Augustine’s *De Magistro*: Teaching, Learning, Signs, and God

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ABSTRACT: Augustine’s *De Magistro (On the Teacher)* is a short and relatively minor dialogue that often is overlooked. Nevertheless, it is an important text, both for its role in the development of key themes in Augustine’s thought and because of its epistemological and pedagogical contributions to the philosophy of education. This paper explores the significance of *De Magistro* in three steps. First, it introduces the dialogue and offers a summary of Augustine’s argument therein. It then examines important contributions that this dialogue makes in the development of Augustine’s thought regarding signs and the inner teacher. Finally, it explores some educational implications of *De Magistro* regarding the nature of teaching and the use of Socratic dialogue that Augustine plunders from the previous work of the pagan Plato.

St. Augustine’s *De Magistro (On the Teacher)* is a short and relatively minor dialogue. It certainly is not as well-known as Augustine’s other works like the *Confessions*, *The City of God*, and *On Christian Doctrine*. Nevertheless, *De Magistro* is an important text, both for its role in the development of Augustine’s thought and because of its epistemological and pedagogical contributions to the philosophy of education. Though Joseph M. Colleran’s claim that this dialogue “became one of the most influential of [Augustine’s] earlier writings” is perhaps hyperbolic,¹ it is true that medieval thinkers continued to wrestle with the epistemological issues this dialogue raises and were indebted to Augustine’s treatment


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of them. De Magistro also is unique among Augustine’s dialogues in a number of ways. It is the only one of his extant dialogues that Augustine mentions by name in the Confessions; it is the only dialogue in which his son Adeodatus is the primary interlocutor; and, perhaps most importantly, it is the only dialogue that Augustine does not correct in any way in his Retractions. In the following I explore the significance of De Magistro in three steps. First, I introduce the dialogue and offer a summary of Augustine’s argument therein. I then examine important contributions this dialogue makes in the development of Augustine’s thought regarding signs and the inner teacher. Finally, I explore several educational implications of De Magistro regarding the nature of teaching and the use of Socratic dialogue, which Augustine plunders from the pagan philosopher Plato.

BACKGROUND AND SUMMARY

St. Augustine’s wrote De Magistro in 389 CE in Thagaste, shortly after his conversion to Christianity (386), his baptism (387), and his return to Africa from Italy (388). The interlocutor is Augustine’s biological son Adeodatus, and the dialogue records or is at least based on an actual conversation between the two when Adeodatus was sixteen. Given that Adeodatus died shortly after this conversation, some have hypothesized that Augustine wrote De Magistro as a memorial to his son.

2Thomas Aquinas, for example, takes up Augustine’s question of whether one human can teach another in his Quaestiones Disputatae (Disputed Questions) in question eleven which is titled, like Augustine’s dialogue, “De Magistro.” St. Bonaventure’s sermon “Christus Unus Omnim Magister” (Christ, the One Master of All) also shows dependence on Augustine’s work in De Magistro.


4See Allan D. Fitzgerald, “Thagaste,” in Augustine Through the Ages, 824. Augustine was born in Thagaste in 354, and he returned in 388 to live on the family property. After his ordination in 391 as a priest in Hippo, Augustine donated his property to the church in Thagaste.

5See Allan D. Fitzgerald, “Adeodatus,” in Augustine Through the Ages, 7. Adeodatus was born in 372, the son of Augustine’s concubine of about fifteen years. Adeodatus was baptized with Augustine in Milan in 387 and returned with Augustine to Thagaste in 388. He died, however, shortly thereafter (probably in 389).

6See Augustine, Confessions, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961), 9.6.14: “We took the boy Adeodatus, my natural son born of my sin. . . . There is a book of mine called De Magistro, which consists of a dialogue between Adeodatus and myself. You know that all the ideas expressed by the second speaker in the discussion are his, although he was only sixteen when it took place.”

The dialogue varies in tone as father and son move from almost playful exchanges to meticulous and relatively abstruse reasoning. At multiple points Augustine deflects the careful arguments or objections raised by his son, thus leaving a number of questions unanswered. When faced by one of Adeodatus’ objections, for example, Augustine dismissively responds, “However it may be, let us go on to the next point lest something most absurd happen to us. . . . At the proper time we shall understand more clearly this kind of difficulty, if God will. Now go back. . . .” (Mag. 2.3–4). Adeodatus, later summarizing this part of the dialogue, reminds his father that, “You made some reply, jestingly avoiding the profundity of the question, and putting it off for another time. Don’t think I have forgotten the explanation you owe me” (Mag. 7.19).

