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Augustine and Signs

Andrew Thomas, September 2003

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MA (thesis)

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Introduction

He was just a word for me. I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything?

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

It is an Augustinian habit to defend one's work before it is to be read, whether he be damping the enthusiasm of charismatic interpreters (*doct. chr.* prologue), or writing an irritated note about stolen manuscripts and artistic differences (prefatory letter to *trin.*). So the reader of this essay should be forewarned on what to expect and what not to look for in the pages that lie in wait.

For example, the aim of this work is not necessarily to outline Augustine's place in the history of ideas. Predecessors will indeed be mentioned, as will expositors and those who have come under the spell of this most daring of thinkers, but only insofar as their own work helps to elucidate that of Augustine. We are not dealing here with an uncritical heir of late Roman Stoic tradition, though curious excavators of texts will be able to find stoic sense nestled in Augustinian argument, for he was indeed familiar with that philosophical trend¹. Neither are we examining a proto-Wittgensteinian, though areas of the Saint's thought were immensely suggestive in this direction, and he was a dominating source for twentieth century thought on language, provoking strong and respectful criticism from that Austrian logician.

Another expectation that may be disappointed in what follows is that of the relation of Greek-inspired *logos* thought (especially concerning the Trinity) to Augustine's own treatment of word-philosophy. While it is certainly an important source, it very rarely helps to elucidate the work in focus. It is true that the term "*logos*" (reason, system, order) in Greek covers a much wider range of meaning than "*verbum*" in Latin, and it was probably in that context that concepts like order, idea and thought came to be associated with words. Augustine, aware as he is of the difference (*diu. qu.* 63²), does not appeal to those nuances of meaning, confining his thinking to the areas we would normally call verbal, or even linguistic. Even in the more abstract sections of the *De Trinitate* (eg. XIV.22; XV.20), he makes reference to common, philosophically

¹ For a portrayal of Augustine in the Stoic tradition, cf Colish (1985b)

² "*Quod graece λόγος dicitur, latine et rationem et verbum significat.*"

uncontroversial qualities of words³: “Augustine only in this fashion ‘saves’ philosophy by characterizing reason more as internal speech, something produced in time by power and therefore more akin to a rhetorical logos”⁴

As for methodology, this will vary according to the level of existing academic debate. The first section is largely exegetical, since the interpretation of the work treated there (*De Magistro*) is perhaps not one that immediately receives the greatest attention in textbooks⁵, and some of Augustine’s key concepts (e.g. I.6: Natural Signs) are rarely expounded. The other two sections contain more elucidation of Augustinian thought, largely attempting to overcome interpretive problems occurring in the wider corpus as a result of the strong claims made in section one. My general thesis is that language, and more generally signification, is an important category in these texts. My problem is: how is this category understood?

We commonly witness a picture of Augustine’s thought concerning language that involves a major turn-around in his theology, contrasting his early work as a philosopher with his later work as a bishop, as if the philosopher were no Christian, or the bishop lost his philosophical sophistication. A typical instance of this view is Mallard’s story:

In the long pilgrimage of those years (395-430), language came into increasing significance. The Incarnation in the church had become the key to fullness and wholeness in language, as shown above. Yet in the early years after his baptism Augustine hoped that language, for the true disciple, could give way increasingly to direct inner contemplation of the Wisdom of God (*The Teacher* 38,45-46). ... Long years as pastor-bishop changed his understanding.⁶

There are a number of problems with this interpretation. One is that it postulates a change in Augustine’s thinking that is not registered anywhere as a revision in his thought, in contrast to many of his other early over-platonic views, that receive correction in later writings, notably in the *retractationes*. Further, this view of the *De Magistro* leads

³ For further discussion of the similarities and dissimilarities between abstract wordiness and literal language, cf below II.3: The Trinity

⁴ Milbank 1997: 462

⁵ Notably Kirwan (1989), although Rist’s (1994) treatment is refreshing.

⁶ Mallard 1994: 164f

to many difficulties in our understanding of the text (cf below, I: Things are Learnt Through Signs: de magistro).

I would like to make the suggestion that Augustine's view throughout is altogether more sophisticated than a simple yes/no answer to the question of language's usefulness. Like his contemporaries and philosophical predecessors (I think here mainly of Stoics, Academics and Sceptics), he is deeply aware of the extensive implications of any theory of language. Whilst he will be suspicious of language throughout his life, I will be arguing that he also held to the necessity of language in works both early and late. It is ironically in precisely the section of *De Magistro* (one of Augustine's early works) that Mallard refers to that we find this (virtuous) necessity and utility affirmed of language: "[Christ] *who prompts us externally through men by signs*, so that we are instructed to be inwardly turned toward Him." (*mag.* xiv.46, emphasis mine)⁷

This approach to language parallels that found in the *Confessions*, where Augustine assumes that while words can indeed deceive, this is not as a result of their being words, but because of the sinfulness of their users. This seems to be a view he held onto.

The words are certainly not learnt any the more easily by reason of the filthy moral, but filth is committed with greater confidence as a result of learning the words. I have nothing against the words themselves. They are like choice and costly glasses, but they contain the wine of error which had already gone to the heads of the teachers who poured it out for us to drink. (I.16.26)⁸

Essentially, the primary contention of this essay is that Augustine did not greatly depart from the views outlined in the *De Doctrina Christiana* in any of his works. In particular, the maxim that things are learnt through signs (*res per signa discuntur*) is supported throughout his life. If this is seen to be the case, then we can perhaps elevate the status of words to beyond a mere metaphor. Where illumination has always been seen

⁷ "*ipse a quo etiam per homines signis admonemur et foris, ut ad eum intro conversi erudiamur.*" n.b. words are signs *par excellence* for Augustine.

⁸ "*Non omnino per hanc turpitudinem verba ista commodius discuntur; sed per haec verba turpitudine ista confidentius perpetratur. Non accuso verba, quasi vasa electa atque pretiosa; sed vinum erroris quod in eis nobis propinabatur ab ebris doctoribus:*" cf also *trin.* VII.iv.7, where the more human activity involved,

as the staple for Augustine's theory of knowledge, we might even read the light imagery as literary tools, and verbal learning as the phenomenon under description. This move is also inspired by the *Confessions*. According to Soskice's reading, Augustine's ascent before the conversion took a visual format. But after conversion, the Ostia ascent is definitely a verbal affair:

The Milan account uses metaphors of vision throughout – Augustine enters a vision and sees a light. The verb, *videre*, is used six times. Ostia is more of an *audition*. ... The vision at Ostia is social, not solitary, for that is how we hear the Word – through Scriptures, preaching, the witness of others. These are the ligatures of love which bind us to one another and to God.⁹

So this thesis will have implications for Augustine's theory of knowledge. It will also have an effect on how we treat the word-imagery in *De Trinitate*.

Throughout the work I will be trying to vindicate the position of Augustine against the Derridaean accusations that he represents the old kind of metaphysics of a rational emotionless soul, as he unfolds his view of language in community, relationship and dispute. In general, I would like to see Soskice's insight that "It is the crux of the *Confessions* that if words are the means of corruption so also are they the source of healing"¹⁰ worked out in reference to his theology in general.

the worse the result: "God can be thought about more truly than he can be talked about, and he is more truly than he can be thought about." ("*Verius enim cogitatur Deus quam dicitur, et verius est quam cogitatur.*")

⁹ Soskice 2002: 456f, emphasis original. She is here drawing upon the magisterial work of exegesis O'Donnell has made on these sections in J J O'Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions*, Vol. III, Oxford: OUP, p128.

¹⁰ 2002: 453

I: Things are Learnt Through Signs: de magistro

We are always ready to be persuaded that learning and sharing are really about some other realm than flesh; but whether or not people can communicate by telepathy, the primary way in which we are connected to each other is by flesh.

Rowan Williams, *Open to Judgement*

I.1: Introduction

The immediate counter-example to Augustine's strong claim that "things are learnt through signs" in *De Doctrina Christiana* is his earlier dialogue, *De Magistro*. The generally negative attitude to signs (and therefore words) in this work might support the suggestion that the later confidence is simply an aberration in Augustine's theology, a heuristic tool used to explain the importance of the text of the Bible under consideration in that discourse.

There are a number of reasons for taking this challenge seriously. One is that the *De Magistro* is a book that Augustine clearly remembers throughout his life, and not something kept tucked away under document, discourse and dust until it was brought to light at the administrative chaos involved in the writing of the *retractationes* (a work written during the last year of his life where he examined all his previous works and commented on them in the light of his later thought). He refers to it some years later in the *Confessions* (IX.vi.14), for example. In addition, when the review is made in the *retractationes*, he makes no criticism of the dialogue at all, letting it stand as it was (a fact King¹¹ attributes to his love for his late son, Adeodatus, the sole interlocutor in the *De Magistro*, who probably died shortly after the dialogue was written). Contrast this to the detailed criticisms made of other early dialogues like *De beata uita* (also involving Adeodatus, throwing doubt over King's hypothesis), and we can see that even if a major change of theology can be argued for between early works like these and Augustine's mature thought (which is unlikely), *De Magistro* hardly seems the place to look for it. On the contrary, the dialogue met with approval throughout his life. The allegation of inconsistency between it and *De Doctrina Christiana* thus becomes a good deal more serious.

¹¹ 1995:94 n1

That this model of signs and knowledge is not part of a youthful neoplatonism is indicated, first, by the fact that in *Retractations*, Augustine does not revise his teaching and says that the whole purpose of *de Magistro* was to defend philosophically Jesus' statement that he alone was to be teacher. Second, Augustine's discussion of the "interior word" prior to all language in the later treatise *de Trinitate* (15.10.17-15.11.20) is a variation of the same type of theory.¹²

We should note the context. In line with most of the early dialogues, Augustine seems to be much concerned with the views of the Academicians, with whom he had only recently broken rank. It comes shortly after *De animae quantitate*, and straddles the composition of *De Musica*. He is at this point living in Thagaste, and is given to philosophical discussion, together with his small community of monastic *servi dei*. Atherton¹³ argues that the distinction made in *mag.* viii.22-24 which would today probably be dubbed the "use-mention" distinction (and used to untangle philosophical puzzles such as those of G E Moore's *Principia Ethica*)¹⁴, is an original Augustinian development on the saying of Chrysippus (the third Stoic leading light, after Zeno and Cleanthes) that "every word is by nature ambiguous"¹⁵. At the same time, though, he is already taken up with refuting the Manichees, with whom his history is longer, if slightly further back in time. So the dialogue comes between the classic *De Genesi adversus manichaeos* and the work directed at Honoratus the Manichee, *De Utilitate Credendi*.

In this respect, *De Magistro* is a little odd, for it bears the marks of both these sets of conversation partners with whom Augustine was in dialogue. It is both philosophical and theological. He refers both to Paul and to Cicero; to Vergil and to the gospels. The issues of authority that occasionally crop up (e.g. appeal to Paul and Cicero in v.15f) seem to be directed towards the Manichees, although traditional philosophical debates are also addressed as Augustine treads along similar lines to the (now generally considered genuine) early work *de dialectica*, which makes more specific use of Stoic philosophy.

¹² Leithart 1999: 138n

¹³ 1993: 289-310

¹⁴ Augustine makes a genius application of this distinction to incarnational thought in *trin.* VII.4

¹⁵ Compare the so-called "wagon argument": "If you say something, it passes through your lips: now you say wagon, consequently a wagon passes through your lips." Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* VII.7.187

It will be worth bearing these issues in mind as we consider the dialogue itself: the relation of *De Magistro* to the Academics in particular is not often brought to light in many treatments, which will affect the interpretation in some respects.

1.2: De Magistro or De Doctrina Christiana

In the *disputatio* the aim was not so much to demonstrate that your opponent was utterly and in every way wrong, and to be derided and dismissed as a fool. Instead you had to show the limited sense in which he was right. The aim was, through disagreement and mutual criticism, to arrive at common truth, that was able to accommodate what was true in each position. (Timothy Radcliffe, *Sing a New Song*)

So exactly how does the *De Magistro* differ from the *De Doctrina Christiana*? Augustine and his son Adeodatus start off the *De Magistro* by arguing that nothing can be learnt without signs (i.1-x.31). They do this by way of pointing to the fragility of communication, and how mysterious our intentions are to others. Augustine famously overturns the whole debate, however, by the example of the bird catcher (x.32), who demonstrates his trade to us without the use of signs (we just watch and learn) and what has come to be seen¹⁶ as a version of Meno's paradox in Plato's dialogue by that name: signs do not teach us anything, for we need to know their meanings before we can understand them¹⁷, and their meanings are all they tell us anyway.

So, on the one hand, signs only signify if we know the reality they signify, which renders such signification otiose; and, on the other, since we have no access to the mind of another, we have no way of interpreting the signs which are meant to express what is in his mind – what the speaker sees interiorly.¹⁸

This seems to contrast fairly conclusively with the view of *De Doctrina Christiana* (I.ii.2), that *res per signa discuntur*. If things are learnt through signs, how can Augustine give as a paradigmatic example of learning a wordless contemplation of someone catching birds? Where are the signs in that? Where earlier in the argument, they

¹⁶ King 1998:182ff; Erikson 2000: 131

¹⁷ Cf *util. cred.* xiii.28, on page 39

¹⁸ Louth 1989:153

had argued that any learning in this situation would require pointers to show the learner what they are to pay attention to, now the pointers are explicitly transcended. “These examples already suggest not one or another but thousands of things that are exhibited through themselves, without any sign being given.” (*mag.* x.32)¹⁹

Correspondingly, if someone wants to explain to me that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were wearing special hats called *sarabarae*, it wouldn’t help them much to simply tell me, unless I knew what *sarabarae* were. Were they to then show me a picture of *sarabarae*, I would still have learnt nothing whatsoever from their words, since it is only the *sarabarae* themselves that taught me what they were. I had to witness the thing first, before using the signs (*mag.* xi.37). “The truth is always found – if it is found at all – inside the individual and not outside amongst the signs.”²⁰

So meanings²¹ are by necessity not given by words, and meanings are private (in a sense similar to Wittgenstein’s²² “Private Language Argument”). It is exactly your meaning, and not simply your words, that I need to grasp when I listen to you. But only your words are available to me. So I am unable to know what you are thinking of.

We carry these images in the recesses of our memory in this way as certain attestations of things sensed previously. Contemplating them in the mind, we have the good conscience that we aren’t lying when we speak. Yet they are proofs for us [alone]. If anyone hearing me was then present and sensed these things, he doesn’t learn from my words but knows them again from the images stored away within himself. (*mag.* xii.39)²³

¹⁹ “*Jam enim ex his non unum aliquid aut alterum, sed millia rerum animo occurrunt, quae nullo signo dato per seipsa monstrantur.*”

²⁰ Erikson 2000: 136 - “Sannheten finnes alltid – om den overhodet finnes – inne i den enkelte og ikke ute blant tegnene.” (translations from the Norwegian of Erikson (2000) are my own)

²¹ Augustine’s words are the modern-sounding “sense”, “force”, and “signification” – *sensus*; *vis*; *significatio*. Anachronism is a danger here, though – the quest for meaning is a modern problem, and Augustine will more often talk in terms of “intention” – the translation “meaning” covers over a number of problems, and has no unambiguous Latin source: contrast Ayers 1979: 71 – “...Augustine, emphasized the category of “meaning”. The outer word is a sign of the inner word.”

²² 2001 [1953]

²³ “*Ita illas imagines in memoriae penetralibus rerum ante sensarum quaedam documenta gestamus, quae animo contemplantes bona conscientia non mentimur cum loquimur: sed nobis sunt ista documenta; is enim qui audit, si ea sensit atque adfuit, non discit meis verbis, sed recognoscit ablatis secum et ipse imaginibus.*”

There are several factors that make words inadequate to the task of conferring the contents of my mind onto someone else. Augustine lists them towards the end of the dialogue (*mag.* xiii.42-xiv.45).

Firstly, we say what we don't believe. We can lie, we can play devil's advocate (e.g. "The view of *de magistro* seems to contrast fairly conclusively with the view of *de doctrina christiana*"). Secondly, we say what we didn't intend. Our body doesn't obey its orders, and we make slips in our speech, whether they be revealing or not. They were not our intended utterance. Thirdly, we misunderstand one another. Language is fragile, and many words have more than one meaning. The meaning is inaccessible to us apart from words, so we do not know what people are getting at. Fourthly, we mishear. Fifthly, we do not believe what we are told anyway. Just because something is told us, we may not necessarily agree with them: so the communication of the proposition "Shadrach wore a baseball cap" results in my stubbornly thinking "Shadrach did not wear a baseball cap", which is exactly the opposite. So words do not transfer the contents of our minds.

One final and overpowering argument against words as an effective medium for knowledge is that they are arbitrary. They must be learnt first, as we have seen with the instance of *sarabarae*, and such learning is not only very difficult (iii.5f), but it is importantly not a reasonable process. It is not like maths, because different people will have different words for different things. This view of language, implied in the *De Magistro* (especially in the third objection above), is backed up in numerous works written around the same time, where Augustine refuses to discuss words, but instead decides to discuss the things they refer to.

[Master] For we can't reply to a question about names as to one about things belonging to a discipline, because things are implanted in the minds of all in common, but names are imposed arbitrarily, and their force depends for the most part on authority and usage. And so there can be a diversity in tongues, but in the very truth of constituted things there certainly cannot be. (*mus.* III.ii.3)²⁴

²⁴ "Non enim ut de rebus ad disciplinam pertinentibus, ita de nominibus possumus respondere interrogati: propterea quia res omnium mentibus communiter sunt insitae; nomina vero, ut cuique placuit, imposita, quorum vis auctoritate atque consuetudine maxime nititur: unde etiam esse linguarum diversitas potest,

In this way, *De Magistro* would seem to be a philosophical corrective to the later optimistic *De Doctrina Christiana*. In place of confidence in words, it argues for “linguistic scepticism”²⁵; in place of the necessity of words, it argues for their contingency; in place of the truth potential of words, it argues for their fragility and inadequacy. Can these two diverse views be reconciled? If not, we will have to hypothesise a radical change in Augustine’s thought concerning language. The rest of this chapter will be devoted to explaining why I believe this interpretation of the *De Magistro* to be wrong-headed, and why the dialogue can be brought into line with the *De Doctrina Christiana* without too much interpretative wizardry.

1.3: Teaching vs Language

“Exactly!” said Deep Thought. “So once you do know what the question actually is, you’ll know what the answer [42] means.”

Douglas Adams, *The Hitch-hiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*

The first point I want to make about the *De Magistro* as a work is that it does not seem to be primarily taken up with words as such, but teaching²⁶. The opening question can be misleading: Augustine asks “When we speak, what does it seem to you we want to accomplish?” I will argue that the theme of the dialogue is mainly the *answer* to this question (“either to teach or to learn”)²⁷, given by Adeodatus, rather than the question itself. It would be typical of Augustine to want to talk about issues that lead to the consideration of truth and knowledge (as the problem of teaching and learning does) rather than the technical functions of human communication. My interpretation here flies

rerum autem in ipsa veritate constitutarum profecto non potest;” cf. also *Acad.* III.xiii.29; *ord.* II.ii.4, vii.21; *an.quant.* vi.11; *mus.* VI.ix.24

²⁵ Ferretter 1998: 260

²⁶ Contrast Ando (1994: 45): “In his early treatise on language, the *de magistro*, Augustine ... criticized language as a means for teaching on the basis of its ambiguity.”

²⁷ “*AUGUSTINUS: Quid tibi videmur efficere velle cum loquimur? ADEODATUS: Quantum quidem mihi nunc occurrit, aut docere, aut discere*” *Mag.* i.1. Cf Rist 1994: 27 “its main aim is to investigate the processes of teaching and learning and the role of words in these processes.”

unashamedly in the face of that of King: "Language, therefore, is the topic of *The Teacher* and explains the structure of the dialogue. The importance of the theory of illumination, and especially of Christ the inner Teacher, shouldn't obscure this fact."²⁸

The first and foremost argument for treating *De Magistro* as a work on the impossibility of teaching as opposed to the uselessness of words is found in his summary given in *retractationes*. There he does not once mention words, but takes the text given in the dialogue's conclusion as the key point. So we have two specific overviews (one within the dialogue, one without) that see teaching as the work's theme: "I wrote a work entitled *The Teacher*. There it is debated, sought, and found that there is no teacher giving knowledge to man other than God."²⁹ (*Retractationes* i.12, tr. in King (1995: 94 n1))

It appears from this quotation that teaching is a matter of the transference of knowledge. Such a definition will be borne out by the treatment that follows, but we should note that it is always the aim throughout that the learner should *know* what walking is, and *know* what bird catching is (*mag.* x.32). Consequently, the work is also deeply concerned with the phenomenology of knowledge.

In addition to these textual concerns, it would appear that scepticism towards the whole project of teaching and learning was not an innovation in the ancient world. In fact it was a prime target of Pyrrhonian scepticism, which had experienced a kind of revival in the work of third century philosopher Sextus Empiricus, a writer of whom Augustine must have been aware.

They [Pyrrhonian sceptics] used also to deny the possibility of learning. If anything is taught, they say, either the existent is taught through its existence or the non-existent through its non-existence. But the existent is not taught through its existence, for the nature of existing things is apparent to and recognised by all; nor is the non-existent taught through the non-existent, for with the non-existent nothing is ever done, so that it cannot be taught to anyone. (Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers* IX.11.100)

²⁸ King 1995: xvii

The implications of this shift in our interpretation from words to teaching are many and varied. Apart from opening up the possibility that we may *learn* from words, though they can not necessarily *teach* us, it also allows us to give a completely different evaluation of words themselves. So teaching may be impossible, but words can still be useful, provided they serve other ends. If we claim that the dialogue is chiefly concerned with denying teaching, and only subordinately with denigrating language, insofar as it is usually associated with teaching, then language itself cannot be interpreted as being generally useless in *De Magistro*, but only useless for teaching. "At another time we shall, God willing, look into the whole problem of the usefulness of words – which, if considered properly, is not negligible!" (*Mag.* xiv.46)³⁰

Of the objections noted against the usefulness of language (see above, p11), we can see that a number of them are directed more towards teaching (and communication) than towards words themselves. For example, we cannot use words to **teach** somebody the nature of *sarabarae* – they need to find that out for themselves – but we can of course continue to use the word in our discourse.³¹

Again, if we look to the supposed problems with language, it is noticeable that they are more criticisms of language as a tool to make someone find out what one is thinking about than devaluing language itself (and here we must note that teaching is only one of the three functions of language listed in *doctr. chr.* IV.xvii.34). So in order for successful teaching to occur, we need to believe what is said; intend to say it; be understood; be heard as we wished to be heard; and we must be believed (the five objections as listed on p11). Otherwise we simply cannot be said to have taught anything at all, according to the definition Augustine seems to be working with.

²⁹ "Per idem tempus scripsi librum cujus est titulus, de Magistro: in quo disputatur et quaeritur, et invenitur, magistrum non esse, qui docet hominem scientiam, nisi Deum,"

³⁰ "Sed de tota utilitate verborum, quae si bene consideretur non parva est, alias, si Deus siverit, requiremus."

³¹ Jason Drucker (1997) argues that we learn from signs what we already know. I would rather want to say that Augustine is making the point that signs do not communicate anything new to us, but when we discover something new, the discovery is always semiotic, or verbal.

I now give in and concede that when words are heard by someone who knows them, he can know that the speaker had been thinking about the things they signify. Yet does he for this reason also learn whether the speaker has stated truths, *which is the question at hand?* (*mag.* xiii.45)³²

Note in this quotation that the argument is directed towards whether successful teaching has occurred – i.e. whether the student has now gained knowledge – and the earlier five arguments against the adequacy of language are ancillary to this aim. “In trying to isolate and examine this theory [of signs and language] it is, therefore, as well to be on one’s guard against attributing to it an importance in itself which it would certainly not have had in Augustine’s estimation.”³³

Hence the often missed turn towards the learner in the middle of the dialogue. At the beginning of the monologue section (which Augustine characteristically delivers at the end of the work, *mag.* x.32ff), Augustine turns from asking whether teachers can be understood through their words, to asking whether a learner understands anything through words. Before the monologue, problems were raised over how words could indicate the intention of the speaker – for example, how anyone knows that I mean what I am pointing to – but at the end, no such indications are necessary, because knowledge can be attained simply by noticing things, and it is *no specified knowledge in particular*. Again, it is the necessity of teaching individual bits of knowledge that has been withdrawn and words only insofar as they are used in the project.

Apart from when involved in teaching, though, words are of course very useful. We can arguably learn the doctrines of Plato just as well from one who believes them as we can from one that does not. But in the latter case, the speaker is not strictly speaking teaching us³⁴ (NB: objection one above (p11) would imply that when we say what we do not believe, we are not actually teaching). In fact, we have evidence of Augustine’s

³² “*Sed ecce jam remitto et concedo, cum verba ejus auditu cui nota sunt, accepta fuerint, posse illi esse notum de iis rebus quas significant, loquentem cogitavisse: num ideo etiam quod nunc quaeritur, utrum vera dixerit, discit?*”

³³ Markus 1957: 84

³⁴ In the *util. cred.* vi.13, Augustine argues that we should seek a teacher who believes what they are teaching in order to understand the subject best – but there he is specifically using the expression *teacher*, implying that one who did not believe it would therefore not be a teacher: “*Quis enim sibi unquam libros Aristotelis reconditos et obscuros ab ejus inimico exponendos putavit; ut de his loquar disciplinis, in quibus lector fortasse sine sacrilegio labi potest? Quis denique geometricas litteras Archimedis legere, magistro Epicuro, aut discere voluit?*”

believing that not even a correct understanding of the speaker's intention is necessary for knowledge (*Conf.* XII.xxxi.). So long as we understand something true from what is said, it does not have to be what was intended to be understood. We can imagine being inspired by somebody's slip of the tongue, or ambiguous words. In fact, the Saint even commends such kinds of learning in other works! "The third [kind of reading error] is the perception of some kind of truth from the writing of another, though the writer himself did not understand it. In this kind there is no little profit; nay, if one considers carefully, therein lies the whole, entire fruit of reading." (*util. cred.* iv.10)³⁵

In this respect, it becomes clear that the *De Magistro* is not primarily concerned with demonstrating that things are not learnt through words, but rather that things are not *taught* by words alone. As we have seen, the difference lies in the specification of a particular area of knowledge or one proposition stated by a person. Where this is present, we can speak of both teaching and learning. Where the knowledge attained is not specified by anyone, nor transferred from one person to another, we can talk of learning, but not teaching in the Augustinian account. King³⁶ dubs this the "Information transference account", but probably "Knowledge transference account" would be more accurate.

