

AUGUSTINE ON THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF TEACHING¹

In *Philosophical Investigations* I, Wittgenstein writes:²

[151] Let us imagine the following example: A writes a series of numbers down; B watches him and tries to find a law for the sequence of numbers. If he succeeds he exclaims: “Now I can go on!”—So this capacity, this understanding, is something that makes its appearance in a moment. So let us try to see what it is that makes its appearance here. . .

[154] . . . If there has to be anything ‘behind the utterance of the formula’ it is *particular circumstances*, which justify me in saying I can go on—when the formula occurs to me. . . In the sense in which there are processes (including mental processes) which are characteristic of understanding, understanding is not a mental process.

These words, it seems to me, give us a particular picture of the essence of human understanding. It is this: learning something is mastering a technique (§150 and §199)—being able to go on. In this picture of understanding we find the roots of the following idea: Knowledge is a matter of rule-governed behavior. Yet rules are intrinsically public (§202). Hence knowing cannot be a private affair, a matter of inner episodes of awareness.

Wittgenstein’s picture has dominated the last half-century or so of analytic philosophy. It has been especially fruitful in two areas. In the philosophy of language, it has given us semantic holism; in the philosophy of mind it has given us the anti-cartesian movement, embracing functionalists, wide-content theorists, behaviorists, defenders of strong AI, and others.

Against this consensus I want to counterpose a single philosopher: Augustine. In his dialogue *The Teacher* (389) he comes to the conclusion that knowing *is* a matter of an inner episode of awareness (called ‘illumination’), flying in the face of Wittgenstein’s picture. Now I think Augustine has gotten hold of a very deep and puzzling philosophical problem—one that the Wittgensteinian tradition has to deny exists, or, to the extent that it is recognized, to deny that it poses a *philosophical* problem. For, according to the Wittgensteinian tradition, knowledge is intrinsically public and

¹ Translations from the *Philosophical Investigations* come from Wittgenstein [1967]; all other translations are mine. Citations of the *De magistro* are from Augustine [1970], and translations from King [1995].

² [151] . . . Stellen wir uns dieses Beispiel vor: A schreibt Reihen von Zahlen an; B sieht ihm zu und trachtet, in der Zahlenfolge in Gesetz zu finden. Ist es ihm gelungen, so ruft er: “Jetzt kann ich fortsetzen!”—Diese Fähigkeit, dieses Verstehen ist also etwas, was in einem Augenblick eintritt. Schauen wir also nach: Was ist es, was hier eintritt? . . . [154] . . . Wenn etwas ‘hinter dem Aussprechen der Formel’ stehen muß, so sind es *gewisse Umstände*, die mich berechtigen, zu sagen, ich könne fortsetzen,—wenn mir die Formel einfällt. . . In dem Sinne, in welchem es für das Verstehen charakteristische Vorgänge (auch seelische Vorgänge) gibt, ist das Verstehen kein seelischer Vorgang.

so cannot have private unshareable constituents. Yet on Augustine's side, consider the following example. You rehearse to yourself the steps of a mathematical proof in an effort to understand it, but not yet grasping it: you're merely parroting the proof. While thinking it through, however, you suddenly have a flash of insight and see how the proof works—you understand it and thereby recognize its truth. There is a real difference between your situation when you do not understand the proof and your situation after understanding it. We commonly describe this difference with visual metaphors, speaking of the flash of insight, seeing the truth, enlightenment, and so on. Augustine calls it *illumination*.³ It is an inner episode constitutive of knowledge, one whereby we become aware of (or 'see') the truth.⁴ The power that reveals the truth to us, Augustine maintains, is Christ as the Teacher operating within us (*The Teacher* 11.38); the very understanding we have testifies to God's presence in the world, since the mind is illuminated with knowledge by the inner Teacher.⁵

³ Augustine, like Plato, explains the metaphor of illumination as involving the direct grasp of special objects (*i. e.* Forms) in a public realm accessible only to the mind. Plato held that this took place prior to the soul's incarnation; Augustine, that it happens during this life—see *De libero arbitrio* 2.

⁴ This formulation is neutral on the disputed question whether for Augustine illumination is that by means of which we are able to exercise our cognitive powers to grasp the truth (as sunlight is that by means of which we can exercise our perceptual faculties to see objects) or the actual comprehension of the truth itself (as seeing itself grasps objects). There are texts on both sides of the question, and *The Teacher* does not resolve it. The same ambiguity pervades our everyday metaphors: in a "flash of insight," the flash is like something we see by, whereas the insight is like the seeing itself. Unfortunately, the language of 'illumination' lends itself to blurring a crucial distinction between the cognitive grasp of a claim and the (further?) judgment that the claim is true—both mixed together in the idea that a knower sees the truth. Likewise, even if the paradigmatic case of knowledge is that of grasping a truth, Augustine recognizes and must account for cases of knowing that do not seem to be episodes of awareness, such as unconscious learning. Straightening out such matters is the task of a positive theory of illumination, which I'm not going to pursue here.

⁵ The theory of illumination is at its most plausible with mathematics, where the objects of knowledge are necessary truths that typically deal with ideal objects, such as perfect circles. How far it extends is disputed. (The dispute is exacerbated by disagreement over what should count as knowledge in the first place.) The view that it is fully generalizable to all instances of knowledge is called 'general illumination' and the view that it is needed only for special cases, such as advanced knowledge in the various disciplines, is called 'special illumination'. The scope of divine activity in illumination is also problematic. Does God have to directly act in each instance of knowledge, or merely ordain the world in such a way that humans can be knowers? These matters are discussed in Nash [1969].

