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The Inaugural Address: Wittgenstein and Augustine De Magistro

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*The Inaugural Address*

WITTGENSTEIN AND AUGUSTINE *DE*  
*MAGISTRO*

M. F. Burnyeat

Augustine, in describing his learning of language, says that he was taught to speak by learning the names of things. It is clear that whoever says this has in mind the way in which a child learns such words as “man”, “sugar”, “table”, etc. He does not primarily think of such words as “today”, “not”, “but”, “perhaps”. (Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books*, p. 77)

Everyone in this audience will know that Wittgenstein is referring to the passage from Augustine’s *Confessions* (I viii 13) which he borrows for the opening words of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Not everyone will know that immediately before the passage quoted in *PI* §1 Augustine claims that his elders did not teach him to speak. He taught himself. Fewer still, I imagine, will be aware that on this point the adult Augustine’s account of his childhood derives from a quite general philosophical thesis to the effect that no man ever does or can teach another anything.

It is the general thesis, as elaborated and defended in Augustine’s *De Magistro*, that I aim to discuss here. I started with Wittgenstein, not from any desire to complain at Wittgenstein’s ‘creative misprision’ of Augustine, but because some of Wittgenstein’s reasons for denying that language is taught in the way his Augustine depicts are strikingly similar to some of the historical Augustine’s reasons for denying that language, or anything else, is taught.

One recent critic of Wittgenstein, offering *homo viator* the blessings of modern cognitive psychology, has said that Augustine has it precisely and demonstrably right when Wittgenstein protests (*PI* §32) that he ‘describes the learning of human language as if the child came into a strange country and did not understand the language of the country; that is, as if it already

had a language, only not this one'.<sup>1</sup> Others see in *Conf. I viii 13* an *Urbild*: a primitive, prephilosophical picture of language, antecedent to argument, from which grow all the evil theories which it is the calling of expositors of the *Investigations* to combat.<sup>2</sup> I shall exhibit the passage Wittgenstein has made famous as the precipitate of some 800 years of Platonist philosophizing. This will be a historical inquiry. But I hope that it will contribute to a more nuanced sense than either Wittgenstein's critics or his expositors have achieved of his relationship to the Platonist writer he admired and opposed.

The paper has three parts. The first is simply a translation and elucidation of enough of *Conf. I viii 13* to make clear the relevance of the *De Magistro*. The second is a detailed discussion of the *De Magistro*. In the third I return briefly to Wittgenstein.

*An excerpt from Confessions I viii 13*

I was no longer an infant who could not speak, but already a chattering boy. This I remember, and I have since realized from what source I had learned to speak (*et memini hoc, et unde loqui didiceram, post adverti*). For it wasn't that my elders had been teaching me, presenting words to me in a definite order of training as they did a bit later with my letters. Rather, I had been teaching myself<sup>3</sup> with the mind

<sup>1</sup> Jerry A. Fodor, *The Language of Thought* (Hassocks 1976), 64. For older and more theological versions of this assessment, beginning with Augustine himself, see the classic study by Gerhart B. Ladner, 'Homo Viator: Mediaeval Ideas on Alienation and Order', *Speculum* 42 (1967), 233-259.

<sup>2</sup> G. P. Baker & P. M. S. Hacker, *An Analytical Commentary on Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations* Vol. I (Oxford 1983), 21-3.

<sup>3</sup> With *sed ego ipse mente supply me docebam* from *non docebant me*, as in the Penguin translation by R. S. Pine-Coffin (1961), the Budé by P. de Labriolle (2nd edn. 1933), and the Bibliothèque Augustinienne translation by E. Tréhorel & G. Boissou (1962). This is the only possible translation of the Knöll text (Teubner 1898) which Wittgenstein possessed and read (Garth Hallett, *A Companion to Wittgenstein's "Philosophical Investigations"* [Ithaca & London 1977], 761), and of any text which follows Knöll (as do both Labriolle and the most authoritative modern edition, Skutella [Teubner 1934]) in ending the sentence at 'to everyone I wished'. The Pusey translation (now in the Everyman series), which Baker & Hacker, p. 21, reproduce to give the immediate context of Wittgenstein's quotation, is a translation of Pusey's text (text and translation appeared as companion volumes in *A Library of the Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church Anterior to the Division of the East and West*, Oxford 1838). Pusey followed the 17th century Maurist edition (Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 32) in printing *praesonabam* instead of *pensabam* and a comma instead of a full stop before it so as to make *praesonabam* the main verb after *sed ego ipse mente*: 'but I . . . did myself, by the understanding which

which you, my God, gave me, when I tried to express the feelings of my heart by cries and different sounds and all sorts of motions of my limbs (in order to get my own way) but could not manage to express everything I wished to everyone I wished. I had been taking thought with the aid of memory (*pensabam memoria*): [here begins *PI* §1] when they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out. Their intention was shewn by their bodily movements, as it were the natural language of all peoples: the expression of the face, the play of the eyes, the movement of other parts of the body, and the tone of voice which expresses our state of mind in seeking, having, rejecting, or avoiding something. Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires.

Augustine's memory is of being already able to talk as a boy, not of how he had earlier learned to talk, and it is the first stage in his autobiographical narrative to be certified by memory. For the earlier period, going back to birth and conception, Augustine repeatedly says that he has no memory but believes the testimony of his parents and others and makes conjectural inferences from his (adult) observation of other babies. Thus the famous account of language learning is not presented as a deliverance of memory, real or apparent.

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thou, my God, gavest me, practise the sounds in my memory'. The effect of this is to submerge, if not totally to drown, Augustine's claim to have taught himself. The Maurist comma was retained by Gibb & Montgomery (1908), who were also still tempted by *praesonabam*, but the only disagreement among more recent editors is whether to begin the new sentence with *pensabam* (Knöll, Skutella) or with (not the weak *praesonabam* but) another variant, *prensabam* (Labriolle, Solignac in the Bibliothèque Augustienne edition): 'I had been trying to grasp (words) with my memory'. This disagreement, unlike the Maurist comma, has no philosophical consequences.

