

# *Signification Verborum: A Study on Augustine's 'De Magistro'*

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**Abstract:** 'De Magistro' (On the Teacher) is one of the most important writings of St Augustine, a medieval theologian whose works were very influential in the development of Western Philosophy and Christianity. This paper explores the significance of this text in four steps. First, it introduces the biographical information about the author, St Augustine. Second, it gives some information of the historical times in which the text was written. It then gives a summary of the content of the text and points out that the main theme of the text is the role of teacher, learner, and God in the acquisition of knowledge. Finally, it explores how Augustine's philosophy of education, as is reflected in 'De magistro', still influences our modern world.

**Keywords:** Purpose of language, The role of teacher, Independent thinking

## 1. Introduction

One of the most influential thinkers, philosophers, and theologians in the medieval times, Augustine of Hippo (13 November 354 – 28 August 430), also known as St Augustine, is generally considered to have made great contributions to the development of Western philosophy and Christianity. Compared with his widely known works like the Confessions, The City of God, and On Christian Doctrine, De Magistro is a relatively short and minor dialogue between him and his prodigy son, Adeodatus, yet it is by no means less important, and has been studied from different perspectives by previous scholars. For instance, Remo Gramigna discussed the philosophy of semiosis in De magistro in his book Augustine's Theory of Signs, Signification, and Lying [1]. James Wetzel analyzed the text from the perspective of language learning [2]. David Diener put emphasis on its role in the development of Augustine's thought and its contributions to the philosophy of education [3]. Whatever their focus of study was, most of these scholars, as well as ordinary readers of this dialogue, discovered one thing in common, that is, the conspicuous religious color embodied in this great work, which is in accordance with the social context of the medieval times in which Augustine lived.

In this paper, however, I will explore whether the philosophy of teaching Augustine expressed in this dialogue is still playing its role in the school education in our modern world which is far less religious than the medieval times. I will begin by giving the biographical information about St Augustine, and then the information about the historical times in which this dialogue was produced. I will then briefly summarize the content of the text and explain some terminology. Finally, I will explore how Augustine's philosophy of education expressed in De magistro can benefit our modern times.

## 2. Biographical Information about the Author – St Augustine

St Augustine was born to a devout Christian mother and a pagan father who converted to Christianity on his deathbed, which might have played a role in his ultimate conversion to Christianity in the latter half of his life. In his early years, however, he was largely lost in all kinds of secular dissolution. Talented in school, he was sent by his parents, who cared less about his behaviors of abandon in life, to receive education in Thagaste, Madauros, and Carthage, where his interest in philosophy started when reading Cicero's Hortensius as a student, the love of wisdom and a great thirst for truth enkindled in his heart. Later, he became a teacher of rhetoric in Carthage and Rome, and then a professor of rhetoric in a university in Milan, all of which failed to help him find the answer to the philosophical questions that he had long been thinking about. After taking to Manichaeism, Platonism, and Neo-Platonism to find truth, but with disappointment, he was finally moved by reading about the life of Saint Anthony of the Desert and embraced Christianity. He was then baptized in 388, after which he decided to devote all his life to the Catholic church, starting to work on his important writings about theology and philosophy, most of which, luckily, have survived to the present day [4]. *De magistro* is one of the several dialogues Augustine produced in the years 387 to 389, "the period between his moral conversion and his baptism" [5]. It is the only one Augustine mentioned by name in his *Confessions*, and the only one he did not correct a word in his *Retractions*, which is undoubtedly evidence of its uniqueness among all his works [3,5].

## 3. Historical Information about the Text

*De magistro* was written in a time when Christianity was rapidly gaining popularity in the Roman Empire with scholars and professionals in this field being in great demand. Thus, the church began to take a leading role in education, and theology, or the Bible, gradually became the primary concern of education. [6, 7].