Augustine identifies Christ as the Teacher within us for theological reasons, confirmed by *Matthew* 23:10—“Nor are you [men] called teachers, since there is one Teacher for you: Christ”⁶—and develops his theory of illumination into a full account of knowledge. But I want to put the (disputed) details of Augustine’s *solution* aside in order to concentrate on his arguments showing that there is a philosophical *problem* here, one that requires a solution such as the theory of illumination. For this is precisely what the contemporary tradition denies. Wittgenstein himself denies it late in *Philosophical Investigations* I:⁷

[321] “What happens when a man suddenly understands?”—The question is badly framed. If it is a question about the meaning of the expression “sudden understanding,” the answer is not to point to a process that we give this name to.—The question might mean: what are the tokens of sudden understanding; what are its characteristic psychical accompaniments?...

[322] The question what the expression means is not answered by such a description; and this misleads us into concluding that understanding is a specific indefinable experience.

This passage will not serve as a stand-alone refutation of Augustine, however, because Wittgenstein asks about the “characteristic psychical accompaniments” of understanding, on the grounds that ‘understanding’ is justifiably ascribed on the basis of rule-following behavior in particular circumstances, and hence is not “psychical” at all and thereby not an “indefinable experience.” In the dialectical context of the *Philosophical Investigations* these matters have been taken care of—but it is precisely their argumentative support we need to examine more closely.⁸ And here Wittgenstein and Augustine are on common ground, for they agree that the issue must be addressed in the context of *learning* and *teaching*.

⁶ There were predecessors: Clement of Alexandria’s *Παιδαγωγός* (ca. 180), devoted to the role of Christ as educator, is the most obvious example.

⁷ [321] “Was geschieht, wenn ein Mensch plötzlich versteht?”—Die Frage ist schlecht gestellt. Fragt sie nach der Bedeutung des Ausdrucks “plötzlich verstehen,” so ist die Antwort nicht das Hinweisen auf einen Vorgang, den wir so nennen.—Die Frage könnte bedeuten: Was sind Anzeichen dafür, daß Einer plötzlich versteht; welches sind die charakteristischen psychischen Begleiterscheinungen des plotzlichen Verstehens?... [322] Daß die Antwort auf die Frage nach der Bedeutung des Ausdrucks mit dieser Beschreibung nicht gegeben ist, verleitet dann zu der Folgerung, das Verstehen sei eben ein spezifisches, undefinierbares, Erlebnis.

⁸ Wittgenstein’s earlier argument, on which the argument of §§321–322 depends, isn’t much better: see §§152–153, where he first talks about psychological “accompaniments” (Begleitvorgänge) of understanding. See also §191. Wittgenstein does raise a good question for Augustine in §323 when he asks whether the ‘feeling’ of enlightenment may be mistaken.

Augustine bases his case for understanding on an apparent paradox: the impossibility of teaching. But to get the full flavor of Augustine's argument and to appreciate its force, we should look at his development of the problem. To do that, in turn, we should briefly consider what Augustine regarded as the first but flawed attempt to deal with it: the Theory of Recollection presented by Plato in the *Meno*.

According to Plato, all instances of learning are merely apparent. Learning in reality is the soul's "recollection" (ἀνάμνησις: 'un-forgetting') of truths it already possesses: recollection is "recovering knowledge by oneself that is in oneself" (*Meno* 85d4 and 85d6–7).⁹ Plato supports his Theory of Recollection by the vivid example of the dialogue between Socrates and a slave-boy, complete with a running commentary on the side to *Meno* (82b–85b). Socrates sets the slave-boy, who is ignorant of geometry, the problem of constructing a square with an area twice the size of a given square. The boy suggests that a square with sides of double length will have twice the area; recognizing his mistake, however, he proceeds to generate the correct construction, which is obvious from simple diagrams. During the conversation the boy has come to see why his first answer is wrong and why the correct answer is correct; he has acquired knowledge by coming to grasp the reasons behind the proof.¹⁰ And that, as Plato concludes, is an internal process. Hence the slave-boy does not really learn at all, but "un-forgets" something already known. Likewise, no teaching takes place in the conversation between Socrates and the boy.

Augustine has only secondhand knowledge of Plato's argument, which he derived from the brief summary given by Cicero in his *Tusculan Disputations* 1.24.57.¹¹

In the *Meno*, Socrates asks a young boy some geometrical questions about the area of

⁹ Plato argues that such knowledge must have been acquired by the soul before its present incarnation in this life; Augustine, though he remained neutral on the possibility of the soul's pre-existence, finds the latter part of this doctrine dispensable, and accordingly dispenses with it.

¹⁰ Socrates later tells us that beliefs, even true beliefs, are "not worth much until they are tied down by reasoning about the explanation (αἰτίας λογισμῶ)—and this is recollection, as we previously agreed" (*Meno* 98a3–5). See Nehamas [1985] for an account of recollection.

¹¹ Nam in illo libro, qui inscribitur Μένων, pusionem quendam Socrates interrogat quaedam geometrica de dimensione quadrati: ad ea sic ille respondet, ut puer, et tamen ita faciles interrogationes sunt, ut gradatim respondens eodem perueniat quo si geometrica didicisset; ex quo effici uult Socrates ut discere nihil aliud sit nisi recordari. See Testard [1958] and Hagendahl [1967] in support of Augustine's indirect acquaintance with the *Meno* (his phrasing in the *De Trinitate*, cited below, clinches the question).

a square; he replies to them as a young boy would, but the questions are so easy that, replying step-by-step, he reaches the same result as if he had learned geometry—from which Socrates wants to conclude that learning is nothing other than remembering.