The central issue in De Magistro concerns the role of teacher, learner, and God in the act of acquiring knowledge. This theme, however, is not manifest from the outset. Rather, the discussion opens with Augustine asking about the nature and purpose of language: “What do you suppose is our purpose when we use words?” (1.1). The immediate answer is that we use words in order “to let someone know something” (1.1). They discuss possible exceptions such as singing and praying, and together agree that “There is no other reason for the use of words than either to teach or to call something to mind” (1.2).

The discussion then turns to the nature of words themselves. They agree that words are signs and that signs necessarily signify something (2.3). Augustine leads Adeodatus through a word-by-word analysis of Virgil’s phrase from book 2 of the Aeneid, “If it pleases the gods that nothing be left of so great a city” (Si nihil ex tanta superis placet urbe relinquit), identifying what each word signifies. They agree that nothing can be demonstrated without a sign, except for actions that we are not doing when we are asked and can immediately start doing (walking, for instance) or actions that consist simply in giving signs (speaking, for example) (4.7). Thus Augustine offers a threefold classification: “[1] When the question concerns signs merely, signs can be demonstrated by signs. But when the question is about things which are not signs, they can be demonstrated [2] by carrying out the action, if possible, after the question has been asked, or [3] by giving signs by means of which the things can be brought to mind” (4.7). They begin

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8See Colleran, “Introduction,” 116, where he describes the dialogue as “spontaneous in expression and irregular in construction. Interruptions, corrections, repetitions abound . . . Profound and challenging thoughts, couched in engaging rhetoric, blend with arguments that sometimes become specious and tenuous and with explanations frequently too repetitious to escape the charge of being somewhat boring.”


10Cf. Mag. 9.27 where Augustine dismisses another objection raised by Adeodatus: “We shall have a better opportunity at another time to discuss that problem more carefully. Meantime what you have admitted is sufficient for what I am desirous of establishing now.”
by analyzing the first case—signs that are demonstrated by signs—meticulously exploring the distinctions between signs, names, significables, and words.

At the end of this lengthy discussion there is a major transition. Augustine asks Adeodatus to summarize what they have learned thus far (7.19), which Adeodatus does (7.19–20). Augustine admits that, “It is hard to say at this point what goal we are striving to reach by all these round-about paths” (8.21) and that Adeodatus probably thinks they “have just been playing a game and diverting the mind from serious things by these apparently puerile questionings, or, perhaps, that a very small gain has been made, if any” (8.21). Augustine explains that while it is true that they have been amusing themselves, he did not lead Adeodatus in this game merely for the sake of playing but rather “in order to exercise and sharpen our mental powers” (8.21).

Having thus summarized and justified the discussion to this point, in the second half of the dialogue they turn to the classification of signs that do not signify other signs but rather signify significables (significabilia). They explore various uses of the word “man” both as a word itself (as in “‘Man’ is a noun.”) and as a sign (as in “You are a man.”). Augustine argues that “Things signified are of greater importance than their signs” on the grounds that “Whatever exists on account of something else must necessarily be of less value than that on account of which it exists” (9.25). While it is false that things signified are always preferred to their signs (in the case of “filth,” for example), nevertheless the knowledge of a thing that is conveyed by its sign is more valuable than the sign itself (9.25–27). Augustine furthermore claims that, “Knowledge of the things signified by signs is preferable to knowledge of their signs” (9.27). Thus there are four items in the hierarchy: the sign, the thing signified, knowledge of the sign, and knowledge of the thing signified. Adeodatus objects to the claim that knowledge of things signified is preferable to knowledge of their signs, and Augustine concedes that, “It is enough for my present purpose that we agree that knowledge of things signified is better than the signs even if not better than knowledge of the signs” (9.28).

At 10.29 the text transitions again when they question whether in fact anything can be demonstrated by carrying out the action (walking, for example) and then turn to the relationship between signs and teaching. Augustine discusses the relationship between teaching and giving signs, concluding that, “There is absolutely nothing which can be taught without signs” (10.30). Returning to the example of walking as well as one of bird catching, however, Augustine immediately reverses course and challenges this conclusion with the particular (i.e., non-universal) claim that “Some men can be taught some things without

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11Significables are those things to which signs point. For example, the object on which I currently am sitting is the significable of the sign “chair.”

