

Article

Teaching Augustine's *On the Teacher*

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Academic Editors: Scott McGinnis and Chris Metress

Received: 20 February 2015 / Accepted: 31 March 2015 / Published: 8 April 2015

Abstract: This paper examines the merits of introducing undergraduates to the philosophical thought of Augustine by means of his short dialogue *On the Teacher*.

Keywords: Augustine; divine illumination; teaching; learning; knowledge

On the Teacher is an excellent text for undergraduates' initial contact with the philosophical thought of the Christian thinker Saint Augustine. While other texts better introduce Augustine's theological thought or his public life as priest and bishop or his personal life, *On the Teacher* reveals Augustine the philosopher. The text works well in a small Great Books seminar where discussion is the order of the day as well as in a large lecture class in Medieval Philosophy with limited opportunities for Socratic interaction. Moreover, the text works well when supplemented with other philosophical writings by Augustine (such as *Against the Academicians*, especially book three, and *On Free Choice of the Will*), as well as when it is the stand-alone sample of his philosophizing. What is the case for teaching Augustine's *On the Teacher*?

For one, the complete work is short (about fifty pages) and, thus, doable in two classes. Its shortness keeps the work tight and thereby minimizes the Ciceronian meandering that Augustine liked and often imitated but that annoys and confuses modern undergraduates. For another, the work is readily accessible like Plato's *Meno* after which it is modeled. The work is a dialogue between a father (Augustine) and his son (Adeodatus), a son who is talented, beloved, and around eighteen and who died shortly after the work was completed. The work also is interesting, especially to Christian students or students at Christian colleges and universities, because it shows Augustine doing what Christian philosophers typically do. They attempt to integrate their Christian beliefs and philosophical reflections.

With Augustine the efforts at integration take many forms. Sometimes he attempts to prove articles of faith like God's existence. Other times he attempts to articulate Christian doctrine with precision

and to manifest that, besides being intelligible, Christian doctrine is noncontradictory and even plausible. Still other times he attempts to harmonize his different sets of beliefs: his Christian faith and his philosophical convictions. This harmonization can consist not only in showing that the two sets are consistent but also in synthesizing the two into a unified set. Such a synthesis is the focus of *On the Teacher*, where Augustine is specifically reflecting on scriptural verses like I Corinthians 3:16, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you?” and Matthew 23:9–10, “Nor are you to be called *teacher*, for you have one teacher, the Christ” and attempting to square those verses with how he thinks people come to know.

In a second way, *On the Teacher* is interesting to undergraduates (those with and those without a creed) because its subject is something they have a stake in: education. Most undergraduates already have strong views about teaching and learning. In fact, undergraduates are often passionate (sometimes even articulate) about what has gone wrong and what has gone right in their educations to date. Thus, the subject of the work is well suited to undergraduates.

What then does Augustine say about teaching and learning?

In the first half of the dialogue, Augustine and Adeodatus establish quickly that all communication is teaching because it attempts to inform a person about what is in somebody’s mind ([1], pp. 94–95). They also quickly agree that all teaching is carried out either with language that communicates or by examples that exhibit what is to be taught ([1], p. 102). The remainder of the first half of the dialogue is a discussion of various puzzles about human language. The puzzles result from imprecise definitions, the blurring of the distinction between the use of a term versus its mention, ambiguity in terms, and self-referential oddities.

Students themselves are puzzled at this point in the dialogue. In fact, they are usually frustrated with the apparent disconnect between Augustine’s linguistic problems and his main topic of teaching. They are not alone in their frustration, however. Augustine senses a similar frustration in Adeodatus, and he addresses it thus:

With so many detours, it’s difficult to say at this point where you and I are trying to get to! Maybe you think we’re playing around and diverting the mind from serious matters by little puzzles that seem childish, or that we’re pursuing some result that is only small or modest... Well, I’d like you to believe that I haven’t set to work on mere trivialities in this conversation. Though we do perhaps play around, this should itself not be regarded as childish... So then, you’ll pardon me if I play around with you at first –not for the sake of playing around, but to exercise the mind’s strength and sharpness ([1], p. 122).

