

CHAPTER 2.1

Augustine: Commentary

Augustine

Aurelius Augustinus Hipponensis (henceforth Augustine) was born in 354 A.D. in the *municipium* of Thagaste (modern day Souk Ahras, Algeria, close to the border with Tunisia). He died in 430, as the Arian¹ Vandals besieged the city of Hippo where he was bishop, marking another stage in the demise of the Roman Empire. Rome had already been sacked in 410 by Alaric the Visigoth, but the slow decline of Roman grandeur took place over a period of about 320 years which culminated in 476 when Romulus Augustus, the last Emperor of the Western Roman Empire, was deposed by Odoacer, a Germanic chieftain. Augustine thus lived at a time which heralded the death knell of the ancient world and the beginnings of mediaeval western European Christendom.² Augustine's great legacy to western civilization is that intellectually he united both worlds in drawing from the ancient thought of Greece and Rome and providing a Christian understanding of the intellectual achievements of the ancients. His new synthesis is a remarkable achievement even today and for those of us, who remain Christians in the West, our debates, agreements and disagreements are still pursued in Augustine's shadow.³

¹ Arianism was a schismatic sect of Christianity that held the view that the Second Person of the Trinity, Christ, is created and thus does not exist eternally with the Father.

² See J. M. Rist's magnificent *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003. Rist notes that, 'Despite his lack of resources he managed to sit in judgment on ancient philosophy and ancient culture.' p. 1.

³ He was canonized before official procedures were ratified by popular recognition. In 1298 he was recognized as one of the great Doctors of the Church (*Doctor Gratiae*, Doctor of Grace) under Pope Boniface VIII. He is the patron saint of brewers, theologians, printers, and sore eyes.

Augustine's educational background reflects not just the preoccupations of his era but their lived existential facticity. His father, Patricius, was a polytheist⁴ while his mother, Monica, was a Christian. So Augustine must have been aware from a very young age of one of the central problems of his era — the conflict between the polytheism of much of the ancient world and the new monotheistic religion, Christianity. In what follows we present some of the key features of Augustine's life and times that have particular bearing on his views on education and in particular on the *De Magistro*.

The formal education Augustine received was very much that of anyone who held Roman citizenship, an education that had changed little from its origins in ancient Greece.⁵ Children went to primary school when they were about seven years old, then to a *grammaticus* (a professional teacher of poetry and literature) from the age of 11 or 12, and finally to the *rhetor* (an orator and teacher of rhetoric) at about 15 until the student reached 20.⁶ It was as a result largely a literary education concentrating on the great classical authors Vergil, Sallust, Terrence, and Cicero,⁷ with little attention paid to philosophy, science and history.⁸ The goal of such an education was to produce orators capable of persuading people — a political art with a pedigree originating with the professional teachers (Sophists) in ancient Greece.⁹

⁴ We prefer the term polytheist to the more usual 'pagan' because of the latter's (contested) etymological link to 'country bumpkin', and certainly in this sense it is not applicable to someone as sophisticated as Porphyry, a determined critic of Christianity.

⁵ Marrou suggests that 'It was not even a case of imitating; it was on the whole a pure and simple transfer.' H.I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, New York, Sheed and Ward, 1956, p. 265. For an accessible treatment of the development of educational theory and practice relevant for Augustine, see David Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought*, Hong Kong, Longman, 1962.

⁶ See A. Stock, 'Chiastic Awareness and Education In Antiquity,' *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 1984, 14: 23, p. 25.

⁷ See S. Harrison, 'Augustinian Learning,' in A. O. Rorty, (ed.) *Philosophers on Education: Historical Perspectives*, London and New York, Routledge, 1998, p.67.

⁸ See, P. Brown's peerless biography, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000, p. 24.

⁹ See for example G.B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981.

Augustine's elementary education was conducted in his home town of Thagaste and nearby at Madaura but his father recognised his precocious intelligence and, despite financial hardship, Augustine was sent to the provincial capital, Carthage, to continue his studies with the *rhetors*. So aged 17 he arrived in Carthage, a young man from the country open to the allures of a big city. At Carthage he discovered theatre, found like-minded friends who indulged in sensual delights, took a concubine and fathered a son, Adeodatus, who is his interlocutor in the *De Magistro*.

Augustine's life may well be seen in terms of a series of conversions (seven are mentioned in his *Confessions*) the first of which occurs in Carthage. In 386, while reading a copy of Cicero's *Hortensius*,¹⁰ he is first converted to philosophy. For the ancients there does not appear to have been a strict dichotomy between philosophy and religion. Indeed, philosophy was conceived of as a way of life that has much in common with religious conversion and vocation.¹¹ The *Hortensius* provided Augustine with arguments rejecting his dissolute libertinism and advocating a life of reason and contemplation. But it was only one of the major sources of influence on the shaping of his philosophical character.

Before his conversion to philosophy Augustine was attracted to the teachings of the Manichees. Manichaeism was a mystical cult that exemplified the relation between philosophy and religion because it embraced both a way of life – a method of living – and a doctrine concerning ultimate reality. Manichaeism, was based on the doctrines of

¹⁰ Cicero's *Hortensius* is an encomium to the philosophical life of reason and overcoming passions. Despite its popularity in the ancient world it is no longer extant. A reconstruction of the Aristotelian work upon which Cicero based his *Hortensius* has been attempted. See Aristotle's *Protrepticus*, *An Attempt at Reconstruction*. I. Düring, Göteborg, Studia graeca et latina Gothoburgensia, 1961; translated by A. H. Chroust, South Bend, University of Notre Dame Press, 1964.