On Wittgenstein's knowledge of Latin, see Herbert Spiegelberg, 'Augustine in Wittgenstein: A Case Study in Philosophical Stimulation', *J. Hist. Phil.* 17 (1979), 320. In any case, the translation which Hallett reports that he owned, by O. F. Lachmann (Leipzig 1888), manages the right translation even with the Maurist text.

But neither does it rest on testimony or inference from observation. *Post adverti* ('I have since realized') is stronger than and different from *credidi* ('I believed') and *conieci* ('I conjectured') in, for example, I vii 12. Its only parallel in the preceding narrative is in I vi 7 on the comfort of women's milk:

Neither my mother nor my nurses filled their breasts by themselves. It was you who gave me, through them, the food of infancy . . . because you, my God, are the source of all good and everywhere you preserve me. This is something I realized later (*animadverti postmodum*), because you proclaim it through all these things you give me, both within and without. At the time all I knew (*noram*) was how to suck . . .

That little Augustine sucked at the breast and learned to speak are two ordinary empirical facts of family history, vouched for in ordinary ways by testimony and inference from like cases. But what the autobiographer is pointing to is the divine presence which explains them both. (Compare I xii 13 on God's good use of his parents' bad reasons for putting him through the miseries of school.) The account of language learning in *Conf.* I viii 13 is neither a simple memory nor an empirical psychologist's conjectural hypothesis, but a highly self-conscious contribution to theological understanding.

I conclude from this that for the author of *Conf.* I viii 13 its central focus is on God's responsibility for the mind teaching itself. In I xiv 23 Augustine is more precise: he must have learned *some* words at his own prompting, *non a docentibus sed a loquentibus*, i.e. in the manner described in I viii 13 and without being taught by others. The *Confessions* does not provide argued justification for either claim. The earlier *De Magistro* does.<sup>4</sup> To give Augustine's own account of the matter:

At the same time [389 or 390 AD] I wrote a book entitled *On the Teacher* in which after discussion and investigation it is discovered that there is no teacher who teaches man

<sup>4</sup> Contrast Hallett, p. 73, and Baker & Hacker, p. 22, who tell students of Wittgenstein (apparently on the authority of Norman Kretzmann's article 'Semantics, History of' in Paul Edwards ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [New York & London 1967], cited by Hallett) that *De Magistro* is critical of the primitive view expressed in *Conf.* I viii 13.

knowledge (*scientia*) except God, as it is in fact written in the Gospel: 'One is your Teacher, Christ'. (*Retractationes* I xii)<sup>5</sup>

*The dialogue De Magistro*

At first sight, the thesis that no man (*homo*) ever does or can teach another has nothing to recommend it but the authority of the Scriptures. Moreover, if so paradoxical a thesis were true, it would apply to itself. Augustine could not have learned it from St Matthew (23:10), nor could he have taught it to his 16-year old son Adeodatus in the discussion (real or imaginary)<sup>6</sup> presented in the *De Magistro*. But Augustine never tires of telling us to believe in order that we may understand. And in fact at the end of the dialogue (xiv 46) Adeodatus accepts that he has not been taught by his father that no man can ever teach another. Nonetheless he has learned that this is so; he knows it now, without a trace of doubt. I take this to be a deliberate indication by Augustine that his dialogue is meant to illustrate its own message—that we will understand his thesis, and maybe see that it is not so paradoxical after all, if we relate it not just to the arguments he has provided but to the whole course of the discussion in which Adeodatus learns without being taught.

Augustine, like most of us, thinks of teaching as imparting knowledge. The question whether teaching is (humanly) possible is the question whether one human being can bring another to know something. So it is worth a preliminary digression to ask about Augustine's conception of knowledge (*scientia*).

There is an important and revealingly Platonist passage in the *Retractationes*, the work in which Augustine in his old age gave his considered judgement on ninety-three of his earlier writings. Here he is supplying a clarification or qualification to an epistemological distinction drawn in the *De Utilitate Credendi* of 391–2 AD:

<sup>5</sup> In the *Retractationes* Augustine can be quite scathing about his early works. That he has nothing self-critical to say about the *De Magistro* implies continuing satisfaction with its methods and conclusion.

<sup>6</sup> According to *Conf.* IX vi 14 all the ideas ascribed to Adeodatus in the *De Magistro* were genuinely his: another marvel for which God alone can be responsible. But Augustine does not claim, as some scholars have supposed, that the *De Magistro* is the report of an actual historical discussion.

And when I said . . . 'What we know, therefore, we owe to reason, what we believe, to authority' (*quod scimus igitur, debemus rationi, quod credimus, auctoritati*), this is not to be taken in such a way as to make us frightened in more ordinary conversation of saying that we know what we believe on adequate testimony. It is true that when we speak properly (*proprie*), we say we know only that which we grasp by firm reasoning of the mind. But when we speak in language more suited to common use, as even the Holy Scripture speaks, we should not hesitate to say we know both what we perceive by our bodily senses and what we believe on the authority of trustworthy witnesses, while nevertheless understanding the distance between these and that. (*Retractationes* I xiv 3)

It is tempting to read this passage as introducing two senses of the verb 'to know', a strict or philosophical sense which preserves the truth of Augustine's earlier dictum 'What we know, we owe to reason', and a plain man's sense which makes it false because in this sense we also know things that we believe on good authority. But temptation should be resisted. What Augustine distinguishes here is the proper meaning of the verb 'to know'<sup>7</sup> and the catachrestic or improper way it is used in ordinary conversation. The ordinary use is harmless; it would be pointless pedantry to object to it: but it remains true that in the proper acceptation of the term we know only what we owe to firm reasoning of the mind. Thus it is not that a change of meaning is involved when in ordinary life we claim to know what we believe on adequate testimony, but that the standard meaning is loosely and improperly applied to a case which strictly speaking it does not fit.

