

THE WISE MAN AND THE LIMITS OF VIRTUE IN *DE BEATA VITA*: STOIC SELF-SUFFICIENCY OR AUGUSTINIAN IRONY?

Augustine's early dialogue *De beata vita* takes as its subject matter one of the commonplaces of ancient philosophical inquiry: "what is happiness and how does one attain it?" To begin one's inquiry into Augustine's relationship with ancient philosophy on the goal of philosophy by taking *De beata vita* as a starting point not only strikes the right note but seems fitting. James Wetzel's recent work, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue*, attempts a reconstruction of Augustine's philosophical development using *De beata vita* as the starting point.¹ Wetzel ventures a description of Augustine's interaction with ancient philosophy by taking the self-sufficiency of virtue as the center of Augustine's dialogue with late antique philosophy. *De beata vita* functions in Wetzel's argument as the work which shows Augustine's commitment to an essential Stoic approach to the attainment of happiness. And from there Wetzel goes on to argue how this commitment to a Stoic conception of virtue as the way to beatitude causes difficulties for Augustine until he finally abandons it when he becomes fully committed to a Pauline notion of grace and adopts a posture which sets severe limits on virtue.

Wetzel maintains that in the early writings Augustine "embraced the Stoic convergence of virtue, autonomy, and happiness in wisdom. It set for him philosophy's ideal, and he would reckon the success of the individual philosophies against it."² Wetzel sees Augustine's "Stoic attempt to describe the convergence between virtue and happiness" as important because "without it his metaphysical concerns with autonomy stand apart from his normative interests in human flourishing, and it then becomes hard to understand why he would have viewed failures of virtue as failures, rather than expressions , of autonomy."³ This way of

¹ James Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 55-61.

² *Ibid.*, 11.

³ *Ibid.*, 15.

formulating the Augustinian problematic is curious, for it describes Augustine in a way that seems somewhat foreign to his own conceptions.

Wetzel insists on Augustine's Stoic beginnings at Cassiciacum against a much older tradition in the works of Holte, Du Roy, Mandouze, and TeSelle, among others, who construe Augustine's Cassiciacum dialogues as an eclectic blend of the fruits of Augustine's Ciceronian and Neoplatonic apprenticeship in philosophy.⁴ The entire weight of Wetzel's argument rests on *De beata vita* 4.25, where Augustine presents a portrait of the proverbial wise man. Wetzel's notion that Augustine's portrait in *De beata vita* 4.25 is an unabashed endorsement of the Stoic conception of the sage also depends on a reference to an aphorism from Terence which Augustine seems to use approvingly: "since what you wish for is impossible, better wish for what is possible." For Wetzel, Augustine's portrait fits so well the image of the Stoic sage that Augustine remains essentially Stoic in his approach to "the happy life."

Two points should be obvious immediately. First, the wise man functions as a trope in the ancient philosophical discourse on virtue, happiness, and human self-sufficiency. And in much of the Hellenistic philosophical tradition the wise man is variously disfigured, caricatured, and lampooned depending on which portrait of the wise man one prefers and which image is in for criticism.⁵ So Augustine's use of the trope should be read in part as his contribution to this tradition. In which case our interpretation of him should consider what tack he takes in relation to the wise man. Second, Augustine's Terentian impulse should probably not be read at face value, since he uses words from the comic poet which seem to celebrate a kind of mediocrity, the last thing one would associate with the pursuit of wisdom and virtue. So taken in tandem, the use of the philosophical trope of the wise man and the appropriation of a comic poet

⁴ Ragnar Holte, *Béatitude et sagesse: Saint Augustin et le problème de la fin de l'homme dans la philosophie ancienne* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1962) sets Augustine in the context of early Christian eclecticism towards ancient philosophy; Olivier du Roy, *L'intelligence de la foi en la Trinité selon saint Augustin: Genèse de sa théologie trinitaire jusqu'en 391* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1966), 149ff., sees an unusual synthesis of Neoplatonism and Cicero in *De Beata Vita*; A. Mandouze, *Saint Augustin. L'aventure de la raison et de la grâce* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1968), also sees the early Augustine in an eclectic vein.

⁵ Notice Cicero's comments in *Tusculan Disputations* 2.22 that such a man in whom absolute wisdom exists has never been seen even though the philosophers attempt to provide a description of him.

given to all manner of verbal puns and jokes,⁶ should alert us to the possibility that Augustine might be up to the something comic: perhaps a parody of the wise man.

What I propose to do here is first, to provide an assessment of Wetzel's interpretation of *De beata vita*. Then, I will proceed to offer an analysis of Augustine's description of the wise man in *De beata vita* and his use of Terence which attempts to make sense of the seeming incongruity of the description of the wise man in *De beata vita* 4.25 and the portrait of Augustine's mother Monica, who is presented as Wisdom's mouthpiece in the dialogue. My analysis should not be construed as a review of Wetzel's entire project, though some of what I suggest will have implications for the philosophical itinerary the Wetzel proposes for Augustine. My main concern is to assess Wetzel's claim that *De beata vita* represents Augustine's early commitment to a Stoic conceptualization of the constitutive elements of the happiness (beatitude) and how it is attained. TeSelle's much earlier interpretation of Augustine's philosophical reflections at Cassiciacum⁷ will serve as a point of departure for my own comments, since it is far more sensitive to the rhetorical aspects of the dialogue than what Wetzel offers. TeSelle's recognition of the disparity between the description of the wise man (*De beata vita* 4.25) and the concluding thoughts of the dialogue (*De beata vita* 4.34-35) suggests at least two things. Either Augustine was unclear about what he intended to argue as the way to beatitude and therefore presented two contradictory ways toward that end, or Augustine probably intended his portrait of the wise man to be read in a less than straightforward manner.