¹¹ The clearest articulation of this symmetry of religion and philosophy in the ancient world is still P. Hadot's ground-breaking study *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. A.I. Davidson, trans. M. Chase, Oxford, Blackwell, 1995.

the Zoroastrian inspired Mani (AD 216–276), who articulated a cosmology involving the struggle between a good, spiritual world of light, and an evil, material world of darkness.¹² It may be speculated that what excited Augustine and led to him joining this group (apart from their proposed solution to the problem of evil, which he later rejects) was their appeal to a form of gnosticism. Gnosticism in its non-dogmatic formulations asserted a direct illumination of the soul by God and this viewpoint was to be of enormous influence on Augustine’s epistemology and, in particular, on his theory of illumination which appears in the *De Magistro*.¹³ Augustine was profoundly sensitive to the symbolic (one might say sacramental) dimensions of reality, and the symbolic aspects of light, illumination and the relations and distinctions between God’s Word (*Verbum*) and human speech provide much of the raw material discussed in the *De Magistro*.

Perhaps the most important intellectual influence on Augustine’s milieu was that of Platonism.¹⁴ It was his discovery of the books of the Platonists that led first to his rejection of Manichaeism and subsequently to his rejection of the scepticism and materialism of the New Academy and its leading figure Cicero.¹⁵ Augustine was attracted to two key features in Platonism. First, its account of Truth and certainty, and second its characteristic concern with non-material reality. Just as Aquinas is widely held to have synthesized Aristotelian and Christian thought, so Augustine (who in some measure

¹² For a recent treatment of Manichaeism see J. BeDuhn, *The Manichaean Body: In Discipline and Ritual*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.

¹³ For more on gnosticism see B. A. Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions And Literature*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2007.

¹⁴ Augustine’s understanding of ‘the Platonic books’ is largely drawn from just a few books of Plotinus, a little of the Platonic corpus, and second-hand commentators of Plato in Latin.

¹⁵ The Academy was founded by Plato around 387 BC. Scholars generally distinguish three phases of the Academy beginning with Plato, then the Middle Academy of 266 BC led by Arcesilaus, and finally the New Academy beginning under the leadership of Carneades in 155 BC. It was to the latter that Cicero’s philosophical scepticism appeals. Ancient scepticism held the view that knowledge of things is impossible, and so a proper response is one of withdrawal and impassivity. For an overview of the Platonic Academy, see W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Vol. 5, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1978. On Cicero see E. Rawson, *Cicero: A Portrait*, London, Duckworth, 2009.

always remains a Platonist) synthesizes Christianity and Platonism.¹⁶ Augustine's conversion to Platonism represents another step in his spiritual understanding of man's relation to the divine.

The ancient world, conceiving of philosophy as a way of life, not merely an academic pursuit, had maintained a fascination with small communities of like-minded persons living together apart from society.¹⁷ It was with this whole-hearted conversion to philosophy as a way of life that Augustine founds a commune of friends, including Monica and Adeodatus, at Cassiciacum, where communally they pursue their philosophical studies.¹⁸ However, the Platonism he embraces is complimented by yet another conversion he undergoes while pursuing an academic career as *rhetor* in Milan (384), one which, in his view, unites true philosophy and true religion.

While in Milan Augustine came under the influence of many Christians, most notably Bishop Ambrose, who provides Augustine with a concern that helps shape much of his thinking. Ambrose's use of Biblical exegesis is brought to bear in debates against the Manichaeans and is allied to a forthright espousal of the immateriality of both the soul and God (*Confessions* 6.5.7-8). These views raised for Augustine a powerful set of questions centred around the nature of belief and certainty. While Platonism had converted Augustine at an intellectual level he now begins to wonder whether believing is a necessary component of some kinds of knowing and understanding. Such belief requires more than intellectual assent. It requires a re-orientation of the whole person,

¹⁶ We should, however, be aware of Aquinas' debt to Platonism, much of which is due to Augustine's influence. See for example the classic discussion of C. Fabro, *Participation et Causalité selon S. Tomas d'Aquin*, Louvain, Université Catholique de Louvain, 1961.

¹⁷ This renunciation of wider society has its origins in the Pythagorean brotherhoods or *synedria* who held all things in common. A Christian form of ascetic renunciation of wider social life was known to Augustine through his reading of the monks of Egypt and particularly St. Anthony. See, Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 99, and Augustine, *Confessions* VIII, vi, 15.

¹⁸ Brown, *op. cit.*, writes: 'The Ideal of philosophical retirement was as stringent as any call to monastic life.' p. 99.

mind, will, body and spirit. Augustine comes to think that some truths can only be understood when complimented by faith. Moreover, this marks a breach with the philosophy of the Platonists because an ideal of the ancient world (going back to Homer) was the notion of human self-sufficiency.¹⁹ Augustine was beginning to think that human beings need both faith and God's grace to ascend towards, let alone attain, certitude of truth.

While in a garden in Milan Augustine's movement towards embracing Christianity achieves a dramatic break-through when he receives what he takes to be a mystical epiphany. He hears a child repeatedly chanting the phrase *Tolle lege! Tolle lege!* ('take it and read'). Opening the nearest book he reads St. Paul's *Letter to the Romans* and his conversion to Christianity is sealed, though he is not formally baptized until late July 386.²⁰ A second mystical experience befalls Augustine together with his mother in Ostia — a mystical vision of God — but by this time Augustine has fully embraced Christianity and is about to embark on his life-time mission, as priest and later bishop, showing that true philosophy and true religion are one and the same.