Of course, this distinction between learning and teaching is in part artificial, because Augustine holds that where learning takes place with no obvious teacher, then it is the inner teacher, Christ, who has produced the knowledge (perhaps maximising on the supposed absurdity of the above sceptical doctrine (on page 13) of the impossibility of learning). Since he then demonstrates that in *no case whatsoever* can it be argued that some human has strictly speaking taught another, all knowledge comes about as a result of *the Teacher*.

This would be continuous with the opening paragraphs of the *Confessions*, where it is argued that language is not taught by people³⁷, but by God himself³⁸. Of course, if Augustine actually makes no distinction between learning, words, and teaching, as King

³⁵ "Tertium est, cum ex alieno scripto intelligitur aliquid veri, cum hoc ille qui scripsit non intellexerit. In quo genere non parum est utilitatis, imo si diligentius consideres, totus legendi fructus est integer."

³⁶ 1998: 184

³⁷ although n.b. *an.quant.* xviii.32, where it is stated that both teachers and a ready mind are necessary for language learning in a mature adult.

seems to imply³⁹, then my argument will be trivial at best. I hope the above notes (p15) on the crucial turn towards the learner in the dialogue suffice to show that such a division exists in his thought, whether consciously or otherwise.

1.4: Verbal knowledge?

'Can't you read my thoughts?'

'Mortal thoughts aren't like that,' snapped Om. 'You think it's like watching words paint themselves across the sky? Hah! It's like trying to make sense of a bundle of weeds. *Intentions*, yes. *Emotions*, yes. But not thoughts. Half the time *you* don't know what you're thinking, so why should I?'

Terry Pratchett, *Small Gods*

Augustine's notion that "thinking is inner speaking"⁴⁰ is not surprising when we consider that he had only recently proposed that dialectic – which is more obviously concerned with words⁴¹ (cf *dial.*, and its close similarity to the *De Magistro*) – is truth itself (*Sol.* II.xv.27)⁴². On a similar note, when Augustine wants to speak of truth (and the notion of knowledge is dependent on that of truth, since "no one knows the false" (*Sol.* II.xi.20)⁴³), he usually does so on the level of propositions

And so I hold what truth I had learned from them; what I had considered false, I reject. But the Catholic Church taught me many other things, also, to which those men, bloodless of body but heavy of mind, cannot aspire, that is, such truths as: God is not corporeal; no part of Him can be seen with the eyes of man; ... (*util. cred.* xviii.36)⁴⁴

Correspondingly, in a most interesting passage in *De libero arbitrio* (a contemporary of *De Magistro*) which works through with Evodius an argument frequently returned to, namely the exalted nature of Truth as a proof for the existence of

³⁸ See Burnyeat (1999) for a brilliant exposition of the continuity between these two works.

³⁹ 1998:185

⁴⁰ Matthews 1972b [1967]: 181; also Watson 1988: 81

⁴¹ As stated concerning Stoic dialectic in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* VII.1.44: "The second main head mentioned above as belonging to Dialectic is that of language, wherein are included written language and the parts of speech, with a discussion of errors in syntax and in single words, poetical diction, verbal ambiguities, euphony and music, and according to some writers chapters on terms, divisions and style."

⁴² "*veritatem esse disputandi rationem*"

⁴³ "*nemo autem quae didicit ac tenet, nescire dici potest; et nemo scit falsa.*" Cf also *trin.* XV.x.17: "it must all be true, otherwise it would not be known." ("*quae utique vera sunt, alioquin nota non essent.*") So also Ferretter 1998: 266, n36

⁴⁴ "*Ita quod apud eos verum didiceram, teneo: quod falsum putaveram, respuo. Sed et alia multa me docuit Ecclesia catholica, quod illi homines exsanguis corporibus, sed crassi mentibus, aspirare non possunt: Deum scilicet non esse corporeum, nullam ejus partem corporeis oculis posse sentiri,*" cf. also *de moribus ecclesiae catholicae* xii.21; *util. cred.* iii.9; xiv.31

God, Augustine speaks of this truth in terms of dialectical rules, joining the metaphysical to the logical in a seamless procession. This truth is unchangeable, and accessible to all.

[Augustine:] We make these judgments according to those rules of truth within us which we see in common, but no one ever passes judgment on the rules themselves. For whenever anyone affirms that the eternal ought to be valued above the things of time, or that seven and three are ten, no one judges that it ought to be so, but merely recognizes that it is so. He is not an examiner making corrections, but merely a discoverer, rejoicing over his discovery. (*lib. arb.* II.xii.34)⁴⁵

There are still problems surrounding the case of the bird-catcher, though, which would seem at first sight to raise incontrovertible objections to the case of words being useful. Augustine notably remarks that the bird catcher actually does *teach* those watching him, presumably because there is knowledge in him to start with, and then knowledge in the spectators at the end of the process, and the knowledge is identical in subject matter. “I ask you: wouldn’t [the bird catcher] then teach the man watching him what he wanted to know by the thing itself rather than by anything that signifies?” (*mag. x.32*)⁴⁶

It is important to notice that in this quotation the knowledge is extracted by the one watching – he is the one that wants to know (“quod ille scire cupiebat”). There is a clear parallel here with Augustine’s theory of perception, where it is the soul that exerts a perceiving power on the physical world, not the senses and bodies breaking in on the soul. The soul is active in acquiring knowledge.

[Augustine:] The soul applies itself to the sense of touch; through it it feels and distinguishes hot and cold, rough and smooth, hard and soft, light and heavy. Then it distinguishes between

⁴⁵ “*Et iudicamus haec secundum illas interiores regulas veritatis, quas communiter cernimus: de ipsis vero nullo modo quis iudicat. Cum enim quis dixerit aeterna temporalibus esse potiora, aut septem et tria decem esse, nemo dicit ita esse debuisse, sed tantum ita esse cognoscens, non examinatore corrigi, sed tantum laetatur inventor.*” Cf. Parallel with God in *diu. qu.* 30: “Moreover, reason judges everything that it uses. God alone it does not judge, because God is the standard according to which it judges other things.”

⁴⁶ “*nonne illum spectatorem suum doceret nullo significato, sed re ipsa, quod ille scire cupiebat?*”

unnumbered differences of taste and smell and sound and shapes, by tasting, smelling, hearing and seeing. (*an.quant.* xxxiii.71)⁴⁷

In this learning process, the soul makes use of what Augustine will later call “natural signs”, which are deeply important for his theory of knowledge, particularly when it is set in its philosophical background. We will return to this (cf I.6: Natural Signs).

Note also Augustine’s solution to the problem of teaching. He did *not* argue that the world enters into the mind like a microcosm. He argued that we receive *revelation* from the internal teaching, not a kind of perception. Is not revelation a verbal concept?⁴⁸ In arguing that Christ is our teacher, did he not imply a kind of inner language by which we are taught?

This would solve Stead’s quandary, that “Augustine’s main theme, of course, is Christ as the teacher of supreme reality, which points one away from the philosophy of language”⁴⁹. Instead, it is human teaching – where teaching involves verbal communication of knowledge – and not words *per se* that are under threat of judgement, as Cynthia Hahn puts it: “for Augustine human speech is empty, and knowledge comes only from God’s speech.”⁵⁰ For although Augustine rarely uses the word “speech” for what God does, some kind of speech is still involved.

Of course, this internal teaching is not in any way vulnerable to the kind of arguments brought against external teaching. For it is internal, and so the inner teacher is present to our mind, and the gap of physicality seen above does not apply here. Christ does not lie, nor speak ineffectively to the soul. Neither can the soul mishear, or suspect the teacher of being wrong, since the teacher is internally present to it. So the inner teaching is subject neither to the arguments against words or teachings (on page 11). For

⁴⁷ “*Intendit se anima in tactum, et eo calida, frigida, aspera, lenia, dura, mollia, levia, gravia sentit atque discernit. Deinde innumerabiles differentias saporum, odorum, sonorum, formarum, gustando, olfaciendo, audiendo videndoque dijudicat.*”

⁴⁸ Cf *Io. eu. tr.* CIV.1: “*quomodo simul loquantur in suorum spiritualium cordibus et Dei Filius et Spiritus sanctus, imo ipsa Trinitas quae inseparabiliter operatur, intelligentibus est verbum, non intelligentibus autem proverbium.*”

⁴⁹ Stead 1989: 63

⁵⁰ Hahn 1991: 179

these reasons, I believe the notion of God's speech is not just a metaphor for the more usual idea of illumination in Augustine's thought, but rather a well-worked out alternative to human speech and teaching.

The notion of an "inner word" is a queer one, and philosophically suspect, so we will return to it later (II: "*The Inner Tongue*": *Verbum vs Lingua*). For now it is sufficient to note that, although it is not explicitly mentioned, the argument of the *De Magistro* seems to imply that we are taught by inner words, and that both knowledge and learning can be construed as verbal.

despite the surface crudity of his distinction between things and names, Augustine's scheme in DDC certainly has affinities with the popular notion that everything is language, everything is interpretation. What we know is what we 'read.'⁵¹

1.5: Words Alone?

'It's better to light a candle than curse the darkness, captain. That's what they say.'
 (...) 'Who says that? When has that ever been true? It's never been true! It's the kind of thing people without power say to make it all seem less bloody awful, but it's just *words*, it never makes any *difference*'

Terry Pratchett, *Men at Arms*

It seems, however, that words are not the only requirement for learning. Augustine goes beyond the demands of his particular argument and hints at a few other aspects that get involved in knowledge. As Rist puts it, "What he intends to make plain is that words (and more generally signs) are a necessary but not sufficient condition of learning."⁵²

One quotation which would seem to raise considerable doubt over the thesis that words are necessary for knowledge is raised by King⁵³, and to my mind confirms the whole case of the insufficiency of signs.

⁵¹ Williams 1989: 145f

⁵² Rist 1994: 32

⁵³ 1998: 189

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 the word – that is, the signification hidden in the sound – once the thing signified is itself known, rather than our perceiving it by means of such signification. (*mag. x.34*)⁵⁴

It is perhaps in this quotation that Augustine states most directly that things are not learnt through signs. When we look ahead, though, to see what would be necessary for teaching to take place, we may note that not only do we require a perception of the things, but also a presentation of them: “Yet someone who presents (*praebet*) what I want to know to my eyes, or to any of my bodily senses, or even to my mind itself, does teach me something.” (*xi.36*)⁵⁵

Presentation is clearly exactly what words are meant to do – they point beyond themselves. We do not intend our listeners to dwell on the physical properties of the word itself, but on that which the word shows, or exposes (*praebet*). The problem is that pointing only works if one can point to something everyone can witness. Hence words of themselves are not even significant (and therefore paradoxically not words) without their referents. A word is only present when the sound is spoken and the meaning apprehended. Words without meanings are not properly called words, but just sounds. If the weakness of words inheres in their lack of meaning, then all the criticism achieves is to say that if we were to understand words independent of things, we would be misled. But we do not understand them thus: “Therefore, knowledge of words is made complete once the things are known. On the other hand, when words are [only] heard, not even the words are learned.” (*mag. xi.36*)⁵⁶

It may be useful to expand on the other aspects of learning in order to get a fuller view of exactly how things are learnt through signs, as this will in turn reflect on our interpretation of *doctr. chr. I*. So I will use the works against the Academicians to show

⁵⁴ “*Et id maxime tibi nitor persuadere, si potero, per ea signa quae verba appellantur, nos nihil discere; potius enim, ut dixi, vim verbi, id est significationem quae latet in sono, re ipsa quae significatur cognita, discimus, quam illam tali significatione percipimus.*”

⁵⁵ “*Is me autem aliquid docet, qui vel oculis, vel ulli corporis sensui, vel ipsi etiam menti praebet ea quae cognoscere volo.*”

⁵⁶ “*Rebus ergo cognitis, verborum quoque cognitio perficitur; verbis vero auditis, nec verba discutuntur.*” Cf also *trin. VIII.viii.12*: “*enim verbum indicat aliquid, indicat etiam se ipsum, sed non se verbum indicat, nisi se aliquid indicare indicet*”

how assent was necessary, the little book *de catechizandis rudibus* to elucidate the role and nature of understanding in language, and the treatise *De Fide et Symbolo* to demonstrate the ways of life required to supplement the word.

1.5.1: Academic Assent

Straight from the horse's mouth into the note-book. The boys scribbled like mad. ... 'I shall begin at the beginning,' said the DHC, and the more zealous students recorded his intention in their notebooks: *Begin at the beginning*.

Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

In this section I will suggest that assent is one of the key features of teaching in Augustine's *De Magistro*, and thus relate it to the slightly earlier works he had been writing in response to the Academicians. In making assent a necessary element of learning knowledge, he emphasises the role of the learner's mind in the process of acquiring knowledge. Information transferred unprocessed from one mind to another just won't do. "But we are no passive recipients of these truths. We also teach ourselves. Cognition is an active process."⁵⁷

The point is that language simply doesn't work like that. We do not receive the truth expressed by a teacher as if we were Dictaphones, because we are more than machines. Our minds are more complex.

The first and last points in the above list (on page 11) of the failings of language are philosophically suggestive. Augustine remarks that teaching requires assent, or belief, on the part of both teacher and learner. If a teacher is saying something she doesn't herself believe, then she can not be said to be teaching in the Augustinian account. More importantly, if students do not agree with the teacher, or have reason to believe she is not telling the truth, then they will not be taught either⁵⁸.

This insight is itself parasitic on the importance of truth in teaching and knowledge. For if something is not true, we do not say it can be known (*Sol.* II.xi.20, on

⁵⁷ O'Daly 1987: 176

⁵⁸ Hence the knowledge is shared, as in *trin.* III.pr.2: "*Si quid in eis veri comprehenderit, existendo non est meum, at intelligendo et amando et tuum sit et meum*"

page 17), and therefore neither can it be learnt or taught. So assenting to something – deciding its truth value – is vital in the acquisition of knowledge. If teaching is the transference of knowledge from one person to another, then assent needs to be given on both sides. It is also interesting to note that assent itself is dependent on a verbal suggestion: if we have no proposition, we cannot assent to it (imagine someone agreeing with you without being sure what they agree about), but if we merely have a proposition and no assent, then there is only information, not knowledge (imagine someone pointing out they know it is raining, but that they do not believe so – Wittgenstein called this “Moore’s paradox”). “Reason: Therefore, error is not in the things themselves, but in the sense (*in sensu*), and he who does not assent to something false is not mistaken.” (*Sol.* II.iii.3)⁵⁹

It is important to notice that the assent given by the learner can never be conveyed by the teacher. Even if the teacher does manage to persuade the student (which would obviously happen by words – cf *mus.* III.viii.19⁶⁰), the assent is not inherent in the teaching itself. It may come as a result of the teaching, but it springs from within the students themselves. All that can be learnt from the words is that “the speaker had been thinking about the things they signify.” (*mag.* xiii.45) Discerning whether the teacher is lying or not can not be taught as such, but must be the student’s own decision (for further on this, cf below, I.6.5:). It is here that the Inner Teacher mediates truth.

Whatever we may say, the hearer either (a) doesn’t know whether it is true; (b) knows that it is false; (c) knows that it is true. In (a) he either believes it or has an opinion about it or doubts it; in (b) he opposes and rejects it; in (c) he bears witness to the truth. Hence in none of these three cases does he learn. (*Mag.* xii.40)⁶¹

According to Augustine’s account, though, it is not even desirable for the language to act on its own in its transference of information. Assent is something

⁵⁹ “R. *Non igitur est in rebus falsitas, sed in sensu: non autem fallitur qui falsis non assentitur.*”

⁶⁰ “M. *Mihine credens, an per te ipse vera esse perspicis? D. Per me ipse sane, quamvis dicente te vera haec esse cognosco.*”

⁶¹ “*omnia scilicet quae loquimur, aut ignorare auditorem utrum vera sint, aut falsa esse non ignorare, aut scire vera esse. Horum trium in primo aut credere, aut opinari, aut dubitare; in secundo adversari atque renuere; in tertio attestari: nusquam igitur discere.*”

necessary for knowledge. “For what foolish curiosity it is to send your son to school so that he can find out what the teacher thinks!” (*Mag.* xiv.45)⁶²

The parallel with his arguments against the Academy is striking. For one of the most important points he has to make there is that the key element of Academic philosophy – that only those who withhold their assent are wise – is simply impossible. We are always giving our assent to various propositions, whether we like it or not. The example he gives is of a sceptical philosopher at a crossroads, who has been given advice as to the road both by a shepherd and a noble-looking man. His response is, ““I do not,” he says, “accept that information as something true: I accept it as truth-like. And, since it is neither fitting nor profitable to be here idle, I shall take the road.”” *Acad.*, III.xv.34⁶³

In this sense, assent is necessary in both life and philosophy. We can not take a road without deciding on that road, and neither can we receive information without assessing its validity. It is as much part of the language process as the unquiet soul is part of spiritual activity⁶⁴.

So it is knowledge and not just information that is impossible to give away in the process of teaching. The arguments against the possibility of transferring information would not include these considerations concerning assent⁶⁵. It is possible that we may comprehend one another’s language and transfer information, given certain felicitous conditions like an understanding listener, and an arena of discourse familiar to both speaker and listener. The point he is making near the end of the dialogue, though, is that this is not enough for knowledge, and therefore not enough for teaching. There is more

⁶² “*Nam quis tam stulte curiosus est, qui filium suum mittat in scholam, ut quid magister cogitet discat?*”

⁶³ “*Non enim monstrationem istam tanquam veram, inquit, approbo; sed quia est veri similis. Et hic otiosum esse nec honestum, nec utile est; hac eam*” on this see also *util. cred.* xi.25; xiv.30

⁶⁴ In fact, it seems to be a part of most mental processes, perhaps because understanding is a part of the mind – cf the judiciary power in *mus.* VI.xiv.45: [Master] A man also using those numbers in either kind as directing, in the role of moderators and examiners of things passing in the senses, not for an idle or harmful curiosity but *for a necessary approval or disapproval?* “*illis etiam qui in utroque genere quasi moderatores exploratoresque caeterorum transeuntium in sensu praesident, non ad superfluum vel perniciosam curiositatem, sed ad necessariam probationem vel improbationem utitur:*” (also VI.ii.3)

⁶⁵ King (1998: 184) misses the point of the difference between knowledge and information, and so moves freely between the two: “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.”

involved. Mann neatly expresses it, “the verb ‘to teach’ is a success verb, not a mere task verb. Whatever I am doing, I am not teaching you if you are not learning from me.”⁶⁶

Correspondingly, we do not learn, if we do not assent to what is being said⁶⁷. Here we have inklings of Augustine’s later philosophy of the mind, which entails that the will is involved in all mental activity, not simply those that are explicit decisions. We will to understand, we will to remember, just as we will to turn our attention to certain things. The subject also reminds us of the later *De Doctrina Christiana*, where Augustine lays the distinction between use and enjoyment over that of sign and thing (for which cf below, III.2: Desire). We do not simply say. We love and value⁶⁸ – for speech involves movement and attitude, not just information.

1.5.2: Teaching and Understanding

A small boy asleep on his right side, the right arm stuck out, the right hand hanging limply over the edge of the bed. Through a round grating in the side of a box a voice speaks softly.

‘The Nile is the longest river in Africa and the second in length of all rivers of the globe...’

At breakfast the next morning, ‘Tommy,’ someone says, ‘do you know which is the longest river in Africa?’ A shaking of the head. ‘But don’t you remember something that begins: ‘The Nile is the...’

‘The-Nile-is-the-longest-river-in-Africa-and-the-second-in-length-of-all-the-rivers-of-the-globe ...’ The words come rushing out. ‘Although-falling-short-of...’

Well, now, which is the longest river in Africa?’

The eyes are blank. ‘I don’t know.’

‘But the Nile, Tommy.’

‘The-Nile-is-the-longest-river-in-Africa-and-second...’

‘Then which river is the longest, Tommy?’

Tommy bursts into tears. ‘I don’t know,’ he howls.

Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

In this section I intend to discuss another reading of Augustine’s *De Magistro* which also leads to the conclusion not only that teaching is impossible, but that language

⁶⁶ Mann 1998:217

⁶⁷ And again, “he who does not assent to something false is not mistaken.” (*Sol.* II.iii.3)

⁶⁸ Here I use the word “value” in its ethical sense, *not* its semantic, as for example de Saussure’s (1960 [1916]: 114) definition of a word’s value as “its property of standing for an idea”.

is necessary for learning. The argument hinges on the notion that the dialogue is primarily talking of teaching in terms of eliciting understanding, not mere knowledge.⁶⁹

In his oft-quoted article on Wittgenstein and Augustine⁷⁰, Burnyeat argues that it is exactly this – understanding – that Augustine associates with successful teaching.

Burnyeat's reading rests on the point that for Augustine, knowledge is only strictly speaking acquired when understanding is present. Although we may say that we know something without understanding it, the technical usage of the expression knowledge (*cogitatio*) does not allow such a claim:

[Master] But it is the greatest error to hold even true phantasms for things known, although in both kinds there is that we say, not absurdly, we know, that is, we have sensed such and such things, or imagined them. ... And so let us resist them as much as we can, nor so fit our mind to them that, while our thinking is on them, we believe we see them with the understanding. (*mus.* VI.xi.32)⁷¹

The point is that the mind is not latent when understanding or knowing something. Not only does it consider the content and assess its validity, in order to give assent or not⁷², the mind also connects the proposition heard with all the other memory items associated with it. This will apply to propositions both compatible and incompatible with the suggestion and to the meanings of the words themselves. Burnyeat sums it up well:

For I take it that the important difference between knowledge and understanding is that knowledge can be piecemeal, can grasp isolated truths one by one, whereas understanding always involves

⁶⁹ These interpretations are clearly not in conflict in terms of Augustine's theory of language in general: cf *trin.* I.ii.4 – "...to account for the one and only and true God being a trinity, and for the rightness of *saying, believing, understanding* that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are of one and the same substance or essence." ("*reddere rationem, quod Trinitas sit unus et solus et verus Deus, et quam recte Pater et Filius et Spiritus sanctus unius ejusdemque substantiae vel essentiae dicatur, credatur, intelligatur.*") (emphasis mine))

⁷⁰ Burnyeat 1999

⁷¹ "*Sed vera etiam phantasmata habere pro cognitis, summus error est. Quanquam sit in utroque genere quod nos non absurde scire dicamus, id est, sensisse nos talia, vel imaginari nos talia. ... Quare his potissimum resistamus, nec eis ita mentem accommodemus, ut dum in his est cogitatio, intelligentia ea cerni arbitremur.*"

⁷² although it is precisely this – the necessary element of belief in understanding – that Augustine highlights in *util. cred.* xi.25: "*Quod intelligimus igitur, debemus rationi: quod credimus, auctoritati: quod opinamur, errori. Sed intelligens omnis etiam credit, credit omnis et qui opinatur: non omnis qui credit intelligit; nullus qui opinatur intelligit.*"

seeing connections and relations between the items known. ‘The only part of modern physics I understand is the formula “ $E=mc^2$ ” is nonsense. “The only part of modern physics I know is the formula “ $E=mc^2$ ” is merely sad.’⁷³

For our purposes, it is important to note that this kind of understanding can not be transferred. No one can guess all the connections I make, for no one shares my idiosyncratic combinations of beliefs, prejudices, leanings and mental wanderings. In this way, Augustine was right to argue against the possibility of teaching as transference of understanding, and in doing so he emphasised the importance of the listener’s mind in language, as well as partly anticipating the more recent notion of the way we construct our world through language. It is Trygetius that points out this aspect of the interconnectedness of language first in the Augustinian corpus: ““What will be the end of it, if I again should like you to define something, and then demand that all the words of this self-same definition be defined one by one, and likewise what follows upon them, pretending that I understood nothing?”” (*Acad.* I.v.15)⁷⁴

There is another work of Augustine’s that is often quoted in reference to his distaste for language as a medium, namely *de catechizandis rudibus*. One of the reasons for his negative criticism in this work is due to his use of the idea of an inner tongue, an inner voice, to which we will return (cf below, II: “*The Inner Tongue*”: *Verbum vs Lingua*). For our purposes, it is enough to point out that here Burnyeat’s reading of Augustinian understanding seems to be vindicated.

In writing to his friend, Deogratius, on the subject of teaching new converts, Augustine laments his inability to convey to them the wondrous insights he receives outside the classroom in prayer. Notice how he talks of this mismatching of inner complex understanding, and external simple propositions:

For it is my wish that he who hears me should have the same complete understanding of the subject which I have myself; and I perceive that I fail to speak in a manner calculated to effect that, and that this arises mainly from the circumstance that the intellectual apprehension *diffuses itself*

⁷³ Burnyeat 1999:298

through the mind with something like a rapid flash, whereas the utterance is slow, and occupies time, and is of a vastly different nature, so that while this latter is moving on, the intellectual apprehension has already withdrawn itself within its secret abodes. (*cat. rud. ii.3*)⁷⁵

While Augustine is excited by the implications of a certain idea, which rushes through his mind, connecting with all the truth he has already learnt, his hearers will never realise what the same idea means to him, because they do not make the same connections. In order for him to explain what it means to him, he would have to elucidate all the connections and implications himself, which takes far too much time, and which simply won't happen, as he forgets them once he has seen them.

The connections can be both implications and justifications. For Augustine, knowledge is not knowledge unless it has been reasoned out, and "What we understand ... we owe to reason" (*util. cred. xi.25*)⁷⁶. If we know something to be true, but don't understand the background, the reasons why, it is not understanding. In the language of *De animae quantitate* (xxvi.49, xxx.58), awareness is knowledge "only if that awareness results from an exercise of reason."⁷⁷ Correspondingly, knowledge does not stand alone even once it is established: reason will always tease out the applications. "[Evodius:] So then, unless this reason found in me something known as a starting point for leading me on to what is unknown, I would never learn anything by reason and I would never call it reason." (*an.quant. xxvi.51*)⁷⁸

There are two things at work, and their relationship is one of dependency. There is the understanding, and there is the thing to be understood. What is to be understood can be verbal, but the understanding itself clearly cannot: it operates on the thing to be understood. So without language, this kind of understanding would not happen, for there would be nothing to understand (or at least, the argument does not require the understood item to be non-verbal), but at the same time, the understanding is entirely non-

⁷⁴ "Quis enim modus erit, si ego rursus velim definiri abs te aliquid, et rursus ejusdem definitionis verba, et consequentium item singillatim omnia, fingens quod nihil intelligam, definiri flagitem?"