It will be important to my argument to follow Augustine's use of Terence not only in *De beata vita* but also in *De civitate Dei* 14.25 and in *De trinitate* 13. The last two are admittedly much later than *De beata vita*, but they will help to illuminate just what Augustine thought he was doing with Terence in *De beata vita*. In *De beata vita* alone Augustine adopts Terence on three occasions: twice in 4.25 and once in 4.32. In all of these uses Augustine seems to be adapting Terence for his own purposes, and may give some indication of Augustine's tendency toward the ironic when dealing with the comic poet. In both *De civitate Dei* 14.25 and *De trinitate* 13, however, he is not nearly as ironic and is explicit on just how he

⁶ See, for example, George E. Duckworth, *The Nature of Roman Comedy: A Study in Popular Entertainment* (Norman, OK.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994 [2nd ed.]), 328-360.

⁷ Eugene TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 61-67.

means to be understood when he appropriates Terence in speaking of the wise man's moderated desire in wishing for only what he can attain.

Now to the wise man, Terence, and Wetzel's interpretation of Augustine. Immediately upon citing Terence's "since what you wish for is impossible, better wish for what is possible" in *De beata vita* 4.25 Augustine asks: "How will he be unhappy to whom nothing happens against his will, since he cannot want anything which he sees he cannot get?" And then answers: "For he has his will directed toward very definite things so that, whatever he does, he does only according to some precept of virtue or divine law of wisdom, and in no way can these be taken from him."⁸ Certainly, someone with a will directed towards definite things and under the guidance of "virtue or the divine law of wisdom" is someone whose acquisitions may be said to be beyond vulnerability. Such a description seems to fit the Stoic sage. But what exactly does Augustine mean by "virtue or the divine law of wisdom," when Augustine also maintains unequivocally by the end of *De beata vita* that the wisdom which gives beatitude is the Son of God, who is truly God, and this, on divine authority (*De beata vita* 4.34)?

But what should be called wisdom except the wisdom of God? Moreover, we have received on divine authority that the Son of God is none other than the wisdom of God, and the Son of God is truly God. Therefore, whoever possesses God is happy, which we all agreed upon at the outset of this symposium.⁹

As Augustine indicates here, the conclusion of the dialogue was never in doubt right from the beginning. Augustine's description of wisdom notwithstanding, Wetzel contends that Augustine tries to "describe beatitude in such a way that it remains fully under human control and fully complete." Wetzel claims that such a posture creates difficulties for Augustine's conception: "First, there is the dilemma posed by our involvement with external goods."¹⁰ And second, "there is the threat posed by vulnerability of virtue itself."¹¹ But does Augustine actually set out to describe beatitude in such a way that it remains fully under human control and fully complete in *De beata vita* as Wetzel claims? Why should

⁸ *De beata vita* 4.25 (CCSL 29, 79). Translated by Mary T. Clark. *Augustine of Hippo: Selected Writings*. Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 186. I have adopted Mary Clark's translation throughout. Henceforth CWS.

⁹ *De beata vita* 4.34 (CCSL 29, 84). CWS, 192.

¹⁰ Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue*, 56.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

Augustine refer to the Son of the Trinity as the wisdom which grants beatitude if beatitude is fully under human control?

Wetzel manages to make his argument while ignoring most of the dialogue, and he pays no attention to the progression of the conversation as it unfolds towards the finale. Almost all that Wetzel has to say depends on that very small section of the dialogue where Augustine describes the wise man. But equally surprising is that Wetzel ignores almost everything else that Augustine wrote at Cassiciacum, even though both *Contra Academicos* and *De ordine* contain reflections on the happy life. Wetzel, however, assimilates *De beata vita* to Augustine's concerns in *De libero arbitrio* Book 1, since Wetzel is convinced that Augustine appropriation of Stoic themes in *De libero arbitrio* Book 1 reflects old commitments he had when he wrote *De beata vita*. No doubt, *De libero arbitrio* 1 presents its own peculiar problems about the acquisition of beatitude and what role the will plays in it. But it is hardly credible to ignore everything else Augustine does in the rest of *De beata vita* in order to establish a line of development which would be untenable if all the evidence were brought into view. Even if Wetzel is correct that in *De libero arbitrio* 1 Augustine argues for the invulnerability of virtue as the way to happiness, that is not the argument of *De beata vita*.

Moreover, before Augustine wrote *De libero arbitrio* 1 (388) he had already worked on *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae*, his first work after his baptism in 387. *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* continued Augustine's reflections on the "happy life" along lines laid out in *De beata vita*. Wetzel, nevertheless, ignores the link between *De beata vita* and *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* while insisting on the similarities between *De beata vita* and *De libero arbitrio* Book 1, similarities which seem questionable when he insists that both "elaborate an ideal of beatitude which would inscribe happiness within virtue and thereby use self-determination to limit the vulnerability of misery."¹² Any credible argument about the nature of Augustine's early thought about beatitude and how it is acquired would have to set *De libero arbitrio* Book 1 side by side with *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* with *De beata vita* as the starting point, if in fact *De libero arbitrio* is necessary to the argument.

Wetzel justifies his approach, however, in the context of disputing what he describes as Marcia Colish's premature attempt to "divorce Augustine from Stoic ethics."¹³ As he puts it: "The novelty of *De*

¹² Ibid., 122.