This interpretation is confirmed by the fact that both uses of the verb 'to know' seem, in modern terms, to involve justified true belief. The difference between them is drawn in terms of the mode of justification. When a true belief is justified by sense-perception or trustworthy testimony, the plain man calls it knowledge, the philosopher belief. But this belief is vastly important for Augustine, since it includes the Christian's belief in

<sup>7</sup> The meaning of *proprie* is well illustrated in the next paragraph: 'we cannot *proprie* call little children wise or foolish'.

the testimony of the Scriptures. When he says it is not knowledge, in the proper acceptation of the term, this is not to disparage belief, or to impugn its rationality, or to deny that it is fully justified; the testimony is, after all, described as adequate and trustworthy. What is missing, by comparison with cases where a true belief is justified by the mind's firm reasoning, is something other than justification: something which justification by reasoning contributes along with and in addition to justification as such, and which justification by sense-perception or testimony cannot supply.

What that extra something is becomes clear, I think, when we look back to the original statement in the *De Utilitate Credendi*. We discover that the contrast between believing and knowing (*scire*) was presented there (*UC* xi 25) as a contrast between believing and understanding (*intellegere*). The original statement was, 'What we understand (*intellegimus*), we owe to reason'. If Augustine feels that it makes no odds whether he writes *scire* or *intellegere*, that implies that in his view the proper meaning of *scire* is *intellegere*. And that in turn explains why he thinks it loose or improper to use 'knowing' (*scire*) in the ordinary way of what we believe on adequate testimony. *Intellegere* would not fit here at all. Adequate testimony is excellent justification for believing something, but it does not contribute an understanding of the thing believed. Firm reasoning of the mind, on the other hand, does both: it justifies a belief in such a manner as to enlighten it with understanding.<sup>8</sup>

This would have been a very traditional conception of knowledge, reflecting the continuing influence of Plato and Aristotle on the philosophical climate of the times. But influences are less important than what the *De Magistro* itself can tell us about Augustine's understanding of 'understanding'. For if it is correct to suggest that Augustine thinks of understanding rather than justification as the differentiating ingredient of knowledge, the main thesis of the *De Magistro*, that no man can

<sup>8</sup> This conclusion fits well with R. A. Markus' account of Augustine's conception of knowledge in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, ed. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge 1970), 348-353, 362 ff. But it must be tempered by a recognition that when Augustine has his sights trained on Academic scepticism (e.g. in *Contr. Acad.* and *De Trin.* XV xii 21), he will insist in no uncertain terms that both sense-perception and testimony yield knowledge (*scire*). Further qualifications below.



teach another knowledge (*scientia*), can now be glossed as the claim that no man can teach another to understand something. The argument will not be that information cannot be transmitted from one person to another, but that the appreciation or understanding of any such information is a task that each person must work at for himself. And while this as it stands is by no means clear and lucid, it is at least a proposition one could imagine coming to appreciate and understand in the course of working through the dialogue.

The dialogue begins with what looks like an exercise in the Academic procedure of arguing both sides of a question. It is first argued that all teaching is effected through words or, more generally, through signs (i 1-x 31), then that no teaching is effected through words or signs (x 32-35). But the two sides are not in fact equally weighted. The second thesis prevails and the remainder of the dialogue (xi 36-xiv 46) explains how, given that words and signs teach nothing, we can and do learn things without them. In retrospect, therefore, the long first section is cast as an exposition of the view to be overthrown. The thesis that all teaching is effected through words and signs is the wrong answer which has to be worked through first, before the right answer can establish itself in the mind as a satisfactory and illuminating solution. As Augustine (or Plato) would have been happy to say, 'To convince someone of the truth, it is not enough to state it, but rather one must find the *path* from error to truth'.<sup>9</sup>

It is obvious enough why it should be tempting to think that *some* teaching is effected through words or signs. As we ordinarily think of it, a good deal of what teachers do is 'talk and chalk'. Words and signs are the instruments by which knowledge is transmitted from them to us. That is the common sense view of teaching, and it implies no great distinction between teaching and information-communicating discourse in general; or at least they come to much the same once we set aside as inessential any institutional associations that the word 'teaching' may introduce. Accordingly, the dialogue begins with a perfectly general question about the intended effect, or function, of speaking, to which an answer is returned that gives to the notion

<sup>9</sup> Wittgenstein, 'Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*', in C. G. Luckhardt ed., *Wittgenstein: Sources and Perspectives* (Hassocks 1979), 61.

of teaching an extremely general scope: 'Speech is instituted for no other reason than for teaching (*docere*) or for reminding (*commemorare*)' (i 2).

Some objections to this large and implausible generalization are dealt with by deciding that a question, for example, teaches the other person what it is you want to know (cf. *PI* §24), and that words addressed to God in inward prayer are reminders to oneself (i 1-2). But remember that Augustine is engaged in a dialectical exercise. 'Play with the purpose of sharpening up the mind' is how he will characterize it later on (viii 21), and the final message of the dialogue is that all through he has been using words neither to teach nor to remind, but to stimulate his son to learn for himself. What matters at this stage is that both common sense and many theorists (ancient or modern) will agree that one absolutely central function of language is the transmission of information, letting people know things, teaching (*docere*). Adeodatus' first task is to get clear about the implications and ramifications of his common sense belief that, when someone does not already know that *p*, he can be told or taught by means of words and thereby come to know what he did not know before.

If, then, some teaching is by words, how do words effect the teaching, how do they convey the information they are instituted to convey (cf. ix 25-6)? The answer given is that words are signs and teach by signifying (ii 3, x 30). Here Augustine starts a lengthy and intricate argument for the thesis that all words signify something, even connectives like 'if' and prepositions like 'from', and consequently all words are names. We are at once reminded of Wittgenstein's use of Augustine as a stalking horse for his attack on the idea that the words of a language are names and its sentences combinations of names. Wittgenstein suggests (*PI* §1, *BB* as quoted) that one falls victim to the temptation to think this way when one concentrates attention on common nouns like 'table' and proper names, leaving other kinds of words to take care of themselves. The historical Augustine was more thorough. Not only did he expressly argue for the namehood of words other than nouns, he was also careful to explain (vi 17) that of course he did not mean that a word like 'from' is a noun like 'table' or 'Socrates' (*nomen* as one of the eight parts of speech). What he meant is neither

more nor less than that ‘from’ is a sign of or signifies something (not, of course, a physical object but, if you like, a separation of the things in question), and that the contribution made by ‘if’ to a sentence is different from the contribution made by ‘because’ in the same position (ii 3–4, v 16).