Understanding the *De Magistro*

In his *Retractiones* (I, x, ii), written towards the end of his life, Augustine briefly reviews his *De Magistro*, highlighting the intellectual capacities of his son, Adeodatus, and the

¹⁹ The Greek ideal of self-sufficiency, which was originally part of the aristocratic warrior code found in the Homeric epics later took on a more philosophical tint. Essentially it came to signify the capacity of an individual to attain knowledge of the divine and perfection of virtue in the self without *requiring* others or supernatural help. It is thus an extreme view of self-actualization. This ancient notion was subsequently transferred to the retirement of philosophers in a community that was relatively self-sufficient and able to provide for those necessary accompaniments of self-actualization such as friendship among community members. On the Greek ideal see A.W.H. Adkins, "Friendship" and "Self-Sufficiency" in Homer and Aristotle,' *The Classical Quarterly* (New Series) 13, 1963, pp. 30-45.

²⁰ Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

latter's contribution to the ideas explored in that work. It is significant that Augustine explicitly recalls that the *De Magistro* was written around the same time as *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* (388-89). Augustine returns time and again over his long life to the first book of the Bible. The uncompleted *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* is followed by *De Genesi ad litteram* (393-94), and again in an extended discussion at the end of the *Confessions* (401). A longer commentary is penned in 402 and in the 11th and 12th books of *De civitate Dei* he provides further reflections. The significance of Augustine's abiding concerns with *Genesis* together with the fact that the *De Magistro* was written around the same time as *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* provide cause for speculating that the *De Magistro* exemplifies themes that are deeply connected to his understanding of God's creative agency in *Genesis*.²¹ Indeed, Augustine explicitly heralds the connection between teaching and God's creative agency in *Confessions* (II.8). He also points to the crucial connections at a symbolic level between God's Word (*verbum*), human speaking, language, and illumination, all of which are central foci of his discussion of teaching, learning, and understanding in the *De Magistro*.

The Gospel of St. John begins *In principio erat verbum...* ('In the beginning was the Word...'). All creation comes to be out of God's Word. This Word is identified as divine Wisdom — the perfection of understanding and certitude, a role accorded to the interior teacher in the *De Magistro*. Augustine writes: 'In this Beginning, O God, hast thou made heaven and earth, namely, in thy Word, in thy Son, in thy Power, in thy Wisdom, in thy Truth; after a wonderful manner speaking, and after a wonderful manner making.'²²

Wisdom is experienced as a super-sensory light directly attributable to, and manifesting,

²¹ This line of thought is suggested by D. Chidester, 'The Symbolism of Learning in St. Augustine,' *The Harvard Theological Review* 76:1, 1983, pp. 73-90. We are indebted to Chidester in what follows, though it should be pointed out that Chidester's interpretation implicitly draws upon the work of Hadot, *op cit*.

²² *Confessions* 11.9. *St. Augustine's Confessions*, trans. W. Watts, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1988, pp. 227 & 229.

God's creative agency — *Fiat lux* ('Let there be light'). It is this light that illuminates the soul of the learner by means of the interior teacher in the *De Magistro* (xi.38). As Chidester puts it: 'Every act of learning symbolically recapitulates the primordial creation in this convergence of word and light....Augustine's learning theory is a religious statement based on a correspondence between the intrinsic process of human learning and the primordial creative event.'²³

The parallels between God's creative agency and the processes involved in teaching, learning, and understanding are too close to be accidental. When God's Word creates, it does so with wisdom and light, and heaven and earth come to be. For Augustine, heaven designates the spiritual order which is perfect and beautiful.²⁴ Earth, on the other hand, is at first an unformed bodily substance.²⁵ Later scholastic philosophers would refer to earth in this sense as a substratum, pure potency or universal substance.²⁶ Augustine describes earth as 'a formless depth also lacking light'.²⁷ In order to have form something must receive light. Light is bestowed upon earth by God's participative agency by means of his eternal Word. This Word which is Wisdom breathes form into the formless. The divine Word brings all realities into being by enlightening them.

A central distinction in Augustine's *De Magistro* is between the exterior teacher (a human being) and the interior teacher, who is Christ, the Word of God illuminating the human soul. The first two kinds of teaching broached in the *De Magistro* are associated with the exterior teacher — teaching as reminding and teaching as presentation. Both of these forms of teaching (which we discuss in more detail presently) are somewhat inadequate

²³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 75-76.

²⁴ *De Genesi ad litteram* I.3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ See for example Aquinas, *De Principiis Naturae*.

²⁷ *De Genesi imperfecta*, 14. *On Genesis*, trans. E. Hill, ed. J. E. Rotelle, New York, New City Press, 2002, p. 121.

since the knowledge imparted by such forms of teaching lack the level of certitude Augustine thinks is necessary for proper understanding. The third kind of teaching discussed in the *De Magistro* — discovering truth within — parallels God's creative activity in *Genesis*. Human teaching begins by using words (signs), but words are open to multiple senses and misinterpretation. Even indicating, as in teaching as presentation, involves ambiguities and possible failures of interpretation. By indicating realities in themselves, instead of merely their signs, teaching as presentation constitutes a higher form of teaching, learning, and understanding than that afforded by teaching by reminding which relies on audible signs or, in the case of the written word, visible signs of signs.

