

Medieval Semiotics in Saint Augustine's *De Magistro*

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Part One: Introduction and Historical Sketch.

Saint Augustine, or Augustine of Hippo (354-430) was one of the main figures in the development of early Christianity. In the Roman Catholic Church, he is a saint, and is a Doctor of the Church. Born in Thagaste (present day Algeria), he was educated in Thagaste, Madauros, and Carthage, and was a teacher of rhetoric. He had a son, named Adeodatus, who was born in 372. In 383, Augustine traveled to Rome, in search of better students. He found smarter students in Rome, but they refused to pay their tuition. After experiencing bitter disappointment in Rome, he was appointed a professor of rhetoric in Milan. While in Milan, however, he grew disturbed by the separation between himself and his son's mother. Consequently, he resigned from his post from the university in Milan in 386 and gave up his professorial aspirations. During his time in Milan, Saint Augustine was deeply moved by reading about the life of Saint Anthony of the Desert, and decided to convert to Christianity. Soon after this, Augustine and his son were baptized by Bishop Ambrose of Milan on Easter Sunday, 387, and then returned to Northern Africa. It was after his baptism when Saint Augustine decided to devote his life to the Catholic Church. He was ordained a priest in 391 in Hippo Regius, an ancient city of Roman Africa. In 396, he was appointed the position of coadjutor bishop of Hippo. It was also during this time that Augustine started writing about theology and philosophy.

In addition to his contributions to the Catholic Church and Christian thought, today he is thought to be one of the greatest of the medieval philosophers. His theological and philosophical reasoning was influenced by Stoicism, Platonism and Neoplatonism.¹ His philosophical writings greatly influenced the development of modern philosophy.² Augustine was a Christian Neoplatonist, and was one of the main thinkers responsible for the synthesis between the ancient Greek philosophical tradition and the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. Augustine was a prolific writer, and luckily, most of his writings have survived. Augustine also made a significant contribution to medieval semiotics. This paper will be limited to his ideas concerning semiotics in an essay entitled *De Magistro*.³

Part Two. Textual Analysis

The *De Magistro* (Concerning the Teacher) was written after Saint Augustine returned to Thagaste, around 389. It is a dialogue between Augustine and his son Adeodatus, a child prodigy. This dialogue is an essay about epistemology and the philosophy of language. How do signs (words) convey meaning? How do teachers impart knowledge? Augustine is concerned with the practical use of signs, and whether knowledge is internal or external.

In the most basic sense, signs (words) allow others to know what we are thinking. Signs teach or remind others of thoughts that we have. During prayer, though, signs are used but we are not teaching nor reminding God. Prayer takes place in the inner man and it is often that we do not articulate our prayers.⁴ Signs are also used in thinking in order to recall the actual things the signs signify.

Words, therefore, are signs that signify something. Synonyms are signs too, and there are other kinds of signs that are not words, such as gestures, which show something. Words are signs and as such they signify something that is not itself a sign, such as stone. Names of places are signs but the things themselves are not. Things signified by signs are called significables. Written words are signs of spoken words, which are themselves signs.