No doubt it is true that ‘When we say: “Every word in language signifies something” we have so far said *nothing whatsoever*; unless we have explained exactly *what* distinction we wish to make’ (PI §13). (Augustine could add, rightly, that the same holds when we say ‘All words are names’.) But in the ancient context there was a distinction, indeed a dispute, between the claim (originally Stoic) that every word signifies something and a rival (Peripatetic) view that this holds for nouns and verbs only, other words being merely ‘co-significant’, not significant in their own right, because they are essentially devices for combining and embellishing.<sup>10</sup> Augustine makes it clear that he is just playing with Adeodatus in ii 3–4 when he forces him to try to *specify* the something signified by ‘if’, ‘from’ and ‘nothing’. (He accepts ‘for the moment’ that ‘if’ signifies a mental state of doubt, he will not stop to bring counter-examples against the ‘separation’ account of ‘from’, and it would be absurd if the discussion was held up by nothing.) But his remarks about ‘if’ and ‘because’ in v 16 can be taken as a serious-minded illustration of what is meant by the thesis that all words are names.

If I see an object in the distance and I am uncertain what it is, I should be satisfied with saying ‘If it is a man, it is an animal’ but not satisfied with saying ‘Because it is a man, it is an animal’. This establishes that it makes a difference whether you use ‘if’ or ‘because’. Now consider the following sentences (remember that Augustine is writing before the age of inverted commas):

If satisfies me (*placet si*)

Because does not satisfy me (*displicet quia*)

If we apply the modern use/mention dichotomy, it is clear that

<sup>10</sup> The evidence is too complicated to set out here (it is persuasively assembled in an as yet unpublished Cambridge PhD thesis by C. Atherton), but some sense of the debate can be gathered from Plutarch’s lengthy attack on the Stoic view in his *Platonic Questions* x. At 1011c Plutarch complains that the Stoic theory makes speech an enumeration like a list of magistrates or days of the week.

'if' and 'because' are not used, as they were in the original sentences. But an earlier argument (v 13–14) confirms that Augustine would also refuse to opt for the other half of the modern dichotomy. For it is not the *sound* which satisfies or does not satisfy (as if I were trying to compose a sonorous poem). It is the meaning, or (perhaps better) the word considered along with its meaning, which Augustine elsewhere calls *dictio* in contrast to *verbum* or the word as sound (*De Dialectica* chap. 5). The thesis that 'if' and 'because' are names is, firstly, the thesis that they can be used to name (stand for, refer to) their own meanings or themselves as *dictiones*.<sup>11</sup> This holds for all words (vii 20) and, secondly, any word can be used autonomously, to name itself as *verbum* (viii 22–4).

Presumably it is a matter of convention to allow 'if' and 'because' to be used in these extra ways, just as it is a matter of modern convention to use inverted commas instead. The substantive claim—but it is not very radical—is that even connectives make a distinct, hence nameable, contribution to speech. The reason Augustine insists on this, I think, is that his topic is teaching. He wants to say that every word contributes to the information content of the sentences in which it occurs, to what is taught by them. That is the burden of the thesis that all words are names.

So interpreted, the thesis is entirely compatible with the sensible (Stoic) view that you *specify* the meaning of 'if' and 'because' by stating the truth-conditions of whole sentences in which they occur.<sup>12</sup> The fact is that, while Augustine is having fun, what he is having fun with, for Adeodatus' benefit, is dry and sensible (often Stoic) theory. He is not in the grip of an *Urbild* when he says that all words are names. Nor has he

<sup>11</sup> Compare the pseudo-mediaeval theory of *supposito semantica* invented by N. E. Christensen, 'The Alleged Distinction between Use and Mention', *Phil. Rev.* 76 (1967), 358–367, to deal with the example 'You should never say "never"', which would require a translator to render into the foreign language *both* the two *different* occurrences of 'never'.

<sup>12</sup> Diogenes Laertius VII 71–4. Stoic also, in all probability, is the thesis that any word can be used autonomously, to name itself: direct evidence is lacking, but it is the most likely explanation of Chrysippus' claim that absolutely every word is ambiguous (Aulus Gellius XI 12, Augustine, *De Dialectica* chaps 8–9; cf. Cicero, *De Inv.* II 117, Quintilian VII ix 1). In a world without inverted commas Chrysippus' claim is simply true. The additional ambiguity imported by the *dictio/verbum* distinction, if I am right about it, may well be Augustine's own development.

succumbed to another idea that figures centrally in Wittgenstein's picture of his Augustine's picture of language, the idea that the meaning of any word just is the object for which it stands (*PI* §1). Or at least, the historical Augustine does not succumb in a simple way. He has various remarks which distinguish between what a word signifies and the way in which it signifies. 'Coloured' and 'visible', 'name' and 'word', are pairs of words which signify the same things but in different ways, in virtue of different aspects of the things signified; and on the strength of this Augustine describes them as having different meanings or significations (v 12, vii 20). Nor, finally, does Augustine think that we can rely on ostension to teach the meaning of words, even with more favourable examples than 'if' and 'from':

*Aug.* Supposing I had no idea of the meaning of the word 'walking', and I were to ask you when you were walking what 'walking' means, how would you teach me?

*Adeo.* I should walk a little more quickly. The change in speed would give notice that I was replying to your question, and I should still be doing what I was asked to demonstrate.

*Aug.* But you know there is a difference between walking and hastening. He who walks does not necessarily hasten and he who hastens does not necessarily walk. We speak of hastening in writing, reading and very many other things. Consequently, if, after my query, you did what you had been doing, only a little more quickly, I should conclude that walking was the same thing as hastening, for the acceleration was the new feature of your behaviour. So I should be misled. (iii 6)<sup>13</sup>

To which Adeodatus later adds that you are no better off trying to teach someone what 'walking' means by starting to walk than by speeding up your walking; for he might take you to mean not walking but walking a certain distance (x 29).