⁷⁵ "Totum enim quod intelligo, volo ut qui me audit intelligat; et sentio me non ita loqui, ut hoc efficiam: maxime quia ille intellectus quasi rapida coruscatione perfundit animum, illa autem locutio tarda et longa est, longeque dissimilis, et dum ista volvitur, iam se ille in secreta sua condidit"

⁷⁶ "Quod intelligimus igitur, debemus rationi:"

⁷⁷ "Non continuo esse scientiam si quid non latet, sed si per rationem non later"

communicable by language. “No one can achieve my understanding for me, not for the trivial reason that it is mine but because to internalize the requisite connections is to go beyond what is presented in any occasion of so-called teaching.”⁷⁹

1.5.3: Ways of Life

Words resemble fish in that some specialist ones can survive only in a kind of reef, where their curious shapes and usages are protected from the hurly-burly of the open sea. ‘Rumpus’ and ‘fracas’ are found only in certain newspapers (in much the same way that ‘beverages’ are found only in certain menus). They are never used in normal conversation.

Terry Pratchett, *The Truth*

The final aspect of our suggestion that words are necessary but not sufficient for teaching involves the context words find themselves in. The fact is that words never occur on their own. They appear in forms of life. It is not a problem that the meanings change, since the context explains everything, and when we find the sentence outside its context, we do not get confused over the meaning – we just do not approach the sign as a sign. Its meaning disappears. Consider, for example, the possible reactions to finding a small square of yellow paper whose reverse is slightly sticky, with the words “please leave” written on it, (a) placed on a pile of books in the library, (b) slipped inside your book in the library, or (c) left on the floor of the library.

This, I take it, is partly what Augustine is getting at towards the end of *De Magistro*: that words need good interpretation from within their context in order to signify properly. Without that context, they simply don’t work. On the other hand, the context without the words themselves would obviously tell us nothing.

This is the kind of point being expressed in Augustine’s treatise on the creed, *De Fide et Symbolo*. In the section on the Incarnation, he tries to bring out the frustration involved in not being understood, when we try to share with others what is going on inside. The emphasis is not on eliciting in someone else knowledge that had previously

⁷⁸ “*Ita ista ratio nisi inveniret in me aliquid cognitum, quo innitens ad incognitum duceret; nihil omnino per illam discerem, nec eam prorsus rationem nominarem.*”

⁷⁹ Burnyeat 1999: 300

been in oneself, but rather on revealing what is internal to those addressed. “For ... by our words, when we speak truly, our mind lets him who hears them know something, and by signs of that kind brings to the knowledge of another what we hold secretly in our heart,” (*f. et. symb. iii.3*)⁸⁰

The passage is again used⁸¹ as a demonstration that language fails as a communicative tool. For Augustine points out that we are unable to reveal what is within through words alone: in fact, the very project seems impossible:

We do this with words and sounds and looks and bodily gestures – so many devices that serve our purpose to make known what is within our minds. But we cannot produce anything exactly like our minds, and so the mind of the speaker cannot make itself known with complete inwardness. (*f. et. symb. iii.4*)⁸²

Notice, however, that this does not rule out the necessity of words for learning. In the communication act, we use whatever we can, but it is not enough. The problem we have is not so much that words are the wrong tool for learning, but that anything external is for Augustine of a fundamentally different nature from the internal. So even if we had the best tools in the world for expressing ourselves, we would fail to sufficiently portray our minds, as long as we were trying to make an external depiction of internal reality.

In fact, there is good reason to believe that in this work, Augustine considered the knowledge that occurs within as verbal in nature. There will still be a difference between internal knowledge and public, external, expressed knowledge, and this puzzle will be taken up later. The fact remains, though, that *De Fide et Symbolo* seems to suggest an intrinsically “wordy” inner life. “We profess with the mouth the faith which we hold in our heart.” (*f. et symb. i.1*)⁸³

⁸⁰ “*Sicut ergo verbis nostris id agimus, cum verum loquimur, ut noster animus innotescat audienti, et quidquid secretum in corde gerimus, per signa hujusmodi ad cognitionem alterius proferatur:*”

⁸¹ Kato 1995 is a good study.

⁸² “*Id facimus conantes et verbis, et ipso sono vocis, et vultu, et gestu corporis, tot scilicet machinamentis id quod intus est demonstrare cupientes: quia tale aliquid proferre non possumus,*”

⁸³ “*etiam ore profiteamur fidem quam corde gestamus;*” cf. *Io. eu. tr. XX.10*: “*Hoc idem ab utroque factum est: sed numquid similiter? ... Hoc ergo fecit corpus, quod fecit animus; sed non similiter. Fecit enim animus quod teneat animus; fecit autem lingua quod sonat, et per aerem aurem verberat;*” *trin II.3*: “He does not do other things *likewise*, like a painter copying pictures he has seen painted by someone else; nor does he do *the same* things differently, like the body forming letters which the mind has thought.”

Here, in the profession of faith, Augustine seems to see not just a correlation between the inner word and the outer, but that it is actually the same profession. So we can profess the faith within as well as without for Augustine, thus making a strong case for the mental event as verbal – for “Even if no words are spoken, the man who is thinking is of course uttering in his heart.” (*trin.* XV.17)⁸⁴

In this way, we have seen once again that Augustine did not wish to rule out the role of words in the learning process, but rather to rule out “words alone”. On the other hand, he does seem to consider words rather important for knowledge, even if the words he is talking about are often “inner” words, and so open to the objection that they are only words in a metaphorical sense.

1.6: Natural Signs

Against the Capitol I met a lion,
 Who glar'd upon me, and went surly by, ...
 And yesterday the bird of night did sit,
 Even at noon-day, upon the market-place,
 Hooting and shrieking. When these prodigies
 Do so conjointly meet, let not men say
 'These are their reasons, they are natural;
 For, I believe, they are portentous things
 Unto the climate that they point upon.

William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*

This section will relate an important feature of the *De Doctrina Christiana*, namely the *signa data* – *signa naturalia* bifurcation, to the *De Magistro*. This distinction made in *doctr. chr.* II separates out Augustine's two usages of the word “sign” (although the fact that the two phenomena have the same name, and are listed together (II.i.1ff) is both important and highly unusual). One use is perhaps the more colloquial, whereby signs like words (for example) signify things, denoting them: *signa data* – given signs – are signs that are given by agents to communicate with one another (called “symbol” by

⁸⁴ “*Nam etsi verba non sonent, in corde suo dicit utique qui cogitat.*”

Aristotle, and signifier-signified by the Stoics⁸⁵), and it is on the merits of this innovation (i.e. calling these “given signs”) that the book is said to have “a better claim than any other to be considered the first semiotic work.”⁸⁶ The other usage of the word refers to symptoms: *signa naturalia* are signs that are simply there, not given by anyone, but free to be interpreted by all reasonable creatures, for example smoke as a sign of fire, footprints as a sign of passing animals, and involuntary expressions such as smiling or frowning as signs of our emotions (*doctr. chr.* II.i.2; this usage represents mainstream sign theory among ancient philosophers).

We may also note that here the two types of signs [*data-naturalia*] – which remained completely separate for Augustine’s predecessors – are integrated: what was sign for Aristotle and the Stoics becomes “natural sign,” Aristotle’s symbol and the Stoics’ combination of signifier and signified become “intentional signs” (moreover, the same examples are always used).⁸⁷

It will be argued below that the cases Augustine makes use of in the *De Magistro* to demonstrate that learning does not take place through words are precisely the kind of examples he could use to illustrate the concept of “*signa naturalia*” – natural signs – although the terminology does not seem to have arisen to mind yet (however cf the use of “God or nature” on page 44)⁸⁸. The earlier marked “turn towards the learner” (on page 15) is also the point where the dialogue moves away from dealing with *signa data* (again not necessarily the terminology used), including mainly words, and begins to consider the kind of sign more familiar to the ancient world, namely *signa naturalia* (cf below, on page 39). In this way, we can see that there is a great deal of continuity between the two works.

⁸⁵ Hence in the highly stoic influenced work (cf. Colish 1985b), *de dialectica*, the noun “signum” is mentioned only 12 times (most of which walk of the written word as a “sign” of the spoken word), as opposed to verb forms, which occur 46 times.

⁸⁶ Todorov 1982 [1977]: 40

⁸⁷ Todorov 1982 [1977]: 47. The “same examples” are smoke as a sign of fire (*doctr. chr.* II.i.1f; Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* viii.152); footprints as a sign of an animal (*doctr. chr.* II.i.1f; Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* viii.271). Rist 1994: 34 is probably more accurate when he notes that in passing swiftly over natural signs, Augustine is “neglecting much of the material given a central place by Stoics and Epicureans:”

⁸⁸ The earliest explicit reference I can find to *signa naturalia* appears in *s. dom. m.* I.ix.24, in the various stages of anger, where first it is hidden, eventually it is spoken out, but the intermediary category is when the anger “wrests from him a vocal sound not signifying anything”, which is later called “a sound signifying anger” (“*vox quae iram significat*”), to be distinguished from the verbal expression of that anger (“*certae vituperationis expressio*”). I assume the sound does not signify anything as a given sign, but signifies anger as a natural sign.

A warning is perhaps apt at this point: I am assuming that the fundamental difference between *signa naturalia* and *signa data* is contained in their use: i.e. their categorisation will be determined by the person hearing or apprehending them, and are not to be read as objective categories. So one person will treat something as *signa naturalia*, and another will treat it as *signa data*, according to their individual relationship to that signifying thing.

So, to give a practical example of Augustine's theory, as I understand it, consider crop circles. There are some, blissfully unaware of extra-terrestrial theories and Mel Gibson films by Shyamalan, who simply think they are pretty. For such as these, the circles are merely things, with no great significance. For others, meteorologists perhaps, it gives them reason to expect unusual weather conditions – the crop circles are perhaps a (natural) sign of turbulent winds. Still others try to decode the patterns of the crop circles in order to understand what is being communicated to them – for them the circles signify something, and each shape may denote a word or number. So different people can read the same thing as different kinds of sign.

I put it this way not because Augustine wants to make the point about the various interpretations of things as signs in either the *De Doctrina Christiana* or the *De Magistro*, but because it is generally assumed⁸⁹ that he is making an ontological distinction, and I don't think that is what he is getting at either. It is tempting to assume so, not least because, as a result of both Augustine's and Saussure's work⁹⁰, we have become used to the *signa data* sense of the word "sign" – a sense we have to remember would have been unfamiliar to Augustine's readers – but such an assumption leads the theory into all sorts of muddy waters that are entirely unnecessary.

It is to be hoped that the reading of Augustine's texts offered below will be its own argument. As a preliminary justification, though, let me just note that there does not seem to be any evidence (textual or logical) to suggest that *signa data* cannot be understood as a subcategory of *signa naturalia*. It is perhaps important to note that he

⁸⁹ Notably by Kirwan (1989: 40-43), gets into real trouble as a result, and so accuses Augustine of four logical errors, all of which can be solved by allowing that many phenomena can be taken either as *signa naturalia* or as *signa data*, according to the approach of the listener/speaker

introduces natural signs first, and then moves on to narrow the subject down (in a manner comparable to the way we went from things to communication in the crop circles example above, on page 33), first to given signs (*doctr. chr.* II.ii.3) then to words (II.iii.4) – which are themselves a kind of given sign⁹¹ – and finally to literal and transferred signs (*doctr. chr.* x.15, cf. below II.5.1: Transferred Signs: Non-verbal Continuity). Notice he does *not* say that he simply leaves the category of natural signs to one side, but rather “It is not my intention to discuss this *whole* category (*hoc toto genere*) now,”⁹² (*doctr. chr.* II.i.2, emphasis mine). So it is perfectly viable to assume that he is investigating a part of it, namely the kind of natural signs that are given. If *signa data* actually have nothing to do with *signa naturalia*, then why does Augustine even mention the latter (somewhat confusingly, since previous tradition had held the two apart, cf above on page 31), given that he himself decides not to discuss it? For it seems implausible that

He does this to dispose of *signa naturalia* (smoke as a sign of fire, a contorted expression on the face of a man as a sign of pain), for though they are an important way of communicating, they provide no basis for any developed form of human communication.⁹³

Natural signs were never a question of communication (except for one mention in *de musica* VI.xiii.41 (quoted below, on page 46), which does not seem to be working with the same understanding as *doctr. chr.* II), but of understanding. Augustine himself explains the inclusion by remarking that “it comes into my classification (*partitionem*)” (*doctr. chr.* II.i.2), thus implying that it is a necessary step in the process of categorising what kind of things *signa data* are.

The reverse, of course, is not true: natural signs may not be interpreted as a subcategory of given signs, because they are distinguished from the latter not by certain essential characteristics, but by their not fulfilling all the qualifications needed to identify them as given signs. But that does not exclude *signa data* having all the qualities necessary for possible categorisation or use as a natural sign.⁹⁴ On the other hand, it

⁹⁰ Cf below, n106

⁹¹ “*sed innumerabilis multitudo signorum, quibus suas cogitationes homines exerunt, in verbis constituta est.*” (*doctr. chr.* II.iii.4)

⁹² “*Sed de hoc toto genere nunc disserere non est propositum.*”

⁹³ Louth 1983: 80

⁹⁴ Markus 1995: 106f makes something like this distinction.

would seem logical that, for example, words can be used as a natural sign that someone has mastered a language.⁹⁵ So there are grey areas. For example, if someone walks into a reception, and coughs in order to indicate their presence, they have given a sign. The receptionist may think “where there’s coughing, there’s a person present” (in the same way as one thinks “where there’s smoke, there’s fire”), and so react accordingly. Or if the person said “I’m here”, how would a receptionist who did not speak English react? Here qualifications for both kinds of sign are present, but Augustine would probably say that it was a given sign, because there was a desire to signify. Kirwan⁹⁶ thinks that such examples count as criticisms of the theory, which would only be the case if we understood the two categories as rigid ontological distinctions. As soon as we admit of differences in interpretation and use, such problems disappear.

So it would appear that *signa data* can be thought of as *dependent* on *signa naturalia*, forming a kind of shaky extension of it. Perhaps when we speak, we intend our words to be taken as a kind of sign-symptom of our inner state⁹⁷. This makes good sense of the otherwise puzzling concept of speaking our memories when trying to referring to absent corporeals (in *mag.* xii.39⁹⁸) as problematised by Gareth Matthews: “Augustine seems to be saying that whenever we are asked about familiar, but absent, sensible things we respond by changing the subject, that is, by talking of our memory images instead.”⁹⁹

Therefore all given signs may be construed as natural signs, and Augustine never actually leaves the conception of sign as symptom, but instead stretches it in new

⁹⁵ Markus (1957: 90-92) agrees that some instances may “be treated as either symptomatic [*signa naturalia*] or symbolic [*signa data*] in their meaning” but strangely does not imagine the distinction’s author to have seen this point.

⁹⁶ Kirwan 1989: 41

⁹⁷ Aristotle hinted at this kind of interpretation of his “symbol” (Augustine’s given sign) when he called it a “sign” (Augustine’s natural signs) of the experience of the soul (*de interpretatione* I.16a4-8). The system is not identical to Augustine’s though, because Aristotle also assumes the experience of the soul resembles what the words refer to in some way: “*Esti men oun ta en tē phōnē tōn en tē psuchē pathēmatōn simbola, kai ta graphomena tōn en tē phōnē. kai hōsper oude grammata pasi ta auta, oude phōnai hai autai hōn mentoi tauta sēmeia prōtōs, tauta pasi pathēmata tēspuchēs.*”. A similar mention (with no systematic discussion) of words as natural signs can be found in stoic sources: Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* viii.279, 290 – “*eiper de ouden sudenos esti sēmaion, ētai sēmainousi ti aikata tou sēmeiou ekpheromenai phōnai ē ouden sēmainousin. ... ei de sēmainousi, mataioi kathestasin oi apo tēs skepseōs, logō men ekballontes to sēmeion, ergō de touto paralambanontes.*”

⁹⁸ “*Cum vero non de iis quae coram sentimus, sed de his quae aliquando sensimus quaeritur; non jam res ipsas, sed imagines ab iis impressas memoriaeque mandatas loquimur.*”

⁹⁹ Matthews 1972a [1965]: 168. Matthews’ article is exceptionally interesting because he uses a version of Wittgenstein’s (2001) [1953] “Private Language Argument”, which the latter had himself directed at Augustine.

directions. Evidence for this approach to our semiotic activity is found, of all places, in the opening words of the *De Magistro* quoted below on page 38. He also seems to be hankering after such an understanding when discussing Vergil with Adeodatus in *mag.* ii.3, as he asks where what “if” signifies is situated (“Adeodatus: ...where is doubt but in the mind?”), and challenges the interpretation of “nothing” as signifying something (not) in the world (“Augustine: ...shall we not say that this word signifies a certain state of mind rather than the very thing that is nothing?”).¹⁰⁰

when it is necessary to convey the knowledge in the language of those we are speaking to, some sign is adopted to signify this word. And usually a sound, sometimes also a gesture is presented, the one to their ears the other to their eyes, in order that bodily signs may make the word we carry in our minds known to their bodily senses. ... the vocal sounds of our speech are signs of the things we are thinking of.¹⁰¹ (*trin.* XV.19)

In addition, signs are distinguished from things purely by their use (“I mean by signs: those things which are employed to signify something” (*doctr. chr.* I.ii.2); cf also Augustine’s criticism of Jews for treating signs as things in *doctr. chr.* III.v.9), so we are simply continuing Augustine’s practise onto the next distinction. “The [*res-signa*] opposition can be reconstituted only at another level – at the level of function, not of substance. A sign indeed may be considered from two points of view: as thing or as sign”.¹⁰²

With regards to this sign theory’s relation to the *De Magistro*, however, we shall have to look at the phenomena under description rather than at the vocabulary used, as the terminology seems to have only been introduced in the *De Doctrina Christiana*. So we will extract aspects of Augustine’s descriptions in the later work and see whether they apply to anything in the earlier.

¹⁰⁰ Ayers 1979: 76-78 suggests an interpretation of this kind.

¹⁰¹ “*sed cum id opus est in eorum quibus loquimur perferre notitiam, aliquod signum quo significetur assumitur. Et plerumque sonus, aliquando etiam nutus, ille auribus, ille oculis exhibetur, ut per signa corporalia etiam corporis sensibus verbum quod mente gerimus innotescat. ... cum ipsae voces in sermone nostro earum quas cogitamus signa sint rerum.*”

¹⁰² Todorov 1982 [1977]: 46

1.6.1: Intention

The main difference between *signa data* and *signa naturalia* in the *De Doctrina Christiana* is the aspect of intention.¹⁰³ In the former it is present, in the latter it is not.

Natural signs are those which without a wish or any urge to signify cause something else besides themselves to be known from them, ... Given signs are those which living things give to each other, in order to show, to the best of their ability, the emotions of their minds, or anything else that they have felt or learnt. (*doctr. chr.* II.i.2f)¹⁰⁴

In this way it is no accident that we described the major shift in the *De Magistro* as a “turn towards the learner” (on page 15). For just as the burden of teaching moves from the teacher to the learner in the *De Magistro*, so the active figure in signification changes from the speaker (or mover, or actor, etc) with *signa data*, to the observer with *signa naturalia*. The latter signifies “because of our observation” (*rerum ... animadversione*), the former does so “in order to show...” (*ad demonstrandos*). I would argue that it is exactly the same movement that takes place in the *De Magistro*.

If we examine Augustine’s treatment of signs towards the end of the *De Magistro*, he repeatedly uses the notion of sign whereby what we understand is not something necessarily intended to be understood. So Adeodatus notably does not need his listeners to understand that he *means* walking, so long as they understand what walking is. Similarly, the bird catcher does not display his skill because he wants them to understand how it works, but because he is “wanting to show off after seeing the attention focused on him,” (*auceps autem cum in se videret attentum, ostentandi se studio cannas expediret; mag. x.32*). It is also notable that the only fact we learn from a teacher’s utterance is *that* she thinks in such a way – something that the teacher did not necessarily intend us to learn, assuming she was trying to teach us the subject itself, and not merely autobiographical information. The intention was that the signs given by the teacher should direct the pupils’ attention towards the subject matter (as would be expected with given signs), yet Augustine holds in *mag. xiv.45* that the hearer only learns the views of the

¹⁰³ Engels (1962: 371)

teacher (as would be expected with natural signs) from her words (cf. I.5.1: Academic Assent).

It is interesting to note that this shift, disallowing any knowledge of what is denoted (and therefore signified by *signa data*) while allowing for knowledge deduced from the utterance itself (therefore signified by *signa naturalia*) comes at the rhetorical climax of the dialogue, where Augustine sweeps away his previous discussion in order to pronounce his concluding argument:

See here: I now give in and concede that when words are heard by someone who knows them, he can know that the speaker had been thinking about the things they signify. Yet does he for this reason also learn whether the speaker has stated truths... ? (*mag. xiii.45*)¹⁰⁵

So towards the end of the dialogue, the notion of intention seems unimportant – a characteristic of *signa naturalia*. Before the crucial shift, though, intention is vital to the argument. “Anyone who speaks gives an external sign of his will by means of an articulated sound.” (*mag. i.2*)¹⁰⁶

It is here that Adeodatus tries to make a distinction between walking and hurrying, wary that actions on their own can mean a number of things (iii.6). Similarly, Augustine chastises him for not trying to discern the intention of the question – what it actually meant: “For if it is ambiguous, you should have had caution and not have replied before you had ascertained in what sense [way] I was asking.” (*mag. viii.22*)¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ “*Naturalia sunt, quae sine voluntate atque ullo appetitu significandi, praeter se aliquid aliud ex se cognosci faciunt, ... Data vero signa sunt, quae sibi quaeque viventia invicem dant ad demonstrandos, quantum possunt, motus animi sui, vel sensa, aut intellecta quaelibet.*”

¹⁰⁵ “*Sed ecce jam remitto et concedo, cum verba ejus auditu cui nota sunt, accepta fuerint, posse illi esse notum de iis rebus quas significant, loquentem cogitavisse: num ideo etiam quod nunc quaeritur, utrum vera dixerit, discit?*”

¹⁰⁶ “*Qui enim loquitur, suae voluntatis signum foras dat per articulatam sonum.*” Note that here Augustine’s use of the word “sign” is an immediate development from evidential (natural) signs – it is a sign of his mind. Contrast de Saussure’s arbitrary use of the word “because I do not know of any word to replace it,” (De Saussure (1960 [1916]: 67)

¹⁰⁷ “*nam si est ambigua, prius hoc cavere debuisti, neque mihi respondere antequam certus fieres quonam modo rogaverim.*” Atherton (1993: 456) agrees that this appeal to a rule of discourse has general applicability to ambiguity in language.

In this way, the dialogue starts with discussion on intended signs, and ends with non-intended signs. We could call the latter *evidential* signs, to highlight the fact that in the ancient world signs were not usually associated with words, as they are immediately in Augustine. This emphasis, and his extensive explanation, was his own innovation¹⁰⁸. Instead, signs were thought of as ways of recognising and proving things – natural signs were pre-eminent. Markus¹⁰⁹ traces this conception back to Aristotle's definition of the sign as "a demonstrative premiss, either necessary or probable" in the *Prior Analytics* II.27.70a7, although he was certainly not alone in this, not least because Philosophy was a common hobby for doctors, who had more practical reasons for working out a theory of evidential signs, whereby for example, shivering would be a "sign" of fever¹¹⁰. Stoic thought based signification on the process of induction (if-then propositions: cf Sextus Empiricus (also a doctor), *Adversus Mathematicos* viii.276), and Augustine seems to have held to this view in many other earlier works. For example, in speaking of how to discern a wise person, he writes "For there are no signs whatever *by which one can recognize (cognoscere) something*, unless he knows the thing itself of which these are the signs." (*util. cred.* xiii.28, emphasis mine)¹¹¹

In this way, signs are forever dependent upon the reasoning behind them. In this case, the reasoning is based on past experience: *if* someone can solve problems involving two mothers and one child, *then* that person is wise. Some signs can be altogether more reliable, however: *if* there is smoke, *then* there is fire; *if* there is a daughter, *then* there is a parent. In addition, of course (as we have seen), given signs can also be treated as natural signs: *if* this person says "Shall I open a window?", *then* they feel hot. In this way, even natural signs can be more or less reliable depending on the interpreter¹¹²: *if* someone takes their coat off, *then* they are warm, or perhaps dry, or allergic to rubber, or perhaps have discovered a wasp in their sleeve. Eco notes that the Stoic model of signs

¹⁰⁸ Markus 1957: 75-78. Jackson 1972 [1969]: 128-137 disagrees, but is unable to give an unambiguously linguistic use of either "signum" or "semaion" (cf. above, n97). Cf Also Todorov 1982 [1977]: 15 – "But Augustine did not invent semiotics; it can even be said that, quite to the contrary, he invented virtually nothing, that he merely combined ideas and notions drawn from several horizons."

¹⁰⁹ Markus 1957: 72

¹¹⁰ so Eco (1984) begins the semiotic story with Hippocrates

¹¹¹ "*Neque enim signis quibuslibet cognoscere aliquid potest, nisi illud ipsum, cujus ea signa sunt, noverit.*" Cf. also *Io. eu. tr.* XXV.11: "*ideo ponis signum, ne confusa cum aliis, a te non possit agnosci*"

¹¹² What we learn from natural signs can be radically different, according to our society, *pace* Babcock 1995: 159, n16. The point was fairly common in antiquity: cf. Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* viii.193

...assumes, therefore, the form of inference ($p \supset q$), where the variables are neither physical realities nor events, but the propositions that express the events. A column of smoke is not a sign unless the interpreter sees the event as the true antecedent of a hypothetical reasoning (*if* there is smoke...) which is related by inference (more or less necessarily) to its consequent (*then* there is fire). This is why the Stoics can say, and they do, that the sign is a *lektón* and, therefore, an incorporeal.¹¹³

So in seeing Augustine turn from intentional signs (how does a student learn what a teacher is intending to say?) to evidential signs (how does a student learn?), we may say that he moves from treating words as given signs, paying attention to what they denote, to treating them as evidential – or natural – signs, discerning what lies behind them.