The clear suggestion is that the various linguistic problems (and even less a full-blown philosophy of language) were not the point of the first half of the dialogue. But what was then?

Students need help to answer this question. My proposal to students is that readers should take seriously a point that Augustine and Adeodatus agreed on earlier in the dialogue. They agreed that there are two ways of teaching: either by communicating something or by exhibiting something, that is, by telling or by displaying. If Augustine fails to tell us much about what is teaching in the first half of *On the Teacher*, does he perhaps nonetheless succeed in displaying for us something about teaching? Thus, I ask my students: what does Augustine display or exhibit for us about teaching in the first half his work?

Students always rise to the occasion with many good answers. One may have to wait for some answers and to prod for others, but students always produce a wonderful array. Here is a sample of their answers.

Answers 1 & 2: As Augustine explicitly says in the previous quotation and also exhibits in the dialogue itself, the pursuit of knowledge must be both serious and playful. It is serious in its ultimate aim but playful along the way with a willingness to try out different ideas and to make mistakes in the course of doing so. Similarly, Augustine explicitly says in the previous quotation and also exhibits that inquiry has to be systematic, beginning with easier problems (like his linguistic problems) first so that the mind gains “strength and sharpness”.

Answers 3 & 4: Augustine and Adeodatus display the values of persistence and perseverance in the dialogue. There is a sustained effort to think through various language puzzles, and they return again and again to their topics in spite of difficulties, detours, and dead ends. Augustine and Adeodatus also display the values of humility and docility. Neither grows angry or despondent by the difficulties, detours, and dead ends, and each is willing to be led by the other’s questions, insights, and suggestions.

Answer 5: Augustine seems to be working hard in *On the Teacher* to exhibit the need for interest or commitment in intellectual inquiry. The language puzzles in the first half of the work seem to be designed to function as hooks to draw Adeodatus (and, by extension, readers) into the search. They attempt to produce perplexity and thereby interest.

Answer 6: Augustine’s work displays the value of conversation. The work is, after all, a dialogue between two people. The form of the work suggests that Augustine thinks human beings advance intellectually in community with others rather than in isolated islands of independence.

Answer 7: Finally and piggy-back on the last point, though *On the Teacher* is a dialogue, the work is written for readers who are not in dialogue with anybody. They are simply reading about a conversation of others. So, although not engaged in conversation with another human being, readers of *On the Teacher* would seem to be called to an internal dialogue between themselves and the text: “what does Augustine mean here”, “why does Adeodatus say this”, “is this claim true”, “why is this work written the way it is”, and the like.

This last point about what Augustine is displaying in *On the Teacher* is most important because it coincides with what he explicitly tells Adeodatus (and readers in general) in the second half of the dialogue. Thus, on to the second half.

The second half of the work begins with more language puzzles. Augustine also explains a few more requirements of rational inquiry (similar to those he displayed earlier in the first half) such as caution before assenting to anything and resistance to misology (a hatred or distrust of reasoning), especially after one’s confidence has been shattered a few times. But the main point of the second half (and the main point of the whole dialogue) emerges after Augustine and Adeodatus return to a line of reasoning begun in the first half.

In the first half of the dialogue, Adeodatus maintains that “nothing can be shown without signs”, unless it can be exhibited in some fashion. That is, when we want to make something known to somebody else, we always resort to words or some symbolic gesture, or we display what we want others to recognize. After both departing from this position and returning to a modified version of it in the second half of the work, Augustine ends the formal dialogue and begins an extended, twelve-page monologue intended to guide Adeodatus (and readers) to several conclusions.