From all this Augustine gets Adeodatus to conclude that nothing whatever is taught without words or, more generally,

<sup>13</sup> This and future quotations from the *De Magistro* are given in the translation of John H. S. Burleigh, *Augustine: Earlier Writings* (Library of Christian Classics Vol. VI, London & Philadelphia 1953), adjusted to Daur's text (Corpus Christianorum 1970) and with a number of corrections of my own.

signs (x 31). The inference is unsound and invalid. That ostension is open to a variety of interpretations is a Wittgensteinian point well taken but, as father and son will shortly acknowledge (x 32), it does not prove that ostension never succeeds in teaching someone the meaning of a word. Even if this was proven, and we accepted as true that all teaching about words requires the use of other words (or at least nonverbal signs like pointing—cf. iii 5-6, x 34), it does not follow from

- (a) Some teaching is effected through words or signs,  
 plus  
 (b) All teaching about words or signs is effected through words or signs,  
 that  
 (c) All teaching whatsoever is through words or signs.

But Augustine knows that it does not follow. He warns his son not to be upset when an opinion held as the result of a too ready and precipitate assent is shattered by a contrary argument (x 31).

The shattering blow is this:

Suppose someone ignorant of how birds are deceived by twigs and birdlime should meet a birdcatcher equipped with his instruments but merely travelling and not actually engaged in his work. Suppose he followed the birdcatcher step by step and wonderingly thought and inquired what could be the purpose (meaning, significance)<sup>14</sup> of the man's equipment. Suppose the birdcatcher, seeing him all attention, and eager to display his skill, got ready his twigs and tubes and hawk and caught a bird he spotted nearby, would he not teach the spectator what he wanted to know by the action itself and without any signs? (x 32)

Formally, this is just a counter-example to the rash generalization (c): 'It is sufficient for our present purpose that some men can be taught some, not all, things without a sign' (x 32). The trouble is that it is also a counter-example to the final conclusion of the entire dialogue. For Augustine is about to argue that

<sup>14</sup> *quidnam sibi . . . vellet* is a phrase that could equally well be used to formulate a question about the meaning of a word. No doubt that is why Augustine chose it.

(d) No teaching is effected through words or signs (x 33 ff.), and thence, by another questionable inference, that

(e) No man teaches another anything (xiv 46).

In the end the counter-example seems to have been a temporary dialectical concession.

This bewildering sequence of about-turns shows that Augustine, like Plato often (and Wittgenstein), is determined not to tell us how to read his writing. I think that we can understand what is going on if we distinguish between teaching by telling and teaching by showing. In the first part of the discussion showing was gradually squeezed out in favour of telling. Indeed, if teaching is restricted to telling, (a), (b) and (c) are innocuously true. What is more, the dry and sensible semantic theory invoked to prove that all words are names can stand as an innocuous account of how one does tell things with words. In the second part of the discussion, by contrast, showing is privileged over telling. If teaching is restricted to showing, (d) is innocuously true, and in arguing for (d) Augustine does so restrict it:

The utmost value I can attribute to words is this. They bid us look for things, but they do not show them to us so that we may know them. He alone teaches me anything who sets before my eyes, or one of my other bodily senses, or my mind, the things which I desire to know. (xi 36)

It is the example of the birdcatcher which pivots the discussion from telling to showing. And I would suggest that, if we look carefully at the example, we can see how to resolve the contradiction between the claim that the birdcatcher teaches and the final conclusion (e) that no man teaches another.

As Augustine describes the case, the birdcatcher knows that he is being watched by someone who wants to know what his equipment is for and he catches a bird with the intention of satisfying the spectator's desire to know. That is all. It is not said or implied that the birdcatcher has the further (Gricean) intention that the spectator should realize that he is putting on the show for this very purpose, in order that the spectator may learn from it what he is so curious to know. In no sense is the

birdcatcher trying to communicate the information that the equipment is for catching birds.<sup>15</sup> He is merely doing something from which he knows the spectator can gather that information for himself. No wonder Augustine proceeds to claim that God is constantly showing the sun, the moon, the stars, the earth and the sea and the innumerable things they bear to everyone who looks at them (x 32; compare the wall at iii 6). In that sense I could teach everybody about flowers simply by putting some on view in a vase. But most of us would agree that this is not really teaching, or even showing. It is merely providing an occasion for the spectator to learn.<sup>16</sup>

In sum, if showing or teaching requires no more than deliberately so acting or arranging things that other people may, if they wish, learn for themselves, then nothing is easier and the birdcatcher is a perfectly good teacher. What Augustine is denying when he reaches his conclusion (e) is that anyone can do what telling is supposed to do, namely, transmit knowledge to another mind. On that common sense understanding of 'teaching', the birdcatcher does not teach.

This brings me to the central and most interesting issue of the dialogue. Why is it impossible to bring another person to know something by telling him? Augustine proceeds to tell Adeodatus (who does not speak again until the end of the dialogue) in a long discourse which starts with a sentence from the story in the Book of Daniel about the three youths whose strength of belief enabled them to survive the fiery furnace of King Nebuchadnezzar:

If we consider this a little more closely, perhaps you will find that nothing is learned even by its appropriate sign (*per sua signa*). If I am given a sign and I do not know what it is the sign of, it can teach me nothing. If I know what it is

<sup>15</sup> Here, of course, I am drawing on H. P. Grice's famous article 'Meaning', *Phil. Rev.* 67 (1957), 377-388.

