae penitus veritatis*). At the very conclusion of the dialogue (39-40), Minucius sits silent (*tacitus*) after Octavius has finished speaking, turning over (*evolvo*) the speech of Octavius in his mind, lost in admiration (*magnitudine admirationis evanui*) before Caecilius interrupts him, prompting the explicit end to the dialogue.

These textual reminders point to the author's hope that we too turn over the arguments again and again. That, if we like, we too can bring Octavius before our mind's-eye and re-turn to this investigation, weighing the arguments *pro* and *con* and make our own judgment as to the strength of each, as Minucius himself is tasked to do by Caecilius.

Indeed, these images of tracing and retracing serve well the last aim of my rhetorical analysis of the introductory setting of the dialogue. In particular, I think the setting serves a metatextual purpose, where both memory of Octavius' friendship and the dialogue between Octavius and Caecilius on the seashore point to the cognitive difficulties pagans in general (and pagans of a philosophical stripe in particular) may face in their own 'conversion story'. Crucial to overcoming these difficulties in Minucius' view, I think, is retracing, rethinking, repetition, and rereading.

Minucius, if we recall, is described by Caecilius as well-practiced in both pagan and Christian ways of life (5.1). Importantly Octavius was not only his friend when on the correct path, but also his dear friend in his wanderings (*ipse socius in erroribus*) (1.4). Octavius gently brought him back to truth, treating him with love and patience while he, Minucius, was in the depth of darkness (*tenebrarum profundo*). The gentle sea-foam curls and wanders too at 3.2 (again, *erroribus*), but comes back into itself at regular intervals. Octavius describes Caecilius as wandering (*errantem*), wavering constantly through error (*per errorem*) at the beginning of his speech (16.1-2). He promises to argue for the truth to finally free Caecilius from doubt and wandering (*vagandum*). Caecilius himself admits that he has triumphed over this wandering and losing one's way (*ego triumphator erroris*) (40.1).

The intricate setting of the *Octavius* suggests both the trials and difficulties awaiting the pagan convert to Christianity as well as the calming reassurance and inevitability of the victory of an interlocutor like Octavius. Wanderings provide for both

---

<sup>16</sup> Again, I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer at *New England Classical Journal* for the suggestion of inclusion of this rhetorical theme—especially to the wordplay contained in *investigandae*. I am thankful for these comments.

the necessary leisure and reinvigoration of the body and the senses, while they are also limited to regular intervals, curled back into themselves like so many cresting waves. The dialogue of the *Octavius* itself, I suggest, could be seen as one of those productive, generative wanderings, a stone-skipping contest, that, if brought to mind once and again, retraced and retreaded as if we are there, could assist the conversion experience of the skeptically-minded unbelieving pagan.

Though this intellectual exercise (retracing and rehashing an argument) might seem extra- or even sub-philosophical, I am reminded of Socrates' mention of ritual 'chants' to face the fear of death in the *Phaedo* 77-78. There Socrates thinks that the recollection argument has sufficiently shown the pre-existence of the soul, but now seeks to employ new argumentation to dispel the fear that upon death the soul "blows away" and "dissipates" (77e). Socrates characterizes this as a child's fear, and Cebes responds:

"Try to convince us, Socrates," he said, "as if we do have that fear. Or rather, not as if we have the fear—maybe there's a child actually inside us who's afraid of things like that. So try to convince that child to stop fearing death as if it were the bogeyman."

"Well," said Socrates, "you must chant (*epadein*) spells to him every day until you manage to chant it away."

"Where then, Socrates," he said, "will we find a good enchanter (*epodos*) for such things, given that you," he added, "are leaving us?"

"Greece is a large place, Cebes," he said, "and there are no doubt good men in it. There are also many races of foreigners. All of these people you must comb in your search for such an enchanter, sparing neither money nor effort, as there's nothing on which you'd be better off spending your money" (77e-78a).

The *Octavius*, on my reading, is an attempt to capture just such an enchanter (*epodos*) at the height of his powers, brought back as if to real life (*in praeterita redire*), a friend in both times of affection (*amoris*) and in wanderings (*erroribus*), who will not leave you in the middle of your journey into truth (*non respuat comitem*), but, as you read, will in fact lead you on your way (*quod est gloriosius praecurrit*) (1.1, 4).