The first is that “nothing can be shown with signs”, the exact opposite of what Adeodatus has maintained throughout the dialogue. If we do not already know what words signify, then words are useless and can show nothing, and if we do already know, then there is nothing new for words to show. Instead of words or other signs doing the showing, the only thing, according to Augustine, that can show us whether something is or is not the case is (1) our senses, (2) our memories, or (3), in the case of conceptual matters, “an inner light of Truth” that we “consult”. In the third (the case of conceptual matters) we find Augustine’s theory of divine illumination, very briefly sketched and raising many questions that are left unanswered. Is divine illumination the cognitive grasping of objects that have been illumined divinely, or is cognitive grasping simply to be divinely illumined? Does human knowledge require God’s sudden and extraordinary causal appearance in the world, or are human beings always in possession of a piece of the divine which they make use of when they come to know? Is divine illumination intended to explain how we know everything or only some things? Do the mechanics of divine illumination differ from the mechanics of mystical experiences or divine inspiration? All are unanswered.

We also find Augustine harmonizing his Christian faith with his philosophical convictions. Augustine (following the lead of Scripture) identifies the inner light that teaches in the course of an internal dialogue as Christ himself, the second person of the Trinity who came down from heaven and became incarnate, dwelling and operating within human persons ([1], pp. 139, 146). This is an unusual claim, no doubt, and it is perhaps peculiar to Augustine. But it is Augustine’s. It is Augustine’s Christian philosophy.

The takeaways from *On the Teacher* include at least three things for undergraduates. First and foremost, Augustine presents an account of teaching and learning radically at odds with what students usually think. Augustine both tells and exhibits how genuine teaching consists in an internal dialogue within students. Students have to see things for themselves and make the truth their own. Memorizing, repeating, imitating, and going through the motions in yet some other ways do not suffice. As for the external, conventional teacher, that person can only attempt to occasion the moments of genuine teaching. Thus, genuine education is not dissemination or transferal of information. Dissemination or transferal of information is better called something like *instruction*, and it can only produce belief, not knowledge. Instead, genuine education is an activity in which students are always the primary agents as they see things for themselves and make the truth their own. As Augustine puts this point, “who is so foolishly curious as to send his son to school to learn what the teacher thinks?” ([1], p. 145).

Moreover, coming to know conceptual truths is for human beings a mysterious phenomenon. How people can grasp permanent and unchanging truths as simple as “ $3 + 2 = 5$ ” is deeply puzzling. Either the puzzle has to be explained away, or an adequate account of human cognition has to preserve the puzzle. Augustine’s divine illumination (like Plato’s theory of recollection, Aristotle’s agent intellect, and Descartes’ “light of reason”) preserves the puzzle, whereas Hume’s empiricism and contemporary theories in philosophy of mind like behaviorism, functionalism, and eliminative materialism explain away the puzzle of human knowledge. By taking philosophical chances and identifying the “inner light of Truth” with Christ the God-man, Augustine unites faith and reason in a Christian philosophy that shows why some this-world mysteries permanently surpass understanding. They are bound up with an incomprehensible wisdom before all ages, with God Himself.

Finally, while Augustine's account of human knowledge is in terms of divine illumination, he does not demand that we, his readers, agree with him. Divine illumination is not a doctrine. Rather, the entire movement of the dialogue has been to move from external conversation, to an internal dialogue of asking questions and searching for adequate answers, and finally to seeing and determining for oneself how it is that we come to know. Thus, while Adeodatus ends the dialogue saying "I have learned that it is He [Christ] alone who teaches us whether what is said is true" ([1], p. 146), we may not now (nor ever) see it that way.

At the bare minimum, *On the Teacher* is a good, though less common, introduction to the Christian philosophy of Augustine. When things go well, Augustine's short dialogue can also help students better understand the intellectual journey that they began in elementary school, are continuing in college, and will remain on the whole of their lives. When things go very well, the hope is that students' greater understanding will contribute to their greater success on that journey.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Reference

1. Augustine. *Against the Academicians and the Teacher*. Translated by Peter King. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995, pp. 94–146. Available online: <http://netbible.org> (accessed on 3 April 2015).

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