12This is the second of the three categories discussed back in 4.7.
“signs” (10.32). He then goes further and makes the universal negative claim that “Nothing is learned even by its appropriate sign” (10.33). The justification for this conclusion is that “If I am given a sign and I do not know the thing of which it is the sign, it can teach me nothing. If I know the thing, what do I learn from the sign?” (10.33). When we first hear a word (the word “head,” for example), we do not know what it means. When the word is frequently repeated, however, and we observe when it is said, we discover that the word is a sign for something that we already know from having seen it. Thus, “The sign is learned from knowing the thing, rather than vice versa” (10.33).

What, then, is the role of words? According to Augustine, words “bid us look for things, but they do not show them to us so that we may know them” (11.36). When a word is spoken, we either do or do not know what it means. If we do already know, then we learn nothing new when the word is spoken. If we do not already know, on the other hand, then we “perhaps are urged to inquire” (11.37), but we are not reminded of what we already know. In either case, we learn nothing new through hearing the word. As Adeodatus later summarizes, “By means of words a man is simply put on the alert in order that he may learn” (14.46). When words that we already know are used to tell us a story about something (about the three young men thrown into the fiery furnace by King Nebuchadnezzar, for example), we may believe the content of the account but cannot know it. Based on the claim in Isaiah 7:9 that, “Unless ye believe ye shall not know,” Augustine draws the following distinction between belief and knowledge: “What I know I also believe, but I do not know 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. I know how useful it is to believe many things of which knowledge is not possible” (11.37).

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13Cf. Ryan N. S. Topping, *St. Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 50: “While it is possible to learn about things without the mediation of the signs, apart from knowledge of the thing itself, a sign has no epistemic value for us. . . . For words to be useful you must know the thing to which they point beforehand.”

14See also 10.34 where Augustine goes on to argue that “We learn nothing by means of these signs we call words. On the contrary, as I said, we learn the force of the word, that is the meaning which lies in the sound of the word, when we come to know the object signified by the word.”

15See also 11.36: “We learn nothing new when we know the words already, and when we don’t know them we cannot say we have learned anything unless we also learn their meaning.”

16In the last paragraph of the dialogue, Augustine acknowledges that the role and value of words has not been exhaustively addressed: “At another time, if God permit, we shall inquire into the whole problem of the usefulness of words, for their usefulness properly considered is not slight” (14.46).

17This is a mistranslation of the original Hebrew and closer to the Septuagint.
How, then, do we acquire knowledge if nothing can be learned through signs? According to Augustine, “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” (11.36). Thus we learn not by listening to anyone outside of ourselves using words but by listening to the truth (i.e., Christ) within us: “Our real Teacher is he who is so listened to, who is said to dwell in the inner man, namely Christ, that is, the unchangeable power and eternal wisdom of God” (11.38). Everything that we perceive is perceived either by bodily senses or by the mind. Just as we need light in order to see sensible things, so too we need this interior truth in order to “know intelligible things with our reason” (12.39). If I use words to speak what is true and the one listening to my words sees the truth of which I speak, it nevertheless is not I who teach him by means of my words. Rather my listener is taught “by the things themselves which inwardly God has made manifest to him” (12.40). Thus we can understand and see the truth in Jesus’ claim in Matthew 23:10 that we have one teacher, the Christ. Augustine concludes the dialogue by applying this doctrine to all that he has “taught” Adeodatus through their conversation: “If you know that what I have said is true, and if you had been interrogated at every point, you would have answered that you knew it to be true. You see, then, who taught you; certainly not I, for you would of your own accord have given the right answer each time I asked. . . . I have never the power to teach anyone” (14.46).

SIGNs

Having thus summarized Augustine’s argument in De Magistro, I now turn to an examination of two key themes in the dialogue that make important contributions to the development of Augustine’s thought. The first is his theory of signs. Augustine’s ideas about semiotics (the study of signs) arise within and contribute to a centuries-old discussion. Earlier theories of signs had been developed by the Stoics and Epicureans, who built on Aristotle’s use of signs as instruments of inference, particularly in his Rhetoric. The Aristotelian use of signs as instru-

18Cf. Colleran, “Introduction,” 117: “As words have no power to make us know physical realities unless we have previously had some experience of those objects through the senses, so, Augustine argues, words cannot make us ‘see’ intelligible realities within the mind. That can be brought about only by the power and wisdom of God. . . . As physical light is necessary that we may perceive corporeal realities, so the divine wisdom must ‘illumine’ the human mind, verifying St. John’s description of Christ as the true light that enlightens every man that cometh into the world [John 1:9]” (emphasis in the original).