Still, we might think that those less trusting of Minucius Felix's intentions in his arrangement of this intricate *locus amoenus* and the metatextual function of both the dialogue and character of Octavius are in fact generally skeptical of what I have termed the preparatory *rhetoric of philosophical debate*. Rather than seeing these literary features of a Ciceronian (or Platonic, for that matter) dialogue as conducive to creating the conditions for the mental exercises that will be required of us upon entering into a particular philosophical investigation, they may think that these detract from the philosophical quality of the piece in question by interfering with the purity of the argument.<sup>17</sup> It is not my aim here to respond directly to this criticism. It is longstanding and without an easy resolution. Some interpreters might indeed think this (i.e., that the dialogue form may corrupt via rhetoric)—but if they do, I would point out, I do not think there is *special* reason to think Minucius Felix uses the dialogue form to deceive or lull his readers into a trap. One would have to think Plato, Cicero, and Augustine do roughly the same.

## B. Caecilius's Intellectual Position: Urbane Skeptical Fideism

But the first point of criticism from Powell I have addressed in this article, namely, that Minucius Felix is being somehow deceptive in his opening to the *Octavius*—

<sup>17</sup> For a helpful, comprehensive study of this (very) longstanding skepticism (dating at least to Plato's own *Republic* where the "old quarrel between philosophy and poetry" is first mentioned [*Republic* 607b5-6]) see Teixeira 2007.

that his attempts at “blandness” and mere *appearance* of pagan respectability are meant only to establish a dishonest intellectual trust between him and the reader—really only succeeds if Minucius in fact has Caecilius defend an obviously absurd or weak position in the course of the dialogue. Otherwise, our view of Minucius Felix’s rhetorical techniques in the *Octavius* would likely be similar to our view of other thinkers’ using literary flourishes in the Platonic dialogue tradition.

It is my view that Caecilius defends a position which is, indeed, difficult, but one which is not ridiculous or obviously inconsistent; and, rather, one that is defensible from a certain skeptical stance. In fact, I think it has a strong forerunners in Cicero’s Cotta in the *De natura deorum* or, perhaps, the Celsus of the *True Doctrine* in Origen’s *Contra Celsum*, and, more broadly, represents a certain cultural attitude among elite metropolitan Romans common at the time of the *Octavius*’ composition.<sup>18</sup> I call this philosophical outlook “urbane skeptical fideism”.<sup>19</sup>

According to this view, since all is able to be doubted (including the truth of *both* the ancestral pagan religions and the Christian upstart one), we ought to cleave to what brings the most social benefit (i.e., the Roman pagan religion) *provisionally*, lest we risk our individual reputation, safety, and the widespread social unrest that might arise with wholesale societal conversion to a new religious mode of life.

I will now discuss this point by appealing, again, to the Latin of the *Octavius*.<sup>20</sup>

Caecilius’ speech in defense of traditional Roman pagan religion is the first delivered in the course of the *Octavius*. In it, Caecilius defends two main theses. The first is that in all things (but especially divine matters) there is no certainty (For this, Caecilius relies on stock Academic Skeptic arguments regarding the unreliability of the senses.).<sup>21</sup> The second is that, given that all is uncertain (including, of course, novel religious movements), Romans ought to continue in practicing traditional pagan religion. He supports this second claim with an appeal to the virtue and character of the Roman people and their successes in war and empire. Throughout the speech other points are made, but it is on these two theses that Caecilius’ position rests.

Caecilius represents an interesting mixture of two views: he is both skeptic and traditionalist. These may at first seem to be in tension, but can be synthesized into a view that, even if unattractive to some, is consistent. This view, as mentioned above, I call “urbane skeptical fideism.”

I will consider the first thesis now. Caecilius says:

---

<sup>18</sup> For the Academic Skeptic orthodoxy surrounding traditional religion as a matter of practice, not science, see Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* 1.62, 3.5, 3.43. For a sampling of the recent flourishing of literature surrounding the intellectual and social situation of paganism in late antiquity, see Watts 2015 (though his study is principally concerned with the latter half of the fourth century, many of its themes find expression in the second and third), Humphries 2018, Grig 2018, O’Loughlin 2018, Krausmüller 2018. For evidence of the material culture of the slow decline of Late Antique paganism, see Lavan & Mulryan 2011. Fowden 1982, 1993 are helpful for illuminating Late Antique pagan mysticism, especially Hermeticism. Rüpke 2018 is an authoritative survey, with chapters 9–12 being especially relevant to this essay.