1.6.2: Reasoning

The above notes on the nature of *signa naturalia* show that the notion of reasoning is also important for the category of natural signs. Inductive reasoning is vital to understanding that smoke means fire. The smoke will not always necessarily be a natural sign, and it is the crucial element of reasoning (if there's smoke, there's something suspicious happening in the kitchen) that makes it such. "It does not signify because it wishes to do so; but because of our *observation and consideration of things previously experienced* it is realized that there is fire beneath it, even if nothing but smoke appears." (*de doctrine christiana* I.i.2, emphasis mine)¹¹⁴

It is not difficult to show that reasoning is used in the example of the bird catcher, strengthening our hypothesis that towards the end of the dialogue, knowledge is attained through *signa naturalia*: "On seeing this birdcatcher, he follows closely in his footsteps, and, as it happens, he reflects and asks himself in his astonishment what exactly the man's equipment means." (*mag.* x.32)¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Eco 1984: 31

¹¹⁴ "Non enim volens significare id facit, sed rerum expertarum animadversione et notatione cognoscitur ignem subesse, etiam si fumus solus appareat."

¹¹⁵ "non tamen aucupanti, sed iter agenti, quo viso premeret gradum, secumque, ut fit, admirans cogitaret et quaereret quidnam sibi hominis ille vellet ornatus;"

The use of signs near the beginning of the dialogue is altogether more complicated (as might be expected if *signa data* constitute a further development of *signa naturalia*). For reasoning clearly takes place when interpreting words, but it is of a different kind. For our purposes, we should note that the reasoning ascertains only the meaning of the phrase, but does not get us anywhere nearer to understanding its truth or falsity. In a sense, it is not, as it were, owned until the hearer can form a conclusion. That kind of reasoning is delayed until the hearers can consider it themselves, concluding that the speaker has said *p*, so must be thinking/feeling in such a way. In this way, the words at the beginning of the dialogue can be said to suggest (we are concerned with what was spoken), whereas the signs at the end demonstrate (we are concerned with what that means).

In the works contemporary with *De Magistro*, we find repeated assertions that knowledge is impossible without reasoning¹¹⁶. Even if we happen to come across a truth through some other method (rumour, mistaken logic), it is not knowledge until we have reasoned it out. The example given in *De animae quantitate* (xxiv.45) is instructive: “Augustine: Therefore, to perceive with the sense is one thing; to know is another. Evodius: Altogether different; for we perceive the smoke that we see, and from that we know (*cognoscimus*) the presence (*subesse*) of the fire which we do not see.”¹¹⁷

In this way we can see that knowledge is only brought about by reasoning, which is parallel to what we have been saying about *signa naturalia*. The example is all the more remarkable for being *exactly the same* as that produced by Augustine later in the *De Doctrina Christiana* as an example of natural signs. Here we appear to have an early demonstration of Augustine’s later assertion that *res per signa discutuntur* (although once again the *signa* are not called such in the early works – the terminology seems to have emerged later). For if we define learning as acquiring knowledge, we see that it can not happen without the kind of reasoning involved in discerning the fire through the smoke. The smoke stands for the fire, it elicits knowledge of fire, is a natural sign for the fire.

¹¹⁶ *Sol.* I.iv.9; *an.quant.* xxvi.49; *lib. arb.* I.vii.16; II.iii.8

¹¹⁷ “A. *Aliud est ergo sentire, aliud cognoscere. E. Omnino aliud; nam sentimus fumum, quem videmus; et ex eo ignem, quem non videmus, subesse cognoscimus.*” Cf. the point rephrased in *Io. eu. tr.* XXIV.6: “*Nihil igitur vacat, omnia innuunt, sed intellectorem requirunt: ... Cernimus quippe animo, quod oculis non potuimus.*”

Therefore we may perceive the smoke, but unless we use it as a sign (Evodius seems to be saying in the above quotation) we get no knowledge.

The evidence is strong, then, for seeing the reasoning present at the end of the *De Magistro* as a use of *signa naturalia*. It has been established that natural signs are based on inductive reasoning both in Augustine and in his philosophical predecessors (cf I.6.1: Intention), and it is only at the end of the dialogue that such reasoning really comes to the fore, bearing with it sure knowledge which is itself something Augustine says (in works contemporary with *De Magistro*) only comes about as a result of reasoning (cf. n116 above). Hence he admits that he believes rather than knows what he is told – through words, which are a kind of *signa data* – in the Bible (*mag.* xi.37). The quotation from *de animae quantitate* above gives as an example of reasoning exactly the same case as he would later give to illustrate natural signs (*doctr. chr.* II.i.2).

This aspect of our interpretation of *signa naturalia*, incidentally, may also aid the reading of opening sections of the *Confessions*,¹¹⁸ where Augustine is accused of

describing the learning of human language as if the child came into a strange country and did not understand the language of the country; that is, as if it already had a language, only not this one. Or again: as if the child could already *think*, only not yet speak. And “think” would here mean something like “talk to itself”.¹¹⁹

The sting of this critique¹²⁰ may be drawn perhaps if we interpret “to think” rather as “to interpret natural signs” – or, as we have argued here, “to reason”. This reading may be confirmed by Augustine’s designation of human actions as *verba naturalia* – surely an echo of *signa naturalia*. So the child interprets actions as revealing human desires and

¹¹⁸ Wittgenstein’s text runs: “*Cum ipsi (maiores homines) appellabant rem aliquam, et cum secundum eam vocem corpus ad aliquid movebant, videbam, et tenebam hoc ab eis vocari rem illam, quod sonabant, cum eam vellent ostendere. Hoc autem eos velle ex motu corporis aperiebatur: tamquam verbis naturalibus omnium gentium, quae fiunt vultu et nutu oculorum, ceterorumque membrorum actu, et sonitu vocis indicante affectionem animi in petendis, habendis, rejiciendis, fugiendisve rebus. Ita verba in variis sententiis locis posita, et crebro audita, quarum rerum signa essent, paulatim colligebam, measque jam voluntates, edomito in eis signis ore, per haec enuntiabam.*”

¹¹⁹ Wittgenstein 2001 [1953]: 32

¹²⁰ Defended (fairly shakily in the light of the discoveries of Generative Grammar) on the basis of the variety of languages by Kirwan (2001: 203)

beliefs, just as language does: "According to Augustine, then, speech is a means of mind-exposure, and speakers expose their minds by giving signs of their minds' contents."¹²¹

The revelation of mind through actions as well as words is a fairly Wittgensteinian move in the understanding of the inner life, and when we remember that the soul can be conceived as a social entity (*trin.* XIII.i.2¹²²) for Augustine, it is only a short step to the modern view that the self is constituted by our actions, or that there is no private soul. So Augustine is not so far away from Wittgenstein as some¹²³ have imagined.

1.6.3: Observation

It is an interesting fact (which few people know) that the yellow-billed cuckoo's other name is the rain-bird, because when he's noisy it means there's going to be a downpour; and this one was making a tremendous racket. The doves listened carefully to what he was saying, and then flew back.

Dick King-Smith, *Noah's Brother*

The other element we saw required by the definition of *signa naturalia* (on page 40) was observation. Natural signs have to be observed carefully in order to extract from them their referent. Given signs, on the other hand, seem to need very little observation, as the focus is more on the referent than the sign itself. So we have to consider smoke carefully in order to discern that there is fire below it, whereas words seem a good deal more automatic, if it can be put in such a way.

For once, the examples in *De Magistro* actually make the argument a good deal clearer. For the element of observation comes to the fore very obviously in the case of the bird catcher. We attain knowledge about the technique of ensnaring birds by watching it. There is no convention required, nothing automatic, but merely an intelligent person examining something (a man and a collection of rods) and coming to conclusions about something else (the art of catching birds). "Adeodatus: I also can add this to the other

¹²¹ Kirwan 2001: 192

¹²² "Utrisque enim notum est quid sit homo, cujus exteriorem partem, id est, corpus per corporis lumina didicerunt: interiorem vero, id est, animam in se ipsis, quia et ipsi homines sunt, et per humanam conversationem cognitam tenent."

¹²³ e.g. Kirwan 2001: 201-204

case! If he is sufficiently intelligent, he'll know the whole of what it is to walk, once walking has been illustrated by a few steps." (*mag.* x.32)¹²⁴

It is in this context that Augustine comes as close as he ever does in the dialogue to pre-empting the later distinction, by remarking that this sign-less apprehension is a *natural* process for some discerning person, who does not need any pointing, but identifies reality as it is for what it is: "doesn't God or Nature show and display to those paying attention, by themselves, this sun and the light pervading and clothing all things present, the moon and the other stars, the lands and the seas, and the countless things begotten in them?" (*mag.* x.32)¹²⁵

In contrast, the beginning of the dialogue displayed a complete unwillingness on the part of the learner to observe. The onus to demonstrate was on the teacher, and if the teacher could not point something out immediately, then the teaching had failed.

Augustine: ... But if when one says 'wall' I were to ask what this one-syllable word signifies, couldn't you show me with your finger? Then when you pointed it out *I would straightaway see* the very thing of which this one-syllable word is a sign, (*mag.* iii.5, emphasis mine)¹²⁶

The *De Magistro* is not alone of the works of Augustine in attributing the sure acquisition of knowledge to proper perception. It is a commonplace point, in the early works, that right observation leads to knowledge, via reasoning¹²⁷. "knowledge exists only when something is perceived and known by certain reason" (*an.quant.* xxvi.49)¹²⁸

¹²⁴ "Ad. Hoc etiam ego possum illi addere; si enim sit bene intelligens, paucis passibus ambulatione monstrata, totum quid sit ambulare cognoscet."

¹²⁵ "solem certe istum lucemque haec omnia perfundentem atque vestientem, lunam et caetera sidera, terras et maria, quaeque in his innumerabiliter gignuntur, nonne per seipsa exhibet atque ostendit Deus et natura cernentibus?" For other earlier instances of this kind of distinction, cf *mus.* VI.ix.24: "Names are imposed by convention, not by nature" ("*placito enim, non natura imponuntur*")

¹²⁶ "*sed si quaerem istae tres syllabae quid significant, cum dicitur, Paries, nonne posses digito ostendere, ut ego prorsus rem ipsam viderem, cujus signum est hoc trisyllabum verbum,*"

¹²⁷ cf *Sol.* II.v.8; *de moribus ecclesiae catholicae* vii.12; *an.quant.* xviii.32; *util. cred.* xvi.34

¹²⁸ "*scientiam non esse, nisi cum res aliqua firma ratione percepta et cognita est?*"

1.6.4: Agreement

Like, for instance, standing in the kitchen wondering what you went in there for. Everybody does it, but because there isn't – or wasn't – a word for it, everyone thinks it's something that only they do and that they are therefore more stupid than other people.

Douglas Adams, *The Salmon of Doubt*

In the *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine quickly drops the concept of natural sign, and goes on to discuss given signs, since he is dealing primarily with Scripture, written and intended by the biblical authors. It is interesting to note, though, that he explains the meaning of given signs (amongst humans, that is¹²⁹) in terms of social agreement. This will of course account for the “automatic” feel to signs – we do not have to go through a complicated reasoning process in order to discern their meaning: all we need is contained in the community we are socialised into.

When I say *lege* a Greek understands one thing by these two syllables, but a Latin speaker something else. All these meanings, then, derive their effects on the mind from each individual's agreement with a particular convention. As this agreement varies in extent, so do their effects. People did not agree to use them because they were already meaningful (*valebant ad significationem*); rather they became meaningful because people agreed to use them. (*doctr. chr.* II.xxiv.37)¹³⁰

Correspondingly, given signs cement communities together, and allow us to live without questioning everything. So what we need for the interpretation of Scripture is more precisely contained in the communities the biblical authors were part of, which means we have to learn all the aspects of other societies too. Hence the enlarging of the semiotic encyclopaedia in *doctr. chr.* II.xx.30-xxx.47.

The new Christian civilization accepts and introduces (by further and further reelaborations) into the interpretive circle, that is, its own growing encyclopedia, all the knowledge of classical

¹²⁹ cf Todorov 1982 [1977]: 47

¹³⁰ “*et cum dico, Lege, in his duabus syllabis, aliud Graecus, aliud Latinus intelligit: sicut ergo hae omnes significationes pro suae cujusque societatis consensione animos movent, et quia diversa consensio est, diverse movent; nec ideo consenserunt in eas homines, quia jam valebant ad significationem, sed ideo valent, quia consenserunt in eas.*”

civilization, as it was inherited by the late Roman culture, under the form of a syncretistic encyclopedia.¹³¹

Now clearly the signs towards the end of *De Magistro* have nothing to do with the conventions referred to here. There was no agreement as such between the watcher and the bird catcher about what was happening. Even if the bird catcher had been oblivious to the audience, the latter would nonetheless have learnt.

In the first part of the dialogue, however, the interlocutors are forced to rely on convention and agreement in order to learn. It is notable that in the case of Adeodatus trying to teach what “walking” means, they assume that the person has already asked what walking means in the first place (*mag.* iii.6). More evidence of social agreement as key for communication can be seen in the handling of sound and signification, where Adeodatus attempts to avoid the conclusion (based on the fact that he is not made up of two syllables) that he is not a man (*homo*).

If anyone asks me whether man is a name, then, I would answer that it is nothing else, for he signifies well enough that he wants to hear the answer from the standpoint in which it is a sign. If he asks whether man is an animal, I would give my assent much more readily. If without mentioning “name” or “animal” he were to inquire only what man is, then *in virtue of that agreed-upon rule of language* the mind would quickly move along to what is signified by this syllable [“man”], and the answer would simply be “an animal”; (*mag.* viii.24, emphasis mine)¹³²

The nature-convention distinction was one of Augustine’s earliest analyses of sign forms, and is subtly different from the natural-given distinction. He seems to be exclusively describing signs of mental activity when he writes that

It happens from the condition of sinners, though, that souls are permitted to bring forth something from the mind by signifying those movements through one of two bodies: either through natural

¹³¹ Eco 1984: 151

¹³² “*Qui ergo quaerit utrum homo nomen sit, nihil ei aliud quam esse respondeam: satis enim significat ex ea parte se velle audire, qua signum est. Si autem quaerit utrum animal sit, multo proclivius annuam: quoniam si tacens et nomen et animal, tantum quid esset homo requireret, placita illa loquendi regula ad id quod duabus syllabis significatur, animus curreret; neque quidquam responderetur nisi animal.*”

signs, such as facial expression or a gesture; or through conventional signs, such as words. (*mus.* VI.xiii.41; translation mine)¹³³

So it seems that the notion of signs established by societal agreement was not such a late discovery for Augustine after all. In fact, the conventionality of signification was one of his more frequent comments on the subject of language¹³⁴.

For reason was held fast by a certain natural bond in the fellowship of those with whom it possessed reason as a common heritage, since men could not be most firmly associated unless they conversed and thus poured, so to speak, their minds and thoughts back and forth to one another. (*ord.* II.xii.35)¹³⁵

In this way we can see the distinction between natural signs and given signs works out in the early works as well, specifically in the *De Magistro*, thus bringing it into line with *De Doctrina Christiana*.

1.6.5: Assent

Finally in this section we must consider the crucial role of assent and how it affects natural and given signs. For just as words were important but by no means enough for the enterprise of teaching knowledge (*I.5: Words Alone?*), so signs do not produce knowledge automatically on their own: we must assent to the results of the signification process in order to know anything.

¹³³ “*Peccatorum tamen conditione fit, ut permittantur animae de animis aliquid agere, significando eas moventes per alterutra corpora, vel naturalibus signis, sicut est vultus vel nutus, vel placitis, sicut sunt verba.*” The key word to this distinction is “*placita*”, for which see also *mag.* viii.24 (in n132); *doctr. chr.* II.xx.30; II.xxiv.37; II.xxv.38; II.xxv.39. The seminal article for this discussion is Engels (1962).

¹³⁴ cf also *ord.* II.xi.31; *mus.* I.i.1, III.ii.3 (en page 11), V.i.1, VI.ix.24; *an.quant.* xxxiii.72; *util. cred.* vii.19; *trin.* VII.vi.7. I also see the arbitrariness of signs as the reasoning behind Augustine’s talk of disregarding words in *Acad.* III.ii.3, III.xiii.29; *Beata. u.* iv.31; *ord.* II.ii.4, II.vii.21; *an.quant.* vi.11; *mus.* V.iii.4; *trin.* V.ix.10; *gn. litt.* IV.v.11. The “*res non verba*” tradition goes back at least as far as Cicero, *Tusc.* V.xi.32: “*Rem enim opinor spectari oportere, non verba*”

¹³⁵ “*Namque illud quod in nobis est rationale, id est, quod ratione utitur, et rationabilia vel facit vel sequitur, quia naturali quodam vinculo in eorum societate astringebatur, cum quibus illi erat ratio ipsa communis, nec homini homo firmissime sociari posset, nisi colloquerentur, atque ita sibi mentes suas cogitationesque quasi refunderent, vidit esse imponenda rebus vocabula, id est significantes quosdam*

Assent still remains outside the boundaries of the sign. But in this case, it is delayed even further than the words given by a teacher. If we are taking the simple case of noticing fire, we see the thing, use it as a sign of fire (here we can see why it is so complicated to locate the sign itself), and come to the conclusion that there is fire. We assent to our own reasoning.

The case of someone teaching is a little more complicated. Here, someone tells us something, for example, that the sky is really pink when you get up close to it. The words, when considered as *natural* signs, are only signs of someone else's opinion (cf. *mag.* xiii.45, quoted on page 38). We hypothesise, "If Adrian says the sky is pink, then Adrian must actually think that the sky is pink". So the words are signs of Adrian's opinions, *to which we would otherwise have no access*.

Accordingly, ... it is our intention, when we speak truth, that by means of our words our mind should be made known to him who hears us, and that whatever we carry in secrecy in our heart may be set forth by means of signs of this sort for the intelligent understanding of another individual (*f. et. symb.* iii.3)¹³⁶

So words are something that bring an absent thing to the mind (*doctr. chr.* II.i.1)¹³⁷. But notice that the absent thing is no longer a simple proposition (as we had above, in I.5.1: Academic Assent): it is *Adrian's* proposition. So with a natural sign, we do not merely give assent to the proposition, but the proposition as held by a certain person. Hence on the one hand we will take a different attitude to Augustine when he tells us that he has seen a flying man as to when he tells us that wise people are better than fools (*mag.* xii.40), because assent is exclusively the domain of the listener where *signa data* are concerned. On the other hand, we do not consider belief in a good authority worthless (*mag.* xi.37), because propositions are considered in the context of their speakers where they are used as *signa naturalia*. We cannot have one without the other, because when we consider utterances as natural signs, they are signs of both a proposition

sonos; ut, quoniam sentire animos suos non poterant, ad eos sibi copulandos sensu quasi interprete uterentur."

¹³⁶ "Sicut ergo verbis nostris id agimus, cum verum loquimur, ut noster animus innotescat audienti, et quidquid secretum in corde gerimus, per signa hujusmodi ad cognitionem alterius proferatur"

and a speaker. “When the teachers have explained by means of words all the disciplines they profess to teach, even the disciplines of virtue and of wisdom, then those who are called ‘students’ consider within themselves whether truths have been stated.” (*mag.* xiv.45)¹³⁸

Once again, this is not an insight unique to the *De Magistro*. In the *De Ordine*, for example, Augustine complains that some readers “pay little heed either to the *why* of a question or to the purpose of the authors or even to what is fully explained and proved by them.” (I.11.31)¹³⁹

This “why” question is something that appears again and again in the sermons, as Augustine seeks not just to apprehend the given signs, but also the reasoning that went on behind it. What provoked the Psalmist to express himself like this? As Peter Brown notes:

Thus the first question he must ask is not ‘what’, ‘what was the nature of this particular religious practice in the ancient Near East?’ but ‘why’ – ‘why does this incident, this word and no other, occur at just this moment in the interminable monologue of God; and so, what aspect of His deeper message does it communicate? Like the child who asked the basic question: ‘Mummy, *why* is a cow?’, Augustine will run through the text of the Bible in such a way that every sermon is punctuated by ‘*Quare ... quare ... quare*’ ‘Why? ... why? ... why?’¹⁴⁰

In this way the radical incommunicability of assent we discovered (I.5.1: Academic Assent) can not in any way be opposed to the important role of belief as portrayed both in the *De Magistro*, and the roughly contemporary *De Utilitate Credendi*. Our own judgement is unavoidable – as no one can force us to assent – and is even present when we listen to authorities, but in the latter case, it is not simply judgement of the propositions presented, but also of our own knowledge that the authority tells us this. With given signs, we assent or not to the notion that God is a rock. With natural signs, we

¹³⁷ “*aliud aliquid ex se faciens in cogitationem venire*”

¹³⁸ “*At istas omnes disciplinas quas se docere profitentur, ipsiusque virtutis atque sapientiae, cum verbis explicaverint; tum illi qui discipuli vocantur, utrum vera dicta sint, apud semetipsos considerant, interiorem scilicet illam veritatem pro viribus intuentes.*”

¹³⁹ “*Isti enim in litteris non multum attendunt aut unde sit quaestio, aut quo pervenire disserentes moliantur, quidve ab eis explicatum atque confectum sit.*”

¹⁴⁰ Brown 1967: 253

assent or not to our own observation that “*The Bible says that God is a rock*”. We only believe that “God is a rock”, but the fact that the Bible says so is fairly unassailable.

1.7: Conclusion: The Use of Words

So what have we found out about Augustine’s worldview? Well, words are not enough to produce knowledge in someone else. But then, Augustine does not think that is a particularly good project anyway. Teaching, in terms of producing exactly the same knowledge in the pupil that was in the teacher, is not what listening and knowing is all about. Instead, the mind is more active in its cognitive processes, according to the *De Magistro*. Memories will always be different, and so, therefore, will understanding. The role of the will is all-important as it is a virtue and a necessity to assess the suggestions brought before the mind. So the idea of teaching as attacked in the *De Magistro* will need severe revising before it can be of any use philosophically. It is no wonder the later works speak much more of learning than of teaching.

Instead, knowledge is learnt by the perceiver apprehending phenomena in the world as natural signs, using them in inductive reasoning, combining them with their existing understanding of the world, and coming to conclusions about things that are witnessed here and now as well as things that are not seen. These signs are not, however, explicitly called signs in the *De Magistro*. This is not an essential point, since Augustine’s terminology is usually quite fluid¹⁴¹, and rarely fixed down to one usage, as is continuous with his own philosophy of the arbitrariness of language.

So are things really learnt through words? Certainly the *De Magistro* leaves that option open. If natural signs are dependent on induction, they may well also require verbal propositions¹⁴². Given the uselessness of teaching, then, and the terminology of use and enjoyment that comes to light alongside words and things in the *De Doctrina*

¹⁴¹ for other uses of the expression “sign”, cf *ord.* II.xi.34; *an.quant.* xi.18, xxxiii.72; *lo. eu. tr.* III.2

¹⁴² cf quotation from Eco (1984) on page 40; also Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* viii.256:

“...the sign is a proposition, and also it is the antecedent in a valid major truth premiss which begins with truth and ends in truth.”

Christiana (cf below, III.2: Desire), it is interesting to note this aside near the end of the dialogue: “At another time we shall, God willing, look into the whole problem of the usefulness of words – which, if considered properly, is not negligible!” (*Mag. xiv.46*)¹⁴³

¹⁴³ “*Sed de tota utilitate verborum, quae si bene consideretur non parva est, alias, si Deus siverit, requiremus.*”

II: "The Inner Tongue": Verbum vs Lingua

Often long after the hobbits were wrapped in sleep they would sit together under the stars, recalling the ages that were gone and all their joys and labours in the world, or holding council, concerning the days to come. If any wanderer had chanced to pass, little would he have seen or heard, and it would have seemed to him only that he saw grey figures, carved in stone, memorials of forgotten things now lost in unpeopled lands. For they did not move or speak with mouth, looking from mind to mind; and only their shining eyes stirred and kindled as their thoughts went to and fro.

J R R Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*

II.1: Introduction

So we have argued that signs are necessary, but insufficient for knowledge. In this chapter I hope to discuss the proposition that mental events are verbal by nature (not that this excludes the notion of mental images, but compliments it), and the immediate problems this raises.

However useful natural signs were for understanding teaching in the *De Magistro*, they do not solve the problem of language for Augustine. We still need to learn through words, or more specifically, texts, and even when we treat the words as natural signs¹⁴⁴ (pointing to the mind of the author, and not just to the things referred to by them), a use of the convention of given signs is unavoidable. Natural signs do approach necessary truths (if smoke then fire), but when they involve language, they are only as useful as the conventions that drive it. Someone informing me that snow is white, is a fairly sure sign that they believe snow to be white. However, what "snow is white" itself means is still undecided, and a contingent truth. It may be that when they say the word "snow", they are thinking about what we would call grass, or perhaps they know someone called Ms Snow. Language is fragile. This is what I take Wittgenstein to be getting at when he writes: "It is clear, however, that 'A believes that *p*', 'A has the thought *p*', and 'A says *p*' are of the form "'*p*' says *p*':" ¹⁴⁵

So learning is still most fragile, since there is a weakness in the way we hear people, our words meaning different things in different contexts, destabilising the security of Scriptural truth and human learning. The Augustinian account of knowledge is beset by

¹⁴⁴ For the *natura-data* distinction as being contained in the approach of the listener, see above, on page 31

¹⁴⁵ Wittgenstein 1921: 5.542 (emphasis original)

a sceptical challenge: how do we even learn right faith if we may not rely on the words it is transmitted with?

I wish to outline Augustine's response to this kind of sceptical challenge by first noting the difference between *verbum* and *lingua* in the Augustinian corpus, and relating it to his trinitarian illustrations, arguing that the comparison cuts both ways. This will lead on to an examination of the notion of an inner tongue, which may be more than just a metaphor for the mind. We will also need an appraisal and application of these solutions to the project of learning from Scripture, based on the hints and tips to be found in the *doctr. chr.* II.

II.2: Verbum vs Lingua

A name was just a sound you heard, and didn't have that rich, heady reek of really being something. A sound didn't well up inside your head and go *woomph* the way a smell did. Smell was real, smell was something you could trust.

Douglas Adams *The Salmon of Doubt*

If one were to carry out a search for the word "language" (*lingua*) in the Augustinian corpus, a very negative picture would emerge. Languages are diverse, sensual things that can hinder us and lead us into deceptive ways of thinking. A brief glance over a work we have already looked at, *de catechizandis rudibus*, gives us a good example. Language can not answer to the experience of the heart (ii.3)¹⁴⁶; it is a step away from our thoughts, distancing the learner (ii.3); it is not common to all people (ii.3; xxiii.41); it can run away with itself, requiring restraint (vi.10); it is conducive to vanity (ix.13)¹⁴⁷; and it is a seat of mockery (xxv.46).