<sup>16</sup> I do not deny it can be called teaching/showing. Ordinary usage extends 'teaching' to any *x* such that I learn something from *x*, regardless of whether *x* intends to teach or intends me to learn, regardless even of whether *x* is an animate being. Examples are: 'She taught/showed me what courage could be', 'The mountain taught me the value of life', and Augustine's example of the wall showing itself at iii 6. But inadvertent and inanimate teaching are presumably so called only because there is deliberate teaching, and I suggest that the same holds for deliberately contrived opportunities to learn.



the sign of, what do I learn through the sign? When I read (Dan. 3:27: LXX Dan. 3:94): 'Their *sarabarae* were not changed', the word *sarabara* does not show me the thing it signifies. If some covering of the head is so called, I surely do not learn from being told this<sup>17</sup> what a head is, or a covering. Those things I knew already, and the knowledge of them came to me not when they were named by others but when I actually saw them. After all, when these two syllables first struck my ear, *ca-put*, I was as ignorant of what they meant as I was of the meaning of *sarabara* when I first heard or read it. But when the word, *caput*, was frequently repeated, observing when it was said, I discovered it was the name of a thing well known to me from my having seen it. Before I made that discovery the word was merely a sound to me. I learned that it is a sign when I found out what it is the sign of—the thing itself, as I said, I learned not from any signifying but from my own seeing. So the sign is learned from knowing the thing, rather than the thing itself being learned when the sign is given. (x 33)

The first sentence in the quotation indicates that the argument (a semantic version of Meno's paradox) concerns individual words.<sup>18</sup> No word shows me the thing it signifies. No word, taken singly, tells me what it signifies or anything about what it signifies. Someone may tell me that a *sarabara* is a certain covering for the head, but that is no help unless I already know what a covering is and what a head is. Fair enough, but suppose I do know what a covering is and what a head is. Augustine argues that I still do not know what a *sarabara* is.<sup>19</sup> It is not just that the word *sarabara* cannot teach me this. Neither can any other word or combination of words, even words I understand

<sup>17</sup> Alternatively, 'from hearing this word'.

<sup>18</sup> This saves Augustine from being guilty of the view which Kretzmann, *op. cit.*, ascribes to him, that knowing what the words mean in 'Armadilloes are mammals' *eo ipso* precludes one's learning anything through hearing that sentence uttered. Augustine simply supposes, and reasonably, both here and later, that knowing what the words mean is a necessary condition for such learning. The bad argument which Augustine does not use may, however, be observed in Sextus Empiricus, *PH* III 267-9.

<sup>19</sup> This further point, which is the vital one, is missed in the (frequently inaccurate) account of the *De Magistro* given by Étienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine* (London 1960), 66 ff.

perfectly well. I have to look at some actual *sarabarae*. The most that words can do, provided I understand them, is tell me to look and see when some *sarabarae* are on view (x 35). Thus telling is not so unlike the birdcatcher's showing as we might have expected it to be: in their different ways, neither does more than prompt people to learn for themselves, but both can be of value for so doing.

At this point it becomes obvious, I think, that already in the *De Magistro* Augustine has special requirements on what it is to know something. Knowledge is not just a matter of having the information and being justified in accepting it. It is not more or better justification that I need in order to know what that peculiar word *sarabara* signifies, but a particular kind of first-hand justification which, now that *sarabarae* are extinct, none of us can ever have.<sup>20</sup> This emphasis on first-hand justification is confirmed when Augustine moves on from the individual word *sarabara* to the whole narrative in which it occurs. When words are combined to form sentences and stories they still cannot impart knowledge to the hearer, but *tertium datur* between knowledge and ignorance, namely, belief. A story about the triumph of belief is used to illustrate the importance of belief for an epistemology which insists that knowledge requires first-hand learning:

But you may say: granted we cannot know those head-coverings, the sound of whose name we remember, unless we see them, and that we cannot fully know the name until we know the thing. But what about those young men of whom we have heard (Dan. 3) how they vanquished King Nebuchadnezzar and his fiery furnace by faith and religion, how they sang praises to God, and won honours from their enemy? Have we learned about them otherwise than by means of words? I reply, Yes. But we already knew the meaning of all these words. I already knew the meaning of 'three youths', 'furnace', 'fire', 'king', 'unhurt by fire'<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Anyone who wants to know (and is content to be told) what *sarabara* really means may however be referred to a fascinatingly learned article by G. N. Knauer, '*sarabara* (Dan. 3, 94 [27] bei Aug. mag. 10, 33-11, 37)', *Glotta* 33 (1954), 100-118.

<sup>21</sup> This last example shows that Augustine has not forgotten that not all words are nouns.

and all the rest. But Ananias, Azarias and Misael, are as unknown to me as those *sarabarae*, and their names did not help me one bit to know them, nor could they help. I confess I believe rather than know that everything we read of in that story happened at that time, just as it was written down. And the writers whom we believe were not ignorant of the difference. For the prophet says: 'Unless ye believe ye shall not know' (Isa. 7:9: LXX). This he would not have said if he judged that there was no difference. What I understand I also believe, but I do not understand everything that I believe. All that I understand I know, but I do not know all that I believe. And I know how useful it is to believe many things which I do not know, among them this story about the three youths. Thus although there are many things I cannot know, I do know how useful it is to believe them. (xi 37)

Augustine, it turns out, is a firm believer in what Jonathan Barnes has called epistemic categories.<sup>22</sup> He sorts all knowable truths into two classes: (1) truths such that if  $x$  knows that  $p$ , then  $x$  has perceived by sense that  $p$ , (2) truths such that if  $x$  knows that  $p$ , then  $x$  has perceived by the mind that  $p$ . If  $x$  has not perceived that  $p$  in either way, he can only believe that  $p$ , not know it. This is the effect of xii 39-40:

Everything we perceive we perceive either by bodily sense or by the mind. The former we call 'sensible things', the latter 'intelligible things'; or, to use the terminology of our Christian authors, the former we call 'carnal things', the latter 'spiritual things'. When we are asked about the former we reply if they are present to our senses, for example, if we are looking at the new moon and someone asks what it is like or where it is. If our questioner does not see it he believes our words, or perhaps often does not believe them, but he learns nothing unless he himself sees what he is asking about. When he sees he learns not from words uttered but from the objects seen and his sense of sight. . . .

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Barnes, 'Socrates and the Jury: Paradoxes in Plato's Distinction between Knowledge and True Belief', *PASS* 54 (1980), 193-206.

But when we have to do with things which we behold with the mind, that is, with the intellect and reason, we speak of things which we look upon directly in the inner light of truth which illumines the "inner man" and is inwardly enjoyed. There again if my hearer sees these things himself with his inward eye, he comes to know what I say, not as a result of my words but as a result of his own contemplation. Even when I speak what is true and he sees what is true, it is not I who teach him. He is taught not by my words but by the things themselves which inwardly God has made manifest to him.