<sup>19</sup> “Skeptical fideism” was coined in Delaney 1972. The term has found use especially in discussion of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century French skeptic and quietist movements, many which were directly inspired by Ciceronian Academic Skepticism; see Maia Neto 2015. From a growing literature, consult Carroll 2008, Strandberg 2006, Popkin 1992, 1964, Penelhum 1984.

<sup>20</sup> It should be noted again that my aim here is principally to motivate a general skeptical fideist reading of Caecilius’ speech. Each of Caecilius’ specific claims against the Christians will not be addressed in detail. Minucius’ inclusion of Caecilius’ slanderous attacks in a philosophical dialogue (as do Celsus’ in Origen’s *Contra Celsum*) open up fruitful lines of inquiry, not addressed in this essay. Why does Minucius think it important to include such scathing criticisms? What does this suggest regarding the new Christian religion’s views regarding self-examination?

<sup>21</sup> See Brittain 2006 for a now standard introduction to the Academic Skeptic school, broadly, and for more on these arguments, particularly.

nullum negotium est patefacere, omnia in rebus humanis dubia, incerta, suspensa magisque omnia verisimilia quam vera. (5.2)<sup>22</sup>

it is no trouble to make clear, that all things are doubtful in human affairs, and moreover that all things are suspended as probable rather than true

He goes on to suggest that the Christians err in proclaiming knowledge about divine things and exhorts knowledge of the self and political affairs:

et beati satis satisque prudentes iure videamur, si secundum illud vetus sapientis oraculum nosmet ipsos familiarius noverimus (5.5).

And, if what that old oracle of the wise man says is true—that we know ourselves more intimately—then it's enough to be happy and wise [to focus on knowledge of ourselves].

After Caecilius spends time considering the vicissitudes and unpredictability of the universe and the incomprehensibility of having one creator as its sole artificer, he says:

cum igitur aut fortuna certa aut incerta natura sit, quanto venerabilius ac melius antistitem veritatis maiorum excipere disciplinam, religiones traditas colere . . . (6.1)

since, therefore, either fortune is certain or nature uncertain, how much more reverent and better it is to accept the teaching of our ancestors as the priest of truth, to cultivate the religions handed down (to us) . . .

This last point is the most relevant for our purposes, and the place where Powell thinks Minucius has given Caecilius an inconsistent point to defend.

Indeed, the move from the skeptical position that no knowledge of divine affairs can be had, on the one hand, to espousal of traditional Roman religion, on the other, may seem difficult to swallow at first. In fact, Octavius himself pushes this very point at 16.1-2. But, while I think that the view Caecilius at first holds is in some sense difficult to understand, it is important to note that it is not obviously inconsistent or a ridiculous view to hold. It is, in fact, a somewhat common skeptical move in the history of philosophy. When global skepticism has shown everything to be in doubt, sometimes the safest option is thought to be to continue on in ways that are tried and true. It is a certain kind of conservatism—different, of course, from unceasing, unflinching commitment to the truth of tradition, rather, just that it has been tried—in that in the face of uncertain novelty it recommends the status quo.

It seems to me that Caecilius does not hold the obviously inconsistent view that i) the existence of the pagan gods is doubtful and ii) we should nevertheless believe that they exist. Rather, he takes the more consistent skeptical position of arguing i) certainty about any divine matters is unlikely to be had by a human mind (5.2-8) and ii) given this uncertainty, we should nevertheless still practice Roman religion because of its social

---

<sup>22</sup> There is a wide literature on *verisimile* and the *probabile* (the 'plausible') in Academic Skepticism; see Glucker 1995 for a helpful discussion of their uses in Cicero. Bett 1989 is a helpful start for navigating the Greek origins of the idea.

benefits (6.1). Indeed, notice that later Caecilius does not say that we should *deis traditis credere* (as he has already expressed doubt as to whether anything certain can be known about them), but rather *prioribus credere*, namely, that we ought to believe in, trust in, our ancestors, and *religiones traditas colere* “cultivate the handed down religions.” Here Caecilius means the rites, rituals, and practice of Roman religion, not anything like a system of belief in the pagan deities.<sup>23</sup>