Augustine's own recapitulation of Plato's argument is even sketchier (*De Trinitate* 12.15.24):¹²

[Plato] recounts how a certain boy, when asked something or other about geometry, answered as though he were quite skilled in this discipline. Artfully¹³ questioned step-by-step, he saw what was to be seen, and described what he saw.

(Note the closing visual metaphors!) Augustine goes on to dismiss Plato's proposed answer to the problem, recollection, with a joke:¹⁴

But if this were a case of remembering things previously known, then surely nobody (or almost nobody) could do this when questioned in this fashion. For not all people were geometers in a prior life—given that there are so few of them in the human race that one can hardly be found!

The barb inside the joke is, of course, that Plato's denial of learning has to be wrong, since different people have different levels of knowledge. For, unlike Plato, Augustine does think there are genuine instances of learning. Therefore, Plato's development of the problem of learning must take a wrong turn.

Augustine does not directly address Plato's account of the conversation between the slave-boy and Socrates. Quite likely this was due to his having no more information than that presented in the bare sketch recounted above. But even if he had had more, he may well not have addressed it; Augustine thought Plato had in fact mishandled his own argument. When Socrates emphasizes to Meno that he, Socrates, isn't telling the slave-boy anything but merely asking questions (*Meno* 82e2–3 and 84d1–2), Augustine, along with generations of readers, immediately counters with the objection that information can be conveyed through leading questions (part of the force of his use of *gradatim* and *artificiose* in sketching the argument). Plato undermines his argument by making it turn (or seem to turn) on the dubious claim that questions cannot teach. Therefore, so the objection goes, Socrates does in fact teach the slave-boy—that is, he provides him with

¹² Retulit enim puerum quendam nescio quae de geometrica interrogatum sic respondisse tamquam esset illius peritissimus disciplinae. Gradatim quippe atque artificiose interrogatus uidebat quod uidendum erat dicebatque quod uiderat.

¹³ The term “artfully” (*artificiose*) is artfully chosen: it can mean on the one hand “skilled” or “according to technique,” as translated here, but on the other hand has overtones of an activity that is “unnatural” or “forced”—“artificial” in our sense.

¹⁴ Sed si recordatio haec esset rerum antea cognitarum, non utique omnes uel pene omnes cum illo modo interrogarentur hoc possent, non enim omnes in priore uita geometrae fuerunt cum tam rari sint in genere humano ut uix possit aliquis inueniri!

knowledge he did not previously possess: Socrates transfers information to the slave-boy, information thinly disguised in interrogative form.¹⁵

Augustine describes for us this common-sense alternative to Platonic recollection, the ‘information-transference account’ of teaching, in his *Homilies on John the Evangelist* 37.4.14–24 (commenting on *John* 8:19):¹⁶

When there is an idea in your heart it differs from [any] sound, but the idea that is in you seeks out the sound as though it were a vehicle to come across to me. Therefore it clothes itself in the sound, somehow gets itself into this vehicle, travels through the air, comes to me. . . . You’ve said what you were thinking and uttered those syllables so that what was hidden inside you would come to me; the sound of the syllables conveys your thought to my ear; through my ear your thought has descended into my heart.

You encode your thoughts into language and utter the appropriate sounds; I hear your utterances, and, knowing the language, I decode them back into ideas. That is how knowledge can be transferred from your mind to mine. Furthermore, ITA seems to explain and justify pedagogical practice, since we do think of teaching, at least in many cases (putting aside apprenticeship and skills-acquisition), as a matter of knowledgeable people transferring their wisdom to the unknowledgeable beginners. Note that ‘teaching’ is taken widely here, so that it covers more than formal instructional situations.

Plato’s attempt to deal with the problem, then, is flawed. Why should anyone subscribe to the Theory of Recollection when ITA explains the mistake in Plato’s argument and is plausible in its own right? Indeed, why should anyone find teaching or learning philosophically problematic?

Augustine tries to address these worries in *The Teacher*. He takes on ITA

¹⁵ At the beginning of *The Teacher*, Adeodatus proposes that the function of language is for us “to teach or to learn” (1.1), emphasizing the communicative function of language as a vehicle for the transmission of information, *e. g.* in making statements and raising questions. But Augustine rules out ‘learning’ on the grounds that interrogative discourse is merely disguised assertoric discourse. Adeodatus agrees and thereby endorses the proposal that language is the medium for one-way transference of knowledge from the speaker to the listener—a version of ITA (described in the next paragraph).