19See, for example, Aristotle, Rhetoric 1357a32–b21. See also Stock regarding the basis of Augustine’s semiotic theory in Stoic notions of utterances. According to Stock this is most apparent in Augustine’s earlier works, and over time Augustine’s thought about signs evolves such that in his more mature treatments “Stoic notions about utterances are increasingly embedded in a Christian-Platonic inquiry into words and things” (Augustine the Reader, 146).
ments of inference continued in the Latin rhetorical tradition through the work of Cicero and Quintilian, and Christian patristics like Origin and Ambrose used theories of signs to explain how we can make inferences about the mind of God based on the words in scripture.  

Prior to De Magistro, Augustine had offered a treatment of signs in his De Dialectica (On Dialectic). The basic terms in that text are the sign (signum) and the thing signified (res). He proposes that a word (verbum) can be the sign (signum) of a thing (res), provided that the word be understood by the hearer when uttered by the speaker. He then examines the relationship between verbal and written signs, as well as the relationship between the sound of words and the meaning of words. Based on these distinctions he defines four key terms: the word (verbum), that which the mind understands through the word (dicibile), the aural awareness of the word (dictio), and the thing (res).  

In De Magistro, Augustine builds on and adds to his theory of signs from De Dialectica. First, he examines not only the elements involved when we use signs but also their relative value. His fourfold scheme, for example, between the name (nomen), the thing (res), the knowledge of the name (cognitio nominis), and the knowledge of the thing (cognitio rei), is used for the purpose of determining a hierarchy among them (9.25–8). “Whatever exists on account of something else is inferior to that on account of which it exists,” Augustine claims, and thus, “The use to which words are put is superior to the words; for words exist to be used, and used to teach” (9.26). This argument imports a hierarchy of value to his theory of signs and gives teleological significance to the use of signs as part of his broader epistemology. Signs have a purpose beyond themselves, and our knowledge of the things they signify, not the signs themselves, are of greatest value.

Another contribution of De Magistro is that Augustine applies semiotics to an inquiry into the role of teacher, learner, and God in the act of acquiring knowledge. He does this by employing his theory of signs in order to analyze the epistemological implications (and limitations) of human communication. Building on his previous work, he focuses on the effects that signs have on their hearers. As Michael Cameron explains, “The sign substitutes for the thing, as in De Dialectica; but [in De Magistro] the auditor performs a corresponding act of substitution by trusting the experience of the sign as a viable replacement for

20Michael Cameron, “Sign,” in Augustine through the Ages, 793–94.
21Cf. Stock, Augustine the Reader, 139: “The thing is whatever is sensed, comprehended, or concealed when utterance takes place; the sign is perceived sensorially in one way and understood intellectually in another (and it can be verbal or written.) [Augustine] thus ties some traditional definitions of the elements of speech to speakers and hearers and to mental activities.”
22Augustine, De Dialectica, 5. See Stock, Augustine the Reader, 139–41 for an analysis of Augustine’s semiotic theory in De Dialectica.
the experience of the thing signified.”23 This expanded analysis of how a sign points to a reality in the mind of the hearer leads Augustine to new conclusions regarding the nature of education and human communication more generally.

The semiotic developments in De Magistro lay the groundwork for Augustine's extended treatment of signs in his later text De Doctrina Christiana (On Christian Doctrine) which “contains Augustine's longest sustained discussion of signs in his works, and synthesizes previous insights.”24 In De Doctrina Augustine focuses on the theological implications of signs regarding, for example, God's communication to us through scripture, the sacraments, and the incarnation.25 Augustine's description of these important theological themes, especially in De Doctrina, build on the epistemological implications of the semiotic theory developed earlier in De Magistro. In addition to the implications for his own thought, the semiotic theory of De Magistro makes a unique contribution to the broader intellectual tradition as well. Through his examination of the role that signs play in human communication, Augustine “is the first to have proposed a relationship between the sender, the receiver, and the sign (normally a word).”26 This is a significant development, and after Augustine this relationship became “a standard feature of medieval and modern theories of language.”27