But it remains to say a word on what the perceived social benefits of Roman religion are which Caecilius describes in his speech. In Caecilius’ view, and, no doubt, to many Romans, Roman religion was essential to making Rome into the empire that it was. He says:

sic eorum potestas et auctoritas totius orbis ambitus occupavit, sic imperium suum ultra solis vias et ipsius oceani limites propagavit. (6.2)

thus the power and authority of those people (i.e., the Romans) has occupied the circuit of the whole world; thus it has extended its empire beyond the paths of the sun and the limits of the ocean itself.

Caecilius goes on to say that the religious rites of the pagan religion played no small part in Roman military successes and the overall inculcation of Roman virtue. His point is no matter the metaphysical truth of Roman religion—which he thinks is just as uncertain as Christianity’s—the ritual and practice of paganism has resulted in a great many social goods. A related point in his speech, which I will not focus on here, is that Christianity seems less likely to produce such goods (e.g., 8.3, 12.5-7).

Again, together the two intellectual currents of Caecilius’ speech, i.e., skepticism and traditionalism, stand in apparent tension, but not outright contradiction. Caecilius rejects certain knowledge about gods and the cosmos, but points to the successes of the Roman empire in the human realm and argues that Roman religion had no small part to play in such successes.

One might, on the other hand, think that a skeptical point of view results in disavowal of all things traditional and a refusal to assent on any matters metaphysical. This, of course, is one possible route for the skeptic. But another, which we have been discussing here, and which has been tried by a number of philosophers in history, is rather to practice skepticism with respect to matters divine (*divina*) but accept the traditional religion, morals, and social mores in matters civil (*civilia*).

This practice—of assenting to the truth of nothing in matters divine (*divina*) while accepting the ‘truths’ civil (*civilia*) for their perceived personal, social, and political benefit—does not just have ancient precedent.<sup>24</sup> It is a recurring theme in the history of Western philosophy.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, one is reminded of Descartes’ famous *morale par provision* ‘provisional morality’ in the *Discourse on Method*, where, in the midst of a method of global doubt, Descartes accepts traditional Catholic moral teachings lest he cease to be able to live in society.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Pascal, Kierkegaard, William James, and Wittgenstein

<sup>23</sup> For an interesting discussion of Late Antique pagan ‘belief’ systems and codification as a reaction to Christian challenges to the pagan religion in the public square, see Watts 2015, ch. 5, where he describes the reactionary principle of Julian and its legislation of belief through the infamous ‘School Laws’ in 362 CE. See also Banchich 1993.

<sup>24</sup> See Brittain 2005 for Cicero’s in-depth discussion of the Academic skeptical attitude toward morality and the importance of the *probabile* (the ‘plausible’) in making provisional practical decisions. See Burnyeat 1980, Bett 2011, 2013 for the difficulties associated with living out skepticism in a practical (or ethical) way in antiquity.

<sup>25</sup> For a prominent contextualist ethical framework that shares some similarities with this trend, see Timmons 1999.

<sup>26</sup> See Shapiro 2017. For more on other early modern skeptical fideists, see Popkin 1964, 1992.

have all have been termed ‘skeptical fideists’ of one stripe or another.<sup>27</sup> Caecilius, then, is in abundant philosophical company.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this essay I have shown that the introduction to the *Octavius*, namely, in its stage-setting at Ostia and its first speech, that of Caecilius, admit of a much more charitable interpretation than as mere props for Minucius Felix’s “Christian propaganda.” I think that, for one, the setting of the dialogue is far from “bland,” but rather that it is charming, inviting, and part of a venerable literary tradition in Platonic and Ciceronian dialogue form. I call the rhetoric cultivated at the beginning of the *Octavius* one of impartial philosophical debate, a continuation of the *locus amoenus* trope in European letters, begun at least since Plato, but likely earlier. I then pointed the reader to further highly suggestive imagery in the introduction to the *Octavius* that shows philosophical care and intention in their composition befitting a Christian *protrepticus* for a pagan audience. Further, I argued that the position defended by Caecilius in the *Octavius* is not inconsistent on its face, as Powell and other interpreters have claimed, but that it is instead a form of conservative skeptical fideism (which I called ‘urbane skeptical fideism’, tying it to the cultural milieu of the metropolitan Late Antique Roman elite) which also has a long serious history in Western philosophy. Taken together these point to my much more optimistic reading of the *Octavius* as a genuine attempt at both literary imitation of the Ciceronian dialogue form and intellectually responsible Christian philosophy.