Teaching as reminding directs the learner by audible signs towards the realities that the signs point to. But teaching as presentation involves grasping realities in themselves by directing our vision towards realities. However, teaching as discovering truth within provides secure and firm certitude in respect to reality because it moves beyond the changeable sensible world to embrace the intelligible world. Here learning is a process of illumination — a direct vision of the soul much like Augustine's mystical vision in Ostia. God, or rather Christ as Word, directly and mysteriously illuminates the soul. It is then the Word of God that illuminates the soul as interior teacher just as God's creative Word breathes form into formless potential matter.²⁸

²⁸ As Chidester aptly summarizes:

Augustine understands learning as a reflection of a deeper symbolic process, based on the paradigm of creation, in which the word initiates an action and the light gives it intelligible form and order.... Therefore, based on the pattern of creation, it is possible to conclude that the word, as the *interior magister*, initiates the process of learning by generating ideas in the human mind. But the word, as in the creation of the primary *informis materia*, generates ideas without form or light. In other words, it may be the case that the activity of the word, as the inner teacher, is to be understood as the motive force which generates ideas within the human mind *in potentia*. The activity of the word is a kind of living potential for knowledge, as yet unformed and unrealised, which must be completed by illumination.... Word and light come to life simultaneously in the act of learning; the distinction between them merely clarifies two dimensions of the process, the agency of the word and the formative influence of light, which Augustine understands to occur simultaneously as Christ teaches within the soul in every act of learning. (*Op. cit.*, p. 89)

Before we turn to providing a more detailed exegesis of the arguments we need to briefly say a few words about Augustine's idiosyncratic account of memory as his views on memory are likely to present an obstacle to contemporary readers of the *De Magistro*. Human beings in common with other animals have a perceptive faculty that gathers information from the material world and forms images corresponding to these realities. Augustine thinks that it is in the memory that these images are stored and operated upon. Memory recalls the past, considers the present, and projects into the future. (*Confessions* XI.20.) Thus, Augustine's discussion of memory brings together what we would nowadays call imagination as well as memory. Indeed, Augustine's account of memory makes of it a kind of storehouse of all possible representations of experience and possible experiences. We might be tempted to simply say that for Augustine memory is mind, though that would distort his thought somewhat, since he accepts that there are non-representational forms of thinking that go beyond the necessarily representational operations of memory. When reading the *De Magistro*, it may be useful to think of memory as a storehouse of images, and when one encounters locutions that sound very peculiar to the modern ear, such as the notion of memory of the present, this may be thought of simply as the collection of sensory representations brought to our immediate awareness.

Augustine's *De Magistro* is a work of great subtlety and complexity. Of all the works collected in this volume it is the most difficult for the contemporary reader. One of the central reasons for this is that no translation can adequately capture the nuances of Augustine's Latin nor the technical specificity of the language used in advancing each stage of the inquiry. Perhaps unusually for Augustine there is also quite a bit of joking in the *De Magistro*, much of which trades on intricacies of language, and this too, is very

difficult to capture in translation. Like French *jeux de mots* and puns, any translation must fail utterly to capture jokes that are tied to ordinary language and trade on multiple meanings of words and indeed pronunciation.

One example of how difficult it is to adequately translate the Latin of the *De Magistro* is apparent in the following passage. At v.13, Augustine deals with the grammatical feature of conjunction. Augustine asks Adeodatus for several examples of conjunction.

Adeodatus replies citing the Latin words *et*, *que*, *at*, and *atque*, corresponding respectively to the English conjunctions ‘and’, ‘and’ (which appears as a copulative particle affixed to the word it connects), ‘but’, and ‘and besides.’ Augustine then goes on to force the point he is arguing for, namely that all words are ultimately noun-like, by linguistically grouping the four conjunctions and referring to them by means of a pronoun (*haec omnia*) ‘all these’, which he earlier had argued functions as a quasi-noun. Adeodatus’ inspired reply rejects Augustine’s use of the pronoun as a quasi-noun when he says, referring to ‘all these’, ‘not all’ (*non omino*), thus referring to them without use of a pronoun. The complexity of this passage continues beyond this point but it is suffice to show the difficulties of translation and the subtleties involved in the arguments. As a result we will need to spend more time and space interpreting Augustine’s *De Magistro* to help make sense of these sorts of difficulties.

Like Aquinas, in his *De Magistro*, Augustine’s approach is dialectical. But whereas Aquinas’ dialectic is presented in the scholastic form of questions, replies, and responses, and in a third person, impersonal style, Augustine’s *De Magistro* is firmly embedded in an imaginative reconstruction of the cut and thrust of live interpersonal questioning and debate. Augustine’s work is also dialectical in a second sense — each of the stages of the dialectical interchange is cumulative. Insights uncovered as a result of the dialectal

sparring provide new platforms for further puzzles and questions. It is also dialectical in yet a third sense as it specifically addresses the situated learner. That is, Augustine the dialectician is engaged not with students in general but with Adeodatus in particular.

Indeed the whole work is generated by a series of questions that on the face of it appear paradoxical. The first question that arises is the purpose of using words. From a contemporary perspective we would not hesitate to answer the question by saying that the primary purpose of using words is to communicate. However, this is not the answer proposed in the *De Magistro*. Instead, Augustine and Adeodatus agree that the purpose of using words is to let somebody know something and hence the basic function of language is to teach.

The structure of the argument in the *De Magistro* follows three paradoxes involved in identifying three conceptually distinct, yet interrelated ways of teaching or communicating knowledge. The three ways of teaching considered are (i) *teaching as reminding*; (ii) *teaching as presenting*; and (iii) *teaching as discovering truth within*.

Teaching as reminding, is characterized by the teacher providing signs by means of which the pupil is directed to become acquainted with what is being taught. *Teaching as presenting*, moves beyond the use of conventional signs, by directing the student's attention to the realities that are explicitly pointed to, by the signs. *Teaching as discovering truth within*, dispenses with the role of the human teacher in favour of God's role as interior illuminator of the student (and the human teacher).

Each way of teaching generates paradoxical questions which centre on the relations involved in teaching — the teacher, what is taught, and the end product or knowledge

discovered. (We referred to these in the **first chapter** of this book by means of the proposition: X teaches Y to Z.) The paradox that arises in the practice of teaching as reminding trades on whether what is taught is merely a sign, or a word, or a reality. The paradox that arises in teaching as presenting centres on whether, in such teaching, only a name of something is taught or whether the knowledge of reality is taught. The paradox associated with teaching as discovering truth within lies in how a person achieves certainty. Is certainty derived from the way in which realities are related and understood; or from the way signs are related and understood; or is certainty derived from some relation between signs and realities?