¹⁶ Apud te ipsum, o homo, cum est in corde tuo uerbum, aliud est quam sonus; sed uerbum quod est apud te, ut transeat ad me, sonum quasi uehiculum quaerit. Assumit ergo sonum, imponit se quodammodo in uehiculum, transcurrit aerem, uenit ad me. . . . Quod cogitabas dixisti; et ut ad me perueniret quod apud te latebat, syllabas sonuisti sonus syllabarum perduxit ad aurem meam cogitationem tuam, per aurem meam descendit in cor meum cogitatio tua, sonus medius transuolauit; uerbum uero illud quod assumsit sonum, antequam sonares, erat apud te; quia sonuisti, est apud me, et non recessit a te. (I translate ‘idea’ here since Augustine is talking about his theory of the inner mental Word.)

by offering an extended analysis of *language*, since language is the medium through which ITA maintains that knowledge is transferred. The result of Augustine's philosophical investigations is that language is inadequate to the task. We come to know linguistic facts through language—that two words mutually signify one another, say—and we can also acquire beliefs about nonlinguistic items through language, from the testimony of others. But that's all. We can't acquire *knowledge* about nonlinguistic items, as opposed to (mere) belief, through language. Without language to serve as an effective medium for the transmission of knowledge, ITA cannot work; teaching is impossible. Hence Augustine is free to present and argue for his alternative to ITA, namely the theory of illumination. Most of *The Teacher* is thus given over to the analysis of language, including our abilities to know items through language and independently of it.¹⁷

Words are linked to things and are used to gain knowledge of the things to which they are linked. Language, according to Augustine, is a system of *signs*. Signs include a wide range of linguistic and nonlinguistic items: words, inscriptions, gestures, symbols, icons, statues, traffic-lights, flags. Three elements are involved: the *sign*, which may be any sort of object; the semantic relation of *signifying*, which is what a sign does, roughly like our notion of meaning; and its *significate*, which is the item signified by the sign.¹⁸ These elements are combined in the expected manner (4.9):¹⁹

We generally call 'signs' all those things that signify something.

Therefore, a sign signifies its significate—when a word is linked to a thing, the word becomes a sign, the thing its significate; and the linkage is accomplished by the semantic relation of signifying. The paradigm case of a sign is the proper name: a proper name (sign) names (signifies) its bearer (significate), so that meaning is taken to be a kind of labeling of things.²⁰

¹⁷ I adopt the analysis of the structure of *The Teacher* presented in Crosson [1989]. Augustine's roundabout method—for which he apologizes in 8.21, and which he explains in 12.40—has pedagogical motivations: his audience must be properly prepared before it can understand and accept the theory of illumination. See King [1995] for more details.

¹⁸ In Latin as in English there is a tempting word to use in connection with signs: *significatio*, signification. This term is ambiguous, referring either to the property possessed by the sign in virtue of its activity of signifying, or to the significate (or class of significates) of a sign. Augustine uses 'signification' in both senses in *The Teacher*. He defines 'sign' in *De doctrina christiana* 2.1.1: "A *sign* is a thing that of itself causes something else to enter into thought beyond the appearance it presents to the senses."

¹⁹ Dicimus enim et signa uniuersaliter omnia quae significant aliquid.

²⁰ The attempt to construe meaning solely in terms of naming, using the model of proper

Just as a proper name must have a bearer to be a name (for a name must be the name of something), so too a sign must have a significate that it signifies. Hence to explicate the meaning of a term is to exhibit its significate, without recourse to any intermediary signs (*The Teacher* 2.4). Augustine's reasoning here is straightforward. To know that *s* is a sign of *x* we have to know *s* and *x* and that the appropriate relation, namely signifying, holds between them. Hence we cannot know *s* to be a sign unless we know the item that is its significate, namely *x*. To know *x* requires direct and unmediated access to *x*; other signs would just get in the way and interfere with our cognitive grasp of *x*. In the last analysis, therefore, explicating the meaning of a word is a matter of exhibiting its significate for us to know directly.²¹ In modern terminology, we have arrived at a "language-exit transition."²² What sorts of items can show themselves as themselves, without any intermediary signs?

Augustine proposes that there are 'self-exhibiting items': if the significate of a sign is an action that can be performed, then the meaning of the sign can be explicated through its performance (3.6).²³ However, not all signs have such self-exhibiting actions as significates, and so the question naturally arises which signs and significates can be explicated in this way. Answering this question leads Augustine and his interlocutor, Adeodatus, to draw a threefold division (*tripertita distributione*) among kinds of signs and things.

This fundamental division is motivated by semantic and epistemological concerns. Augustine states it as follows (4.7):²⁴

Thus [1] when a question is raised about certain signs, these signs can be exhibited by means of signs. Yet [2] when a question is raised about things that aren't signs,

names, has serious difficulties. (This is the account Gilbert Ryle derisively called the 'Fido'-Fido account of language: the dog's name 'Fido' picks out the actual dog Fido itself, a claim that works for pets and not much else.) See Burnyeat [1987] for a discussion of Augustine's proposal in modern terms. Even Augustine seems to be aware that not all he wants to say can be said with this model in mind, for at one point he introduces an element that looks suspiciously like the *meaning* (intension) of a sign; see *The Teacher* 7.20.

²¹ Augustine gives this argument in 10.33 (and follows out its consequences in 10.33–11.37).

²² This expression is derived from Sellars [1963].

²³ For this tactic to succeed, the performance of the action has to be literally 'self-exhibiting', incapable of misinterpretation. But that's impossible, Augustine hints, although he lets Adeodatus get away with claiming that he could always disambiguate an action through performance (3.6).

²⁴ Cum ergo de quibusdam signis quaeritur, possunt signis signa monstrari; cum autem de rebus, quae signa non sunt, aut eas agendo post inquisitionem, si agi possunt, aut signa dando, per quae animaduerti queant.

[these things can be exhibited] either [(a)] by doing them after the query [has been made], if they can be done, or [(b)] by giving signs with which they may be brought to one's attention.