In sum, when Caecilius asks that Octavius whether they might *conserere sapientiam* (engage in wisdom/philosophical debate), not merely *in contubernaliis disputare* (debate among friends) he was serious; and, when Octavius accepts, he delivers on the challenge.<sup>28</sup>

Culver Academies  
Evan.Dutmer@culver.org

#### Works Cited

- Amesbury, R. 2017. “Fideism.” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta.  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/fideism/>
- André, J. 1966. “L’otium Dans la Vie Morale et Intellectuelle Romaine des Origines à l’Époque Augustéenne”. Paris: Presses universitaires de France.
- Banchich, T. 1993. “Julian’s School Laws: *Cod. Theo.* 13.3.5 and *Ep.* 42.” *Ancient World* 24: 5-14.
- Baur, D. 1835. “Die Christliche Gnosis Oder die Christliche Religionsphilosophie in Ihrer Geschichtlichen Entwicklung.” *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und katholische Theologie* 17-18, 128-74.

<sup>27</sup> For more, see Amesbury 2017.

<sup>28</sup> The author wishes to thank John Wynne for his many comments on, and interest in, this essay. A seminar he taught at Northwestern University (on the ‘earliest Christian Latin’) in which I was a participant served as its genesis. His careful reading and helpful suggestions resulted in a superior paper. The author would also like to thank an anonymous reviewer at the *New England Classical Journal* and Aaron Seider for their extensive and sympathetic comments. All contributed to the strengths of this essay; errors found within it are my own. The phrase appears to be unique to Minucius Felix (*Octavius* 4.4-5). See Baur 1835, 163, Seiler 1893, 54. Seiler reads *conserere sapientiam* as a Greek elocution for the more regular *conserere pugnam sapientiae*. *Modo* and *more* have been suggested as interpolations, as in: *conserere [modo/more] sapientIUM* (i.e., to engage in the way of the wise people). The *Thesaurus linguae Latinae* gives only one parallel, itself from Tertullian, another African Christian: *Adv. Mar.* 3.2 ‘hinc gradum consero, an debuerit Christum tam subito venisse’. (TLL v. 4, 416, l. 48)



- Baylis, H. 1928. *Minucius Felix and His Place Among the Early Fathers of the Latin Church*. London: Macmillan.
- BeDuhn, J. 2010. *Augustine's Manichaean Dilemma, Conversion and Apostasy, 373–388 C.E.* (vol. 1) Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press. <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812207422>
- Bett, R. 1989. "Carneades' Pithanon: A Reappraisal of its Role and Status," In *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 7: 59–94. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-015-9082-2\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-015-9082-2_7)
- . 2010. "Scepticism and Ethics." In *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism*, edited by Bett. 181–94. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521874762>
- . 2011. "How Ethical Can an Ancient Sceptic Be?" In *Pyrrhonism in Ancient, Modern, and Contemporary Philosophy*, Diego Machuca, edited by Dordrecht: Springer, 3–17. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-1991-0\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-1991-0_1)
- . 2013. "Ancient Scepticism." In *Oxford Handbook of the History of Ethics*, edited by Roger Crisp, 112–28. Oxford: Oxford University Press <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199545971.013.0006>
- Beaujeu, J. 1964. *Minucius Felix: Octavius*. Paris: Societe d'Edition 'Les Belles Lettres'. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156852567X01220>
- Bergjan, S. 2001. "Celsus the Epicurean? The Interpretation of an Argument in Origen, Contra Celsum." In *The Harvard Theological Review*, 94(2), 179–204. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816001029030>
- Brittain, C. 2006. *Cicero: On Academic Scepticism*. Indianapolis and Cambridge, MA: Hackett.
- . 2015. "Cicero's Sceptical Methods." In *Cicero's De Finibus: Philosophical Approaches*, edited by J. Annas & G. Betegh. 12–40. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139871396.002>
- Brown, P. 2000. *Augustine of Hippo*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Burnyeat, M. F. 1980. "Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?" In *Doubt and Dogmatism: Studies in Hellenistic Epistemology*, edited by M. Schofield, M. Burnyeat and J. Barnes, Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511974052.011>
- Cameron, A. 2014. *Dialoguing in Late Antiquity*. Washington D.C.: Center for Hellenic Studies.
- Carroll, T. 2008. "The Traditions of Fideism." *Religious Studies*, 44: 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412507009250>
- Clark, G. 2008. "Can we talk? Augustine and the Possibility of Dialogue." In Goldhill. 117–34. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511575464.007>
- Cooper, K. & Dal Santo, M. 2008. "Boethius, Gregory the Great and the Christian 'Afterlife' of Classical Dialogue." In Goldhill. 173–89. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511575464.010>
- Cousins, P. 1997. "Great Lives in Troubled Times: The Date and Setting of the *Octavius* by Minucius Felix." *Vox Evangelica* 27:45–56.
- Delany, S. 1972. *Chaucer's House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism*, Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1994. <https://doi.org/10.1086/390574>
- Foley, M. 2019. *St. Augustine's Cassiciacum Dialogues: Against the Academics and On the Happy Life*. Vols. 1–2. New Haven: Yale University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvhrxxt0>
- . "Cicero, Augustine, and the Philosophical Roots of the Cassiciacum Dialogues." *REAug* 45 (1999): 51–77. <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.REA.5.104795>
- Fowden, G. 1982. "The Pagan Holy Man in Late Antique Society." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 102: 33–59. <https://doi.org/10.2307/631125>