It is a direct consequence of this epistemological stance that there is no such thing as historical knowledge or knowledge transmitted by the word of another person.<sup>23</sup> All knowledge has to come from first-hand learning, by the intellect or by my own sense-perception, just as Plato maintains in the *Meno* that mathematical knowledge has to come by reasoning and knowledge of the road to Larissa by actually travelling there, and in the *Theaetetus* that what happened at the scene of a crime can only be known by the eyewitness who saw it with his own eyes.<sup>24</sup>

You get a stronger Platonic position—more like Plato's position in dialogues other than the *Meno* and *Theaetetus*—namely, that knowledge is rational understanding, if you demote the category of truths known by sense-perception and say that this is knowledge only by courtesy, by an improper manner of speaking. That is what Augustine does in the passage from the *Retractiones* quoted earlier, and elsewhere.<sup>25</sup> Plato's vacillation over whether to allow knowledge of sensible things has often been discussed. The fact that it has a parallel in Augustine suggests to me that it derives from their shared stress on first-hand learning.

I suggest, in fact, that in the *De Magistro* Augustine needs the analogy of sense-perception precisely in order to enforce the

<sup>23</sup> Augustine accepts the consequence, so far as history is concerned, at *De Div. Qu.* 83 48 (PL 40.31), *Ep.* CXX ii 9—in flat contradiction with *De Trin.* XV xii 21 (n. 8 above).

<sup>24</sup> On Plato's treatment of these issues, see my 'Socrates and the Jury: Paradoxes in Plato's Distinction between Knowledge and True Belief', *PASS* 54 (1980), 173–191, to which the present paper is a sort of sequel.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *Solil.* I iii 8 and references in Markus, *loc. cit.* (n. 8 above).

point that knowledge requires first-hand appreciation, and that it is for the same reason that Plato in the *Meno* and *Theaetetus* needs to be able to appeal to the knowledge of the eyewitness or of the man who has made the journey to Larissa. The need is the need of advocacy. For Augustine has no *argument* for the thesis that knowledge requires first-hand learning. There is no such argument in Plato either. What there is, in both Plato and Augustine, is the attempt to make the thesis persuasive to us by calling upon our sense of a great gap between the epistemic position of an eyewitness who watches an event with his own eyes and that of the jury later, or, in Augustine's example, the position of present day readers of the Book of Daniel.

Plato and Augustine want to persuade us that this gap is the gap between knowledge and mere true belief. We may reply that the alleged gap is no more than a difference: second-hand justification is a different kind of justification from first-hand, but it is not *eo ipso* less of a justification. Suppose, then, that I am justified in believing that  $p$  on the strength of an eyewitness's story, and suppose further that  $p$  is true. I claim that I know that  $p$ , just as the eyewitness does, although not on his grounds. But typically there will be other, connected facts of the case which I do not know because the eyewitness has not told me. The eyewitness frequently knows more than he tells. He saw the whole thing. That synoptic grasp in which the knowledge that  $p$  is just one element does mark a gap, a cognitive difference between him and me. And it is this which makes the eyewitness such a useful analogy for a philosopher who wants in the end to assimilate knowledge to rational understanding.<sup>26</sup> For I take it that the important difference between knowledge and understanding is that knowledge can be piecemeal, can grasp isolated truths one by one, whereas understanding always involves seeing connections and relations between the items known. "The only part of modern physics I understand is the formula "E=mc<sup>2</sup>" is nonsense. "The only part of modern physics I know is the formula "E=mc<sup>2</sup>" is merely sad.

There are several passages in the *De Magistro* which imply

<sup>26</sup> The philosopher in question need not be a Platonist. In Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* I iii 24, eyewitnessing, the need for first-hand learning, knowledge as understanding, and connectedness, all come together for his anti-Platonic attack on innate principles.

that the understanding which Adeodatus is aiming for is a matter of being able to get a clear synoptic grasp of a large complex field (x 31, xii 40, xiv 46). But I suspect that Augustine has a weaker conception of knowledge as understanding than Plato would recommend. For Plato, like Aristotle, makes it a condition on knowing or understanding that  $p$  that one grasps the explanation of  $p$ . This of course involves seeing the connection between  $p$  and a whole lot of other propositions, but it is not mere connectedness so much as explanatory connectedness that counts, and it is by way of this thought that Plato and Aristotle reach the conclusion that knowledge in the full sense, i.e. understanding, requires the synoptic grasp of a whole field.<sup>27</sup> Augustine, however, says nothing in the *De Magistro* about explanation. He may intend a more full-blooded Platonic view in the *Retractationes* when he demotes sense-perception and speaks of knowledge as owed exclusively to firm reasoning of the mind. (In sense-perception one may perceive a complex of elements as a coherent whole, but one does not perceive explanatory relations between one element and another.) But the important point for our purposes is that the emphasis on connecting one item with another is enough by itself to yield the conclusion that knowledge, in the sense of understanding, cannot be taught or conveyed by words from one person to another. Knowledge must be first-hand if it is essentially of connections.

I can of course be given the information that  $p$  is connected with  $q$ ,  $r$ , etc., just as I can be given the information that  $p$  is true because  $q$  is true. What is more, I can accept that this is so with adequate justification and thereby, in the ordinary sense, know it. But every schoolboy is familiar with the fact that it is one thing to know in that external way *that* the connection holds (e.g. that these propositions constitute a proof of that theorem), and quite another to understand the connection, to see how the elements hang together. That is something one can only do for oneself.<sup>28</sup> And we still describe the moment when this is achieved as a moment of illumination.

<sup>27</sup> See my 'Aristotle on Understanding Knowledge', in E. Berti ed., *Aristotle on Science: The Posterior Analytics* (Padua 1981), 97-139.

<sup>28</sup> This answers an objection brought by Barnes, *op. cit.*, 203, against my earlier (and more detailed) arguments on this subject.