On the one hand, we might ask what conditions have to be satisfied for us to have knowledge of significates that are themselves signs. This is Augustine's Division [1]. On the other hand, we might be concerned with knowledge of significates that are nonsigns. This is Division [2]. Nevertheless, although we are interested in non-sign significates, signs might be relevant in two ways. First, the nonsign significates could be the sort of self-exhibiting items Augustine and Adeodatus have been discussing; this possibility is covered under Division [2(a)]. But even when the significates are not self-exhibiting items, signs might function instrumentally in somehow prompting us to gain knowledge of the significates, and this is covered in Division [2(b)].

Augustine and Adeodatus discuss each part of the fundamental division in turn. The discussion of Division [1] occupies 4.7–6.18, concluding with Adeodatus's summary in 7.19–20 and Augustine's apology in 8.21. The discussion of Division [2] begins in 8.22 and occupies the remainder of *The Teacher*. This division requires us to move beyond the knowledge of signs to the knowledge of significates that are not themselves signs. After some preliminaries are out of the way, Augustine and Adeodatus discuss Division [2(a)] in 10.29–32, and Augustine delivers a monologue about Division [2(b)] in 10.33–13.46.²⁵ It is in the last case that we return to ITA and puzzles surrounding teaching and learning.

Division [1] deals with knowing significates that are themselves signs—call this 'semiotic' knowledge. (In the restricted case of linguistic signs it is linguistic knowledge.) Augustine and Adeodatus identify a pair of signs that signify each other mutually, are coextensional, and differ only in sound: the interlinguistic synonyms 'name' and 'ὄνομα'; each exhibits the other to the greatest possible degree, given that they are different signs (6.18). Thus it is possible to know signs through signs, to the extent to which one sign can exhibit itself or another. But we can set this aside for our purposes, since it is a very minimal kind of knowledge, applying to a restricted range of facts.

Division [2] deals with significates that are nonsigns. More precisely, it deals with the extent to which things that may be signifiable (but are not themselves signs) can be known, either (a) in their own right or (b) through

²⁵ Crosson [1989] 126 notes that the treatment of Division [1], Division [2], and Division [2(b)] all begin with *consideremus* ("let us consider"), the formal mark for transition among segments of a work, and that the discussion of Division [2(a)] begins with an explicit reference to continuing the analysis.

signs. The upshot of Augustine's discussion of (a) is that self-exhibiting items are or at least can be known in their own right rather than through signs. This class of items includes not only human actions but also all natural things: the sun, moon, stars, land, sea, and creatures of the world (10.32). Knowledge of such things does not depend on signs; it is, in a sense to be spelled out, 'self-intimating'.

We can know about words through words, and we can know about the world directly from the world itself. Is there a link between words and the world, between linguistic sign and nonlinguistic significate, of the sort demanded by ITA? Can people teach us by telling us truths?

Augustine takes up this question in (b), and he answers it in the negative. Nothing is learned through its signs (10.33: *nihil... per sua signa discatur*). He argues for this conclusion by demonstrating that nothing can be taught by means of signs—that teaching is impossible. Augustine initially states his main argument against ITA as a version of the learner's paradox (*ibid.*):²⁶

When a sign is given to me, it can teach me nothing if it finds me ignorant of the thing of which it is the sign—but if I'm not ignorant, what do I learn through the sign?

I cannot know that a sign is a sign unless I know what it signifies—but then I learn nothing from the sign; my knowledge of its significate is presupposed in its being a sign in the first place. More exactly, I can only know that something is a sign if I know that it signifies, but I only know it as a sign—it can “teach me”—if I know what it signifies. Hence teaching by means of signs is impossible.

Augustine argues that if you come across an unfamiliar word, such as *sarabarae*,²⁷ it is meaningless until you can correlate it with its significate—for “the word doesn't show me the thing it signifies”: *Non enim mihi rem, quam significat, ostendit uerbum* (10.33). The situation is the same for any unfamiliar word, and hence for the case of language-learning in general. Knowledge is derived from things directly rather than from their signs.

The contemporary response to this line of thought is to insist that we have here a paradigmatic case of a language-exit transition. This is usually accomplished by ostension: we aim our finger at the significate while ut-

²⁶ *Cum enim mihi signum datur, si nescientem me inuenerit, cuius rei signum sit, docere me nihil potest, si uero scientem, quid disco per signum?*

²⁷ *Daniel* 3:94 (Vulgate) = 3:27 (RSV). (The Vulgate has *sarabala* rather than *sarabara*.) I have left *sarabarae* untranslated, since Augustine is employing a deliberately unfamiliar word to make his point. A good thing, too: the form and meaning of the word are extremely unclear. See the entry in Pauly-Wissowa [1920] 2.R.1 col. 2386 *s.v.* *saraballa*, and Knauer [1954].

tering the sign. We forge our word-world connections by pointing out the referent of a given utterance.

Augustine rejects this response on the grounds that ostension is equally a conventional sign. We have not made an *exit* from the circle of signs at all; we have merely substituted one sort of conventional sign (gesture) for another (word). Aiming a finger at the significate is as conventional a sign as can be (10.34):²⁸

I don't much care about aiming with the finger, because it seems to me to be a sign of the pointing-out itself rather than of any things that are pointed out. It's like the exclamation "Look!"—we typically also aim the finger along with this exclamation, in case one sign of the pointing-out isn't enough.

Augustine draws the obvious moral (*ibid.*):²⁹

Most of all I'm trying to persuade you, if I'll be able to, that we don't learn anything by these signs called words. As I have stated, we learn the meaning of a word—that is, we learn the signification hidden in the sound—once the thing signified is itself known, rather than our perceiving it by means of such signification.