- . 1993. *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Glucker, J. 1995. “*Probabile, Veri Simile*, and Related Terms.” In *Cicero the Philosopher*, edited by J.G.F. Powell.
- Goldhill, S. ed. 2008. *The End of Dialogue in Antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511575464>
- Grig, L. 2020. “Life and Death in Late Antiquity: Religious Rituals and Popular Culture.” In *A Companion to Religion in Late Antiquity*, edited by J. Lössl and N.J. Baker-Brian. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118968130.ch21>
- Hadot, P. 1995. *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Hasenhütl, F. 2008. *Die Heidenrede im “Octavius” des Minucius Felix als Brennpunkt Antichristlicher Apologetik*. Wien: Lit Verlag.
- Humphries, M. 2018. “Christianity and Paganism in the Roman Empire, 250–450 CE.” In *A Companion to Religion in Late Antiquity*, edited by J. Lössl and N.J. Baker-Brian. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118968130.ch3>
- Kenyon, E. 2018. *Augustine and the Dialogue*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108525558>
- Krausmüller, D. 2018. “The ‘Greek East’: Christianization and the Provincial Elites.” In *A Companion to Religion in Late Antiquity*, edited by J. Lössl and N.J. Baker-Brian. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118968130.ch6>
- Kuper, C. N. 2017. “The Latin Controversial Dialogues of Late Antiquity.” PhD diss., Bryn Mawr College.
- Lavan, L., & Mulryan, M. (Eds.). 2011. *The Archaeology of Late Antique ‘Paganism’*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004192379.i-643>
- Lerer, S. 1985. *Boethius and Dialogue: Literary Method in The Consolation of Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400857654>
- Maia Neto, J. 2015. *Academic Skepticism in Seventeenth-Century French Philosophy: The Charronian Legacy 1601–1662*. International Archives of the History of Ideas, 215. Dordrecht: Springer.
- McPherran, M. 1989. “Ataraxia and Eudaimonia in Ancient Pyrrhonism: Is the Sceptic Really Happy?” In *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, edited by J. J. Cleary and D. C. Shartin. 135–71. <https://doi.org/10.1163/2213441789X00117>
- Miles, R. 2008. “‘Let’s (Not) Talk About It’: Augustine and the Control of Epistolary Dialogue.” In Goldhill. 135–48. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511575464.008>
- Moreschini, C. 2014. *A Christian in Toga: Boethius: Interpreter of Antiquity and Christian Theologian*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. <https://doi.org/10.13109/9783666540271>
- O’Loughlin, T. 2018. ‘The Latin West in the Period of Transition from the Late Roman Empire to Early Medieval Europe.’ In *A Companion to Religion in Late Antiquity*, edited by J. Lössl and N.J. Baker-Brian. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118968130.ch4>
- Penelhum, T. 1984. *God and Skepticism: A Study in Skepticism and Fideism*. Philosophical Studies Series in Philosophy, vol. 8. Dordrecht/Boston/Lancaster: D. Reidel.
- Popkin, R. 1964. *The History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Descartes*, rev. ed. New York: The Humanities Press.
- . 1992. “Fideism, Quietism, and Unbelief: Skepticism For and Against Religion in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries.” In *Faith, Reason, and Skepticism*, edited by Marcus Hester. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