Under such social circumstances, Augustine went through his moral conversion and baptism in Italy. Shortly after that, he gave up his career as a professor of rhetoric in Italy and returned to his hometown Thagaste in North Africa (now Algeria) with his son Adeodatus in 389 [4]. It was in this year that he wrote *De magistro*, in which he expressed his newly developed thoughts about education in a heavily religious context through a dialogue with his son.

By the time when he was writing *De magistro*, Augustine had become fully devoted to the Catholic church with a firm conviction in the Christ. Therefore, the central theme of *De magistro* "concerns the role of teacher, learner, and God in the act of acquiring knowledge," although it is not manifest from the outset of the text [3]. The concept of the inner teacher, in essence the Christ, was also put forward in this text. As is mentioned in Chapter 11, "our real Teacher is he who is said to dwell in the inner man, namely Christ, that is, the unchangeable power and eternal wisdom of God" [8].

## 4. Summary of the Content

*De magistro* starts with a discussion between Augustine and his son Adeodatus on the purpose of language. According to Augustine, people speak simply to teach – in other words, to inform others of the speaker's thoughts. Even when they ask questions, they aim to teach the person interrogated what they wish to learn from him. Besides teaching, people also speak to recall something long buried in their memory, whether to others or to themselves.

The text then diverts to Augustine's explanation of words as signs referring to some realities other than the words themselves. Not only words, but gestures and body languages as well, are all signs to signify realities, which makes our language meaningful. Thus, it is the reality signified by signs that is more important rather than the signs themselves. After discussing various possibilities of the

relation between words and signs, Augustine and Adeodatus reach a conclusion at the end of Chapter 6, classifying all words or “signs” into four categories: “signs which signify themselves; signs that signify each other mutually; signs that have the same extension; signs that differ only in sound.” [9]. Interestingly, after Adeodatus summarized what they have discussed thus far, as had been asked, Augustine claimed that they “have just been playing a game” “in order to exercise and sharpen our mental powers” [8].

Then Augustine goes on to discuss with his son the function of signs in the actual process of teaching and learning and makes the negative claim that “nothing is learned even by is appropriate sign” [8]. The justification for this claim is that words are signs that point to objects or ideas they signify, but do not sufficiently describe said objects or ideas by themselves; as such, unless the objects or ideas are already known by whoever hears the corresponding words, the words are no more than meaningless noises to the listener. Take the phrase “the trolley problem”, for instance: it refers to a moral dilemma of having to choose between two evils, but if whoever hears the phrase has no knowledge of that dilemma then they couldn’t possibly comprehend the phrase. Thus, it can be concluded that the understanding of a word depends heavily on the knowledge of the corresponding object or idea, and thus when we hear a word, if we know the corresponding object or idea, we don’t learn anything new, but merely reminded of what we already know; and if we do not know the object or idea, we are unable to learn the meaning of the word. As such, learning seems to be impossible. How, then, can we make learning possible? Augustine claims that learning cannot be achieved through communication by signs from an outside teacher. Rather, the source of knowledge is the “Truth which presides over our minds within us,” and our real teacher is an inner teacher who “is said to dwell in the inner man, namely the Christ, that is, the unchangeable power and eternal wisdom of God” [8]. What a human teacher can do, he argues, is point students toward the truths that can be acquired through the inner teacher, rather than impart what he knows to the students through the use of words. He said to his son in *De magistro*, “one who hears (a teacher) likewise sees those things with an inner and individual eye. He knows the matter of which I speak because of his own contemplation, and not by means of the words of the teacher. Hence, I do not teach even such a person, although I speak what is true and he hears it. For he is taught not by words, but by the realities themselves made manifest to him directly by God revealing them to his inner self.” [10]. Adeodatus agrees with his father in the final paragraph of the text that “By means of words a man is simply put on the alert in order that he may learn” [8].