Words at best prompt us to look for things, and we derive knowledge directly from the things themselves (11.36). We have not gained knowledge of nonsigns through signs.

ITA holds that the speaker transmits knowledge to the hearer—or at least, transmits the speaker's thoughts and beliefs, if not knowledge. But even this weaker thesis cannot be right. There are many cases, after all, in which language does not serve to accurately encode a speaker's thoughts, and *a fortiori* the speaker does not transfer his thoughts to the hearer. Augustine mentions four cases. First, in 13.41 he describes the case of an Epicurean reciting proofs for the immortality of the soul, proofs the Epicurean himself disbelieves; should someone "able to look upon spiritual things" hear him, then "he judges that the speaker is stating truths" even though the speaker himself, as a good Epicurean atheist, doesn't know that he is stating truths (and indeed takes himself to be stating falsehoods instead). Second, liars and deceivers do not reveal their thoughts by their words, but ultimately conceal them by their words. Third, we may speak about one thing and think about another, especially in the case of memorized recitation. Fourth, there are slips of the tongue and misstatements, which surely don't

²⁸ Sed de intentione digiti non nimis curo, quia ipsius demonstrationis signum mihi uideatur potius quam rerum aliquarum, quae demonstrantur, sicut aduerbium, quod "ecce" dicimus; nam et cum hoc aduerbio digitum solemus intendere, ne unum demonstrandi signum non sit satis.

²⁹ Et id maxime tibi nitor persuadere si potero, per ea signa, quae uerba appellantur, nos nihil discere; potius enim ut dixi uim uerbi, id est significationem, quae latet in sono, re ipsa, quae significatur, cognita discimus, quam illam tali significatione percipimus.

reflect the speaker's thoughts. Hence language does not always have the simple function of conveying thoughts, much less knowledge, from speaker to hearer.

There are also difficulties on the side of the hearer, difficulties that show that the simple causal model proposed by ITA, wherein the speaker can cause the hearer to have knowledge by directly affecting his soul (via the medium of language), cannot be correct. For one the one hand, there are instances of misunderstanding, which should not be possible if language literally causes ideas in the hearer (13.43). On the other hand, there are also cases of mishearing plain and simple (13.44). Both of these cases point to a deeper problem with the causal account, namely that because the hearer must know the language the speaker uses, there must be a minimum of interpretive activity the hearer must contribute to the process.

Now it might be objected that in the absence of complicating factors such as mishearings and misunderstandings I do learn from others—perhaps I do not receive their thoughts directly, but I learn whatever may be gathered from the content of their reports and their descriptions. But Augustine argues against even this limited claim (11.37), asserting that what is signified by the words in a narrative account must already be known to us; if not, the words don't enable us to know the things, as in the case of *sarabarae*. More important, he points out that from narrative description all we can get is belief rather than knowledge (12.40):³⁰

I might say: "The things I'm saying that you admit to be truths, and that you're certain of, and that you affirm yourself to know—where did you learn them?" Maybe you would reply that I had taught them to you. Then I would rejoin: "What if I should say that I had seen a flying man?³¹ Do my words then make you as certain as if you were to hear that wise men are better than fools?" Surely you would deny it and reply that you do not believe the former statement, or even if you did believe it that you do not know it; whereas you know the latter statement with utter certainty. As a result, you would then understand that you hadn't learned anything from my words, neither in the former case (where you did not know although I was asserting it) nor in the latter case (where you knew quite well), seeing that when questioned about each case you would swear the former was unknown and the latter known to

³⁰ Ut dicerem: ea quae me loquente uera esse confiteris et certus es et te illa nosse confirmas, unde didicisti? Responderes fortasse, quod ego docuissem. Tum ego subnecterem: quid si me hominem uolantem uidisse dicerem, itane te certum uerba mea redderent, quemadmodum si audires sapientes homines stultis esse meliores? Negares profecto et responderes illud te non credere aut etiamsi crederes ignorare, hoc autem certissime scire. Ex hoc iam nimirum intellegeres neque in illo, quod me affirmante ignorares, neque in hoc, quod optime scires, aliquid te didicisse uerbis meis, quandoquidem etiam interrogatus de singulis et illud ignotum et hoc tibi notum esse iurares.

³¹ The same example is discussed in *De utilitate credendi* 16.34.

you.

Even if we allow that the speaker's thoughts are "known" (in some extended sense), the hearer does not thereby learn whether what the speaker has said (or thought) is true, a necessary condition for having knowledge. Rather, the test of knowledge is still within each person. In the case of items perceived by the senses, we have knowledge when the sensible object itself is present to us.³² In the case of items perceived by the mind, we look upon these "immediately in the inner light of Truth" and know them.³³ Signs can at best lead to knowledge only of other signs, not of signifiable things that are not signs, and to belief about what is not known firsthand from the things themselves. And while belief is useful and has its place, it is not to be confused with knowledge. Hence teaching cannot succeed in conveying knowledge from one person to another, as it is supposed to do according to ITA.

Augustine concludes that nothing can be taught through the use of signs. But since teaching can only take place through signs (an earlier result of *The Teacher*), it follows that teaching, in the sense required by ITA, is simply impossible. Augustine then turns to positive argumentation for his theory of illumination as a way to explain learning.³⁴ We need not follow him in that enterprise.