¹³ Ibid., 72.

moribus ecclesiae, a work nearly contemporaneous with book 1 of *De libero arbitrio*, can easily be overdramatized." Wetzel continues:

Although it is certainly important that Augustine has transformed the virtues in the language of love of God, he has yet to suggest that the ground of the virtues is ultimately God's love for us. The reversal of perspective that introduces divine agency into the very heart of human willing is still years away. Colish surely overstates her case when she claims that the source of the virtues in *De moribus* serves as 'a well-spring that combines the divine initiative with the human response.' The mere invocation of love does not compromise Stoic autarky with divine initiative.¹⁴

The accuracy of Wetzel's reading of Colish is not my concern here. What matters for my purposes is how Wetzel manages to critique Colish's use of *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae*, while remaining indifferent to the prospect that the supposedly overdramatized novelty might in fact undermine Wetzel's claim of Augustine's unabashedly Stoic beginnings, and with it the kind of narrative of Augustine's philosophical development that he proposes. What is more, Wetzel's assertion that "the mere invocation of love does not compromise Stoic autarky with divine initiative" simply ignores the fact that the invocation of love is already present in Augustine's Cassiciacum dialogues and is mentioned by Augustine in *De beata vita*. When Monica recalls the words of Ambrose of Milan at the end of the dialogue saying "help O trinity those who pray," she ends with the treble invocation of faith, hope and love: "This is unmistakably the happy life, a life which is perfect, toward which it must be presumed that, hastening, we can be led by a well-founded faith, joyful hope, and ardent love" (*De beata vita* 4.35).¹⁵ So the language of love is not absent in *De beata vita*, and it is encapsulated in so much that Augustine and his interlocutors have to say about possessing God (*habere deum*). *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae*, then, develops more systematically what is already present in the Cassiciacum dialogues. While ignoring the entire argument in *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* on beatitude, Wetzel, however, insists that whatever precision Augustine gives to the four cardinal virtues as aspect of the love of God is merely rhetorical since his view of the virtues in *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* is substantially that same one he articulates in *De libero arbitrio*. But why this need to discount *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae*? For Wetzel, even though the language of love "evokes the importance of the affections to beatitude and suggests the personal quality of human interest in God,"

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ CWS, 193.

Augustine's "actual description of the consummation of virtuous love is coolly intellectual."¹⁶ And "it is hard to imagine that love of God in *De moribus* sets the fuse for the explosion of affections in the *Confessiones*." As he puts it: "Several years after his conversion, Augustine continues to worship the God of Abraham at that altar of the philosophers."¹⁷ The rhetorical flourish actually conceals another problem which Wetzel appears to overlook, that is, the difference between what Augustine himself experiences and how he theorizes about them at the time of the experiences in question and later on. It is simply not tenable to ignore what Augustine himself writes about his own experiences soon after his conversion in *Soliloquia* and *De ordine*, for example, and still maintain that in one small section of *De beata vita* one can distill Augustine's entire attitude towards ancient philosophy. One has to wonder whether Wetzel has taken Augustine's arguments in both *De beata vita* and *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* seriously enough to warrant the kind of claim he makes of Augustine's Stoic commitments.

There is certainly an element in Wetzel's criticism which depends on using a later standpoint to argue for what is supposedly missing in the early Augustine. Wetzel seems to assume that if Augustine does not use the explicit language of divine initiative in the way that he eventually does in the mid-390's when he takes his most decisive turn in speaking of the initiative of grace, then he could not possibly see love as the ground of the virtues, even after Augustine has defined the four cardinal virtues as aspects of the love of God. In spite of the apparent coherence he claims for his approach to the early Augustine, Wetzel's methodological defenses begin to weaken somewhat in a later point in his discussion. He offers a caveat that concedes a great deal. Wetzel writes:

The real limitation of my method, as far as I am concerned, is that my perspective must follow Augustine's transformation of philosophy as an internal development of his theology. This puts me in the position of having to use his early works, *De beata vita* and *De libero arbitrio* I, as my source of his Stoic ideal of virtue's invulnerability, even though he has already begun in these works to modify his philosophical inheritance to reflect his own interests.¹⁸

But if Wetzel's approach compels him to sort out Augustine's philosophical indebtedness, shouldn't Augustine's modifications be "the story" instead of the other way around? And should not all the evidence

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 73.

¹⁸ Ibid., 122.

from the Cassiciacum dialogues and *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* be considered?

Wetzel continues in a way that raises questions about his criticism of Colish, for example: he writes that "Because an internal perspective can assess external influences only after they have been appropriated, it automatically loses some of the ways in which Augustine leaves his impress on what he inherits. But it would be a tall order for any perspective to supply the whole story."¹⁹ Oddly enough, it is Colish's attempt to supply the whole story which earns her some of Wetzel's criticisms. And simply to claim that one cannot tell the whole story is no excuse for the wholesale omissions in Wetzel's account of Augustine's early philosophical tendencies.

Turn to the details of Wetzel's reading of *De beata vita* and the omissions turn into contrivance, as Wetzel sets forth what he takes to be main theme in *De beata vita*. He writes that "it concerns the completeness of beatitude, or the issue of what we need to have beatitude in its fullest measure."²⁰ This may seem an accurate description of the overall objective of the dialogue. But it is not as innocuous as it appears. To ask what one needs to have beatitude, which is Augustine's preoccupation, is not quite the same thing as asking how one can possess beatitude in its fullest measure. If it were simply an infelicity in Wetzel's statement of Augustine's objective, it wouldn't matter. But Wetzel's argument, in fact, depends on reading Augustine's objective as one concerning "the completeness of beatitude." To speak of having beatitude in its fullest measure is to suppose that one could have beatitude in some measure without having it completely, a point Augustine expressly denies throughout the dialogue. There is no middle ground: either one has beatitude or one does not (*De beata vita* 4.24).