THE INNER TEACHER

The second theme in Augustine's thought to which De Magistro makes an important contribution is that of God as inner teacher. Augustine's understanding of the inner teacher is central to his explanation of how we acquire knowledge, and according to William Ligon Wade it is even “the most fundamental and central principle of Augustine's philosophy.”28 This doctrine of the inner teacher exists in nascent form in works prior to De Magistro. For example, in his first Christian publication, Contra Academicos (Against the Academicians), Augustine says to Alypius, “You said not only briefly but even reverently that only some

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23Cameron, “Sign,” 794. Thus, for example, we can discuss a given object’s properties by using signs without needing an immediate experience of that object in order to do so.
24Ibid., 795. See 796–97 for a concise explanation of Augustine's taxonomy of four types of signs in De Doctrina: unknown literal signs (2.11.16–15.22), unknown figurative signs (2.16.23–42.63), ambiguous literal signs (3.1.1–4.8), and ambiguous figurative signs (3.5.9–25.35).
26Stock, Augustine the Reader, 7.
27Ibid. Stock also notes that “Augustine is credited with introducing the notion of signification into theories of language” (162).
divinity can show man what is true” (3.6.13). Similarly, in De Beata Vita (On the Happy Life) Augustine writes about God as an internal light that is the source of all truth: “A certain Admonition that pleads with us to remember God, to seek Him, and—after driving out all distaste—to thirst for Him flows out to us from the very Font of Truth. This secret sun pours forth its radiance into our interior lamps [i.e., our ‘inner eyes’ or minds]” (4.35).

As these passages show, Augustine’s theory of the inner teacher rests on a correspondence between intellection and the sense of sight. When we see a physical object, there are three elements involved: the object that is seen, our faculty of seeing, and light which enables us to see. Similarly, in an act of intellection the three elements involved are the truth that is intelligibly known, our faculty of knowing, and the light which enables us to know. Thus for Augustine, “Intellection is to the mind what seeing is to the eye.” Just as our sense of sight needs the presence of the sun’s light in order to see, so too our intellect needs the presence of the light of truth in order to know: “On the one hand we need light that we may see colors, and the elements of this world. . . . On the other hand, to know intelligible things with our reason we pay attention to the interior truth” (Mag. 12.39). This light of truth, according to Augustine, is Christ: “Whenever we learn, it is Christ, the everlasting Word of God, who actively illumines our minds.”

This comparison between intellection and the sense of sight can be found throughout Augustine’s works. The significance of De Magistro, however, is that it is the first time Augustine “formulates definitely and clearly the essential features

30 Augustine, On the Happy Life, trans. Michael P. Foley, in St. Augustine’s Cassiciacum Dialogues, vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019). See also Augustine, The Soliloquies, in Augustine: Earlier Writings, trans. John H. S. Burleigh (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953) for a clear anticipation of his view in De Magistro: “The earth and light are visible, but the earth cannot be seen unless it is illumined. Anyone who knows the mathematical symbols admits that they are true without the shadow of a doubt. But he must also believe that they cannot be known unless they are illumined by something else corresponding to the sun. About this corporeal sun notice three things. It exists. It shines. It illumines. So in knowing the hidden God you must observe three things. He exists. He is known. He causes other things to be known” (1.8.15).
31 Wade, On the Teacher, 32–33. See, for example, Augustine, De Ordine 2.3.10: “Understanding is to the mind what seeing is to the sense” (Menti hoc est intellegere, quod sensui videre).
32 Topping, St. Augustine, 51. Cf. Kries, “Magistro,” 520: “The inner teacher, Christ, [thus] turns out to be the ground or possibility upon which human knowing is based.” Cf. also Wade, On the Teacher, 66: “We must actually see the intelligible reality in the light of the interior Truth which is Christ dwelling within us. Christ is the light which enlightens every man coming into this world and has the same influence on our intellectual knowledge as the sun has on the knowledge we acquire by means of the bodily eyes.”
of the theory with his fundamental reasons for such a theory.”33 His analysis of signs and their limitations leads Augustine to conclude that words spoken by a teacher cannot teach us anything that we do not already know. This conclusion serves as the basis for Augustine’s argument that we must “listen to Truth which presides over our minds within us. . . . Our real Teacher is he who is so listened to, who is said to dwell in the inner man, namely Christ, that is, the unchangeable power and eternal wisdom of God” (11.38).34 Since signs from an external teacher cannot give us knowledge, our knowledge must come from the inner teacher who can teach without the use of signs.