Take stock. In *The Teacher* Augustine has given us an extended argument that teaching is impossible. Since knowing something is an inner episode of awareness—specifically, comprehension of what has been proposed and then an internal test to see whether it is true—knowledge just isn't the sort of thing that can be transferred between persons. Of course, Augustine does not argue this way; to do so would be to beg the question against

³² Augustine is puzzled over the case of 'past sensibles': how can we know things that happened in the past, given that the objects themselves are not present but only their representations are? His tentative answer is that we know past objects *as* past through present representations of them, but this knowledge must be individual. This is an intimation of problems that will eventually be dealt with in the *Confessions*; see O'Daly [1987].

³³ Roughly, each person grasps conceptual truths, to the extent he or she is able, without recourse to experience or external testimony. See the discussion below.

³⁴ Two arguments are worth noting. First, Augustine argues that his theory of illumination explains the plausibility of ITA: people are so "quick to learn internally after the prompting of the lecturer, they suppose that they have learned externally from the one who prompted them" (14.45). Second, Augustine declares that the theory of illumination is self-validating: you can recognize its truth by looking within! (It is not, however, a reliable negative test: failing to recognize the truth of a proposition does not mean that it is false.)

Wittgenstein. Nor need we accept (or even explore!) Augustine's theory of illumination to take the important point from his discussion, namely that learning (and so teaching) pose a deep and puzzling *philosophical* problem—one that the contemporary tradition does not often recognize.

Yet it would be too strong to say that the contemporary tradition *never* recognizes learning and understanding as a problem, or that Augustine's intuitions are entirely absent from the contemporary philosophical scene. Ideas very like Augustine's are at work, I believe, in the classic attack on "strong AI"—roughly, the view that computers can think in literally the same sense that we can—put forward in Searle [1981], with his famous example of the Chinese Room. Briefly, his case is as follows. Searle imagines that he is locked in a room that has two slots in the wall and a "dictionary" table with squiggles on one side and squoggles on the other. Every so often a piece of paper comes through one slot, covered with squiggles. In the absence of anything better to do, Searle writes down on the back of the sheet of paper the squoggles that correspond in the table to the squiggles, and then sticks the sheet of paper out through the other slot. Now unbeknownst to him, the squiggles and squoggles are actually well-formed Chinese characters, correlated by the table to produce reasonable output. From the point of view of an outsider, then, we have a Chinese-speaking computer: given reasonable Chinese input, there is reasonable Chinese output. Yet Searle, by hypothesis, has no idea what the squiggles and squoggles are—he doesn't even know that they are a language.

Now for controversy. Searle claims that the strong AI thesis—that a computer can understand—is shown to be false, because in the Chinese Room case *he* is the working part of the "computer" and he doesn't understand Chinese at all. As he writes:

I have everything that artificial intelligence can put into me by way of a program, and I understand nothing. . . . As long as the program is defined in terms of computational operations on purely defined formal elements, what the example suggests is that these have no interesting connection with understanding. . . . Whatever purely formal principles you put into the computer will not be sufficient for understanding, since a human will be able to follow the formal principles without understanding anything. (286–287)

Now whatever plausibility Searle's argument has—and it has had its share of both defenders and attackers—it has, I claim, in virtue of Augustine's insight that mere rule-governed behavior is not enough to account for understanding, contradicting Wittgenstein's picture.³⁵ (I think it's clear that Searle's Chinese Room example doesn't get its force from his own account

³⁵ Strictly speaking, this is only part of Augustine's intuition, which is made up of (at least) four logically distinct claims: (1) the analysis of knowledge into actualizable ca-

of understanding, since that plays no part in the development of the example.) The fact that computers operate with internal representations of rules is unimportant; what matters is that computers just don't understand the rules they are following—they follow them perfectly well. But they just don't, well, they just don't get it. There is some other inner episode that is left out of the story here—the “getting it.” This is very much the kind of thing Augustine had in mind. And it is very much the center of swirls of debate in contemporary philosophy.

Let me suggest a way in which we can utilize some of Augustine's discussions to formulate the problem of learning in a sharp way, one disentangled from his own arguments (and in particular free from the discredited semantic theses of *The Teacher*). I will do so by relying on a few of Augustine's undeveloped remarks about knowledge and belief. Caution: What follows is highly speculative “analytic Augustinianism.”

First, Augustine draws a distinction between three types of cognitive activity in his *De utilitate credendi* 11.25:³⁶

There are likewise three things that border on one another (so to speak) in human minds, things that are worth distinguishing: understanding, believing, and holding an opinion. . . . There is a great difference whether something is grasped by a sure reason of the mind, which we call ‘understanding’, or commending it to be usefully believed by posterity via report or writing. . . . Hence what we understand we owe to reason; what we believe; to authority; what we hold opinions about, to error.

Understanding is a matter of grasping reasons. Strictly speaking, you only understand something when you know *why* it is so. Others uses of ‘reason’ (or ‘knowledge’) are simply improper.³⁷ The grasp of reasons is constitutive

pacities for rule-following isn't enough to capture everything important about knowledge; (2) there is, or must be, an inner episode that takes place in a case of learning; (3) this inner episode includes awareness; (4) it also carries epistemic weight. Searle seems to be appealing to (2)–(3) in his account of the Chinese Room.

³⁶ Tria sunt item uelut finitima sibimet in animis hominum distinctione dignissima: intelligere, credere, opinari. . . . multum interesse, utrum aliquid mentis certa ratione teneatur, quod intelligere dicimus, an famae uel litteris credendum posteris utiliter commendetur. . . . Quod intelligimus igitur, debemus rationi: quod credimus, auctoritati: quod opinamur, errori.