Wetzel rightly observes that for Augustine only the one who possesses God enjoys beatitude, adding that "to possess God is to have adopted the standard of eternal wisdom in our conduct."²¹ On the face of it this assertion also does not seem at all problematic, since Augustine defines eternal wisdom as the Son of God. Surprisingly, Wetzel then goes on to write that "In *De beata vita*, however, the content of this eternal wisdom does not extend much beyond the pithy wisdom of Terence, whom Augustine cites approvingly for guidance in the use of temporal things:

¹⁹ Ibid., 122.

²⁰ Ibid., 57.

²¹ Ibid.

'since what you want cannot be done, want what you can.'"²² And in a footnote several pages later Wetzel mentions that "the object of beatitude in *De beata vita* is not, strictly speaking, God, but the appropriation of the wisdom of God." "This appropriation," he claims, "amounts to an exercise of virtuous self-definition, or conforming ourselves to the measure of all things, the Logos."²³ Here, then, the object of beatitude is no longer God but the wisdom of God which, according to Wetzel, is something quite distinct. Wetzel's note is not only incomprehensible in light of so much that Augustine maintains throughout the dialogue, it also contradicts Wetzel's own assessment of Augustine's view that to have beatitude is to possess God.²⁴

Wetzel never says exactly what Augustine means by wisdom; nor does he make any reference to Monica, Augustine's mother, who is presented by Augustine as the voice of Wisdom. Can Monica's piety and her words of wisdom be reconciled with the conception of the Stoic sage? Possibly, but not without the devaluation of the philosophers, since in so many of the comparisons Augustine makes throughout *De beata vita* between Monica and Cicero, for example, it is Monica who comes out the better. And if Monica's piety can be compared with the wisdom of the philosopher only to the detriment of the latter, why the alleged equation of the Stoic sage and the Christian saint that Wetzel fastens to Augustine?²⁵ If, on the other hand, Augustine's portrait of his mother as the source of wisdom does not matter to our evaluation of the dialogue then what exactly does one make of the way Augustine concludes the *convivium*?

Augustine is explicit in saying that he wanted that disparate group of people because the "happy life" (*beatus*) is not the concern of philosophers only, that even his uneducated relatives, Lastidianus and Rusticus, could contribute to the discussion. Although the two remain silent throughout the dialogue and are to a large extent inconsequential to the arguments proffered, that cannot be said for Augustine's representation of Monica, or even of his son Adeodatus. Regardless of whatever else Augustine says about the wise man in *De beata vita* 4.25, the content of divine wisdom in *De beata vita* most certainly extends beyond Terence's rule for daily living, in spite of what Wetzel supposes. If, as Terence has it, moderation allows one to live a life without "perturbations," moderation

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 62 n31.

²⁴ Ibid., 57.

²⁵ Ibid., 59.

also means a life of mediocrity.²⁶ To miss this element in the Terentian maxim is to miss the comedy entirely.

I turn now to the details of Augustine's description of the wise man in *De beata vita* 4.25 to consider what it yields. According to Augustine, there is no middle position between happiness and unhappiness, just as there is no middle ground between life and death (*De beata vita* 4.24). "Therefore, no one doubts that everyone in need is unhappy, nor are we alarmed that even wise men need certain things for their bodies." For the "soul in which the happy life is placed" has no need for such things as the body requires. The soul can live without the needs of the body: The soul that has the happy life is itself "complete and no soul, being complete, needs anything; and while it takes whatever seems necessary for the body if it is there, if it not there, the lack of such things will not crush it." Augustine appears to be setting a very high standard for the life of beatitude. He proceeds to give his sketch of the wise man.

Every wise man is strong, and the strong man entertains no fear. For every wise man fears neither bodily death nor sufferings. For the banishment, prevention, or delay of such pains he would need all those things of which he is capable of being in want. Yet he does not fail to use them well if they are there. For very true is that aphorism, 'It is foolish to suffer what you can avoid.' Therefore, he will avoid death and pain as far as it is possible and fitting that, if he does not avoid them, he will not be unhappy when they occur but because he refused to avoid them when it was possible, behavior which is a clear sign of folly. And so whoever does not avoid these things will be unhappy not from enduring them but from folly.²⁷

✓ Taken at face value Augustine's words here present the wise man as a man well suited to all conditions of life: He has absolutely no fear, neither good fortune nor misadventure can upset his hold on happiness, because his soul can do without the needs of the body; although he does not shun the use of other goods if they are available to him. And if he cannot avoid suffering or other kinds of misfortune he is not made unhappy, as long as his behavior has been "careful and proper." In the

²⁶ Cf. Christopher Kirwan, *Augustine* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 19-20, where he observes that it is probably "an innovation" on Augustine's part to take an entirely different route towards the fulfilment of desire from what Aristotle, the Stoics and the sceptical traditions offered, namely trimming one's desires in order to overcome obstacles in the way.