## 5. Terminology

- a. The inner man: the innermost court of the rational soul
- b. Sign: A word, a gesture, a body language, etc. that signifies some reality
- c. Signifiabiles: things that can be signified by signs, but are not signs
- d. Word: everything expressed by articulate sound with meaning

## 6. Argumentation – Can Augustine’s Philosophy of Education Benefit Our Modern Times?

I have been used to thinking of language as an effective way of communication with other people, which makes it possible for me to share interesting stories with acquaintances, to express my opinions on social issues to classmates, to describe my feelings of joy and sadness to my friends, to negotiate the deadline of homework assignments with my teachers. Never before have I thought that we speak simply to teach or to recall. Augustine’s explanation of the purpose of language makes me think of this unique faculty of human beings from a different perspective. The definition of words as signs and its classification is also quite a new concept to me, for prior to reading this dialogue I haven’t

bothered to look at words the way Augustine did: to me, there was no distinction between a word and the concept it represents – a tree is a tree, and that’s all there is to it.

The discussion in the beginning part of the text intrigued me to read through the whole text carefully, and finally discovered his true purpose of introducing these seemingly confusing concepts – to lead to the final discussion of the role of teacher, learner, and God in the process of learning. He said to his son in *De magistro*, “one who hears (a teacher) likewise sees those things with an inner and individual eye. He knows the matter of which I speak because of his own contemplation, and not by means of the words of the teacher. Hence, I do not teach even such a person, although I speak what is true and he hears it. For he is taught not by words, but by the realities themselves made manifest to him directly by God revealing them to his inner self.” [10]. For Augustine, a teacher’s role is to arouse the students’ curiosity and inspire them to find the truth on their own, rather than directly impart the knowledge to the students by use of words.

This makes me rethink of my own learning experience. Did I learn new knowledge by listening to my teachers, or by my own contemplation? The answer seems quite different considering the two educational systems I personally experienced before. I had been educated in a local primary school and then a local middle school in China for eight years before I attended a boarding high school in the US. When in China, most of my teachers chose to teach us the required knowledge according to the syllabus and gave us the answers to all the questions that might likely appear in the exams. Even for humanities subjects like Chinese and history which involve essay questions in exams, there are supposedly correct answers. The teacher thus trained us to think like the examiners. We were not encouraged to think on our own because our own thinking, if different from the examiner, cannot help us score high in the exam. By comparison, my teachers in the US paid more attention to our own thinking. When dealing with major historical issues, my US teachers would assign challenging questions as our homework, which needs us to spend a large amount of time reading the relevant materials to find the answer on our own. Our answers vary violently, but as long as we read all the assigned materials and answer the questions in a logical and reasonable essay, we are always rewarded with a good mark. There is not an absolutely correct answer to any question.

Personally, I prefer my US teachers’ way of teaching. It is true that I learned no less in my Chinese teachers’ classes, but more often than not, I forgot what I had learned shortly after the exam. By contrast, what I learned in my US teachers’ classes would constitute my own system of knowledge, because the answers are the result of my extensive reading and deliberate contemplation.

## 7. Conclusion

Today our world is far less religious than the Middle Ages, but Augustine’s philosophy of education, as many scholars pointed out, is still of great significance in a modern non-religious social context [6,7]. This is especially true when it comes to the role of a teacher as an inspirer. Augustine himself was a good inspirer, which is manifest from the way he interacted with his son. He kept asking questions and trying to motivate his son to find the answer by himself, rather than tell his son what he thought right away. In the process of being interrogated, his son kept trying to find the answer and his ability to think independently was thus cultivated. If Augustine had taught his son everything he knew without any interrogation, his son would have lost the opportunity to think for himself, and his curiosity for new knowledge would have been largely destroyed accordingly. An indispensable consideration of modern education is the cultivation of independent thinking and “nobody sends his children to school to let them think the teacher’s ideas” [11]. Therefore, Augustine’s teaching philosophy, which was put forward more than 1600 years ago, is still constructive in our current world.

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