In subsequent texts Augustine builds on this understanding of God as the inner teacher. For example, he writes in his Epistulae (Letters) that God “externally admonishes us by his ministers through the signs of things but by himself teaches us internally through the things themselves” (144.1).35 Similarly, in In Johannis Evangelium Tractatus (Homilies on the Gospel of John) he explains, “There is something in our soul which is called intelligence. This part of the soul, which is called intelligence and mind, is enlightened by a higher light; this higher light, by which the human mind is enlightened, is God” (15.19).36

Exactly how Augustine understands this divine illumination to function has been interpreted in various ways by various thinkers. Some medieval theologians, for example, interpret Augustine as teaching that our concepts are produced directly by God and imprinted on our intellects as a representation of reality. Malebranche claims to derive from Augustine his doctrine that the soul acquires its concepts by seeing the divine ideas insofar as they are imitated by creatures. Gilson interprets Augustine’s interior teacher not as an explanation of how we obtain concepts but rather as the source and guarantee of the truth of our self-evident judgments. Thomists, such as Charles Boyer, sometimes maintain that in Augustine’s view God illumines the intellect indirectly by creating in us an internal light, an intellectual faculty, that is akin or equivalent to the agent-intellect of Aristotle and Aquinas.37 However these interpretive nuances are understood, what

33Wade, On the Teacher, 22. Cf. Stock, Augustine the Reader, 160 where Stock argues that in De Magistro “neoplatonic metaphors of enlightenment are first coupled with explicit statements concerning interior instruction by means of Christ.”
34Cf. Stock, Augustine the Reader, 161: “De Magistro is a turning point in his consideration of language and ethics through the introduction of the concept of illumination.”
is clear is that the inner teacher is a central concept in Augustine’s epistemology and that it finds its clearest justification in the argument of De Magistro.

TEACHING AND SOCRATIC DIALOGUE: A CASE OF PLUNDERING

Having examined the important contributions that De Magistro makes to the development of Augustine’s thought regarding signs and the inner teacher, in this final section I turn to some of the dialogue’s educational implications, particularly with regard to the nature of human teaching and the use of Socratic dialogue. To begin, it is important to recognize that Augustine’s educational philosophy in De Magistro demonstrates a clear case of the “plundering the Egyptians” approach to pagan thought he elsewhere advocates. In book 2 of De Doctrina Christiana, for example, he explains that just as the Israelites appropriated from the Egyptians their idols, gold, silver, and garments in order to employ them “for a better use,” so too Christians should adapt the liberal instruction found in the learning of the heathens “to the use of truth.” This “gold and silver,” which the pagans “dug out of the mines of God’s providence” and are “perversely and unlawfully prostituting to the worship of devils,” we ought “to take away from them, and to devote to their proper use” (2.40.60). The philosophy of education Augustine puts forward in De Magistro is a clear example of this plundering from Plato’s epistemology, particularly as articulated in the Meno. More specifically, Augustine’s understanding of education in this dialogue is an appropriation and adaptation of Plato’s thought in three aspects: the problem, the metaphysical solution, and the consequences of that solution regarding the nature of teaching and the use of Socratic dialogue.

In Plato’s Meno, the overarching question is whether virtue can be taught. After a series of proposed definitions of virtue and Socrates’ refutation of them all, Meno puts forward a skeptical argument in order to show that learning is impossible: “How will you look for it, Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is? How will you aim to search for something you do not know at all? If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know?” (80d4–6). Socrates restates the first part of the paradox thus:

38For a helpful introduction to “Socratic dialogue” or what is also sometimes called “the Socratic method” or “Socratic conversation,” see Jeffrey S. Lehman, Socratic Conversation: Bringing the Dialogues of Plato and the Socratic Tradition into Today’s Classroom (Camp Hill, PA: Classical Academic Press, 2021).
40Augustine probably never actually read the Meno. Nonetheless he clearly was acquainted with many of the Platonic doctrines expressed therein. On this topic, see Stock, Augustine the Reader, 147.
41Plato, Meno, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976). Note that there are actually two paradoxes here: The first is a paradox of inquiry and asks how one can search for what one does not know. The second is a paradox of discovery and asks how one can know that one has discovered what was being sought if it was not previously known.
“A man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know. He cannot search for what he knows—since he knows it, there is no need to search—nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for” (80e1–5). In De Magistro, Augustine poses the problem of learning in terms strikingly reminiscent of Meno’s paradox: “If we consider this a little more closely, perhaps you will find that nothing is learned even by its appropriate sign. If I am given a sign and I do not know the thing of which it is the sign, it can teach me nothing. If I know the thing, what do I learn from the sign?” (10.33).