The *De Magistro* was Augustine's first extended presentation of his famous doctrine of internal illumination. The doctrine has been described as a misguided transference of the idea of empirical vision into the intellectual sphere.<sup>29</sup> The same charge has repeatedly been levelled at the visual metaphors of which Plato is so fond. Both philosophers are represented as holding that knowledge or understanding is an immediate relation to an isolated abstract object, in much the same way as seeing a table is a relation to a single physical object. Both philosophers are in fact saying the very opposite, that knowledge or understanding is of the connections between things, of things only as parts of a whole interrelated system; that is why, like empirical vision, it involves seeing things for oneself. Both philosophers also have the idea that there is such a thing as the complete synoptic vision which embraces all partial understandings, and that any understanding which falls short of this is not in the fullest sense knowledge because it does not see all the connections. In other words, the whole truth is also the light that gives understanding. All Augustine adds is that this Truth and this Light is God as present to our mind. Hence the dictum that Christ is the only Teacher, the one source of understanding.

It is eloquent testimony both to Augustine's philosophical acumen and to the coherence of the Platonic epistemology that Augustine should have been able to reconstruct it, on the basis of a quite new set of arguments, so much better than many people who have actually read Plato's dialogues.<sup>30</sup> Whatever is to be said about Adeodatus, of Augustine at least it is true that he learned it for himself, without being taught.

### *Wittgenstein and the Confessions*

It is inconceivable that Augustine should have forgotten the *De*

<sup>29</sup> R. A. Markus, 'Augustine', in D. J. O'Connor ed., *A Critical History of Western Philosophy* (London 1964), 87.

<sup>30</sup> Augustine thinks of himself as an admirer of Plato and refers to the *Meno* often enough, but *De Trin.* XII xv 24 implies that he does not know what questions Socrates put to the slave. This would be because he read about the *Meno* in Cicero, *Tusc.* I 57-8. See further Pierre Courcelle, *Late Latin Writers and their Greek Sources* (Cambridge, Mass. 1969), 168 ff., who suggests that Augustine's first-hand knowledge of Plato was confined to the portion of the *Timaeus* translated by Cicero. What he did read, thanks to God's intervention, was 'the books of the Platonists' (*Conf.* VII ix 13, VIII ii 3), i.e. Plotinus and his followers.

*Magistro* when he came to write the *Confessions* (397–401 AD). The dialogue was all too painfully associated with the death of his son soon after its dramatic date.<sup>31</sup> Besides, Wittgenstein's quotation from *Conf.* I viii 13 exactly matches what Augustine says about how he learned the word *caput* in *De Mag.* x 33 (quoted above). Add the preceding sentences, which Wittgenstein omitted; view the whole in the wider setting provided by the *De Magistro*; and it becomes clear, I submit, that Augustine's concentration, in the now famous account of language learning, on words for objects that can be pointed out or shown (*ostendere*) is due to epistemological considerations rather than a primitive theory of meaning. Language learning starts with the interplay between visible objects and visible adults because these are things the child can see for himself and his task is to discover for himself that certain of the sounds which adults emit are connected with things he already knows. To repeat:

I learned that it is a sign when I found out what it is the sign of—the thing itself, as I said, I learned not from any signifying but from my own seeing. So the sign is learned from knowing the thing, rather than the thing itself being learned when the sign is given. (x 33)

We have seen, moreover, that Augustine shares with Wittgenstein a strong sense that nothing other people may do or say, and no fact about the world around me, can determine me to respond in the right way. No-one can achieve my understanding for me, not for the trivial reason that it is mine, but because to internalize the requisite connections is to go beyond what is presented on any occasion of so-called teaching. Augustine does not have Wittgenstein's subtle arguments to bring out the multiplicity of ways in which I might seem (to myself and others) to understand and later turn out to have missed the point, which in turn demonstrates the multiplicity of connections involved in understanding itself. But we might read Wittgenstein as reviving the ancient understanding of the complexity of understanding. And we certainly should read *Conf.* I viii 13 as agreeing with Wittgenstein that the description quoted in *PI* §1 is wholly inadequate to explain how little Augustine came to

<sup>31</sup> *Conf.* IX vi 14, cited above n. 6.



grasp his first words. Divine help was needed, in the form of the mind (*mens* or *memoria*) which Augustine inherited from the Platonic tradition.

My final suggestion—for obvious reasons it can be no more than a suggestion—is that Wittgenstein probably knew much better than his expositors what he was doing when he omitted the sentences preceding his quotation.<sup>32</sup> To leave out God and the Platonic mind for the beginning of the *Philosophical Investigations* was to accept Augustine's problem as his own and to declare that it must now be solved in naturalistic,<sup>3</sup> purely human terms:

Would it not be possible for us, however, to calculate as we actually do (all agreeing, and so on), and still at every step to have a feeling of being guided by the rules as by a spell, feeling astonishment at the fact that we agreed? (We might give thanks to the Deity for our agreement.)

This merely shews what goes to make up what we call "obeying a rule" in everyday life. (*PI* §§234–5; cf. *Conf.* X xl 65)<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> The first time he copied out (some of) his Augustine quotation, in the 1936 revision of *BB* published as *Eine Philosophische Betrachtung* (Vol. 5 of the Suhrkamp *Schriften*, Frankfurt am Main 1970, 117), he began it, '... cum . . . appellabant, etc.'. Not even this minimal gesture towards a larger context is to be found in, for example, Robert L. Arrington, "'Mechanism and Calculus': Wittgenstein on Augustine's Theory of Ostension', in Luckhardt, *op. cit.*, 322–9; as a result, I have to say that what Arrington presents as 'Augustine's theory' is largely fiction.

<sup>33</sup> I am grateful for assistance from Th. Ebert and Brian McGuinness; for comments on an earlier draft by Julia Annas, Robert Brandom, C. A. J. Coady, Gareth B. Matthews, John Procopé, and Richard Sorabji; for a published critique by Alexander Nehamas ('Meno's Paradox and Socrates as Teacher', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 3 [1985], 26–9); and above all for a penetrating commentary prepared by Norman Kretzmann for a discussion at Cornell.