The dialectic of the *De Magistro* traces the paradoxes involved in the three ways of teaching by focussing on an orderly, cumulative address of the following issues: (1) the nature of signs; (2) the nature of *significables* (that is, the realities that signs point to); and (3) the nature of certainty and truth. These issues are dialectically taken up by the questions: (1*) Can anything be taught without signs?; (2*) Can reality be understood when directly indicated by ostension (that is, by pointing or performance)? (The concern here is whether when we point, we become acquainted with the thing or only the sign of the thing at which we point?); (3*) Can words or signs elicit certainty?

The unravelling of these issues and questions hierarchically reveals three principles. Teaching as reminding reveals a *principle of universality* attached to meaning in language. Teaching as presentation uncovers a *principle of value* in the relation between signs and realities. Finally, teaching as discovering truth within yields *certainty of truth* and thus stands as the *fons et origo* of all communication in teaching, learning, and understanding.

The universality of meaning embedded in language for Augustine implies a hierarchy of value which in turn presupposes truth as the ground of communication. Meaning in language is universal because language can be translated from one idiom, say Greek, into another, say Latin. Value is embedded in languages and concepts since we can see that a reality understood is more valuable than the sign used to point to it or the mere appearance of a reality, and that certainty and truth are more valuable than uncertainty. Judgements of truth and the value of such truth, for Augustine, depend upon a principle of Truth which coincides with God.

Augustine's *De Magistro* then is concerned with a meta-level inquiry into teaching insofar as it provides illumination of the Truth. As a result there is little direct discussion of what needs to be taught, the ordering of what is to be taught, the characteristic activities of teaching, or indeed the nature of the learner.²⁹ Rather, Augustine illuminates all of these dimensions by demonstrating how they can come together in one masterful performance by a gifted student and teacher in dialogue.

Teaching as Reminding

The central argument of the early part of the *De Magistro* concerns teaching as reminding. Augustine's argument is based on the idea that all words *name* and, by implication, that all words are quasi-nouns. Words signify realities either by aiding us to recall a reality or by signifying a reality itself, just as smoke is a sign of fire. But how exactly can teaching as reminding happen? The paradox here is that if someone does not know the reality to which a sign points, then that person also does not understand the sign. Since teaching

²⁹ Some of these more practical pedagogical concerns are taken up in Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* and *De Catechizandis Rudibus*.

as reminding of necessity occurs by using signs, most often words, when someone neither understands a reality, nor the sign which points to the reality, then teaching it would seem is impossible.

This paradox provides the context for the entire section on teaching as reminding.

Augustine, in dialogue with Adeodatus, seeks to overcome the paradox by finding a principle of universality of meaning in language conceived of as a system of signs. First Augustine considers several objections to the idea that the purpose of language is to teach. At first glance, the activities of 'questioning', 'singing', and 'praying' seem to have no connection with teaching. But it is agreed that questioning is a form of teaching in the sense that questions teach someone what one hopes to know. Singing is distinguished from speaking, and thus from teaching, because its object is the pleasure derived from sound and rhythm. When priests say prayers aloud to a congregation they remind, and thus teach us, about our relation to divine things. However, in silent prayer, words are not vocalised, but are spoken interiorly in the memory which recalls the realities to which the silent words and thoughts refer.

Augustine wants to show that all speech is connected to memory. He does this by arguing that all words are signs, that is, all words signify realities to be remembered. He arrives at this view by analyzing three representative but challenging grammatical features of language: the conjunction 'if', the preposition 'from', and the noun 'nothing'. The conjunction 'if' brings to mind a kind of doubt. The preposition 'from' brings to mind the notion of some form of separation. 'Nothing' provides a difficulty because signs, it has already been agreed, stand for realities. 'Nothing' thus cannot refer to what does not exist. Augustine here anticipates Sartre, in suggesting that 'nothing' brings to mind 'some

affection of the soul'.³⁰ By induction from these hard cases, Augustine concludes that all words have a naming function. 'If' names a kind of doubt, 'from' names a form of separation, and 'nothing' names the absence of a presence. Moreover, in each of these cases we achieved clarity by introducing new words to explain the meaning of the original terms. Thus, in each of these cases a sign or word has been taught by means of another sign or word. We have thus not yet moved beyond signs.

This does not exhaust the ways in which signs can be taught. Signs draw our attention towards realities signified, but this can be done also by performance or demonstration. If I am asked what 'walking' is, I can perform the action of walking. But even here confusion is possible, for it is indeterminate whether the performance refers to the person walking, or to the activity performed, or even to the meaning of the word 'walking', such that a speaker is apt to say 'walking' when in the presence of someone performing such-and-such an action. More simply, Augustine's point could be made by saying that a performance of walking could with equal justice be interpreted as a series of interrupted falls.³¹

Augustine is concerned at this point with the distinction between a sign and the reality signified by the sign. Matters are made more complex by the existence of *signs of signs*, as is the case when a word is written. The written word is a sign of a sign. The words, 'Romulus', 'Rome', 'virtue', and 'river' are all nouns but the words used, either in speech or when written, are not the realities pointed to by means of these signs. Augustine refers to these realities targeted by signs as *significables*. The words mentioned are all examples of

³⁰ *De Magistro* II.3. J. P. Sartre articulates a similar idea in *Being and Nothingness* 9-10 when he talks of planning to meet his friend Pierre in the café. When Sartre arrives Pierre is not there, and Sartre describes this as the absence of Pierre's presence. 'Nothing' always points to the objective lack of a properly present 'something'.