The problem both Plato and Augustine articulate in the form of a constructive dilemma is that learning appears to be impossible. Augustine adds a semiotic layer to the paradox, but the educational implications are basically the same. What, then, is a solution to this problem that would make learning possible? In the Meno, the response offered by Socrates is Plato’s theory of recollection (anamnesis) based on the transmigration of souls. The human soul is immortal, argues Plato, and through repeated cycles of birth and death it “has seen all things here and in the underworld” such that “there is nothing which it has not learned” (81c5–6). What we often call “learning,” then, consists not in acquiring some new knowledge that one previously did not possess but rather in remembering or recollecting the knowledge already latent within one’s soul. As Socrates concludes, “Searching and learning are, as a whole, recollection” (81d4–5).

Augustine’s solution to the problem of learning parallels Plato’s, but he Christianizes Plato’s metaphysics. Given that learning cannot come through communication by signs from without, it must come from within. For Augustine, though, the source of knowledge is not our own soul but rather the “Truth which presides over our minds within us” (Mag. 11.38). As for Plato, our real teacher is within us and also is eternal. For Augustine, however, this inner teacher is not of ourselves. Rather it is he who “is said to dwell in the inner man, namely Christ, that is, the unchangeable power and eternal wisdom of God” (11.38).

What, then, are the educational consequences of these metaphysical solutions to the problem? What is the nature of human teaching? How can it best be accomplished? For Plato, the answer is that a teacher merely reminds students of what they already know. After explaining his theory of recollection in the Meno, Socrates attempts to demonstrate the truth of this theory by working through a geometry problem with one of Meno’s slaves. Throughout this episode, Socrates repeatedly argues that he is not giving the boy any knowledge he does not already possess but is simply asking questions in order to facilitate the boy’s recollection of the geometric truths he already knows. “You see, Meno,” Socrates says at one point, “that I am not teaching the boy anything, but all I do is question him” (82e33–4). Later Socrates repeats the claim that “I shall do nothing more than

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42 See Wade, On the Teacher, 49–50 for an analysis of Augustine’s initial inclination toward Plato’s theory of recollection and later clear rejection of it.
ask questions and not teach him. Watch whether you find me teaching and
explaining things to him instead of asking for his opinion” (84c8–d2). At the
end of the episode Socrates again draws the educational implications that he
supposedly has demonstrated:

SOCRATES. What do you think, Meno? Has he, in his answers, expressed
any opinion that was not his own?
MENO. No, they were all his own.
SOCRATES. And yet, as we said a short time ago, he did not know?
MENO. That is true.
SOCRATES. So these opinions were in him, were they not?
MENO. Yes.
SOCRATES. So the man who does not know has within himself true
opinions about the things that he does not know . . . and he will know it
without having been taught but only questioned, and find the knowledge
within himself?
MENO. Yes.
SOCRATES. And is not finding knowledge within oneself recollection?
MENO. Certainly. (85b8–d5)

What we call teaching, in other words, consists of pointing students toward
the knowledge they already possess within themselves in order to help them
remember it. The most effective pedagogical approach for bringing about such
learning (i.e., recollection) is to use Socratic dialogue—that is, to ask questions
that lead or point students toward the truths the teacher wants them to learn.