²⁷ *De beata vita* 4.25 (CCSL 29, 78-79). CWS, 184-185.

midst of all this stands Augustine's adaptation of an aphorism from Terence (*Eunuchus* 761): "It is foolish to suffer what you can avoid."²⁸

Augustine invokes Terence (*Andria* 305-306) again when he comes to the end of his description, saying that "indeed, this aphorism of the comic poet is no less true: 'Since what you wish for is impossible, better wish for what is possible,'" asking rhetorically, "how will he be unhappy to whom nothing happens against his will, since he cannot want anything which he sees he cannot get?" Augustine adds that such a person has his "will directed toward very definite things so that, whatever he does, he does only according to some precept of virtue or divine law of wisdom" which cannot be taken away from him (*De beata vita* 4.25). The conclusion is categorical: the wise man wills only that which is virtuous and conforms to wisdom and modulates his desires to suit the conditions in which he finds himself. The wise man lives a life which conforms perfectly to wisdom, because whatever he does is guided by some precept of virtue or the divine law of wisdom. This makes almost incongruous the juxtaposition of the wise man's moderated desire and his possession of wisdom.

✓ How then are we to understand Augustine's portrait of the wise man in *De beata vita* 4.25, and in particular his use of Terence? Is this Augustine's endorsement of the Stoic notion of the self-sufficiency of virtue and the equanimity of the Stoic sage? Is it simply Augustine's attempt to present his own version of this philosophical trope? Or is it something else? How does Augustine want his use of the aphorism from Terence to be read, an aphorism from a comic poet which appears to be celebrating virtue through lowered expectations? Is Augustine's posture comic? There are certainly some comic moments in the dialogue. Perhaps the most telling is when Monica describes the Academic skeptics as epileptics, after she receives a summary of their views from Augustine. Augustine describes Monica's coup de grace, and writes that they concluded their conversion for that first day, departing in a hail of laughter (*De beata vita* 2.16).

On Augustine's own premises life presents the wise man with moments of suffering, bodily danger, and misfortune. Since one cannot live without such hardships intruding in one's life, wisdom requires that the wise man do all that he can to avoid them, and then if his efforts should prove inconsequential, he must endure his suffering. The wise man's fortunes are no different from anyone else's. His happiness is not

²⁸ Ruth Allison Brown, *S. Aureli Augustini: De beata vita* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1944), 164.

disturbed, however, because his misfortune does not affect his soul, which acts according to virtue and the law of divine wisdom. As TeSelle summarizes Augustine: the wise man "will always refrain from desiring what is unattainable, and he will commit himself to what can be desired with perfect certitude, a course of life always in accord with virtue."²⁹ But there may be an inherent problem with this image and its claim that the wise man lives in accordance with virtue.

✓ TeSelle too believes that Augustine was committed to the Stoic conception of the wise man as the embodiment of beatitude at the time of his conversion.³⁰ However, TeSelle also recognizes something of a contradiction between the image of the wise man here in *De beata vita* and how the dialogue concludes. How TeSelle deals with this dissonance suggests that perhaps the more obvious reading of *De beata vita* 4.25 may not necessarily be the most helpful in understanding Augustine's strategy in the dialogue. For TeSelle maintains that "there is little preparation for the conclusion, in which Augustine, who has been speaking in the customary fashion of wisdom as a virtue, suddenly reverses his perspective" and suddenly speaks of the wise man as someone who contemplates wisdom and is embraced by God. According to TeSelle, the conclusion "is arrived at through what seems a sudden leap in the argument." TeSelle acknowledges that hints of it have been present, it is true, from the very start, especially in the comments of Monica, who represents a Christian piety able to outrun the doctrines of the philosophers. It is Monica who even at the beginning sees that the food of the soul consists in knowledge (II,8); who, without philosophical training, anticipates Cicero's insight that happiness is not merely the possession of what one desires (II, 10); and who preempts a point that Augustine has been saving as his final word in the discussion of unhappiness (IV, 27).³¹

"But these," TeSelle, insists, "are only hints strewn along the way, and by themselves they are not sufficient basis for the conclusion. That conclusion, he maintains, "grows rather out of the main philosophical analysis in the dialogue, the one which leads the notions of virtue and vice in the direction of the Platonist contrast between Plenty and Poverty."³² But is it necessary to set Monica's role in the dialogue apart from all of

²⁹ TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian*, 63.

³⁰ Ibid., 62.

³¹ Ibid., 65.

³² Ibid., 65-66.

this, when in fact Augustine presents her as the voice of Wisdom?³³ And if in fact Augustine concludes in a way wholly at variance with the notion that virtue is happiness, should we not rethink the assumption that his portrait of the wise man in *De beata vita* 4.25 is meant to be an endorsement of a Stoic conception of beatitude and how it is attained?

The Terentian maxim speaks about the moderation of desire. On the other hand, Augustine's reference to acting according to virtue and the divine law of wisdom imply quite the opposite. That is, the wise man is wholly taken with the love of virtue and wisdom that he is able to live in a manner indifferent to the life of the body, and all this on his own efforts. There is no allusion here that the wise man receives divine aid towards his achievements. The self-sufficiency of the wise man is at odds with Monica's "assist O Trinity, those who pray" with which the conversation ends.

Is it not more than conceivable that Augustine never meant his portrait of the wise man in *De beata vita* 4.25 to be taken as his conception of the "wise man" as such. The wise man in *De beata vita* 4.25 is all the things that Monica is not. But there is something else. Augustine provides immediately following his description of the wise man another portrait of yet another man who appears to be the quintessence of happiness. The caricature is more evident in the second case, and might help to illuminate the possibly ironic and comic aspects of Augustine's portrait of the wise man.