³¹ We take this observation from Merleau-Ponty who uses it in his *Phenomenology of Perception*.

nouns. The audible word ‘noun’ is a *sensible sign* whereas the written word ‘noun’ is a sign of a sign, just as ‘word’ is, according to Augustine, a sign for ‘noun’.

This point is difficult to grasp. Augustine is attempting to show that signs can signify themselves and can also signify other signs. For the first case, note that ‘word’ is also a word. For the second, note that Augustine thinks that everything signified by ‘word’ is also signified by ‘noun’. This move is designed to support the claim that all signs signify realities (whether those realities be themselves or other things) and are not just parts of language. It is for this reason that Augustine thinks it important to consider linguistic signs that do not immediately seem to refer to realities.³²

‘If’, ‘or’, and ‘from’ are examples of grammatical conjunction. That is, these three words can all be used to combine simple sentences into compound sentences. But while ‘conjunction’ signifies these three words, they, in turn, do not seem to signify ‘conjunction’ because they are examples of conjunctions but individually do not exhaust what it means for something to be a conjunction. So Augustine needs an argument to show how all words may be thought of as quasi-nouns in order for words to be signs that point to realities. He does so by invoking the authority of St. Paul and by appealing, via Cicero, to rules of our use of language. The language of Augustine’s argument here is almost impossible to capture in translation (as was mentioned earlier), but the basic point is that all parts of speech, including conjunctions, are called, i.e., named, something — as when we say that some part of speech is a noun, or a verb, or a preposition. As a result these conjunctions function in some respects as nouns — in other words, they refer to

³² Augustine here anticipates—and would disagree with—later analytic philosophers like Bertrand Russell, who developed the view that certain words, such as ‘and’ and ‘or’, do not have a semantic meaning but are purely syntactic.

realities.³³ ‘Noun’ and ‘word’ have the same extension and, at the same time, signify each other. Since signs are both self-referential and signified by other signs, the meanings attached to the signs are in principle translatable from one language to another. It is only the vocal sound *nomen* in Latin (literally, ‘name’) and *onoma* (‘name’) in Greek that differ, not their meaning.

Once it has been accepted that all signs are quasi-nouns, that is, they name and thus point to some reality, Augustine may conclude that the meanings of any proposition in language (since meaning is in principle translatable because there are realities referred to by signs) is universal and likewise not tied to a particular linguistic community. Meaning in language then is parasitic on reality and everyone has access to meaning no matter what language is spoken or written. These claims are but provisional steps in the dialectical investigation and even though they are accepted by the interlocutors, they remain highly contestable. Despite this Augustine maintains that there is a radical indeterminacy associated with signs and signs of signs, just as later he will show that there is an inherent indeterminacy in teaching as presentation.³⁴

It is the principle of universality of meaning which drives the intricacies of Augustine’s argument. When engaged in teaching as reminding, the teacher employs signs and, typically, spoken words. The teacher so engaged directs the student’s attention to realities with which the student is already acquainted. With this point clarified, Augustine’s next

³³ If this is a fair report of Augustine’s argument — and the text is so convoluted that it is difficult to be sure — then it is a not a particularly strong argument. He seems to be arguing that *whatever is named, names*. By parallel reasoning we could claim that *whatever is cut, cuts* or *whatever receives, gives*. These are obviously false claims, the last being especially objectionable to Augustine in light of his theistic commitments concerning creation.

³⁴ Augustine in fact anticipates what later analytic philosophers call the indeterminacy of translation. See for example W.V.O. Quine’s remarks on the word *gavagai* in his *Word and Object*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1960, ch. 2.

step is to inquire into whether a teacher by employing signs can direct the student's attention to realities that are not already known.

Teaching as Presentation

This next stage of the dialectic again begins with a paradox. Teaching is carried out by communicating knowledge of signs that are names pointing to realities. But is knowledge achieved by teaching the sign, since the sign must already be known in some sense in order for it to be meaningful? Can the teacher teach anything about realities directly? Or, is what is known, after realities have been indicated by pointing or performance, merely (a) knowledge of a word, or (b) knowledge of reality itself, or (c) knowledge of some relationship between reality and words? To make these difficult questions clearer, let us consider examples of (a), (b), and (c). The first two options would lead to unacceptable results for Augustine.

In (a), we can come to the understanding of any given sign by means of other signs that are already known. For example, we can come to learn what 'kleptomania' means by indicating its association with habitual and compulsive stealing, phenomena of which we are already aware. Consider also the case of the translatability of meanings. The German word for 'glove' is *Handschuh*, which is a compound of the German words for 'hand' and 'shoe'. Once we have an understanding of the English word 'glove', we can come to learn that a similar significable is designated by the German *Handschuh*. But this could still leave us unsure as to whether *Handschuh* refers only to what English speakers call a glove. Does *Handschuh* extend to mittens and the hand coverings used by boxers? Or, more perversely, to jewellery worn on the hands? The point here is that familiarity with the transferability of meaning by means of signs of signs, whether in one language or

between languages, is indeterminate, and hence we cannot be said to firmly grasp the precise signification of the sign, in other words, to know with certitude the reality to which the sign points.

In (b), imagine that I am trying to teach a student the meaning of the English word 'epicaricacy'. I could show the student any number of classic slapstick comedies, and the student may take delight in these, without ever appreciating the precise focus and underlying phenomenon (i.e., the reality) I wish to indicate, namely the feeling of *Schadenfreude*, or joy taken in the misfortune of others. The experience of the reality overflows the meaning of the term and thus the term remains indeterminate among significables.

In (c) we have the apparent desired object of teaching: a precise fit between sign and signified, or between language and reality, is attained. Here lies the major challenge for Augustine. Can a human teacher ever get beyond signs and teach the realities themselves? At this point Augustine enters into a deeper discussion of this most promising sort of teaching which seems adapted to direct attention to realities, namely teaching as presentation, and of the value to be found within that manner of teaching.