- Powell, J. 2007. "Unfair to Caecilius? Ciceronian Dialogue Techniques in Minucius Felix." In *Severan Culture*, edited by Simon Swain, Stephen Harrison, and Jas Elsner. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Quispel, G. 1949. "A Jewish Source of Minucius Felix." *Vigiliae Christianae* 3: 113–22. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157007249X00096>
- Rebillard, E. 2012. *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200–450 CE*. Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7591/cornell/9780801451423.001.0001>
- Rigolio, A. 2019. *Christians in Conversation: A Guide to Late Antique Dialogues in Greek and Syriac*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190915452.001.0001>
- Röpke, J. 2018. *Pantheon: A New History of Roman Religion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Sadlek, G. 2004. *Idleness Working: the Discourse of Love's Labor from Ovid through Chaucer and Gower*. New York: CUA Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2853q6>
- Schofield, M. 2008. "Ciceronian Dialogue." In Goldhill, 63–84. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511575464.005>
- Schubert, C. 2014. *Minucius Felix "Octavius"*. Freiburg: Verlag Herder. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zac-2016-0028>
- Seiler, B. 1893. *De sermone Minuciano*. Augustae Vindelicorum.
- Shanzer, D. 2007. "Augustine's Disciplines: *Silent diutius Musae Varronis?*" In *Augustine and the Disciplines: From Cassiciacum to Confessions*, edited by Karla Pollmann and Mark Vessey. 69–112. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199230044.003.0004>
- Shapiro, L. 2017. Descartes's Provisional Morality. In *The Cambridge History of Moral Philosophy*, edited by S. Golob & J. Timmermann. 221–232. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781139519267.018>
- Silk, E. 1939. "Boethius' *Consolatio Philosophiae* as a Sequel to Augustine's Dialogues And *Soliloquia*." *Harvard Theological Review* vol. 32: 19–39. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S001781600002157X>
- Stock, B. 2010. *Augustine's Inner Dialogue: The Philosophical Soliloquy in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511760877>
- . 2011. "Self, Soliloquy, and Spiritual Exercises in Augustine and Some Later Authors," *The Journal of Religion* vol. 91, no. 1, The Augustinian Moment: 5–23. <https://doi.org/10.1086/656604>
- Strandberg, H. 2006. *The Possibility of Discussion: Relativism, Truth and Criticism of Religious Beliefs*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Stroup, S. 2010. *Catullus, Cicero, and a Society of Patrons: the Generation of the Text*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511730177>
- Teixeira, L. 2007. "Rhetoric for Philosophers: An Examination of the Place of Rhetoric in Philosophy." PhD diss.. London School of Economics.
- Timmons, M. 1999. *Morality Without Foundations: A Defense of Ethical Contextualism*. New York: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3071081>
- van Oort, J. 2011. "Augustine's Manichaean Dilemma in Context." *Vigiliae Christianae* 65: 543–67. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157007211X591830>
- Varner, W. 2004. *Ancient Jewish-Christian Dialogues: Athanasius and Zacchaeus, Simon and Theophilus, Timothy and Aquila*. Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellon Press.
- Von Albrecht, M. 1987. "Minucius Felix as a Christian Humanist." *Illinois Classical Studies* 12.1: 157–68.

- Wilhite, D. 2017. *Ancient African Christianity*. Abingdon: Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203075678>
- Wynne, J. 2015. "Learned and Wise: Cotta the Sceptic in Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*." *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 47: 245-74.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198722717.003.0007>
- . 2019. *Cicero on the Philosophy of Religion: On the Nature of the Gods and On Divination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781107707429>