Augustine sets up the discussion by making the presentation all the more ideal by throwing in the proviso that the wealthy man Sergius Orata, who Cicero presents in one of his works, had no desire for anything, and that whatever he wanted he had achieved (*De beata vita* 4.26): he has achieved all his desires and seems to be without any wants. Licentius, one of Augustine's students, responds that Orata could still be afraid of losing his possessions, and thus the fear itself would be an example of a certain lack in him. So assuming a half-decent intelligence he should be aware of the prospect of loss, in which case he would be in fear and therefore a most unlikely candidate for happiness.

Much of the conversation here simply goes over territory that is covered in a previous discussion where Monica makes the case in a different context that having all that one wants does not constitute

³³ Jean Doignon, "'Vie heureuse' et perfection. Variantes philosophiques dans l'unisson d'Augustin et de Monique à la fin de *De beata vita*," *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 41 (1995): 309-314, appears to split the difference on the conclusion of *De beata vita*: Augustine expressing himself in a platonic form while Monica come across in the words of the Stoics.

happiness. Once again it is Monica who reminds the participants that the description of Orata as someone without need is misleading, and not only because he might have a fear of loss. Rather, no greater want exists than the lack of wisdom itself, since beatitude is impossible without it. "Are we going to consider him in want, if he be without silver and money, and not in want if he should lack wisdom?" Monica asks (*De beata vita* 4.27). And so Augustine writes that he was filled with joy and delight because it was she who had uttered that truth which, as gleaned from the books of the philosophers, I had intended to bring forward as an imposing final argument. (*De beata vita* 4.27)

Monica knows by a different source what Augustine has gleaned from books. Unless Augustine is misleading his readership there is an admission here that his mother had anticipated his final argument: "Do you see now that a great difference exists between many and varied doctrines and a soul that is devoted to God? For from what other source flow these words that we admire?" The end of the sequence also shows something of Augustine's rhetorical strategy. On more than one occasion he presents an argument only to expose its weakness later on. Orata is offered as an example, though the ensuing discussion has the goal of showing the inadequacy of the model. The portrait of the wise man may be subject to a similar devaluation.

There is an aspect of Augustine's portrait of the wise man which may already indicate something of the transition from that image to the description of Sergius Orata, "the wealthy man without need." It is contained in the condition Augustine mentions at the end of his description of the wise man in *De beata vita* 4.25. When Augustine claims that the wise man lives according to "some precept of virtue or divine law of wisdom" he adds that these cannot be taken away from the wise man. The question is whether Augustine means this in fact or whether there are elements of a parody here? Does someone who lives by modulating his needs and expectations so as not to be disappointed offer the best model of virtue? Can such a person be said to possess happiness in such a way that it is beyond vulnerability? Put another way, what kind of virtue is it, when its chief characteristic is that it does not suffer disappointment? And is Augustine presenting the self-sufficiency of virtue when he insists at the end that the good life belongs to those who know not only the one through whom (and I suspect the passive may not be incidental) they are led into the truth but the bond that ties them to that truth (*De beata vita* 4.35).

Notice too that Augustine speaks of wisdom as plenitude (*plenitudo*) in *De beata vita* 4.31-32. So even though he is prepared to accept Cicero's definition that moderation and restraint are the greatest

virtues (*De beata vita* 4.31) he is inclined to argue that wisdom is of such a nature that it does not admit of the normal way in which moderation is presented as the mother of the virtues. He maintains that Cicero is able to make his case for wisdom as a kind of moderation by suggesting that *modestia* comes from *modus* and *temperantia* from *temperies*, so "where there is measure and proper blend, there is nothing too much or too little."³⁴ In which case, what is superabundant still lacks something because it overflows and is not properly measured. So Augustine proposes to speak of wisdom as measure, and then he invokes Terence once again in a context that is anything but conventional: "This is the most useful principle in life: nothing too much."³⁵ How Augustine manages to turn the Terentian maxim, "nothing too much" (*Andria* 61), into an encomium for the pursuit of wisdom is pure ingenuity.

On any reading Augustine's appropriation of the phrase is peculiar. Taken by itself the Terence's "nothing too much" seems to be another endorsement of the notion of moderated desire, but Augustine uses it here to claim something unique: "For wisdom is nothing but the measure of the soul, that is, that by which the mind is liberated so that it neither runs over into too much nor fall short of fullness." Augustine's use of "nothing too much" is meant to underscore the fact that wisdom provides order to the mind or soul by not giving either too much of what it needs or too little of what it lacks. Augustine makes the Terentian maxim mean what it seems to deny at first sight, which is what he seems to have done with its variant in *De beata vita* 4.25. Augustine's use of Terence in both *De beata vita* 4.25 and 4.32 indicates how easily he adapts the comic poet to his purposes, and usually with an objective that seems contrary to what the aphorisms imply on face value.

It might be relevant now to consider Augustine's use of another variant of the aphorism he uses in connection with the wise man in a much later context where he has the philosophers under his purview. In *De civitate Dei* 14.25 we find Augustine citing the same line from Terence, but this time with explicit criticism of what those words celebrate, namely the prospect of moderating one's desires in order to be able to attain what one wants. Augustine asks whether in our current condition anyone can live the life he wishes when so little, if anything, is in our control. The very idea of someone living as he wishes seems to Augustine not only unremarkable but dubious, "since he has put the screw on himself and ordered himself not to wish for what is beyond his power, but to wish for

³⁴ *De beata vita* 4.32 (CCSL 29, 83). CWS, 190.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 191.

what he can get." He next cites Terence: "Since what you wish is not within your power, direct your wish to what you can achieve."³⁶ Augustine then asks: "Now is this man happy just because he is patiently miserable?" And he answers with an emphatic "no," because if the happy life is not loved it is not possessed (*beata quippe uita si non amatur, non habetur*).³⁷

Augustine's use of Terence here is expressly negative. This fits well into his generally critical assessment of ancient philosophy in the *De civitate Dei*. Augustine goes on to write that if someone loves the happy life "he must needs love it more dearly than all other things, since everything else that he loves must be loved for the sake of the happy life."³⁸ The way Augustine writes about the happy life in *De civitate Dei* 14.25 is almost unchanged from how he speaks of it in *De beata vita*. In both works Augustine writes of possessing the happy life and possessing God. What is more, in *De beata vita* he uses *habere deum* and *beatus* almost interchangeably (e.g. *De beata vita* 3.21).