Since teaching as reminding, as we have seen, involves the teacher drawing attention by means of signs, and signs of signs, towards realities and signs already known, a new way of teaching is required. This is because neither signs nor signs of signs, teach knowledge of realities. Augustine examines the Latin phrase *utrum homo, nomen sit* ('whether "man" is a noun'). The dialectical unpacking reveals that the syllables vocally enunciated are not *in* the reality signified. In other words, the syllables *ho* and *mo* are not found in this particular human being before us, nor indeed would these syllables make something to be

a man. Reflection also reveals that the naming capacity in language cannot by itself move attention from a word to reality. If I do not already know that ‘mushfakery’ names the profession of mending umbrellas, the naming function tells me nothing.

However, the rules of grammar, language, and meaning enable a teacher to direct the attention of the student to the reality signified, provided that the reality is in some sense already known. If one already knows the signification or reality of which ‘man’ is the sign, then the student quickly generalises to the intelligible definition ‘rational mortal animal’ — at least according to Augustine. Knowledge of the Latin word *homo* (‘man’) involves knowing the noun, knowing the differentia of the signified — ‘rational’, ‘mortal’, and ‘animal’ —and acquaintance with at least one particular man. The knowledge involved in the signification pointed to by the sign *homo* requires knowledge of all three elements and their relations and, ideally, how that word coheres with the reality signified in its relations and central dimensions.

Augustine argues that knowing a reality and understanding the significance of its associated sign does not depend on our use of words but rather on a prior memory of realities present to us. When engaged in teaching as presentation, instead of making use of signs already understood by the student, the teacher directs the attention of the student to realities already understood. But before exploring the operationalisation of teaching as presentation, Augustine examines the order of dependence and relations between signs and the realities they signify and the values that we attach to each.

If teaching as reminding were the only way we could teach, then nothing could be taught without the use of signs. But indications — teaching as presenting — which are not signs, are genuine ways of teaching. When we do not know what mushfakery is, the

teacher can point to (i.e., indicate) what the mushfaker does, and since the elements that go to make up mushfakery are already known, the attention of the student has been brought to bear upon something, the elements of which are known, but the sign of which was unknown.

Augustine's whole discussion of teaching as presenting is permeated by the notion of 'indicating'. Moreover, since the role of memory is crucial to all teaching, learning, and understanding, Augustine introduces the notion of 'memory of the present' to explain how knowledge of the indicated realities is possible. Sometimes, the teacher when presenting or indicating moves the student's attention to a direct apprehension of realities, neither immediately under consideration nor understood, but capable of being appropriated via images within the memory of the present (or, as we would now say, the imagination). This way of putting the matter helps capture situations like the following. Suppose a teacher wishes a student to attend to some realities that the student has not attended to before. The teacher might say: 'Look at those!' and indicates those realities by pointing. The student then attends to the realities before her, and sees a previously unnoticed group of animals. The teacher says: 'Those are wolverines.' The student whose attention has been so directed by the teacher has, first of all, become acquainted with realities she had not experienced before, and subsequently come to learn the appropriate linguistic sign for those realities with which she is newly acquainted. Augustine's discussion of teaching as presentation thus involves an inquiry into teaching without signs or words.

Augustine is also concerned with establishing knowledge of value as it attaches to realities. For Augustine, significables, which are the realities understood, are to be viewed in terms of their importance. He highlights a *principle of valuation* that orders the relations

among signs, signs of signs, and the significables or realities that come to be known. He accomplishes this task by appealing to the widely-accepted metaphysical principle that ‘whatever exists for the sake of something else must be inferior to that for whose sake it exists.’

If this principle is granted, it is inescapable that realities signified are more valuable than the signs used to point to them. Every sign exists to point to the reality it signifies, so signs are less valuable than what they signify. This principle of value is illuminated by considering what we ordinarily value more. Do we value more a reality itself, or the sign of a reality, or the knowledge of a reality, or the knowledge of the sign of a reality?

Augustine uses the examples of ‘filth’, ‘vice’, and ‘virtue’ to establish that the reality *known* is better — more highly valued — than the reality itself. Augustine is thus committed to the position that knowledge plus reality is more valuable than reality alone. Reality trumps signification, just as knowledge of reality trumps knowledge of the signs of reality. It is the orientation towards that which is of greater value that brings out the nobility of teaching as presenting over teaching as reminding.

Gathering these points together, Augustine has shown that teaching as presentation re-collects the elements already known into a new synthesis – memory of the present – which yields a kind of new knowledge. But the question now becomes: Is it possible for a student to be taught anything about realities with which the mind is not at all familiar? This leads us to the final step in the dialectic — teaching as discovering truth within.

Teaching as Discovering Truth Within

A fundamental problem is associated with teaching as presentation. Drawing the attention of a student by indicating or performing is inherently open to error. If I try to teach the meaning of ‘walking’ by performing the act of walking, it may be interpreted as a series of interrupted falls. Similarly, to use Augustine’s example, drawing on *Daniel 3:94*, a student may be led to understand what *saraballae* are by already knowing (memory of the present) what a head is and what coverings are — hence, a type of head-covering. However, knowing that *saraballae* are head-coverings provides insufficient knowledge because it does not provide us with enough specificity to enable us to distinguish *saraballae* from other similar types of head-covering.