³⁷ *Retractationes* 1.14.3: Et quod dixi: “Multum interesse utrum aliquid mentis certa ratione teneatur, quod scire dicimus, an famae uel litteris credendum posteris utiliter commendetur,” et paulo post: “Quod scimus igitur debemus rationi, quod credimus auctoritati”—non sic accipiendum est, ut in sermone usitatiore uereamur nos dicere scire quod idoneis testibus credimus. Proprie quippe cum loquimur, id solum scire dicimus quod mentis firma ratione comprehendimus. Cum uero loquimur uerbis consuetudini aptioribus, sicut loquitur etiam scriptura diuina, non dubitemus dicere scire nos et quod percipimus nostri corporis sensibus et quod fide dignis credimus testibus dum tamen inter haec et illud quid distet intellegamus.

of the power of reason itself. The mere ability to parrot a formula—or to behave in conformity with a rule—gets one to the level of a parrot and no more, as Augustine points out in his *De musica* 1.4.6:³⁸

TEACHER: Do you hold that dumb animals, which we call irrational, are able to use reason?

STUDENT: Not at all.

TEACHER: So you are either going to call woodpeckers and parrots and ravens rational animals, or you have rashly called their imitation [of speaking] by the name of an art. For we see that these birds sing and say many things in the human manner, but they do so only through imitation.

Thus it will be characteristic of knowledge that the agent have reasons for his beliefs.

Second, taking our inspiration from Augustine's linking of belief and authority, we can introduce the requirement that epistemic justification be content-relevant, that is, we can require that knowledge-claims offer reasons that are tied to the content of what is believed. In particular, believing something because Jones told you will not count as content-relative (unless the proposition is about Jones himself), because Jones's reliability or lack thereof is no part of the content of the belief.³⁹ Therefore, accepting something on the basis of authority will never provide knowledge, since the reason for accepting the belief is not appropriately linked to its content (does not explain *why* what you believe should be so).

Since knowledge is a matter of an individual grasp of reasons why something should be so, and such reasons have to explain the content of what is known, it follows that knowledge is not *per se* transmitted from a teacher to a student. Rather, a teacher *proposes* reasons to a student, who either sees how they work (and thereby accepts them), takes them by authority, or neither. In the first case there is knowledge; in the second belief; in the third ignorance. But for our purposes the important point is that in the first case, the student's acceptance of the reasons is a process internal to the student—and, in the end, mysterious: the teacher may provide the occasion for learning but cannot do more. And this is enough to argue that the problem of learning is a deep and perplexing philosophical puzzle. For if the teacher doesn't cause the student to understand—and it's clear that

³⁸ MAGISTER: Censesne muta animalia, quae etiam irrationalia dicuntur, uti posse ratione? DISCIPULUS: Nullo modo. MAGISTER: Aut igitur picas et psittacos et coruos rationalia esse dicturus es animalia, aut imitationem nomine artis temere uocasti. Videmus enim has aues et multa canere ac sonare quodam humano usu, et nonnisi imitando facere.

³⁹ This takes a stand on the question whether reliabilist accounts of knowledge are adequate. The Augustinian model under construction here rejects the reliabilist approach.

the teacher cannot literally *cause* the student to understand, since otherwise everyone in the classroom would get it, or nobody would—then what is it that takes place? What *is* learning, if not a mysterious inner episode of awareness?

Bibliography

- Augustine [1970]. *Corpus christianorum series latina* 29: Aurelii Augustini opera, pars II.2: Turnholti, Typographi Brepols editores Pontificii 1970. De magistro, liber unus, cura et studio Klaus-Detlef Daur: 157–203.
- Bubacz [1981]. Bruce Bubacz, *St. Augustine's Theory of Knowledge: A Contemporary Analysis*. New York/Toronto 1981.
- Crosson [1989]. Frederick J. Crosson, "The structure of the *De magistro*" in *Revue des études augustinennes* 35 (1989), 120–127.
- Hagendahl [1967]. H. Hagendahl, *Augustine and the Latin Classics*. Goteborg 1967.
- King [1995]. Peter King, *Augustine. Against the Academicians and The Teacher*. Hackett 1995.
- Nash [1969]. Ronald H. Nash, *The Light of the Mind: St. Augustine's Theory of Knowledge*. University Press of Kentucky: Lexington 1969.
- Nehamas [1985]. Alexander Nehamas, "Meno's Paradox and Socrates as a Teacher" in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 3 (1985), 1–30.
- O'Daly [1987]. Gerard O'Daly, *Augustine's Philosophy of Mind*. Duckworth: London 1987.
- Rist [1994]. John M. Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized*. Cambridge 1994.
- Searle [1981]. John R. Searle, "Minds, Brains, and Programs" in John Haugeland, ed. *Mind Design*. The MIT Press: Cambridge MA 1981, 282–306.
- Sellars [1963]. Wilfrid Sellars, "Some Reflections on Language-Games" in *Philosophical Perspectives*. Routledge & Kegan Paul: London/New York 1963, 321–358.
- Testard [1958]. Maurice Testard, *Saint Augustin et Ciceron. Études Augustiniennes*, Paris 1958.
- Wienbruch [1989]. U. Wienbruch, *Erleuchtete Einsicht: zur Erkenntnislehre Augustins*. Bonn 1989.
- Wittgenstein [1967]. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Basil Blackwell: Oxford 1967.