Given Wetzel's claim that in Augustine's *De beata vita* the content of divine wisdom does not extend beyond Terence's rule for life, one would have to assume that Augustine later use of Terence is indeed a departure from Augustine's earlier usage. But is that in fact the case? Wetzel himself makes no reference to *De civitate Dei* 14.25, although he discusses Augustine's criticism of Stoic psychology in Books 9 and 14 of *De civitate Dei* (p. 98-111) and refers to 14.6 (p. 101), 14.7 (p. 104), 14.8 (p. 102), and 14.9 (p. 103). The absence of any discussion of Augustine's reference to Terence in *De civitate Dei* 14.25 is somewhat curious, then, in light of what Wetzel makes of the maxim in *De beata vita*.

Moreover, the different uses to which Augustine puts Terence, twice in *De beata vita* (4.24 & 4.32) and once in *De civitate Dei* 14.25, raise questions about what Augustine thought he was doing when he invoked the comic poet. We have already seen that when Augustine uses Terence in *De beata vita* 4.32 to speak about wisdom as a kind of moderation he alters what it means to say "nothing too much." So when Augustine uses the two variants of the aphorism in *De beata vita* 4.25 and *De civitate Dei* 14.25 to suggest two apparently different things we need to be alert to his rhetorical posture in each case.

³⁶ *De civitate Dei* 14.25. *St. Augustine: City of God*, translated by Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), 589-590.

³⁷ *De civitate Dei* 14.25 (CCSL 48, 448).

³⁸ *St. Augustine: City of God*, translated by Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), 590.

Two things need to be kept in view here. In the first place, Augustine inverts the kind of rhetorical question he poses after his use of the maxim, he does not do the same thing in *De beata vita* 4.25 and in *De civitate Dei* 14.25. In the former he asks the question: "how will he be unhappy to whom nothing happens against his will?" In the latter he poses the question: "how is this man happy just because he is patiently miserable?" The same aphorism, two different rhetorical questions. The question in *De civitate Dei* assumes that the person who lives according to Terence's maxim has simply made his peace with misery. In *De beata vita* it assumes that in fact such a person, to whom nothing happens against his will, is happy. And it is this rhetorical claim to happiness in *De beata vita* 4.25 which proves so conclusive to Wetzel.

But in *De beata vita* Augustine sets up a prospect that is nearly impossible to attain. And it is not at all unlikely that the portrait Augustine presents of the wise man who lives in accordance with virtue or the divine law of wisdom is a rhetorical move. Augustine may simply be following convention by presenting the wise man as he is normally constructed in order to subvert the image. There are some similarities between the wise man and Orata. The wise man of *De beata vita* 4.25 shares the same pedigree as the rich man in *De beata vita* 4.26 in one important sense. They both lack something. The only real "lack" that the wise man experiences comes in the form of his possible fear of appearing unwise, whereas the rich man's folly consists in his lack of fear in losing his temporal goods. If the wise man must make preparation for the possible misfortunes that can befall him and would be foolish in not doing so, then neither his claim to the precepts of virtue nor his undivided attention to supposedly divine law (*ex uirtutis quodam praecepto et diuina lege sapientiae*) saves the wise man from misery.

Certainly, an ironic reading of Augustine on this point would have to contend with the obvious fact that a straightforward reading of *De beata vita* 4.25 seems to suggest the exact opposite. But if there is any credibility to this interpretation of Augustine's portrait of the wise man in *De beata vita*, it is because it is the only one which does not make nonsense Augustine's conclusion and much of the ground established in the early part of the dialogue. Augustine presents the wise man in much the way that the philosophical tradition would have him. So what we have in *De beata vita* 4.25 is exactly the portrait as the philosophers claim, a claim towards self-sufficiency which the comic poet Terence captures aptly. But the portrait is not meant to be Augustine's endorsement of the image, and still less of Augustine's supposedly Stoic commitments. There is far too much in the rest of the Cassiciacum dialogues that argue against Stoic

materialism and the self-sufficiency of virtue to lend such a theory any credibility. To the extent that Augustine presents Monica as Wisdom's representative we may also be warranted in taking Monica as the "wise man," so to speak, since Augustine dares to say at one point that Monica spoke so persuasively that "we, entirely oblivious of her sex, believed that some great man was with us."³⁹ And a "great man" indeed whose grasp on wisdom is the more certain, whereas the wise man's is a mere pretense.

If one still insists on *De beata vita* 4.25 as an endorsement of the Stoic notion of the self-sufficiency of virtue then it would have to be maintained that Augustine's dialogue presents a blatant inconsistency or at best an ambiguous posture, at once claiming that the virtue of the wise man ensures beatitude, while also insisting the devotion to God, as the Christian religion proposes, and as Monica represents, is the way to happiness. If, on the other hand, the last word belongs to Monica, as Augustine claims at several points in the dialogue, then, the apparent Stoicism of *De beata vita* would have to be considered suspect.