Were this the final word on language, the conclusion would be quite evident that Augustine does not think much of language as a medium for anything good. There are

¹⁴⁶ cf *trin.* V.i.1: "*Hinc jam exordiens ea dicere, quae dici ut cogitantur vel ab homine aliquo, vel certe a nobis non omni modo possunt.*"

¹⁴⁷ also hiding evil works with good words – cf *trin.* XII.viii.13: "*tanquam folia dulcium fructuum, sed sine ipsis fructibus, ita sine fructu boni operis bona verba contexunt, ut male viventes quasi bene loquendo contegant turpitudinem suam*"

good reasons for his negativity, though. We must note that the Latin word for language, “lingua”, also denotes the tongue.

[Augustine:] We use the term “tongue” not only for the bodily member which moves about in our mouth when we speak, but also for the effect produced by this movement of the tongue, namely, the arrangement and sequence of words. It is in this sense that we say that Greek is one tongue, and Latin another. (*lib. arb.* III.xix.54)¹⁴⁸

It is for this reason, i.e. the tongue’s corporeality, added to the danger he knew all too well of persuasive speech and powerful rhetoric in service of lies (*doctr. chr.* IV.ii.3; *dial.* 7), and possibly also the cautionary notes to be found in the book of James, that Augustine denigrates language as something outer, bodily, fundamentally different from truth and wisdom, God and soul. “Communication, by language pre-eminently, is communication across the external by means of the sensible, and the Platonist in Augustine deeply distrusts it.”¹⁴⁹

This is not the case for all kinds of words, though. There is an equally strong thread in Augustine’s thought that speaks of inner words, that are explicitly not susceptible to the above deficiencies of language, but incorporeal. For this phenomenon, however, he never uses the word *lingua* (language/tongue), but the altogether more flexible and biblical *verbum* (word). The distinction between corporeal voice and mental expressions was already known in the ancient world, for example among the Stoics¹⁵⁰: “Furthermore, voice according to the Stoics is something corporeal: ... A statement or proposition is speech that issues from the mind and signifies something, e.g. “It is day.”” (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*: VII.1.55f)

¹⁴⁸ “*Nam sicut linguam dicimus non solum membrum quod movemus in ore dum loquimur, sed etiam illud quod hujus membri motum consequitur, id est formam tenoremque verborum, secundum quem modum dicitur alia lingua graeca, alia latina.*”

¹⁴⁹ Louth 1989:154. cf also Brown 1967: 256

¹⁵⁰ Watson (1988) is almost certainly right in attributing the substance of Augustine’s “inner word” theory to the Neoplatonists, rather than the Stoics: the coherence argued for in Jackson 1972 [1969] between *de dialectica*, *de doctrina christiana*, and *de trinitate* is unconvincing. The occasion, however, for these reflections, is almost always the exposition of biblical phrases “the inner voice” (*lib. arb.* II.xv.39), “word of God” (*Io. eu. tr.* XIV.7) or “he that speaks in his heart” (*mend.* xvi.31f)

It is not this corporeal sound, though, but the inner word¹⁵¹, this *verbum*, that justifies our speaking of verbal mental events, for it is the word Augustine uses to describe knowledge and desire in his *trin.* IX. Here, it is the mental word that motivates our actions, being the underlying knowledge and will that our actions betray. “Nobody voluntarily does anything that he has not previously uttered as a word in his heart.” *trin.* IX.vii.12¹⁵²

Augustine seems to think of this kind of inner word as the essential word, closer to the mind and not prone to bodily error. In this way, he negates the problems he found with *lingua* when he speaks of them: “The word ... is neither uttered in sound, nor thought of in the likeness of sound, which necessarily belongs to some language;”¹⁵³ (*trin.* XV.xi.20)

For more logical reasons, this kind of word can answer to the experience of the heart more effectively, does not require restraint, nor is susceptible to the kind of vanity mentioned above, since it can not be grammatically correct. So perhaps the account of *lingua* is not the last word on words. On the contrary, the very problem with *lingua* is that it is corporeal. And the corporeal word is not the only sense of the word “word” (*verbum*) for Augustine:

In one sense we give the name of word to whatever occupies a space of time with its syllables, whether it is spoken aloud or merely thought; in another, everything that is known is called a word impressed on the consciousness, as long as it can be produced from the memory and described ...¹⁵⁴ (*trin.* IX.x.15)

Thus the word which makes a sound outside is the sign of the word which lights up inside, and it is this latter that primarily deserves the name of “word.”¹⁵⁵ (*ibid.* XV.xi.20)

¹⁵¹ For a fascinating analysis of this concept in Augustine, cf. Matthews 1972b [1967]: 181-184

¹⁵² “[quod non verbo apud nos intus edito praevenimus.] Nemo enim aliquid volens facit, quod non in corde suo prius dixerit.” Cf. also *trin.* IX.14f

¹⁵³ “quod neque prolative est in sono, neque cogitativum in similitudine soni, quod alicujus linguae esse necesse sit”

¹⁵⁴ “Aliter enim dicuntur verba quae spatia temporum syllabis tenent, sive pronuntientur, sive cogitentur; aliter omne quod notum est, verbum dicitur animo impressum, quamdiu de memoria proferri et definiiri potest,”

¹⁵⁵ “Proinde verbum quod foris sonat, signum est verbi quod intus lucet, cui magis verbi competit nomen.”

If corporeality is not essential to words, then it can be seen that most of Augustine's negative statements concerning language are not directed at words across the board, but the bodily nature. This is often seen most clearly when he refers to the teaching of God:

he ... delivers his body to the ministry of God *that the preaching of the truth hold pre-eminence and the service of the body be given the least consideration*; yet through that very service of the body the higher teaching should blaze forth which through bodily functions, that is, through voice and tongue and other actions of the body, should seep into the learners in good works¹⁵⁶. (*s. dom. m. I.vi.17*, emphasis mine)

As an example, we can take the supposed negative statements concerning language in the *De Genesi adversus manichaeos*.¹⁵⁷ These are often¹⁵⁸ taken to be the marks of Augustine's theology of language as a post-fall thing¹⁵⁹, not an ideal tool, but what humans turned to once they had left their paradisaic state of wordless communication: "Augustine says that it was the Fall of man that made necessary communication by means of signs. ... this rather suggests that language *itself* is a fruit of the Fall."¹⁶⁰

A close examination of the text itself, though, will show that the analogy worked out here is not that language was instituted after the Fall, but that God's truth (here represented as water) could no longer be given to humanity internally, due to the break

¹⁵⁶ "*corpus suum ministerio Dei subijcit, ut superior sit praedicatio veritatis, et inferior servitus corporis: per ipsam tamen corporis servitatem excelsior luceat doctrina, quae per officia corporalia, id est per vocem et linguam et caeteros corporis motus in bonis operibus insinuatur discentibus.*"

¹⁵⁷ A similar passage can be found in *s. dom. m. II.x.37*. Some authors (Harrison 2000: 66) refer to *gn. litt.* in this context. This is a strange move, since in this later work, Augustine appears to be even more favourable to bodily signs in paradise: "God did not wish the man to live in Paradise without the mysteries of spiritual things being presented to him in bodily form (*mysteriis rerum spiritualium corporaliter praesentatis*). So then in the other trees he was provided with nourishment, in this one with a sacrament – a sign" (*gn. litt. VIII.iv.8*)

¹⁵⁸ e.g. Brown 1967: 261; Harrison 1992: 59f; Markus 1995: 110; O'Daly 1987: 175; Rist 1994: 37, who qualifies: "It seems, however, from book 2 of *Christian Teaching*, that Augustine later concluded only that the *diversity* of languages presupposes the expulsion from the Garden." (emphasis original)

¹⁵⁹ Contrast the later work, *gn. litt. VIII.xviii.37*: "Was it inwardly in the mind, directly to his intelligence, that is so that he would clearly be aware of the command and understand God's will without any bodily sounds or likenesses of bodily things? But I do not somehow think that that is how God spoke to the first man." ("*Utrum intus in mente secundum intellectum, id est, ut sapienter intelligeret voluntatem ac praeceptum Dei sine ullis corporalibus sonis vel corporalium similitudinibus rerum? Sed non sic existimo primo homini locutum Deum.*")

¹⁶⁰ Louth 1989: 154, emphasis original. The view may originate from *mus. VI.xiii.41* (quoted above, on page 46) which would in fact be the best basis for such an interpretation.

made at the fall, and so had to be mediated through the flesh, that is the human and physical words of the Bible¹⁶¹:

Now God also makes the green of the field, but by raining upon the earth; that is, he makes souls become green again by his word. But he waters them from the clouds, that is, from the writings of the prophets and apostles. ... But before sin God had made the green of the field and food, and we said that this expression signified the invisible creature. God watered it by an interior spring, speaking to its intellect, so that it did not receive words from the outside, as rain from the aforementioned clouds. Rather it was satisfied from its own spring, that is, by the truth flowing from its interior. (*Gn. adu. Man. II.iv.5*)¹⁶²

This impression is further enforced by the working out of the analogy of the cloud, which seems to refer not to the verbal nature of the truth, but rather to its fleshly, external nature:

our Lord deigned to assume the cloud of our flesh and poured out most generously the rain of the holy gospel. He promised that, if anyone should drink of his water, he will return to that inner spring so that he does not seek rain externally. (*Gn. adu. Man. II.v.6*)¹⁶³

In this way we can see that language as such is not necessarily a post-fall phenomenon, but rather that its externality is necessitated by the sin of humanity¹⁶⁴. This is perhaps more on account of humanity's turning from God, who is Truth, than turning

¹⁶¹ So Harrison (2000: 29f). Augustine will later cautiously suggest the contingency of the Bible in *doctr. chr.* I.xxxix.43. He expresses agnosticism concerning whether pre-fall words of God went straight into the mind or took bodily form in *gn. litt.* IX.ii.3f

¹⁶² "*Quia et nunc viride agri Deus facit, sed pluendo super terram, id est, facit animas revirescere per verbum suum; sed de nubibus eas irrigat, id est de Scripturis Prophetarum et Apostolorum. ... Ante peccatum vero, cum viride agri et pabulum fecisset Deus, quo nomine invisibilem creaturam significari diximus, irrigabat eam fonte interiore, loquens in intellectum ejus: ut non extrinsecus verba exciperet, tanquam ex supradictis nubibus pluviam; sed fonte suo, hoc est de intimis suis manante veritate, satiaretur.*" Augustine will later (*gn. litt.* VIII.xvi.35) argue that God himself taught Adam and Eve to speak, just as children are taught by those around them.

¹⁶³ "*Dominus noster nubilum carnis nostrae dignatus assumere, imbrem sancti Evangelii largissimum infudit, promittens etiam quod si quis biberit de aqua ejus, rediet ad illum intimum fontem, ut forinsecus non quaerat pluviam.*" Contrast the later *gn. litt.* VIII.xviii.37: "God spoke to the man in Paradise just as he also spoke later on to the fathers, as he did to Abraham, as he did to Moses, that is, in some kind of bodily appearance. (*in aliqua specie corporali*)"

¹⁶⁴ A similar move can be seen in *gn. litt.* VIII.27.49f, where God's physical words in the garden (Gen. 3.8) are contrasted with his spiritual speech designed "not only for creating but also for enlightening"

from each other. For it is not communication that is made difficult, but the communication specifically of God and his truth. To hold that all things verbal are therefore a result of the Fall for Augustine would be a rash move indeed, for “why should we have any doubts that God spoke to [Adam in Gen 2.16-17] through some creature of that sort, with such vocal signs as he would be able to understand?” (*gn. litt.* VIII.xxvii.50)¹⁶⁵

II.3: The Trinity

“You think you’re writing words that’ll last for ever? It’s not like that. This newspaper stuff ... that’s words that last for a day. Maybe a week.”

Terry Pratchett, *The Truth*

An obvious place for Augustine to locate his theological thought on language is the prologue to John’s gospel, where the writer speaks of Christ as the Word. Indeed, this passage seems to have been of enormous importance to Augustine throughout his Christian life, from just before his conversion (*Conf.* VII.9), right through to the late stages of his bishopric, when he wrote a series of sermons on the gospel of John (*Tractati in Iohannis Evangelium CXXIV*).

So it is not surprising to find a number of sections of the Augustinian corpus considering the similarities between the incarnation and human language: he will want to know where the analogy is to be kept, and what would be pushing it too far. There are two strands we need to consider: the first, which generally includes earlier sources, drives the two apart (designating where the analogy will not hold), and the second, from later sources, emphasises the similarities between human and divine words, allowing the metaphor to do more work.

The source we look to for the first is an early discourse on the creed, called *De Fide et Symbolo*, which Augustine addressed to a gathering of bishops at Carthage, while serving as a priest in Hippo. The section of note is of course that on Christology, where he immediately speaks of Christ as the Word (*Verbum*), in spite of that designation not

¹⁶⁵ “*cur ambigimus per aliquam huiusmodi creaturam ei esse locutum Deum, talibus vocum signis quae*

being mentioned in the creed. He makes three main distinctions between the Word of God and human language.¹⁶⁶

Firstly, human language is temporal, whereas God's word remains forever. This distinction not only divides the human and the divine, but also the corporeal and the incorporeal, as any inner word produced by an immortal soul could be said to last forever. This kind of criticism arose also in *cat. rud.* ii.3 (cf above, p27). In this work, though, words are criticised explicitly for their fleshly nature: "We must not think that the Word is like our words, which proceed from our mouths and are passed on by vibrations in the air and abide no longer than the sound of them remains. That Word abides unchangeable." (*f. et. symb.* iii.3)¹⁶⁷

The second criticism is that the word is fundamentally different from its source. The mind is incorporeal, but words are corporeal, and therefore the two can not resemble each other. Again, we have words criticised for their fleshly nature. "We do not beget verbal sounds but make them; and in making them we make use of the body as material. Now there is a great difference between mind and body. When God begat the Word, the Begetter was "he who is."" (*f. et. symb.* iii.4)¹⁶⁸

The final criticism of human language made in this text is that humans fail to make adequate signs of themselves. This is not surprising, given the process involved: we have to produce something which our listener will be able to use as a causal sign of our will (cf the discussion of given and natural signs above on page 35). We are unable to communicate, and this comes as a result of the difference between our words and our minds. We fail, for "no one has ever expressed himself well enough to be understood by everybody on everything"¹⁶⁹ (*trin.* I.5). This seems to be a failure on the part of both our powers of expression and the listeners' comprehension, though. We intend them to "know

intelligere posset?"

¹⁶⁶ These are only those found in this work. Matthews (1972b [1967]: 182) for example, notes three completely different ones. By far the most common is the temporal nature of human outer words: *gn. litt.* VI.iii.4, viii.13, VIII.iii.7; *lib. arb.* II.xxxiv.38; *trin.* VIII.vi.9

¹⁶⁷ "Quod tamen Verbum non sicut verba nostra debemus accipere, quae voce atque ore prolata verberato aere transeunt, nec diutius manent quam sonant. Manet enim illud Verbum incommutabiliter" – cf. also *diu. qu.* 43; *trin.* II.9, VII.1,4; *lo. eu. tr.* XXXII.4

¹⁶⁸ "Nos quippe non gignimus sonantia verba, sed facimus; quibus faciendis materia subjacet corpus.

Plurimum autem interest inter animum et corpus. Deus vero cum Verbum genuit, id quod est ipse genuit"

¹⁶⁹ "verumtamen nullus hominum ita locutus est, ut in omnibus ab omnibus intelligeretur"

and understand" ("*cognoscendum et perspiciendum*": *f. et symb.* iii.4) our own minds, but we do not manage to do this, because the signs we give are too obscure; they do not portray like with like. For God, though, both situations are accounted for – both the speaker's weakness and the listener's incomprehension.

But God the Father had the will and the power to make himself truly known to those who were destined to know him, and to make himself known he begat one who is like himself, and who is called the Power and Wisdom of God because God operated through him and arranged all things. (*f. et symb.* iii.4)¹⁷⁰

So we can note that in this treatise on the creed, Augustine needs to make a number of changes to our conception of words in order to allow the analogy of the Word of God to obtain¹⁷¹. All these "upgrades" can be seen as further difficulties with the fleshly nature of words, and contrasting it with the spiritual, the incorporeal. They would not be needed were we to imagine a spiritual word, even if it were not divine.

In contrast to *De Fide et Symbolo*, a short, but theologically suggestive mention of the incarnation in relation to words makes quite a different kind of point in Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*:

When we speak, the word which we hold in our mind becomes a sound in order that what we have in our mind may pass through ears of flesh into the listener's mind: this is called speech. Our thought, however, is not converted into the same sound, but remains intact in its own home, suffering no diminution from its change as it takes on the form of a word in order to make its way into the ears. (*doctr. chr.* I.xiii.12)¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ "*Deus autem Pater, qui verissime se indicare animis cognituris et voluit et potuit, hoc ad se ipsum indicandum genuit, quod est ipse qui genuit*"

¹⁷¹ Perhaps the nerves of a new priest lecturing a mass of politician bishops were set on edge by the recent condemnation of bishop Photinus of Sirmium (at the synod of Sirmium, just 42 years previous, in 351), on the grounds of an unorthodox likeness between Christ and a word: "if anyone says that the son of God is an inner or outer word, let him be anathema" (translation mine: "inner or outer word" refers to Stoic categories). I owe this point to Watson 1988:90.

¹⁷² "*Sicuti cum loquimur, ut id quod animo gerimus, in audientis animum per aures carneas illabatur, fit sonus verbum quod corde gestamus, et locutio vocatur; nec tamen in eundem sonum cogitatio nostra convertitur, sed apud se manens integra, formam vocis qua se insinuet auribus, sine aliqua labe suae mutationis assumit.*" cf. also *trin.* XV.20 ("*omnia quibus significatur signa praecedit, et gignitur de scientia quae manet in animo, quando eadem scientia intus dicitur, sicuti est.*"); *Io. eu. tr.* XIV.7; XXIII.8

In this passage, we see the story that had been told in *De Fide et Symbolo* put into context. For words do indeed turn into fleshly sound, and therefore acquire the qualities associated with the flesh as outlined above. But it is explicitly not the wordiness itself that is the problem here, but the fleshliness. Augustine is very clear that when the thought takes on the form of a word in the mind, there is no downgrading of any sort. So we can infer that the mental word is just as incorporeal as the thought itself. The inner word “is absolutely the same kind of thing as the knowledge it is born from”¹⁷³ (*trin.* XV.x.19) Words are not such bad things as we had thought when we outlined Augustine’s attitude to language above: instead, they are useful mental events that are necessary in the process of communication, which itself will eventually take place in the fleshly realm, bringing all its fragility and weakness. These latter do not appear, however, before the physical act of speaking. “The incarnation of transcendence ‘in flesh’ does not undo its transcendence; the *signum* does not deny the *mysterium*, but rather points to it.”¹⁷⁴

II.4: Language and Mind

That was not the point. The point was in his being a gifted creature, and that of all his gifts the one that stood out pre-eminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words – the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness.

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

In this section I intend to discuss more deeply the possible similarities that could be drawn between Augustine’s views of language and mind. A great and arduous task, since neither aspects of his thought are in any way simple!

Augustine’s thought on language can be broken down into many parts, but for the purposes of this argument, I will be elucidating it in terms of memory, understanding and will, the concept arrived at in *trin.* XIVf. Augustine arrives at this framework of the mind while trying to describe the trinity adequately, in terms of relations and identity. After setting out the parameters given by orthodoxy and logic (*trin.* I-VI), he takes as his

¹⁷³ “*nascatur verbum quod ejusmodi sit omnino, cujusmodi est illa scientia de qua nascitur.*”

starting point humanity's creation in the image of God (*trin.* VII). This image is to be put to use by the Christian's love of the God known in the person, since no one can love someone they do not know in themselves (*trin.* VIII). He spends much of the rest of the book (*trin.* IX-XV) examining the appropriateness and (more importantly) the inadequacy of the various trinities he finds in people. The trinity of memory, understanding and love satisfies many of the logical problems, in that each is related to the other, and each can be seen as an operation of the other (I will to understand what I remember; I will to remember my understanding, etc). This is not, however, some kind of solution to the problem of the trinity (although it does provide us with a felicitous account of the mind), but rather a challenge to engage with God in order to perfect the image and thus know God more.

My purpose is to show that just as the mind is not taken to be simply an independent rational being¹⁷⁵, but also a willing and remembering agent, created by God, so language is not purely about information (for the distinction between knowledge and information, cf above on page 23), as we shall see.

Here is an example: when I name my memory, understanding, and will, each name refers to a single thing, and yet each of these single names is the product of all three; there is not one of these three names which my memory and understanding and will have not produced together¹⁷⁶ (*trin.* IV.xxi.30)

II.4.1: Memory

The memory is indeed a very complicated notion in Augustinian thought. It will always be difficult to distinguish his meanings when speaking of it, and I do not intend to analyse the concept at this juncture. For now, let us take the idea of memory as a part of the mind which is latent, as opposed to the activity of the understanding and will. "That is

¹⁷⁴ Smith 2000:78

¹⁷⁵ cf. Williams 1990: 317f

¹⁷⁶ "*Et quemadmodum cum memoriam meam et intellectum et voluntatem nomino, singula quidem nomina ad res singulas referuntur, sed tamen ab omnibus tribus singula facta sunt; nullum enim horum trium nominum est, quod non et memoria et intellectus et voluntas mea simul operata sint.*"

why we were constantly presenting a trinity in this way, placing in the memory that from which the gaze of thought is formed..."¹⁷⁷ (*trin.* XIV.vi.8) The understanding and the will act upon what they extract from the memory, whereas the latter merely stores them. It is actually a good deal more complicated than that, as perception itself is of course more complicated, but we may leave it at that for now¹⁷⁸.

It is important to note that we never witness an act of the memory alone: there will always be understanding and will involved in any mental act we might be describing, and we will see that the same is true of the equivalent aspect of language.

So I take the notion of memory in the make up of the mind to be roughly equivalent to information or propositions in language. We noted above (I.5: Words Alone?) that these never appear on their own – they will always be assented to, always apprehended by an understanding subject – yet they exist nonetheless, and we may talk of them as long as we remember that we never talk of them on their own.

In the earlier *Soliloquorum libri duo*, the memory is understood to contain whole propositions. We have already seen that the objects of knowledge in that work seem to be verbal in nature: error is not found in things, but in their sense (*in sensu*: II.iii.3 – quoted on page 23); truth is a matter of dialectic (II.xi.21, xv.27¹⁷⁹; dialectic itself being a matter of words); and truth resembles falsity in its *form of expression* (II.xv.29¹⁸⁰). Near the beginning of the work, though, he speaks of the objects of knowledge and belief (which we now see are verbal in this work) as being contained in the memory:

For many people speak at length of things they do not know, just as I myself said I desired to know all those things for which I prayed. ... Indeed, I spoke, not of things which I grasped with my intellect, but of the things which I had gathered from many sources and committed to memory, the things which I believed as much as I could. (*Sol.* I.iv.9)¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁷ "Ideo trinitatem sic commendabamus, ut illud unde formatur cogitantis obtutus, in memoria poneremus."

¹⁷⁸ For a fuller discussion of memory, cf. O'Daly 1987, ch.5

¹⁷⁹ "veritatem esse disputandi rationem"

¹⁸⁰ "Imitatur ergo ipsa enuntiatione veras sententias falsa sententia."

¹⁸¹ "Nam multi copiose dicunt quae nesciunt, ut ego ipse omnia quae oravi, me dixi scire cupere, quod non cuperem si jam scirem: ... sed quae undecumque collecta memoriae mandavi, et quibus accommodavi quantam potui fidem: scire autem aliud est"

Here also, we see the memory portrayed as a necessary condition for speech. Although he did not know or understand the things of which he spoke, as long as he remembered them, he could speak of them. In this way, we find that the “memorial” function of language is perhaps the most basic, and the memory is the part of the mind most associated with language:

[Augustine:] consider memory not in its role as the link with familiar situations, but as the recorder and compiler of facts without number: ... the invention of so many signs in letters, in words, in gesture, in the pronunciation of these, in paintings and carvings. Consider the languages of so many peoples, the varied teachings, some new, some renewed. Consider the great number of books and similar documents for preserving memory, and all this provision for posterity. (*an.quant.* xxxiii.72)¹⁸²

II.4.2: Understanding

Once again, we come to a notion which we have already argued is intimately involved in the language process (cf I.5.2: Teaching and Understanding). It was maintained above that understanding can not be transferred from a teacher to a student (which doesn't exclude the role of a teacher – cf *util. cred.* xvii.35), but that what is understood can (must?) be verbal.

The role of understanding in ascertaining someone's meaning is already established in the Augustinian corpus. If active perception is responsible for witnessing the physical qualities of the word (sound and its form), understanding then relates that apprehension to its signification. This, of course, will be the obvious assumption if we are to adopt the hypothesis above (I.6: Natural Signs) that words are given signs, apprehended by the hearer's use of them as natural signs. Naturally the understanding will

¹⁸² “*cogita memoriam non consuetudine inolitarum, sed animadversione atque signis commendatarum ac retentorum rerum innumerabilium, ... inventiones tot signorum in litteris, in verbis, in gestu, in cujuscemodi sono, in picturis atque figmentis; tot gentium linguas, tot instituta, tot nova, tot instaurata; tantum librorum numerum, et cujuscemodi monumentorum ad custodiendam memoriam, tantamque curam posteritatis;*”

be called upon to make the deductions (if-then) required in that process. The link is made more explicitly in texts, though:

Augustine: Now, since a word is made up of sound and meaning, and the sound refers to the hearing, but the meaning to the understanding, does it not seem to you that, just as in some living body, the sound of the word is the body and the meaning is, as it were, the soul? (*an.quant.* xxxii.65)¹⁸³

Now clearly, language, in its proper function, was developed not as a means whereby men could deceive one another, but as a medium through which a man could communicate his thought [understanding; *cogitatio*] to others. (*ench.* vii.22)¹⁸⁴

In another manifestation, though, it can be maintained that understanding is an altogether more essential part of language, and not simply the part of the mind that apprehends meanings. To elucidate this, let us accept as a starting definition that understanding is the use of reason (*util. cred.* xi.25 (quoted above, n72); also *Lib. arb.* I.vii.16)¹⁸⁵. Reason is not simply the connecting of various facts, as Burnyeat might have it (cf above, I.5.2: Teaching and Understanding), but in general holds a more evaluative function: it is by reason that we discern what is good and what is bad. What is worthy of praise and what of blame “Do you think it’s the same thing to be delighted¹⁸⁶ by sense and to appraise by reason?” (*mus.* VI.ix.23)¹⁸⁷.