Augustine’s explanation in De Magistro of what teaching is and how it is
best brought about echoes what we find in Plato almost verbatim, though again
Augustine puts it in Christian terms. A human teacher, he argues, cannot impart
knowledge through the use of words. What the teacher can do, however, is point
students toward the truths that can be known through the inner teacher. Thus
Augustine claims, “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”
(11.36). If words are spoken the meaning of which we already know, then “we
do not learn, but are rather reminded of what we know” (11.36).43 If, on the

43This is an echo of Augustine’s claim at the beginning of the dialogue that, “I think there
is a kind of teaching, and a most important kind, which consists in reminding people of
other hand, we do not know the meaning of the words, then “We are not even reminded, but are perhaps urged to inquire” (11.36). The teacher, then, is not one who imparts knowledge but who, as for Plato, prompts and directs students toward their own process of inquiry. As Augustine explains, “We may be bidden to listen [to the inner teacher] by someone using words” (11.38). In the final paragraph of the dialogue Adeodatus similarly claims he has learned from his father that “By means of words a man is simply put on the alert in order that he may learn” (14.46).  

In De Magistro Augustine does not give a full-blown argument for the pedagogical value of Socratic dialogue based on his understanding of what it means to teach. It is instructive, however, to note the parallels between his claims at the end of the dialogue about what he has accomplished and Socrates’ claims at the end of the slave-boy episode about what he has demonstrated. Augustine says to Adeodatus that, “I should like you to tell me what you think of my whole discourse. If you know that what I have said is true, and if you had been interrogated at every point, you would have answered that you knew it to be true. You see, then, who taught you; certainly not I, for you would of your own accord have given the right answer each time I asked” (14.46). Augustine’s claim, in other words, is that Adeodatus, like the slave boy, has not been taught anything but rather can affirm of his own accord the truths toward which Augustine’s questions point. That is to say, the function and value of Socratic dialogue is for Augustine, as it was for Plato, to provide students with the questions that will lead or point them toward the truths that the teacher wants them to learn.  

As Wade explains, “The method that other men use in admonishing us to seek the interior truth is the method of question and answer. Augustine had learned this method from the Platonists and Neo-Platonists, and, although he rejected their theory of reminiscence, yet he still retained their method of teaching and considered it even more compatible with his theory of illumination than their theory of reminiscence.”

something” (1.1). Cf. William Harmless, Augustine in His Own Words (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 69: “Augustine argues that we do not really learn realities outside us, but are reminded interiorly of forgotten truths. This theory of knowledge as ‘remembrance,’ while akin in some ways to Plato’s, is also quite different. Augustine came to deny Plato’s hypothesis that learning is remembering something from a past life. For Augustine, knowing is a matter of inner illumination; Christ is the true teacher teaching truth deep within us.”  

Cf. Topping, St. Augustine, 50, 51: “Within the process of learning, all that words accomplish, and at their best, is to remind us to direct our attention to the things themselves. . . . So, teachers do have a function after all. Their aim is, like Socrates’ aim, to present the right questions and the right objects before the mind and senses of the student.”  

See Topping, St. Augustine, 49: “Like Plato, for Augustine learning is primarily an interior recollection prompted by dialectical discussion.”  

Wade, On the Teacher, 63–64.
As a final note, Augustine’s pedagogical plundering of Plato with regard to the nature of human teaching and the use of Socratic dialogue is not only instructive theoretically but also can be of practical benefit for classical liberal arts educators who value Socratic dialogue as a pedagogical tool. Many contemporary classical educators employ and praise the merits of Socratic dialogue. In some neo-classical education circles, it even is viewed as an essential characteristic of so-called “classical pedagogy.” Almost none of these advocates, however, accept Plato’s metaphysical beliefs about the nature of the soul and its knowledge upon which the merit of Socratic dialogue is based. Augustine’s account of learning, on the other hand, provides an explanation of and justification for the value of Socratic dialogue on the basis of a spiritual and metaphysical framework that classical educators may find more palatable than Plato’s transmigration of souls. Rather than humanistically pointing us toward ourselves as the self-referential source of truth, Socratic dialogue within the Augustinian framework points us toward our dependence on illumination by the divine for whatever knowledge we may possess.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, then, Augustine’s De Magistro is an important text that offers numerous valuable insights. It articulates key developments in Augustine’s thought regarding central Augustinian doctrines such as his theory of signs and his understanding of the inner teacher. It also clearly articulates Augustine’s philosophy of education regarding the nature of human teaching and the pedagogical value of Socratic dialogue. In so doing, its appropriation and retooling of Platonic educational philosophy provides an instructive example of how Augustine believes we should “plunder the Egyptians.” While this dialogue is unfortunately often overlooked among the other works in Augustine’s expansive corpus, De Magistro is an instructive dialogue that can be of great benefit for both Augustine scholars and educational practitioners alike.