It is this worry that generates Augustine’s next step — questioning the degree of our *certainty* in respect to realities known. For Augustine only teaching as discovering truth within confers certainty. Taking a step back, teaching as reminding generally occurs when memory is engaged by attending to signs striking the ear or, in the case of written words, signs of signs striking the eye. Teaching as presentation occurs when the student’s attention is drawn to how a given sign relates to a reality by indication. Teaching as discovering truth within likewise requires knowledge of reality by acquaintance with and insight into the indications which undergird sign relations. However, if certainty is to be achieved, that which is to be understood requires not sensibles but *intelligibles*, that is, realities dwelling not merely in the senses but realities as intellectually grasped. In this latter arena of knowledge Augustine is concerned with propositional knowledge and *intuitive knowledge* (i.e., direct apprehension of intelligible objects).

Augustine has already argued that innate rules are necessary in order to understand significations of words which point to realities. These innate rules are both logical and ontological, as with the principle of non-contradiction. They include rules of recognition, which are innate capacities to recognise and judge individuals and kinds and to extract salient features. They are innate because they provide the very conditions of our reasonability. As Aristotle effectively pointed out, we cannot provide a formal argument for the principle of non-contradiction by appealing to a more basic principle since the principle of non-contradiction must be assumed for any rational argument to proceed. Ontological rules operate at the most general level of predication. They involve both the limitations and possibilities open to things due to the particular natures they possess. Thus a human being cannot flap her arms and fly though it is open to birds to flap their wings and do so.

Augustine recognises that certainty comes in degrees. When I understand something I also believe it, but I can believe many things without understanding them. The significations pointed to by the names 'Ananias', 'Azarias', and 'Misaël' are well known to those who read the Bible, but Daniel's account of their stories is something believed, not known with certainty. Thus knowledge and belief are different.

This distinction guides the ensuing discussion of the role of the will in knowing.

Knowledge of certain intelligible realities depends upon the perfection of the will. When truth is known for certain in any act of knowing, God illuminates the mind (recalling the symbolism of creation discussed earlier), but faith, Augustine asserts, is also required to prepare the mind for God's illumination. The will, perfected by faith, opens itself to objects of love, and there are many realities that can only be known if they are loved.

These realities include, for Augustine, love of persons, the loving relations characteristic

of the communion of the saints, the cherishing of religious sacraments, and more generally truths concerning divine things.

Propositional knowledge is directed both at sense objects or images and at intelligible objects.

If I am teaching about sensible things that are present (in some sense), someone may or may not believe what I say — ‘It is raining today in Ireland’. The student does not learn from my words unless he or she ‘sees’ what I am speaking about. When I try to teach something relating to the past my words do not signify realities but rather impressions or images, and are hence open to doubt.

However, when I attempt to teach realities apprehended by the mind I am concerned with intelligible objects which the student can access directly by the light of truth. Here the student apprehends meanings directly by means of the inner teacher, Christ, who illuminates the ‘inner man’. (*De Magistro* xii.40) The notion of an interior teacher, or interior illumination, may be approached by the rather inadequate but simple experience of sudden intuitive grasping. We have all had the experience of trying to work our way through a difficult problem, as in mathematics, and despite all our efforts and those of our teachers, we simply fail to *see* the solution. Often at some point the light goes on and we break through our frustration in a ‘eureka’ moment.

Augustine bases his argument on the following observation: ‘But after teachers have presented their words about all the disciplines they claim to teach, even including virtue and wisdom, their pupils then examine for themselves whether what has been said is true, contemplating thus by their own abilities interior truth.’ (*De Magistro* xiv.45) The student learns interiorly, and no external human teacher can teach in this way. Here the

interior teacher is, Augustine asserts, none other than Christ, the eternal Word, Wisdom, and Light of God. The notion of the interior teacher, which is an important theme running through Augustine's writings from his earliest days to his middle and late masterpieces *On Christian Doctrine*, *Confessions*, and *City of God*, is mentioned only briefly at the end of the *De Magistro*. Here he is concerned to establish the necessity of positing an internal teacher and less worried about positive development of that notion. The basic reasoning runs like this.

Suppose that a teacher is successful in presenting the contents of his or her thoughts to a student. (Augustine gives good reasons for doubting that this is ever the case, but let us set these worries aside for the sake of argument.) Even granting the ideal case of teaching as presentation, nonetheless such presentation is insufficient for genuine knowledge. This is because the certainty characteristic of Augustine's account of knowledge requires an act of judgement initiated by the learner. This judgement is itself based on a recognition of what is so and what is not so. This recognition comes not from an external teacher but arises internally within the student.³⁵ But how could the student recognize something without already being in possession of some standard or model against which he or she measures and judges it? A good fit between this standard or measure and that which has been presented results in a judgment on the part of the student that assents to the truth of that which the teacher has proposed. Thus, there must be some interior teacher, serving as an interior standard and necessary condition for the acquisition of certain truth by the student.

³⁵ Compare this with Aquinas' *De Magistro* art. 1, in which he discusses what the student contributes to learning.

The identification of the interior teacher with Christ, the eternal Word of God, present as interior teacher within each and every act of understanding, may be elaborated briefly. There are no limits to the truths human beings may know.³⁶ While that which is potentially knowable and that which a human may actually know are both infinite, it is unfitting to assert that any human being is omniscient — a possessor of actually infinite stores of knowledge. The necessarily perfect and infinite standard that serves as measure of all truth recognized and recognizable that is interior to the student therefore cannot ultimately be identified with the student. While transcendent infinity and intimate interiority are not compatible with any merely human teacher or learner, these properties are fittingly attributed to the divine. Hence, the interior teacher, Augustine asserts, is God, the infinite Word, Wisdom, and Light Who illuminates minds and in Whom all things live, move, and have their very being.

³⁶ Augustine mentions some nice examples in his *Contra Academicos*, including his famous anticipation of the Cartesian *cogito* argument concerning the certainty of the existence of the self. I know that I exist; and I know that I know that I exist; and I know that...as far as one may care to repeat.