And there is this: Augustine's use of Terence in *De trinitate* 13. Wetzel in fact begins his second chapter with a reference from *De trinitate* 13 about Augustine's view that no one is happy who does not get what he wants, and that not all those who have what they want are happy. These are in fact the very themes Augustine deals with in *De beata vita*. They are also to some extent how one could caption Augustine's portrait of the wise man and of Orata in *De beata vita* 4.25 and 4.26 respectively. Wetzel, however, does not discuss much of what Augustine states in *De trinitate* 13, except a brief reference in a later footnote, even though Augustine addresses directly what Terence proffers in relation to the philosophical tradition. Wetzel notes that Augustine "cites Terence's maxim as the epitome of pagan wisdom," and "disparages this wisdom as pathetic 'counsel given to the wretched, lest the wretched be more wretched.'" Wetzel adds that "in *De beata vita*, an early work, Augustine is disposed to accept Terence's advice," however.⁴⁰

The early/later contrast easily disposes of what possible misrepresentation might be entailed in Wetzel's analysis of Augustine's use of Terence in *De beata vita*. Moreover, the philosophical themes and the Ciceronian text (*Hortensius*) Augustine cites and alludes to in *De trinitate* 13 are the very ones he uses in *De beata vita*. So the years that separate

³⁹ CWS, 174.

⁴⁰ Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue*, 105 n35.

the writing of *De beata vita* from *De trinitate* Book 13 may be less important than the possible fact that Augustine is repeating in *De trinitate* 13 what he had always thought about Terence and the claims of philosophy when he was at Cassiciacum. It is impossible to summarize Augustine here without losing the force of his criticism. But excerpts of his extensive remarks should suffice:

Writing about the man who appears to have much under his control, Augustine comments that "In his courage he may well be prepared to take whatever adversity comes upon him and to bear it with equanimity; but he would prefer it not to come upon him, and if he can he sees to it that it does not. So he is prepared for both eventualities, but in such a way that he hopes for one and avoids the other, and if he runs into the one he would avoid, he willingly bears it because what he wanted could not come about. He endures it therefore in order not to be pushed under completely, but he would rather not be pushed at all. How then can he be said to live as he would like?"⁴¹ Compare this with Augustine's description of the wise man in *De beata vita* 4.25: "Every wise man is strong, and the strong man entertains no fear. For every wise man fears neither bodily death nor sufferings. For the banishment, prevention, or delay of such pains he would need all those things of which he is capable of being in want. Yet he does not fail to use them well if they are there. For very true is that aphorism, 'It is foolish to suffer what you can avoid.' Therefore, he will avoid death and pain as far as it is possible and fitting so that, if he does not avoid them, he will not be unhappy when they occur but because he refused to avoid them when it was possible, behavior which is a clear sign of folly. And so whoever does not avoid these things will be unhappy not from enduring them but from folly."⁴²

It is after this that Augustine goes on to add that "But if he cannot avoid them, although his behavior has been careful and proper, they will not make him unhappy. Indeed, this aphorism of the comic poet is no less true: 'Since what you wish for is impossible, better wish for what is possible.' And then Augustine poses that rhetorical "how will he be unhappy to whom nothing happens against his will, since he cannot want anything which he sees he cannot get?"⁴³

In *De trinitate* 13 Augustine states unambiguously that in fact the wise man's equanimity is a farce: "How then can he be said to live as he

⁴¹ *De trinitate* 13.7.10 (CCSL 50a, 395). *The Trinity*, translated by Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 1991), 351.

⁴² *De beata vita* 4.25 (CCSL 29, 78-79). CWS, 185-186.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 186.

would like? Because he is willingly brave in bearing unflinchingly what he would rather had not been inflicted on him?" He contends that "the reason he will what he can do is that he cannot do what he wills. That is the sum total, whether it makes you laugh or cry, of the happiness of proud mortals who boast that they live as they want because they bear patiently with what they do not want to happen to them. This, they say, is what Terence put so well." And so Augustine removes the pretense: "Since what you will can never be, will what you can do." "Who would deny that this is very sensibly said?" he asks, insisting that "it is advice given to an unhappy man how not to be unhappier still. To a happy man, however, such as all men want to be, it is neither right nor true to say what you will can never be."⁴⁴ So much for Augustine's approving use of Terence in *De beata vita*. Augustine insists in *De trinitate* 13 that his presentation of Terence is what Terence had always been understood to be saying. In other words, Augustine already assumed this when he adopted Terence's words in *De beata vita* 4.25, hence the deliberate irony in the portrait of the wise man that I have suggested.⁴⁵

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⁴⁴ *De trinitate* 13.7.10 (CCSL 50a, 395-396). *The Trinity*, translated by Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 1991), 351.

⁴⁵ In *Retractiones* 1.2 Augustine comments on a section of *De beata vita* 4.25. It is significant that he does not revise what he says about the wise man as being inconsistent with his later thinking on the use of Terence's *Andria* in both *De civitate Dei* 14.25 and *De trinitate* 13. What he comments on is the fact that he had defined the happy life as dwelling in the soul of the wise man regardless of the condition of his body. This he realizes appears to contradict the language and thought about the resurrection of the body I Corinthians 15. His retraction, then, involves the implied body-less beatitude of the wise man who has beatitude in his soul. It is this indifference to the body in the life to come which he believed needed correcting. We should also note that in *De trinitate* 13, where he gives his review of the Terentian maxim Augustine also refers to the erroneous opinion which would consign beatitude only to a disembodied soul (*De trinitate* 13.9.12), mentioning in passing his argument in *De civitate Dei* 12 on the issue.