If it is indeed to the understanding that we attribute a correct estimation and value (cf n68 above) of things, then that is also the source of value judgements, and the crucial aspects of praise and blame in Augustinian thought. Just as the mind notices something, plucking it from the memory, valuing it by understanding, and moves towards it or

¹⁸³ “A. *Cum ergo nomen ipsum sono et significatione constet, sonus autem ad aures, significatio ad mentem pertineat; nonne arbitraris in nomine, velut in aliquo animante, sonum esse corpus, significationem autem quasi animam soni?*” cf also *Acad.* I.v.15; *mus.* III.viii.19; *lib. arb.* II.xi.16. Evodius, however, does not seem to hold to Augustine’s usage: “Evodius: I understand what you say, but not yet, perhaps, what you mean.”; “*Intelligo quid dicas, sed nondum fortasse quid velis.*” (*an.quant.* xii.21)

¹⁸⁴ “*Omnis autem qui mentitur, contra id quod animo sentit loquitur voluntate fallendi. Et utique verba propterea sunt instituta, non per quae se homines invicem fallant, sed per quae in alterius quisque notitiam cogitationes suas perferat*”

¹⁸⁵ It should come as no surprise, then, that reason is also involved in understanding language: *ord.* II.xi.32, xii.35

¹⁸⁶ delight being the function of the will (*lib. arb.* III.i.3) and appraisal the understanding.

¹⁸⁷ “*An tibi unum atque idem videtur delectari sensu, et aestimare ratione?*” Cf also *uera. rel.* xxix.53

retreats from it through the will, so language describes the world with value pregnant words, dictating our own attitudes and actions towards it.

There are various strings of evidence to demonstrate that language is necessarily evaluative for Augustine. The more obvious ones are the examples Augustine tends to give in his discussions of true and false propositions. Take the case of his own contrast in *De Magistro*: ““What if I should say that I had seen a flying man? Do my words then make you as certain as if you were to hear that wise men are better than fools?” ... you know the latter statement with utter certainty.” (*mag.* xii.40)¹⁸⁸

So we see that for Augustine, the paradigmatic case of a true statement is a value judgement.¹⁸⁹ These are made by reason, through the understanding. So language mirrors the mind in having a kind of comprehending element to it. In many places Augustine will switch between mental functions and language functions¹⁹⁰, not least when addressing the difficulties of God talk: “Now since we ought to think about the Lord our God always, and can never think about him as he deserves; since at all times we should be praising him and blessing him, and yet no words of ours are capable of expressing him, ...”¹⁹¹ (*trin.* V.i.1)

The place we see evaluative discourse used most often is where Augustine is talking theology proper, i.e. God-talk. Here, the kind of informational fact-discourse is inadequate, since God will tend to transcend adjectives we attribute to him. In order to avoid the silence enjoined by this theological dilemma, though, he makes recourse to the mode of praise in a kind of logico-linguistic ascent (which we will treat in more detail below, III.3.2: Causing).¹⁹² “Hence the fact that he is called God: he himself is not truly known by the sound of these two syllables, yet when the sound strikes the ear it leads all

¹⁸⁸ “*Quid si me hominem volentem vidisse dicerem, itane te certum verba mea redderent, quemadmodum si audires sapientes homines stultis esse meliores? ... hoc autem certissime scire.*” For the context of this argument, cf I.5.1: Academic Assent

¹⁸⁹ This may include moral statements: “Augustine: I also believe you will not deny that we should have a zeal for wisdom and will agree that this in fact is true.”: “*Item credo te non negare studendum esse sapientiae, atque hoc verum esse concedere.*” (*lib. arb.* II.x.28)

¹⁹⁰ for his justification of this, cf *trin.* XV.17

¹⁹¹ “*primum ab ipso Domino Deo nostro, de quo semper cogitare debemus, et de quo digne cogitare non possumus, cui laudando reddenda est omni tempore benediction, et cui enuntiando nulla competit diction*”

¹⁹² cf O’Leary: “[Augustine] breaks open the framework of metaphysical names and evokes God in the open-ended “Thou” whom we may name as we will (“*Summe, optime, potentissime, omnipotentissime...*”

users of the Latin language to think of a supremely excellent and immortal being.” (*doctr. chr.* I.vi.6)¹⁹³

It can also be seen in the *De Mendacio* that praise and blame seem to be the very grounding of moral discourse. Instead of asking what is right and wrong, he asks how we should speak about these actions.

But it is one thing to hold something as praiseworthy in itself, and another thing to think of it thus by favourable comparison. For in one way we congratulate a healthy man, and in another when a sick man improves.¹⁹⁴ (*mend.* v.7 (translation mine) cf also I.1, IX.15, X.17, XII.20, XIII.21,24)

Given the importance in this work of doctrine as related to piety (*mend.* xix.40), it is of no small importance that the forms of praise and blame also repeatedly arise. Indeed, knowing what is good is the most important part of knowing any kind of truth for Augustine. He not only makes a habit out of prioritising things (which sometimes results in increased confusion – *mag.* ix.25-28 – and sometimes in great clarity – *mend.* xiv.25), but also counts good judgement as key knowledge that leads us to God: cf *doctr. chr.* II.xxxviii.57. So praise appeals to the understanding, but not necessarily to definitive knowledge (otherwise it could not be applied to God):

Thus, it is possible to speak about God, but in the mode of *praise*, as a non-objectifying, non-positivistic mode of conceptualization which does not reduce God to a concept, but rather employs language in such a way that respects God’s transcendence and *refers* the listener to experience the thing itself.¹⁹⁵

Conf. I.4.4) as long as every name is heard as declaring the surpassing greatness of that “Thou” and does not fall back again within the limits of a metaphysical representation.” (1985: 196)

¹⁹³ “*Nam inde est et quod dicitur Deus. Non enim revera in strepitu istarum duarum syllabarum ipse cognoscitur; sed tamen omnes latinae linguae scios, cum aures eorum sonus iste tetigerit, movet ad cogitandam excellentissimam quamdam immortalemque naturam.*”

¹⁹⁴ “*Sed aliud est quod per ipsum laudibile proponitur, aliud quod in deterioris comparatione praeponitur. Aliter enim gratulamur cum sanus est homo, aliter cum melius habet aegrotus.*” V.7

¹⁹⁵ Smith 2000: 79

11.4.3: Will

Language resembles the will in a very similar way: firstly, because praise and blame seem to be *affective* language for Augustine. Secondly, because language signifies the will just as much as anything else, and most importantly because of the role language has in moving people and self¹⁹⁶.

The idea that language is movement of the affections does not come as a major surprise when looked at in the context of the *doctr. chr.* I, where the *res-signa* (thing-sign) distinction is immediately overlaid with that of *frui-uti* (loving by enjoyment or by use)¹⁹⁷, and one of the key *res* is identified as the human agent, choosing what to enjoy and what to use (*doctr. chr.* I.iii.3). In this way, it would seem that the ascent described above (on page 66) involves both the will and the word. “Nevertheless, as he emphasizes, God ‘has accepted the homage of human voices’ (DC 1.6.6). But for Augustine, this ‘praising him with human words’ is an order of discourse which is more *affective* than cognitive.”¹⁹⁸

So words can be and often are emotional by nature. Again, the surprise of this point is lifted slightly by one of the earliest definitions of speaking (a sign of the will), as given in the *mag.* I.2 (quoted above on page 27). In this instance, we not only see the confirmation of our thesis (above, on page 35) that words are natural signs given by speakers (and therefore both *signa naturalia* and *signa data*), but also that the immediate thing we are trying to give a sign of is our will. What is more, this is not some early idea that was later grown out of by the bishop: “‘Know the will of that man,’ which is not available in any way to our sense perceptions, nor even to our intelligence unless certain bodily signs of it are given”¹⁹⁹ (*trin.* X.ix.12)

In another early work, Augustine remarks that language functions in order to move people. Not only do we see the rhetor coming out in this, but it can also be noticed

¹⁹⁶ cf *trin.* X.i.1: “love commonly results from hearing: thus the spirit is roused by talk of someone’s beauty to go and see and enjoy it,” (“*solent existere amores ex auditu, dum cuiusque pulchritudinis fama ad videndum ac fruendum animus accenditur*”)

¹⁹⁷ Williams 1989 is the seminal work on this aspect of Augustine’s theory – see especially p139.

¹⁹⁸ Smith 2000: 78 (emphasis original)

¹⁹⁹ “*Cognosce voluntatem illius hominis: quae nobis nec ad sentiendum ullo modo, nec ad intelligendum praesto est, nisi corporalibus signis editis;*”

that this account tallies with the description we have just given of speaking. If we give a sign of something, nothing will happen unless someone is moved to use it as a sign. We need the good will of the listener in order to work our language.²⁰⁰

Let us now briefly consider the power of words, insofar as the thing is open to investigation. The power of the word is that by which we know how much it is worth. Its value is the extent to which it is able to move the hearer. It either moves the hearer by itself or by what it means or by both. (*dial. vii*)²⁰¹

In a similar fashion, Augustine will later draw on Cicero to argue that the functions of language are to inform, delight and to move²⁰² (*doctr. chr. IV.xii.27*). Speech is a type of *action*, and its form will be determined by the intention behind it. Hence language (as a given sign) will only ever occur with the co-operation of the will. Both ours and that of our listeners.

This threefold function of language further demonstrates our contention here. For just as he repeatedly forms various trinities in the human (appearance, image, and looking; mind, knowledge of itself and love of itself, etc), so there are various trinities of language. So Augustine conceptualises a kind of grammar of truth in language through these three forms: "For this reason also, in the search for truth, there can be no more than three kinds of question: Does a thing exist at all? [memory] Is it this particular thing or something else? [understanding] Should it be approved or disapproved? [will]"²⁰³ (*diu. qu. 18*)

In such a way, language does indeed mirror the mind in its various elements, which is no surprise, if it is meant to be a sign of what is going on in the mind. More, though, it mirrors the three transcendentals: for language has a capacity to communicate

²⁰⁰ Hence Augustine urges teachers towards love as the best pedagogical tool in *de catechizandis rudibus*, as interpreted brilliantly in Louth (1989)

²⁰¹ "Nunc vim verborum, quantum res patet, breviter consideremus. Vis verbi est, qua cognoscitur quantum valeat. Valet autem tantum quantum movere audientem potest. Porro movet audientem aut secundum se aut secundum id quod significat aut ex utroque communiter." (Cf n68 above)

²⁰² "ut doceat, ut delectet, ut flectat"

²⁰³ "Ideoque etiam cum veritas quaeritur, plus quam tria genera quaestionum esse non possunt; utrum omnino sit, utrum hoc an aliud sit, utrum approbandum improbandumve sit."

the true, the good and the beautiful in a more complete way than any other aspect of creation.

II.5: Significant Scriptures

In this section, I hope to apply much of what has been discovered in the previous chapters to one particular *locus* of theology in Augustine: the interpretation of Scripture, as explained in *doctr. chr.* II. This particular part of the work has received a great deal of attention by scholars in past decades, not least because of the debate concerning the concluding section (xix.29-xl.63), describing and evaluating various streams of learning available in Augustine's time. The passage tends to be treated as an "excursus"²⁰⁴, standing alone with its own structure and topic, nestled between the books on unknown signs (*doctr. chr.* II) and ambiguous signs (*doctr. chr.* III).

In order to untangle the interpretation of this text, we will have to put it in its context in the plan of the book as a whole, which will involve an examination of metaphor, a literary-interpretive technique Augustine makes great use of, as accounted for by his own theory, and termed by him "transferred signs". Then the role of knowledge in the book will have to be looked at, before we turn to the importance of signs for the theory. I hope to demonstrate that with the understanding of signs we have drawn up in the above chapters, we do not need to treat this particular section (i.e. *doctr. chr.* II.xix.29-xl.63) as an "excursus" – not that such literary moves are atypical either of Augustine or the rhetorical tradition from which he sprung – but as a distinct theme falling in line with the real purposes of the book as a whole. That is, the purpose of turning our signs to God.

²⁰⁴ Verheijen 1974

II.5.1: Transferred Signs: Non-verbal Continuity

Transferred signs (*signa translata*) are often called analogies, metaphors, or figurative signs. In the context we are considering them, it is probably easiest to keep to the terminology of transferred signs, given his explanation of them shortly before he expounds their interpretation:

[Signs] are metaphorical (*translata*) when the actual things which we signify by the particular words are used to signify something else: when, for example, we say *bovem* and not only interpret these two syllables to mean the animal normally referred to by that name but also understand, by that animal, 'worker in the gospel' (*doctr. chr. II.x.15*)²⁰⁵

There are a number of points to note from this definition. The first is that the transferred meaning is determined by its *use* (cf above, on page 33), although it is unclear whether he is talking here about speaker's intention or reader's interpretation: usually these distinctions are determined by the reader for Augustine. The second point that stands out is that it is not the word itself that signifies the metaphorical meaning (so transferred signs are very different from, for example, ambiguous signs, which are treated in book III), but the thing which has been signified by the word, which is to say that there are effectively two moments of signification, whereby (1) the word is treated as a sign of the ox²⁰⁶, and (2) the ox as a sign of the evangelist: "The analogy is not only *in verbis* but also *in factis*."²⁰⁷ This is why I shall avoid terminology involving "figurative" language, even though it is to be found in the text:

Yet "figurative signs" will prove misleading, if it suggests that associations between words and things, rather than associations between things and other things, are at the centre of Augustine's

²⁰⁵ "*Translata sunt, cum et ipsae res quas propriis verbis significamus, ad aliud aliquid significandum usurpantur: sicut dicimus bovem, et per has duas syllabas intelligimus pecus quod isto nomine appellari solet; sed rursus per illud pecus intelligimus evangelistam,*"

²⁰⁶ This is the literal meaning: cf. *gn. litt.* VIII.i.1: ut quemadmodum ipse Adam, etsi aliquid aliud significat secundum id quod eum formam futuri dixit esse Apostolus, homo tamen in natura propria expressus accipitur, qui vixit certo numero annorum, et propagata numerosa prole mortuus est, sicut moriuntur caeteri homines

²⁰⁷ Eco 1984: 151; cf. also Markus 1996: 8-11; Louth 1983: 118f. Strictly speaking, this should only be applied to allegories (*trin.* XV.ix.15), but in that case we must add that Augustine tends to keep to that trope, with few exceptions. He shuns the analogy *in verbis* (or what is more accurately described as *allegoria verbi* in Louth 1983:119) in *gn. litt.* VIII.iv.8, vii.13.

attention. As I have already indicated, a verbal sign counts as a *signum translatum* for Augustine when the thing that it signifies itself signifies some further thing.²⁰⁸

Whilst Babcock has caught the point about the mechanics of transferred signs, he seems to have skipped over the importance of the continuity of signification. It is to be noted that no great distinction is made between verbal signification and non-verbal signification: these categories do not arise in Augustine's work. For when he writes of the two moments of reference, he speaks not of words and then things, but of "two syllables" followed by "animal" followed by "worker in the gospel". Two syllables are very different from the word itself, as we discovered in *De Magistro* (the "homo"/wagon problem – cf *mag.* viii.22ff and n15 above). For both Augustine and the Stoics, the words we use are primarily physical (cf above, II.2: *Verbum vs Lingua*), but their meaning is the incorporeal part (cf *an.quant.* xxxii.65f, quoted above, on page 65). In this way, Augustine draws attention to the word as *res*, just as he calls the ox by its own name, and not by its function of signifying. They are both things, caught up in Scriptural interpretation. Hence when Augustine gives a summary of signs before dividing them up into groups, he moves freely between words and things:

So when we see a footprint we think that the animal whose footprint it is has passed by; when we see smoke we realize that there is fire beneath it; when we hear the voice of an animate being we observe its feeling; and when the trumpet sounds soldiers know they must advance... (*doctr. chr.* II.i.1)²⁰⁹

It is in the context of this discussion of transferred signs, which occur when hearers continue the signification process on the signified (here, the ox) to give a further layer of reference, that Augustine writes the controversial passage concerning the various branches of knowledge.

²⁰⁸ Babcock 1995: 150

²⁰⁹ "*sicut vestigio viso, transisse animal cujus vestigium est, cogitamus; et fumo viso, ignem subesse cognoscimus; et voce animantis audita, affectionem animi ejus advertimus; et tuba sonante, milites vel progredi se*"

II.5.2: World and Text

"You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times."

Matthew 16.3 (NRSV)

We saw above (I.5: Words Alone?) that signs will always require a certain amount of understanding, and therefore knowledge, for their interpretation. If we take it for granted that given signs are a subset of natural signs (cf. above, on page 35) then we will expect the knowledge necessary to interpretation to be not only linguistic (although that is important, cf. *doctr. chr.* II.xvi.23²¹⁰), but also that of causes, and the natural order: such things as aid us in inductive reasoning.

We would also expect Augustine to be exhorting us to understand causal reasoning and laws of inference, since it was established that natural signs were essentially to do with logic and propositions. In this way, he follows both Aristotle and the Stoics²¹¹, for whom "Sign theory is linked to the theory of demonstration, and once again what interests its authors is the nature of the knowledge to be derived from it."²¹²

This is exactly what we find in this section: not only does Augustine single out the principles of logic by actually teaching them, as opposed to the contents page summary received by the other disciplines in *doctr. chr.* II.xxxi.48-xxxv.53, but he finds their use throughout the whole activity of interpretation, rather than just certain instances, as would be the case for geography, history, etc.

It might also be possible to put together an explanatory account of numbers, confined to numbers mentioned in the divine scripture. ... Whether the same can be done for logic, I do not know. I rather think not, because logic permeates the whole body of scripture, rather like a network of muscles, (*doctr. chr.* II.xxxix.59)²¹³

²¹⁰ "In translatis vero signis si qua forte ignota cogunt haerere lectorem, partim linguarum notitia, partim rerum, investiganda sunt."

²¹¹ and indeed all "Hellenistic reflection about signs and its traces in Roman rhetoric and Christian theology", according to Markus (1957 : 78)

²¹² Todorov 1982 [1977]: 23

²¹³ "Potest etiam de numeris fieri, ut eorum tantummodo numerorum exposita ratio conscribatur, quos divina Scriptura meminit... Quod utrum de ratione disputandi fieri possit, ignoro: et videtur mihi non posse, quia per totum textum Scripturarum colligata est nervorum vice;"

In keeping with the sign theory described above, Augustine immediately proceeds in our section to areas of knowledge involving a kind of cause and effect relationship, which could be accounted for by signification. These areas include medicine, predictions, and effects on the mind.

As we saw above, medicine has always been a semiotic business. Diagnoses are formed on the basis of symptoms, which is essentially another word for natural signs (cf above, on page 39). Similarly, remedies take the same form – “if you take this pill, you will get better.” So Augustine goes to great length to distinguish between real signs to be used in medical science, and arbitrary signs that are based on superstition:

For it is one thing to say ‘if you drink this plant in powdered form your stomach will stop hurting’, and another to say, ‘if you hang this plant round your neck your stomach will stop hurting’. In the one case the health-giving mixture is commendable, in the other the superstitious meaning (*significatio*) is damnable. (*doctr. chr.* II.xxix.45)²¹⁴

Augustine also takes issue with astrologers, who make just as obvious a use of signs²¹⁵. Here, his main argument is to undermine the logic of the signification. So he points out that if the time of birth of a person and their constellations are signs of the life of that person, then surely the same signs should give the same reference: so two people in the same situation born at the same time with the same constellations should strictly speaking lead the same lives, or at least parallel lives, whereas experience suggests that this is not the case. Notice he does not judge the choice of object (i.e. stars), nor the practise of interpreting the world, but instead the signifying process comes into question: “So these ideas too, because they involve signs instituted by human presumption, must be classed among those contracts and agreements made with devils.” (*doctr. chr.* II.xxii.34)²¹⁶

²¹⁴ “*Aliud est enim dicere, Tritam istam herbam si biberis, venter non dolebit; et aliud est dicere, Istam herbam collo si suspenderit, venter non dolebit. Ibi enim probatur contemperatio salubris, hic significatio superstitiosa damnatur.*”

²¹⁵ e.g. Plotinus (*Enneads* II.3.x) maintains that we cannot attribute causality to the stars, but only signification (σημείωσις). cf. also *gn. litt.* II.xiv.29, where Augustine contrasts astrology with the weather forecast!

²¹⁶ “*Quare istae quoque opiniones quibusdam rerum signis humana praesumptione institutis, ad eadem illa quasi quaedam cum daemonibus pacta et conventa referendae sunt.*” For signification as prediction, cf. *Io. eu. tr.* XVI.3: “*prodigium enim appellatum est quasi porrodictium, quod porro dicat, porro significet, et aliquid futurum esse portendat*”

A similar pattern can be observed in his treatment of superstitions (whereby certain situations are signs of bad luck, future disaster, etc), for he repeatedly refers to the natural meaning of events, rather than the strange invalid deductions of the superstitious. So, for example, he quotes Cato as seeing nothing unusual in mice eating his slippers, though it would indeed have meant something special if the slippers had been munching on mice. "some people are so superstitious that they go as far as striking a dog who comes between them, but they do so to their cost, because as a result of this inane remedy the dog sometimes sends its assailant straight to a real doctor." (*doctr. chr. II.xx.31*)²¹⁷

One other aspect of cause and effect pointed out in this section is his explanation of language. It is in these pages that Augustine writes of the conventional nature of language, contrasting the various understandings of certain words by Greeks and Latins. His theory of language, though, still very obviously involves a form of natural sign: "All these meanings, then, derive their effects on the mind from each individual's agreement with a particular convention. As this agreement varies in extent, so do their effects." (*doctr. chr. II.xxiv.37*)²¹⁸

Repeatedly in our section of the text, Augustine contrasts God's order with the contingent order. Medicines that work by nature are good, but those that work by some superstitious convention (and here anti-nature goes with anti-God, i.e. demonic conventions) are bad. Predictions based on causal factors are good, those based on hidden, illogical signs are bad. The distinction Augustine makes between established, divinely-instituted facts and constituted ones (without doubt related to natural and given signs, if not identical to them²¹⁹) is reminiscent of the distinction between signs and simple observation (interpreted above in I.6.3: Observation, as natural signs) in *mag. x.32* (quoted on page 44). "there are two kinds of learning pursued even in pagan society. One consists of things which have been instituted by humans, the other consists of things

²¹⁷ "*nam plerumque tam superstitiosi sunt quidam, ut etiam canem qui medius intervenerit, ferire audeant, non impune; namque a vano remedio cito ille interdum percussorem suum ad verum medicum mittit.*"

²¹⁸ "*sicut ergo hae omnes significationes pro suae cujusque societatis consensione animos movent, et quia diversa consensio est, diverse movent;*"

²¹⁹ For their being identical, cf. Babcock (1995: 152f); for there being a distinction, cf Engels (1962), and Todorov (1982 [1977]: 48). For my note on the distinctions, cf above, on page 46

already developed, or divinely instituted, which have been observed by them.” (*doctr. chr.* II.xix.29)²²⁰

In this respect, Augustine exhorts the practise of subordinating our instituted order to God’s order in nature, something we will come back to in the context of transforming our language, below in III.3.3: Naming. This program of linguistic reform seems to be in Augustine’s mind here as well, applying it not only to our words, but also to whole institutions, turning their appropriateness to reflect the natural order:

There are some human institutions which are modelled on natural ones or at any rate similar to them. Those which involve an alliance with demons are, as I have said, to be completely rejected and abhorred, but those which men practise along with their fellow men are to be adopted, in so far as they are not self-indulgent and superfluous. (*doctr. chr.* II.xxvi.40)²²¹

Throughout all these considerations, though, Augustine keeps returning to the interpretation of scripture. These areas of knowledge are considered as aids to the interpretation of things as signs, and hence to understanding transferred signs. Education in this work is not a tool for a career, as it had functioned before Augustine’s conversion, but as a way of finding truth.

In human life knowledge of [crafts and skills] is to be used sparingly and in passing, and not in order to make things – unless a particular task demands it, *which is not my concern now* – but to assist our judgement, so that we are not entirely unaware of what scripture wishes to convey when it includes figurative expressions based on these arts. (*doctr. chr.* II.xxx.47, emphasis mine)²²²

So it would seem that all this section concerning various areas of knowledge “is inseparably connected to the previous section on the figurative use of *ignota signa*,”²²³

²²⁰ “duo sunt genera doctrinarum, quae in gentilibus etiam moribus exercentur. Unum earum rerum quas instituerunt homines; alterum earum quas animadverterunt jam peractas aut divinitus institutas.”

²²¹ “Adumbrata enim quaedam et naturalibus utcumque similia hominum instituta sunt. Quorum ea quae ad societatem, ut dictum est, daemonum pertinent, penitus repudianda sunt et detestanda: ea vero quae homines cum hominibus habent, assumenda, in quantum non sunt luxuriosa atque superflua;”

²²² “Harum autem cognitio tenuiter in ipsa humana vita cursimque usurpanda est, non ad operandum, nisi forte officium aliquod cogat, de quo nunc non agimus; sed ad iudicandum, ne omnino nesciamus quid Scriptura velit insinuare, cum de his artibus aliquas figuratas locutiones inserit.”

²²³ Schäublin 1995:50

and the scheme outlined above (II.5.1: Transferred Signs: Non-verbal Continuity). It will not be a surprise, then, to see Augustine situating his discussion in the third (devoted to Scriptural knowledge) of the seven steps to understanding, mentioned in *doctr. chr.* II.vii.9-11, which start with fear of the Lord, and seeking God's will in humility (*doctr. chr.* II.vii.9; ix.14), and doing this in exactly the quotation that would otherwise confirm the argument that this *is* an excursus on education: "So it seems to me that the following advice is beneficial for young people who are keen and intelligent, who *fear God and seek a life of true happiness.*" (*doctr. chr.* II.xxxix.58)²²⁴

II.5.3: Signs and Ascents

"Nothing humbles human pride more than inability to understand a language. It's a perfect image of spiritual limitation. The cleverest man looks a fool if he can't speak a language properly." ...

... "God wanted us to see how limited we were?"

"He wanted us to see that goodness is a foreign language."