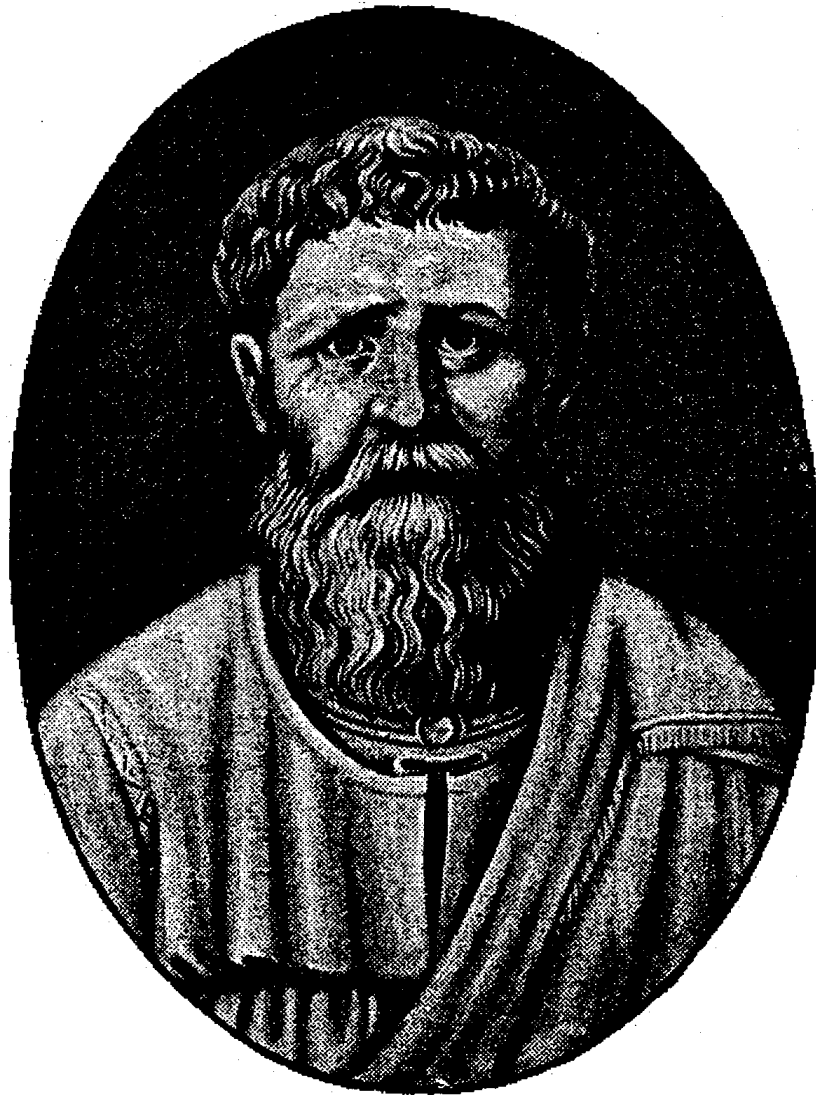
The acquisition of knowledge from signs is problematic for Augustine. In the dialogue Augustine asks his son if the thing a sign refers to or the sign itself is more preferable. The example he uses is the word filth (*caenum*.) This word is more preferable than to the thing it signifies, however, this is not universally true. By naming things, even undesirable things such as filth, humans are bestowing a sign in order to purposely convey knowledge.⁵ The knowledge conveyed by the sign is more important than the sign itself, yet the thing signified is not necessarily better than the sign. Knowledge is superior to signs because knowledge is the goal of the use of signs. There are four different things to consider here; the name, the thing, knowledge of the name, and lastly, knowledge of the thing. Augustine is concerned with the most important aspect of knowledge and he uses the example of vice (*vitium*.) The name, vice, is better than the thing that it signifies. However, knowledge of vices is better than knowledge of the sign, even if that knowledge makes a person miserable. Therefore, knowledge of the things signified is superior to the signs themselves.

The possibility of learning is dependent upon signs. For nothing can be demonstrated without signs, including movements such as walking, lying down or speaking. If a person asks what walking

is, and a teacher shows what it is without words, but by a demonstration of walking the questioner may not understand immediately what is being demonstrated. The demonstration of walking without spoken signs may be misinterpreted or completely misunderstood. The questioner may be deceived into believing that walking means walking only the distance that was demonstrated. If the questioner observed others walking shorter or longer distances he may think that they haven't walked at all.⁶ The action of walking, however, is itself a sign, and most fairly intelligent people do learn from observing the actions of others. Teaching, then, is a type of action and it cannot take place without the use of signs. Teaching, therefore, is the action of giving signs. Teaching and giving signs are two different things, though, just as speaking and teaching are two different things. Hence, we give signs in order to teach, but we do not teach in order to give signs.