Iris Murdoch, *A Word Child*

So it becomes clear that signs can not be understood apart from the knowledge of the society in which they are used. This is to be expected from the argument concerning understanding and reasoning in signification (cf. I.5: Words Alone?, I.6: Natural Signs), and the arbitrary community contract that drives meaning (cf. below, III.3.3.2: Contracts). So it is to be expected that Augustine will treat the understanding of society and the world while teaching sign interpretation. To learn language is to learn a civilisation, and civilisations must be learnt through language. "Language, the work common to a whole civilisation, harbours precious values, truths, in its very structure. ... Augustine doubtless goes a long way in this direction."²²⁵

In this way, we can see that the polarisation between seeing this section as a hermeneutical handbook and as an assessment of pagan learning is not a necessary one: the two perspectives are mutually dependent. The standard view²²⁶ is to unite these options in remarking that general education is vital for understanding signs, and therefore

²²⁴ "*Quamobrem videtur mihi studiosis et ingeniosis adolescentibus, et timentibus Deum, beatamque vitam quaerentibus,*"

²²⁵ Marrou 1938-49:676 (*Rétractation*) : La langue, œuvre commune de toute une civilisation, recèle bien des valeurs précieuses, des vérités, dans sa structure même. ... Sans doute Augustin va très loin dans cette direction. cf. also Markus 1995.

reading Scripture. This view is indeed well-founded: there are many reasons for believing that the interpretation of Scripture is the main reason for writing, whilst general knowledge is a corollary to be related to that aim. So “students of the divine scriptures, equipped in this way,” (*doctr. chr.* II.xli.62)²²⁷ will learn the various disciplines, but only insofar as they are relevant to right interpretation. Hence, in the quotation above (on page 73), the numbers that are to be studied are only the ones that appear in scripture. Similarly, in speaking of history, he gives an example of how this study can be applied to the interpretation of a transferred sign in a passage in John:

Ignorance of the consulships in which the Lord was born and died has led many to the erroneous idea that the Lord suffered at the age of 46, because it was said by the Jews that their temple (which represented the Lord’s body) was built in forty-six years. ... since the number cannot be explained in terms of the Lord’s age, it must be explained as an abstruse lesson about the human body, (*doctr. chr.* II.xxviii.42)²²⁸

The text is frustratingly ambiguous, though, since Augustine then goes on to apply the study of history to a much less hermeneutical subject, namely the chronology of monotheistic teaching, as set out in Ambrose’s research: “So as a result of studying the chronology it is much easier to believe that the pagans took everything that is good and true in their writings from our literature than that the Lord Jesus Christ took his from Plato – a quite crazy idea.” (*doctr. chr.* II.xxviii.43)²²⁹

It does not help resolve the question to find further texts where Augustine speaks about the usefulness of his teaching both in the understanding of scripture on the one hand and in other Christian projects on the other, for he seems to be tantalisingly neutral in his own assessment of the various functions of knowledge:

²²⁶ Harrison 2000: 59; Hill 1991: 23; Verheijen 1974: 19

²²⁷ “*Sed hoc modo instructus divinarum Scripturarum studiosus*”

²²⁸ “*et ignorantia consulatus, quo natus est Dominus, et quo passus est, nonnullos coegit errare, ut putarent quadraginta sex annorum aetate passum esse Dominum, quia per tot annos aedificatum templum esse dictum est a Judaeis, quod imaginem Dominici corporis habebat. ... ut cum referri iste numerus ad aetatem Domini non potuerit, ad secretiorem instructionem humani corporis referatur*”

²²⁹ “*Ita consideratis temporibus fit multo credibilius istos potius de Litteris nostris habuisse quaecumque bona et vera dixerunt, quam de Platonis Dominum Jesum Christum, quod dementissimum est credere.*”

But when [eloquence] is learnt, it has to be used in communicating what has already been understood rather than in the actual process of understanding. The rules about syllogisms and definitions and classifications, on the other hand, greatly help people to understand, provided that they avoid the error of thinking that when they have mastered them they have learnt the actual truth about the happy life. (*doctr. chr.* II.xxvii.55)²³⁰

Similarly, the subjection of pagan knowledge to the bar of scriptural knowledge at the end of the book does *not* solve the interpretive problem of this text: it does not tell us that the overview just given was written for the sake of either. Instead, Augustine seems to be threading a treatment of pagan knowledge in itself together with a discourse on hermeneutics including the usefulness of various themes to that purpose. It is probably as a result of seeing this ambiguity that Schäublin writes:

Thus it becomes clear that the “system of sciences” is a self-contained, extraneous element which does not precisely fit the context. If we consider the structure of the whole work, the intended function of this discussion within it is clear. However, because of the prearrangement of this foreign material, that function is fulfilled only in a limited sense, and not explicitly enough...²³¹

What seems to be unambiguous, however, is that pagan knowledge is indeed subordinate to scriptural, and that all these signs have one function only: to point to God, whether they be general knowledge or textual (for the latter implies the former²³²). So pride (perhaps to be construed as pointing to oneself?) is condemned in both cases, whether one is interpreting scripture (II.xli.62)²³³ or learning maths (xxxviii.57)²³⁴.

²³⁰ “*Sed haec pars cum discitur, magis ut proferamus ea quae intellecta sunt, quam ut intelligamus, adhibenda est. Illa vero conclusionum et definitionum et distributionum, plurimum intellectorem adjuvat: tantum absit error, quo videntur homines sibi ipsam beatae vitae veritatem didicisse, cum ista didicerint.*”

²³¹ Schäublin 1995: 51f

²³² *trin.* I.i.2 – It was therefore to purify the human spirit of such falsehoods that holy scripture, adapting itself to babes, did not shun any words, proper to any kind of thing whatever, that might nourish our understanding and enable it to rise up to the sublimities of divine things ... The divine scriptures then are in the habit of making something like children’s toys out of things that occur in creation, by which ... to get us step by step to seek as best we can the things that are above and forsake the things that are below.

²³³ “*Sed hoc modo instructus divinarum Scripturarum studiosus, cum ad eas perscrutandas accedere coeperit, illud apostolicum cogitare non cesset: Scientia inflat, charitas aedificat*”

²³⁴ “*Quae tamen omnia quisquis ita dilexerit, ut jactare se inter imperitos velit*”

So it would seem that in all areas, the maxim of signification (together with using this world – remember that good knowledge is useful knowledge in this book – II.xlii.63²³⁵) is the overriding theme of the section, whenever Augustine speaks of learning about things. “If we were perfected in charity, we should not need Scripture (I.xxxix) – just as, if we had known how to ‘read’ the created order, we should not have needed the incarnation (xii).”²³⁶ Just as the things marked out in scripture are valuable for their abstract qualities, the snake for its cunning, the hyssop for its medicinal virtues (II.xvi.24), so an understanding of logic and categories is *not* only there for the interpretation of scripture, but also to point to God, in the form of an ascent such as we have seen scattered throughout the Augustinian corpus (eg. on page 66):

Some people take such delight in all this that they like to boast among the unlearned instead of asking why the things which they simply perceive to be true actually are true, or why things that are not only true but also unchangeable ... actually are unchangeable; nor do they, as they come from the visible and physical to the human mind and find this too to be changeable ... relate all these things to the praise and love of God, realizing that it is from him that all things have their existence. (*doctr. chr.* II.xxxviii.57)²³⁷

So it can be seen that an Augustinian understanding of the transference involved in signing and loving will shift our interpretation of book II of *De Doctrina Christiana* away from the false distinction between knowledge of scripture and general education, into a hierarchy of reality and praise, culminating in God, the supreme thing (*res*), that may be seen to underlie his philosophy of language and interpretation throughout. So it is to this hierarchy, and the relatedness of language to reality and desire that we must turn in the next chapter.

²³⁵ “*Nam quidquid homo extra didicerit, si noxium est, ibi damnatur; si utile est, ibi invenitur.*”

²³⁶ Williams 1989: 141

²³⁷ “*Quae tamen omnia quisquis ita dilexerit, ut jactare se inter imperitos velit, et non potius quaerere unde sint vera, quae tantummodo vera esse persenserit; et unde quaedam non solum vera sed etiam incommutabilia, quae incommutabilia esse comprehenderit; ac sic a specie corporum usque ad humanam mentem perveniens, cum et ipsam mutabilem invenerit, quod nunc docta, nunc indocta sit, constituta tamen inter incommutabilem supra se veritatem, et mutabilia infra se caetera, ad unius Dei laudem atque dilectionem cuncta convertere, a quo cuncta esse cognoscit;*”

II.6: Conclusion

We began this chapter by vindicating the verbal process of signification against its critics who might accuse it of being a result of the fall through looking first at mental words (as opposed to physical language) and the description of the incarnation in terms of the Word of God. As a result of this discussion, it became clear that words are not bad *per se*, but only fallen insofar as they are realised in the flesh. Words were further seen to be integrated with the mind, paralleling the various functions of memory, understanding and will. In our consideration of Scripture, we see Augustine approving of those areas of knowledge that are turned to God through signification. In this way, neither scriptural signs nor pagan doctrines²³⁸ are necessarily good or bad of themselves, but are treated correctly when they are humbly used – passed through – in order to witness God.

The clarification of these distinctive characteristics serves to determine and order a proper attitude to all temporal reality, to all *signa* (including Scripture as well as secular culture), which treats them as ultimately inconclusive, as pointing beyond themselves, as finding their meaning only in God the Trinity.²³⁹

So we can see one final parallel between signs and the mind: just as the point of the *De Trinitate* is that “the *image* of God in us ... is realised when the three moments of our mental agency all have God as their object”²⁴⁰, so the sign processes outlined in the closing sections of *doctr. chr.* II are good when they sweep the reader up into an ascent from earth to heaven, from knowledge to God²⁴¹. “The difficulty in Scripture arises from the depth of its signification, and forces us to find a point of stability, or is rather a warning that we have yet to find it.”²⁴²

It is in this way that words are good, and language is redeemed. For if human language was a hopeless case, why would Augustine go to such trouble in writing of it?

²³⁸ or any form of knowledge: cf. use of agricultural knowledge in *gn. litt.* VIII.viii.16

²³⁹ Harrison 2000: 64

²⁴⁰ Williams 1990: 319

²⁴¹ cf. Harrison (2000: 64), who sees the Christian community as having the *res* to which Scriptural *signa* point, rather than using the process of signification to seek it.

²⁴² Louth 1983: 112

Yet if it were unproblematic, he would not need to bother. Such is the ambiguity of words: not that they are wrong, but that they are usable, not enjoyable.

III: A Sign of Ascents

In this chapter I will be arguing that there are three kinds of hierarchy underlying the first book of Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*, and that they correspond to the three distinctions of non-existence/existence, use/enjoyment, and sign/thing. My thesis will be that signification works for Augustine's thought as the mechanics of ascent. Through signification, we use the world in order to apprehend and enjoy God. So we will look first at cosmology, then at desire, before we arrive at the issue of signification and naming.

III.1: Cosmology

There are a number of exegetical reasons for believing that the notion of God as the source of all being underlies a good deal of thought in the *doctr. chr.* I. Although he mentions it explicitly only a handful of times (eg I.ii.2: "what is under consideration at this stage is the fact that things exist,"), the framework was almost certainly at the back of his mind, not least as he was probably writing the *Confessions* at about the same time, with its emphasis on the puzzle of evil (as solved by the platonists through the notion of *privatio boni* (*Conf.* VII)) as well as the commentary on the creation account in books XI-XIII.

Another fact that catches the eye and gives us pause is that one of Augustine's greatest mediaeval commentators, Thomas Aquinas, made heavy use of the *doctr. chr.* I in the context of some of his work on cosmology: namely concerning the notion of the goodness of existence, and God as its originator (cf *Summa Theologiae* 1a.5.1,4).

It is a typical Augustinian explanation of the doctrine of creation, so I will summarise it briefly. The world is created from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*), which means that anything that exists derives its whole existence from God, and not from anything

else. So it was not crafted out of pre-existent material²⁴³. We were not, however, created solely out of God's own existence (as, for example, the Son is), for that would not be creating, but begetting. We are created out of nothing (hence a difference with the neo-platonists, for whom the world proceeds from the One – cf Louth (1981: 75ff) on this). Hence we owe all our existence to God, but our evil to nothing²⁴⁴. So evil is nothing – it is a privation of the good (*privatio boni*) which is God.

We exist because he is good, and we are good to the extent that we exist. Moreover, because he is also just, we are not evil with impunity; if we are evil, to that extent we exist less. God exists in the supreme sense, and the original sense, of the word. (*doctr. chr.* I.xxxii.35)²⁴⁵

In this way, goodness is equated with existence. Humans are good, because they exist, and are caused to do so by God. In a sense, we exist because God dwells in us, and we participate in him. We are good through goodness, which is God²⁴⁶: “It is God from whom all those who love him derive both their existence and love;”²⁴⁷ (*doctr. chr.* I.xxix.30; cf also xxxi.34, xxxiii.37 and viii.8). It is interesting to note, in passing, that Augustine includes language in this scheme:

...the heart of a friend is good with its sweet accord and loving trust, and a just man is good, and riches are good because they are easily put to use, and the sky is good with its sun and moon and stars, and angels are good with their holy obedience, and speech is good as it pleasantly instructs and suitably moves the hearer, and a song is good with its melodious notes and its noble sentiments.²⁴⁸ (*trin.* VIII.iii.4)

So the main points to remember for our treatment here are that evil does not exist – it is a kind of process acting upon good substance, turning it towards nothing; the world

²⁴³ This is the substance of most Augustinian anti-manichaean polemic in eg *f. et. symb.* ii.2f

²⁴⁴ The best treatment of Augustine on evil I know is Williams (2000)

²⁴⁵ “*Quia enim bonus est, sumus; et in quantum sumus, boni sumus. Porro autem quia etiam justus est, non impune sumus mali; et in quantum mali sumus, in tantum etiam minus sumus. Ille enim summe ac primitus est.*”

²⁴⁶ On this cf O'Daly (1991)

²⁴⁷ “*et a quo habent omnes qui eum diligunt, et quod sunt, et quod eum diligunt;*”

²⁴⁸ “*et bonus animus amici consensionis dulcedine et amoris fide, et bonus vir justus, et bonae divitiae, quia facile expediunt, et bonum coelum cum sole et luna et stellis suis, et boni Angeli sancta obedientia, et bona locutio suaviter docens et congruenter monens audientem, et bonum carmen canorum numeris et sentiis grave.*”

exists only through participation in God, from whom it came; the world is fundamentally good; the world is fundamentally *not* God, and therefore not goodness, and therefore not the best thing. It is created, and so is inferior to its cause, though it is essentially good, since any defect derives from its disappearance, not any positive substantial faults.

We will see these insights gained from Augustine's consideration of the church doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* interlocking neatly with the other two systems we are examining in the *De Doctrina Christiana*. So the thing that must be loved, that must be enjoyed, is the same thing that is the source of existence. Just as it is the only one that can exist in and of itself, so it is the only one that may be loved in and of itself.

The things (*res*) which are to be enjoyed, then, are the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and the Trinity that consists of them, which is a kind of single, supreme thing, ... but perhaps the Trinity is better called the one God from whom, through whom, and in whom everything is. (*doctr. chr. I.v.5*)²⁴⁹

In a similar way, the things which signs signify are *existent* things, and signs themselves fall into the category of things only insofar as they exist. "So every sign is also a thing, since what is not a thing does not exist."²⁵⁰ (*doctr. chr. I.ii.2*)

In this way, we have seen that there is a good case for believing Augustine's doctrine of creation to be just below the surface throughout the first book of *De Doctrina Christiana*, and that it complements the other two major themes in the book nicely.

III.2: Desire

²⁴⁹ "Res igitur quibus fruendum est, Pater et Filius et Spiritus sanctus, eademque Trinitas, una quaedam summa res, communisque omnibus fruentibus ea; si tamen res et non rerum omnium causa sit, si tamen et causa. Non enim facile nomen quod tantae excellentiae conveniat potest inveniri, nisi quod melius ita dicitur Trinitas haec, unus Deus ex quo omnia, per quem omnia, in quo omnia"

²⁵⁰ "Quamobrem omne signum etiam res aliqua est; quod enim nulla res est, omnino nihil est"

If the notion of existence is vital to the *doctr. chr.* I, that of love is perhaps even more important. It takes no exegetical wizardry to show that the fundamental distinction he makes here is between things that are to be enjoyed (*frui*) and those that are to be used (*uti*).

III.2.1: Definitions

"There's something fishy about describing people's feelings," said Hugo. "All these descriptions are so dramatic."

"What's wrong with that?" I said.

"Only," said Hugo, "that it means that things are falsified from the start."

Iris Murdoch, *Under the Net*

Augustine employs these two verbs to break down the crucial idea of love that drives his interpretation of the Bible. For him, love can take one of two forms – to lovingly use something for the sake of some greater good, or to lovingly enjoy something on account of what it is. "If he neither enjoys nor uses us, then I fail to see how he can love us at all"²⁵¹ (*doctr. chr.* I.xxxi.34). The distinction is introduced firstly as a division of things, rather than of actions, though:

There are some things which are to be enjoyed, some which are to be used, and some whose function is both to enjoy and use. Those which are to be enjoyed make us happy; those which are to be used assist us and give us a boost, so to speak, as we press on towards our happiness, so that we may reach and hold fast to the things which make us happy. (*doctr. chr.* I.iii.3)²⁵²

However, although the distinction is an ontological one, the way we treat these things is not. The main source of sin in this book is an improper approach to reality, implicitly because we do not apprehend things as they are, in these two categories.

And we, placed as we are among things of both kinds, both enjoy and use them; but if we choose to enjoy things that are to be used, our advance is impeded and sometimes even diverted, and we

²⁵¹ "*Nam si neque fruitur neque utitur, non invenio quemadmodum diligat.*" For a good summary of previous scholarship on these terms, cf. O'Donovan 1982: 361-5

are held back, or even put off, from attaining things which are to be enjoyed, because we are hamstrung by our love of lower things. (*doctr. chr.* I.iii.3)²⁵³

Strictly speaking though, as we saw in the previous section (III.1: Cosmology), the only thing to be enjoyed is God, and the world is to be used exclusively for the sake of attaining God.²⁵⁴ “So in this mortal life we are like travellers away from our Lord: if we wish to return to the homeland where we can be happy we must use this world, not enjoy it” (*doctr. chr.* I.iv.4)²⁵⁵

So God is the only true thing. Similarly, there is no real notion of hatred in the *doctr. chr.* I²⁵⁶. There are things to be enjoyed, and things to be used, but no things should be hated. Even where things are there to be used but not loved, they tend not to be elements of creation, but rather processes (like all things we can call “evil” in that respect)²⁵⁷: “It is not the case that all things which are to be used are to be loved: ... The martyrs, certainly, did not love the wickedness of those who persecuted them, but used it to win their way to God.” (*doctr. chr.* I.xxiii.22)²⁵⁸

III.2.2: Love and Things

²⁵² “*Res ergo aliae sunt quibus fruendum est, aliae quibus utendum, aliae quae fruuntur et utuntur. Illae quibus fruendum est, beatos nos faciunt. Istis quibus utendum est, tendentes ad beatitudinem adjuvamus, et quasi adminiculamur, ut ad illas quae nos beatos faciunt, pervenire, atque his inhaerere possimus.*”

²⁵³ “*Nos vero qui fruimur et utimur, inter utrasque constituti, si eis quibus utendum est frui voluerimus, impeditur cursus noster, et aliquando etiam deflectitur, ut ab his rebus quibus fruendum est obtinendis vel retardemur, vel etiam revocemur, inferiorum amore prae pediti.*”

²⁵⁴ Although cf *doctr. chr.* I.xxii.20, where enjoyment is merely restricted to “the eternal and unchangeable things which I mentioned” (having just spoken about the soul, although he could be making reference to earlier talk of God as the one to be enjoyed). This ambiguity may reach back to Cicero’s adaptation of the one good of the Stoics in terms of many virtues (*honestum*) in the *De Officiis* (cf. Colish 1985a: 145)

²⁵⁵ “*sic in huius mortalitatis vita peregrinantes a Domino, si redire in patriam volumus, ubi beati esse possimus, utendum est hoc mundo, non fruendum;*”

²⁵⁶ In actual fact he does talk of hate existing as a kind of self love, where we act irrationally to our own detriment – cf I.xxiii.23 – “*talīs autem sui dilectio melius odium vocatur*”

²⁵⁷ contrast O’Donovan 1983: 387, who holds that we do not love temporal things in general, despite the fact that Augustine’s explicit exception was only given to things not in relation to us (*doctr. chr.* I.xxiii.22), while endorsing love of our bodies. Unrelated things are curiously excluded from the category of temporal things in general for O’Donovan.

²⁵⁸ “*Non autem omnia quibus utendum est, diligenda sunt, ... Nam utique martyres non dilexerunt scelus persequentium se, quo tamen usi sunt ad promerendum Deum.*”

Although God is the only thing *par excellence*, he seems to have been generous with that quality, and so Augustine calls others *res* at various points in the book. And similarly the distinction of usables vs. enjoyables is not as hard and fast as it first looked either. It is possible that the love hierarchy is beginning to look more and more like that of existence. “Augustine lays the dichotomy between *uti* and *frui* over the division between creator and the created. The created is never anything other than means to be used. The creator is the only end to be enjoyed.”²⁵⁹

First of all, Augustine holds that humans can be termed as things. Our thing-ness derives from God, and is especially attributed to humans on account of the *imago dei*, which implies that it is also applicable to other creatures, but to a lesser extent. In the context of considering whether we should enjoy humans or not, he writes:

We ourselves who enjoy and use other things are things. A human being is a major kind of thing, being made ‘in the image and likeness of God’ not by virtue of having a mortal body but by virtue of having a rational soul and thus a higher status than animals. (*doctr. chr.* I.xxii.20)²⁶⁰

In this way, although he goes on to note that humans are themselves to be used on account of God, and not to be enjoyed on their own, there later appears a way in which we do actually enjoy humans: a way which opens up a key to the whole system. “This reward is the supreme reward – that we may thoroughly enjoy him and that all of us who enjoy him may enjoy one another in him.” (*doctr. chr.* I.xxxii.35)²⁶¹

It is perhaps important to note that this latter quotation follows immediately on the cosmological considerations we referred to above (III.1: Cosmology), where Augustine notes that our goodness and existence derives from God’s. He goes on to write that we can enjoy God insofar as we find him in other people. And this notion can approximate to what he means when he speaks of using people with love.

²⁵⁹ Eriksen 2000: 223. “Augustin legger tvedelingen mellom *uti* og *frui* oppå skillet mellom skaperen og det skapte. Det skapte er aldri annet enn midler som skal brukes. Det skapte er det eneste formål som skal nyttes.”

²⁶⁰ “*Nos itaque qui fruimur et utimur aliis rebus, res aliquae sumus. Magna enim quaedam res est homo, factus ad imaginem et similitudinem Dei, non in quantum mortali corpore includitur, sed in quantum bestias rationalis animae honore praecedit.*”

²⁶¹ “*Haec autem merces summa est ut ipso perfruamur, et omnes qui eo fruimur, nobis etiam invicem in ipso perfruamur.*”

When you enjoy a human being in God, you are enjoying God rather than that human being. For you enjoy the one by whom you are made happy, and you will one day rejoice that you have attained the one in whom you now set your hope of attaining him. (*doctr. chr.* I.xxiii.37)²⁶²

The parallel with the system of goodness and existence should be obvious: just as we are good and existent because of God's presence in us, so we can be enjoyed insofar as God is in us – and then it is God who is being enjoyed, and not us. The loving agent, then, has to discern when they are enjoying the good (the divine) in someone and when they are sinfully enjoying the bad in someone. “we too desire to enjoy [God]; and the more we enjoy him in this life, *whether 'in a mirror' or 'obscurely'*, the easier it is for us to endure our absence and the stronger our yearning to end it.” (*doctr. chr.* I.xxx.31)²⁶³

The neo-platonic elements thus emerge. Augustine's schema is similar to neo-platonic emanation in that all our existence derives from God, and loving the world, we start our contemplative ascent towards the One. The echoes of Plotinus and Origen are sometimes quite striking, not least in the suggestion that our own existence depends on our enjoying God, lest we fall into nothing:

For this reason such a mind [that loves injustice] becomes weak and is tormented because of its mortal body, for it is inevitable that it should love the body and be weighed down by the body's corruption. A body's immortality and immunity from corruption derives from health of mind, and health of mind means resolutely holding fast to something better, namely the unchangeable God. (*de doctrina christiana* I.xxiii.23)²⁶⁴

On the other hand, the God-world distinction is made by the possibility of sin in loving what is substantially not God. Augustine's idea of using those things which are created reality is made necessary by the ontological divide between humanity and God

²⁶² “*Cum autem homine in Deo frueris, Deo potius quam homine frueris. Illo enim frueris quo efficeris beatus; et ad eum te pervenisse laetaberis, in quo spem ponis ut venias.*”

²⁶³ “*quo et nos frui desideramus: et quanto in hac vita fruimur vel per speculum vel in aenigmate, tanto nostram peregrinationem et tolerabilius sustinemus, et ardentius finire cupimus.*”

²⁶⁴ “*et ideo fit infirmus animus, et de mortali corpore cruciatur. Necessse est enim ut illud diligat, et ejus corruptione praegravetur. Immortalitas enim et incorruptio corporis de sanitate animi existit; sanitas autem animi est firmissime inhaerere potiori, hoc est incommutabili Deo.*”

implicit in the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. For Plotinus, all the world is of the same substance as the One – there is no substantial distinction between created reality and begotten reality, since the world simply emanates from the One – and so no distinction is needed between enjoyment and use. Everything can be enjoyed – we just enjoy the One more than we enjoy things that have emanated from it.