Teaching is the action of giving signs, but how knowledge is actually acquired is problematic. Through perception we understand the world around us. A word that one doesn't understand is a meaningless sign. Through repeated perceptions of things one comes to remember what things are, even if the signs representing them are unknown. For example, if every time a student passed by a Japanese shrine, and a teacher pointed to it and said *jingu*, the student would eventually remember the word for shrine. In this case, the thing signified is what gives meaning to the sign, not vice versa. Before this discovery the sign *jingu* was just a meaningless sound. Therefore, it could be argued that it is the objects in the world that give meaning to the signs. The acquisition of knowledge takes place with the perception of the object, not from a sign.

Knowledge of the sign takes place only when the object that is signified is known. Signs have two things, sound and meaning. Sound is heard when it hits our ears, and meaning is created when the object is perceived in the world. These signs are meaningless unless the object in the world is known. Therefore, signs cannot teach us anything, but only through understanding objects in the world can we place any meaning on signs.



Saint Augustine

Part Three: Conclusion

Words beckon us to search for the things they signify, but they cannot show us anything about those things. The most words can do is teach us other words, and in this case, these words are just meaningless sounds and empty signs unless the object that they signify is known. Without meaning, a word is just a noise. The acquisition of knowledge of words occurs only when we have knowledge of the things. Nothing new is learned when only a word is memorized unless the meaning is also known. This meaning is acquired not from reading or hearing the word, but by learning about what the word signifies in the world. It is sound reasoning and truly said that when words are spoken we either know or do not know what they mean. If we know, we do not learn, but are rather reminded of what we know. If we do not know, we are not even reminded, but are perhaps urged to inquire.⁷

We cannot be taught about universals, such as truth. Truth exists inside each of us, and we listen to ourselves, not to others who make sounds about the truth. For Saint Augustine the true teacher is Christ, who “dwells in the inner man.”⁸ When we know something is true, it is because we have observed it repeatedly in the world, have made use of the faculties of intelligence, reason, and memory, and have reflected upon it with the inner light of truth which illumines the inner man and is inwardly enjoyed.⁹ Therefore, when a teacher says something true to a student, the teacher is not actually teaching anything, for it is the truth inside the student which is illuminated by God. Signs, then, have meaning in the fact that they point the way for illuminating truth. Teachers

give students signs which lead to knowledge, or truth, but only by means of observing objects in the world and through inner contemplation do students learn. Teachers use signs to ask questions and stimulate thought, but only through the “inner Teacher” do students learn. When students are told something that is true by their teacher, they inwardly recognize this truth, and they are filled with joy, and they praise their teacher.

The problem with Augustine’s theory in *De Magistro* is that it only deals with one kind of word, namely objects in space. Signs are words which have meanings for objects that we observe in space, and for certain observable actions. Universals and abstractions do not fit into this semiotic theory which consists of the name, the thing, knowledge of the name, and knowledge of the thing. A transcendental leap is necessary for universals and actually for all understanding. His semiotic theory works, but only in certain cases. It works in situations where things in the world are described through signs. Objects in space give meaning to signs which are written and made up of sounds. Only known objects can impart meaning upon signs, not the other way around. Signs are recognized words and sounds which people mutually agree represent certain objects in space. We use these signs to let others know something. This is a partially true, yet limited, description of the Whole.

¹ See "Augustine," pgs. 388–428 in the Routledge History of Philosophy, Volume II for a full treatment of Augustine's philosophical influences.

² Some modern philosophers influenced by Saint Augustine include Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Descartes and Wittgenstein.

³ Translated from Latin by John H. S. Burleigh.

⁴ De Magistro, chapter 9.

⁵ De Magistro, chapter 25.

⁶ De Magistro, chapter 29.

⁷ De Magistro, chapter 36.

⁸ De Magistro, chapter 38.

⁹ De Magistro, chapter 40.

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