But in the terms outlined in the *doctr. chr.* I, not only do we identify the world as created, but also as good. Although there are various levels of existence in creation, they complement one another such that the whole is good. Similarly, when we use and enjoy the world correctly, we derive goodness from things that are not necessarily as good as we ourselves are.

if we wish to return to the homeland where we can be happy we must use this world, not enjoy it, in order to discern ‘the invisible attributes of God, which are understood through what has been made’ or, in other words, *to derive eternal and spiritual value from corporeal and temporal things*. (*doctr. chr.* I.iv.4, emphasis mine)²⁶⁵

So we have seen that the order of love reflects the order of reality.²⁶⁶ Things to be enjoyed in themselves are equivalent to the thing that exists of itself, namely God. Things that derive their existence from God are to be used. God, however, is present to be enjoyed in creation, and so we may enjoy him through things that exist by him, for him and through him. In such cases, we may say (in a kind of transferred sense – *doctr. chr.* I.xxxviii.37²⁶⁷) that we enjoy someone in the Lord. “So in fact, whether we notice it or not – and we seldom do – *God*, who is truth, and *God*, who is goodness, is the category in terms of which we know anything, and the category or value in terms of which we love anything.”²⁶⁸

²⁶⁵ “*si redire in patriam volumus, ubi beati esse possimus, utendum est hoc mundo, non fruendum; ut invisibilia Dei, per ea quae facta sunt, intellecta conspiciantur, hoc est, ut de corporalibus temporalibusque rebus aeterna et spiritualia capiamus.*”

²⁶⁶ The linking of ethics and physics is a Stoic habit: cf Colish 1985a: 36; 1985b: 159

²⁶⁷ O’Donovan 1982: 389f seems to miss the significance of the ontological (and semantic) scheme in *doctr. chr.* I, and so considers Augustine to be speaking “loosely” here, whereas it seems to me that this qualification is a rigid reflection of his doctrine of creation.

²⁶⁸ Hill 1991: 24f

III.2.3: Enjoying eschatology

This all seems quite simple: the world is divided up into two groups of things, and so long as we manage to see that division fairly clearly, we should have our love ordered appropriately and be sure to avoid sin. There are, however, some serious problems to be encountered. Our sinful habits prevent us from working the system, so that we mistake our hopes for the reality, making the continuous life of journeying a most difficult achievement.

Seasoned Augustine scholars could easily predict what Augustine would go on to say once he has settled down into the Plotinian metaphor of the journey: the road is not straight, nor clear. In addition, it is a journey of desire, which is not something we tend to be very much in control of. It is not just a case of hating one thing and loving another, but of *preferring* one thing to another (*doctr. chr.* I.xxiv.24). As a result, we are consistently weighed down by our former ways of life – the way we lived and loved, chose and bought, talked and taught. “We are on a road – in spiritual (*affectuum*), not spatial terms – and one blocked as it were by thorny hedgerows, which flourish through the evil influences of our earlier sins,”(*doctr. chr.* I.xviii.17)²⁶⁹

In a similar vein, it appears that we will never enjoy God in an unmediated way, which creates problems – if we only ever get to witness God in and through creation (and admittedly revelation), how are we to know what is God and what is bad? The present world is only provisional in that sense: “For if something is to be loved on its own account, it is made to constitute the happy life, even if it is not as yet the reality but the hope of it which consoles us at this time.” (*doctr. chr.* I.xxii.20)²⁷⁰

So in spite of the fact that we are meant to love God and enjoy him, we are not able to do so yet, and must be comforted by hope. Not that we should be *satisfied* by hope, but should continuously strive to apprehend the divine through the world. So long

²⁶⁹ “Porro quoniam in via sumus, nec via ista locorum est, sed affectuum, quam intercludebat, quasi septa quaedam spinosa, praeteritorum malitia peccatorum”

²⁷⁰ “Quod enim propter se diligendum est, in eo constituitur vita beata; cujus etiamsi nondum res, tamen spes ejus nos hoc tempore consolatur.”

as we are satisfied with hope, we have stopped, in a sense, which is the essence of enjoyment: to “go no further”.²⁷¹

But if you hold fast [to something] and go no further, making it the goal of your joy, then you should be described as enjoying it in the true and literal sense of the word. This is to be done only in the case of the Trinity, the supreme and unchangeable good. (*doctr. chr.* I.xxxiii.37)²⁷²

Not even hope should be enjoyed, but only God. In this way, we should be forever in movement in this world, which may only be used. It is perhaps for this reason that Augustine gives brilliant expression in this book to the idea that begins the work he was composing concurrently (the *Confessions*): the unquiet mind.

Nothing must detain us on our way, since not even the Lord, at least in his graciously chosen role of being our way, wanted to detain us; rather he wanted us to pass on, not sticking feebly to temporal things – even though they were accepted and endured by him for our salvation – but hastening eagerly through them so that we may achieve progress and success in our journey to the one who has freed our nature from temporal things and set it at the Father’s right hand. (*doctr. chr.* I.xxxiv.38)²⁷³

So we must use the world, passing through it in order to attain to God. This is the chief role of the use/enjoy distinction: to cultivate a mind that seeks God in everything. Such also is the role of the sign/thing distinction to which we must now turn, and which could also be described in terms of passing through the world in order to attain to God. We use the significant realm of signs in order to arrive at what is truly *res*, what really exists, and to which all signs ultimately point.

²⁷¹ The most common imagery Augustine associates with this notion is a journey to the homeland : cf *doctr. chr.* I.iv.4; *trin.* XI.vi.10

²⁷² “*Si vero inhaeris atque permanseris, finem in ea ponens laetitiae tuae, tunc vere et proprie frui dicendus es: quod non faciendum est nisi in illa Trinitate, id est summo et incommutabili bono.*”

²⁷³ “*Ex quo intelligitur quam nulla res in via tenere nos debeat, quando nec ipse Dominus, in quantum via nostra esse dignatus est, tenere nos voluerit, sed transire; ne rebus temporalibus, quamvis ab illo pro salute nostra susceptis et gestis, haereamus infirmiter, sed per eas potius curramus alacriter, ut ad eum ipsum, qui nostram naturam a temporalibus liberavit, et collocavit ad dexteram Patris, provehi atque pervehi mereamur.*” For a relationship of the unquiet soul to semiotic activity, cf Williams 1989, and Markus 1995: 113f

It is *when he cancels all sovereignty and all authority and power* that the Son will reveal the Father, that is, when there is no more need for the regime of symbols administered by the angelic sovereignties and authorities and powers. ... Until that happens, *we see now through a glass in a puzzle*, that is in symbols, but *then it shall be face to face* (*trin* I.viii.16, emphasis Hill's)²⁷⁴

III.3: Signs

'I'm not going after all,' he said with a frown. 'I've changed my mind. Do you know the meaning of a sign?'

'A sign?' she repeated.

'The world is full of signs. Everything is a sign. They need to be interpreted. You were due to go, you got tight, and you didn't go: why didn't you go? It was because you oughtn't to have gone. It's a sign: you had a job to do here.'

Sartre, *The Reprieve* (tr. Eric Sutton)

In this section I will argue that Augustine's theory of signs in the *doctr. chr.* I works as a kind of ascent, in much the same way as the theory of love. "It is not a matter of chance that the context of the *usus-fruitio* distinction is to be a discussion of semantics,"²⁷⁵ This in itself is unremarkable, given the correspondence of *res* as the end of both systems²⁷⁶. The technicalities will need to be teased out, though. Signs can be used as an ascent through causation, in much the same way as the Thomist cosmological way of knowing God involves causation. The world is a *signum naturalium* of God – if the world, then God. We will also need to look at the role of names in this inductive ascent, which will in its turn be explained in the role of praise and blame in both community and language. "It follows that the only thing that is not a sign (because it is the object of enjoyment *par excellence*) is God."²⁷⁷

²⁷⁴ "*Tunc revelabitur a Filio Pater, cum evacuaverit omnem principatum et omnem potestatem et virtutem; id est, ut necessaria non sit dispensatio similitudinum per angelicos principatus et potestates et virtutes. ... Quod antequam fiat, videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate, hoc est in similitudinibus; tunc autem, facie ad faciem.*"

²⁷⁵ O'Donovan 1982: 384

²⁷⁶ Cf. Also the theme of use-enjoyment in the context of word production in *trin*. IX.viii.13

²⁷⁷ Todorov 1982 [1977]: 41, emphasis original

III.3.1: Signifying

As we saw, the hierarchy of love does not help us unless we understand and evaluate what is to be used, and what to be enjoyed. We need to be able to discern the God in things so that we can enjoy them in him, but also the createdness in them, so that we can use it to enjoy him. Without this element of discernment, the theory of love is more of a descriptive observation than a prescriptive exhortation. It is a banal point that we love everything in different amounts:

Some say that they would prefer not to have a body at all, but they are mistaken. For what they hate is not their body, but its imperfections and its dead weight. ... But it should not be said that someone does not value his body's health and safety just because he values something else more highly. A miser buys himself bread in spite of the fact that he loves money; in doing so he gives away the money which he loves so much and wants to have more of, but he does this because he puts a greater value on the health of his body. (*doctr. chr.* I.xxiv.24, xxv.26)²⁷⁸

So it is clear that we need to understand the world in order to use it correctly. In fact, in some places it almost seems as if the element of understanding is the redemptive part – we understand the fallen world aright in order that it may lead us to God (cf *doctr. chr.* I.iv.4, quoted above on page 90). Correct recognition is vital. We must know the world for what it is in order to discern what kind of thing it is - whether it should be used or enjoyed:

But since human beings, assimilated as they were to this world because of their desire to enjoy the created order instead of its actual creator ... did not recognize it, the evangelist said, "and the world did not recognize it". So "in the wisdom of God the world was incapable of recognizing God through wisdom". (*doctr. chr.* I.xii.11)²⁷⁹

²⁷⁸ "*Et quod nonnulli dicunt, malle se omnino esse sine corpore, omnino falluntur: non enim corpus suum, sed corruptiones ejus et pondus oderunt. ... Et quod nonnulli dicunt, malle se omnino esse sine corpore, omnino falluntur: non enim corpus suum, sed corruptiones ejus et pondus oderunt.*"

²⁷⁹ "*Sed quoniam cupiditate fruendi pro ipso Creatore creatura, homines configurati huic mundo, et mundi nomine congruentissime vocati, non eam cognoverunt, propterea dixit Evangelista: **Et mundus eum non cognovit.** Itaque in Sapientia Dei non poterat mundus per Sapientiam cognoscere Deum.*"

As we noted above (I.6.1: Intention), we recognise things through signs²⁸⁰. For example, low head, dark fur, and night prowling are all signs of the hyena. In this sense, we use signs in order to decide what should be loved and in what way.

It is interesting to note what it is we do to signs. We *use* them.²⁸¹ If the world is to be used, it is perhaps no accident that it is in good company with signs. In fact, it is exactly this that designates things as signs – that they are used as such²⁸². Similarly, the world is defined by what we do with it. Use/enjoyment, we saw (above, III.2.1: Definitions), is primarily a cosmological distinction. So when we use signs, we are making a cosmological distinction in the world: signs are what should be used:

What I now call things in the strict sense are things such as logs, stones, sheep, and so on, which are not employed to signify something ... There are other signs whose whole function (*usus*) consists in signifying. Words, for example: nobody uses (*utitur*) words except in order to signify something. From this it may be understood what I mean by signs: those things which are employed to signify something. (*doctr. chr. I.ii.2*)²⁸³

So signs are not things in and of themselves: they are functions of things²⁸⁴. In this way, anything can be a sign, if it is used as such²⁸⁵. So we can see how our approach to the world can be characterised by an attitude of either signification or merely perception. When we just perceive something, we accept it as it is, and “go no further”. If we use it as

²⁸⁰ *util. cred. xiii.28; lo. eu. tr. XXV.11*

²⁸¹ *doctr. chr. II.ii.2: “Hae namque ita res sunt, ut aliarum etiam signa sint rerum. Sunt autem alia signa quorum omnis usus in significando est, sicuti sunt verba. Nemo enim utitur verbis, nisi aliquid significandi gratia.” III.vii.11: “Si ergo signum utiliter institutum pro ipsa re sequi, cui significandae institutum est, carnalis est servitus; quanto magis inutilium rerum signa instituta pro rebus accipere?” III.viii.12: “Quamobrem christiana libertas eos quos invenit sub signis utilibus,” ; mag. ix.26 (on words): “vides profecto quanto verba minoris habenda sint, quam id propter quod utimur verbis; cum ipse usus verborum jam sit verbis anteponeendus: verba enim sunt ut his utamur; utimur autem his ad docendum.” (latter quote pointed out in O’Donovan 1982: 377)*

²⁸² so also de Saussure 1960 [1916]: 118

²⁸³ “*Proprie autem nunc res appellavi, quae non ad significandum aliquid adhibentur, sicuti est lignum, lapis, pecus, atque huiusmodi caetera. ... Sunt autem alia signa quorum omnis usus in significando est, sicuti sunt verba. Nemo enim utitur verbis, nisi aliquid significandi gratia. Ex quo intelligitur quid appellem signa; res eas videlicet quae ad significandum aliquid adhibentur.*”

²⁸⁴ so also de Saussure 1960 [1916]: 122 – “*language is a form and not a substance*” (emphasis original)

²⁸⁵ The use can also be part of the drama and symbolic action of Scripture: *trin. II.vi.11* – “it was by reason of some dramatic action that [the rock] symbolized Christ and was called by his name; ... All these things existed and were given significance by certain symbolic actions.” (*Illa enim petra jam erat in creatura, et per actionis modum nuncupata est nomine Christi quem significabat; sicut lapis ille, quem Jacob positum*

a sign, the world as we know it becomes a kind of unstable system of signs that ultimately point to God.

But just as if we were to look at beautiful letters somewhere, it would not be enough for us to praise the writer's hand because he made the letters uniform, even, and elegant, if we were not also to read what he made known to us through them, so he who only looks at this deed is delighted by the deed's beauty so that he admires the artist; but he who understands also reads, so to speak. (*Io. eu. tr. XXIV.2*)²⁸⁶

It is perhaps for this reason – i.e. that the world should be treated as a sign, passed through in order to get to God²⁸⁷ – that Augustine describes the world as proclaiming to him who God is, once he uses his reason to ask and be answered, in the *Confessions* X.6.

I spoke to all the things that are about me, all that can be admitted by the door of the senses and I said, "Since you are not my God, tell me about him. Tell me something of my God." Clear and loud they answered, "God is he who made us." I asked these questions simply by gazing at these things, and their beauty was all the answer they gave.²⁸⁸

III.3.2: Causing

The question is: is there an unanswered question about the existence of the world? Can we be puzzled by the existence of the world instead of nothing? I can be and am; and this is to be puzzled about God.

Herbert McCabe, *God Matters*

It is relatively clear how we can take the world to be one big sign system. That aspect of Augustine's thought should not be particularly new to anyone – oracles of the time would interpret anything and everything as an omen, and it may be presumed that

ad caput etiam unctio, ad significandum Dominum assumpsit; sicut Isaac Christus erat, cum ad se immolandum ligna portabat. Accessit istis actio quaedam significativa jam existentibus:)

²⁸⁶ "Sed quemadmodum si litteras pulchras alicubi inspiceremus, non nobis sufficeret laudare scriptoris articulum, quoniam eas pariles, aequales decorasque fecit, nisi etiam legeremus quid nobis per illas indicaverit: ita factum hoc qui tantum inspicit, delectatur pulchritudine facti ut admiretur artificem; qui autem intelligit, quasi legit."

²⁸⁷ A move also made by Markus 1996: 26-29. Williams 1989: 141 sees the incarnation as revealing that the world is *signum*, and not *res*.

²⁸⁸ Cf also *s. dom. m. II.iii.12; trin. IV.xix.25*

such a practise could be construed as treating the world as a sign. So Todorov comments on late antique mantics:

As a first step toward a semiotic conception, let us consider the sheer variety of substances that could become the starting point for interpretation: from water to fire, from the flight of birds to animal entrails, everything seems capable of becoming a sign and thus of giving rise to interpretation.²⁸⁹

It is altogether more difficult, however, to see that the world is a sign directed ultimately at God. In order to tease out this idea we will have to first return to the theory of natural signs, then look at the kind of ascent Augustine describes in the *doctr. chr.* I, before finally explaining this sign theory in terms of *conversio*.

So natural signs, as interpreted above (I.6: Natural Signs) may not be as trivial a category to Augustinian thought as is sometimes assumed²⁹⁰. Indeed, it has now been argued there that they are the foundation of given signs, and stand as a basis for his theory of knowledge and understanding. The natural sign is a result of an observant onlooker going beyond what is immediately obvious in order to discern other information and phenomena the situation is, as it were, hiding. We saw that the form of a natural sign is an if-then proposition. Augustine's example is the observation of smoke, resulting in the assumption that there is fire (*doctr. chr.* II.ii.2).

While for Augustine some words functioned as signs both of things and of meanings held in the mind, he nevertheless made the distinction between the meanings of words and the meanings of things for which words stand. The former has to do with the definitional meanings in terms of common usage. The latter has to do with things in terms of their causes, purposes, explanations, and what these things as the vestiges of God's creative and providential care signify.²⁹¹

In this way, we ascertain causes of things through their results. The smoke was caused by fire, but we do not see the fire: we merely infer the existence of fire from the

²⁸⁹ Todorov 1982 [1977]: 31

²⁹⁰ eg Markus (1957: 89), for whom Augustine only uses *signa naturalia* in the *De Doctrina Christiana* "to distinguish it from the second type, which he calls *signa data*."

existence of smoke. The natural sign introduces a *relation* between what we see and what we do not see. And what we do not see comes before our mind as a result of this relation. Our mind does not stop at the obvious and immediate, but can be said to observe it for the sake of the hidden cause.

that is why, when the psalmist mentions *fire, hail, snow and ice and the stormy winds*, he adds, *which carry out his word*, in case anyone should imagine that they exist purely by chance, or as a result only of physical causes, or even spiritual ones, but without reference to God's will²⁹² (*trin.* III.ix.19)

The similarities between natural signs and love should not be missed. With a natural sign, agents relate the thing immediately before their senses to an unseen thing that they then apprehend. In love, the agent related the thing close to them (*proximum*, neighbour – cf *doctr. chr.* I.xxviii.29) to the unseen thing that they then enjoy.

So a person who loves his neighbour properly should, in concert with him, aim to love God with all his heart, all his soul, and all his mind. In this way, loving him as he would himself, he relates his love of himself and his neighbour entirely to the love of God, which allows not the slightest trickle to flow away from it and thereby diminish it. (*doctr. chr.* I.xxii.21)²⁹³

So natural signs work in a parallel to loving use in Augustine's thought. They both involve a crucial relation. This common relation can be epitomised by the Latin word "*propter*".²⁹⁴ For in just the same way as a word can stand "for" (*propter*) a thing²⁹⁵, so when using things in the world, we love them "for" (*propter*) God.²⁹⁶ This relation itself

²⁹¹ Ayer 1979: 72

²⁹² "*unde et in Psalmo, cum quaedam hujus generis essent commemorata, Ignis, grando, nix, glacies, spiritus tempestatis; ne quis ea vel fortuito, vel causis tantummodo corporalibus, vel etiam spiritualibus, tamen praeter voluntatem Dei existentibus agi crederet, continuo subjecit, Quae faciunt verbum ejus*"

²⁹³ "*Quisquis ergo recte proximum diligit, hoc cum eo debet agere, ut etiam ipse toto corde, tota anima, tota mente diligat Deum. Sic enim eum diligens tanquam seipsum, totam dilectionem sui et illius refert in illam dilectionem Dei, quae nullum a se rivulum duci extra patitur, cujus derivatione minuatur.*"

²⁹⁴ In the notes on *propter* I follow O'Donovan 1982: 377-382

²⁹⁵ cf *mag.* ix.25: "[Aug:] *Quidquid enim propter aliud est, vilius sit necesse est quam id propter quod est; nisi tu aliud existimas. Ad. Videtur mihi non temere hic esse assentiendum: nam cum dicimus, Coenum, longe hoc nomen arbitror rei quam significat antecellere.*"

²⁹⁶ *doctr. chr.* I.i.1: "*Quibus explicatis docetur totius Scripturae sacrae plenitudinem et finem esse geminam charitatem, Dei propter seipsum, ac proximi propter Deum.*" I.iv.4: "*Frui enim est amore alicui rei inhaerere propter seipsum,*" et *passim*

implies both causation and priority simultaneously. For causes are always superior to their effects for Augustine: “They seek to know the causes of the will of God though the will of God is itself the cause of all that exists. For if the will of God has a cause, there is something that surpasses the will of God – and this we may not believe.” (*Gn. adu. Man. I.ii.4*)²⁹⁷

So we see the two systems of signs and desires integrating at this point, in the word “*propter*”, with God at their head, denoted in both cases as the highest and the best:

The doctrine of instrumentality, which we encountered first in Augustine’s thought about semantics, is now brought into closer connection with the ontological concern with the *summum bonum*. That is to say, the general rule that whatever is ‘for’ something else is inferior to it, is now regularly associated with the claim that there is one thing which all other things are ‘for’.²⁹⁸

In a similar way, the descriptions of his ascent to God in *doctr. chr.* I.vii.7ff, echoing the very similar account in *Conf.* VII.17, outline his consideration of good things and what makes them good, through a kind of logico-metaphysical account of causation.²⁹⁹

And since all who think of God think of something alive, the only thinkers whose conceptions of God are not absurd and unworthy can be those who think of life itself. ... They understand that the living corporeal form, however outstanding its light, however outstanding its size, however outstanding its beauty, consists of two separate things, namely itself and the life by which it is energized; and they raise that life above the mass which is energized and activated by it to a position of unrivalled status. (*doctr. chr.* I.viii.8)³⁰⁰

²⁹⁷ “*Causas enim voluntatis Dei scire quaerunt, cum voluntas Dei omnium quae sunt, ipsa sit causa. Si enim habet causam voluntas Dei, est aliquid quod antecedit voluntatem Dei, quod nefas est credere.*”

²⁹⁸ O’Donovan 1982: 381

²⁹⁹ cf Mizuochi (1993) for an account of how Augustine does this with the liberal arts, specifically in *de dialectica*

³⁰⁰ “*Et quoniam omnes qui de Deo cogitant, vivum aliquid cogitant, illi soli possunt non absurda et indigna existimare de Deo, qui vitam ipsam cogitant ... eamque ipsam viventem corporis formam, quantalibet luce praeefulgeat, quantalibet magnitudine praeemineat, quantalibet pulchritudine ornatur, aliud esse ipsam, aliud vitam qua vegetatur intelligunt, eamque illi moli quae ab illa vegetatur et animatur, dignitate incomparabili praeferunt.*”

This passing through the world is done through a combination of seeking the good and seeking the cause. First of all the observer looks to what is best in the world. Then a relation is made. If there are living things, then there must be life. The living things act as a kind of natural sign of the hidden concept of life, in much the same way as the praxis of the bird catcher acted as a natural sign of the art of bird catching in *mag.* x.32.

Again, once Augustine has considered wise things, he ascertains the existence of wisdom from them. This progression parallels his consideration of reason, his own judgements, and the truth that makes them true or false. Just as the world has been treated as a sign, now the self is also treated in such a way, so that natural causality runs alongside platonist contemplation and returning to the self.

They certainly see that the actual standard of truth, by which they maintain the superiority of that life, is not subject to change, and they can only see this as belonging to a realm above their own nature (*doctr. chr.* I.ix.9)³⁰¹. For I wondered how it was that I could appreciate beauty in material things on earth or in the heavens ... I wondered how it was that I was able to judge them in this way, and I realized that above my own mind, which was liable to change, there was the never changing, true eternity of truth. (*Conf.* VII.17.23)³⁰²

So it is possible that signs are not such an arid, insufficient thing for Augustine, but the way he uses the world in order to attain to a spiritual apprehension of God. Natural signs help the mind to transfer its gaze beyond the physical towards the spiritual. Not that the physical is bad, but that it is not the end. It is a perfect tool for exemplifying both the system of love and the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*.

We see this kind of thought also in the fact that for Augustine, "a sign is a thing which of itself makes some other thing come to mind" (*doctr. chr.* II.i.1)³⁰³. Similarly,

³⁰¹ "*Ipsam quippe regulam veritatis, qua illam clamant esse meliorem, incommutabilem vident; nec uspiam nisi supra suam naturam vident,*"

³⁰² "*quaerens enim unde approbarem pulchritudinem corporum, sive caelestium sive terrestrium, ... hoc ergo quaerens, unde iudicarem cum ita iudicarem, inveneram incommutabilem et veram veritatis aeternitatem supra mentem meam commutabilem*" (O'Donnell's Latin: to be found at <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/conf/frames7.html>)

³⁰³ "*Signum est enim res, praeter speciem quam ingerit sensibus, aliud aliquid ex se faciens in cogitationem venire.*"

when speaking of enjoying things, it is not simply the affections that are turned towards the object of desire, but also the intellect, and perception:

Since, therefore, we must enjoy to the full that truth which lives unchangeably, and since, within it, God the Trinity, the author and creator of everything, takes thought for the things that he has created, our minds must be purified so that they are able to perceive that light and then hold fast to it. (*doctr. chr. I.x.10*)³⁰⁴

In fact, the love command itself implies that the whole mind be active in its fulfilment – a fact that is not lost on Augustine, as he describes it in terms that could equally well be applied to signification as they could to use:

And when it says “all your heart, all your soul, all your mind”, it leaves no part of our life free from this obligation, no part free as it were to back out and enjoy some other thing; any other object of love that enters the mind (*animus*) should be swept towards the same destination as that to which the whole flood of our love is directed. (*doctr. chr. I.xxii.21*)³⁰⁵

The whole section is scattered with *conversio* terminology, spilling over from his work on the *Confessions*. Given that signs turn our attention towards the cause, it is perhaps no surprise that they are useful in Augustine’s program of continually turning towards God, who is the cause and creator of all we see and all we are.

For the divinely established rule of love says “you shall love your neighbour as yourself” but God “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind”, so that you may *devote all your thoughts, all your life and all your understanding to the one from whom you actually receive what you devote to him* (*doctr. chr. I.xxii.21, emphasis mine*)³⁰⁶

³⁰⁴ “*Quapropter, cum illa veritate perfruendum sit, quae incommutabiliter vivit, et in ea Trinitas Deus, auctor et conditor universitatis, rebus quas condidit consulat; purgandus est animus, ut et perspicere illam lucem valeat, et inhaerere perspectae.*”

³⁰⁵ “*Cum autem ait, toto corde, tota anima, tota mente, nullam vitae nostrae partem reliquit, quae vacare debeat et quasi locum dare ut alia re velit frui; sed quidquid aliud diligendum venerit in animum, illuc rapiatur, quo totus dilectionis impetus currit.*”



III.3.3: Naming

So signs are certainly important for Augustine's spiritual praxis. The way we understand the world will affect what we see behind it, what the world means. In their turn, our names for things will affect the way we use those things as signs (for if signs are dependent on if-then propositions, they are therefore dependent on something that we usually consider to be verbal). They will also determine to a certain extent our attitudes to the things they name.

III.3.3.1: Names

God looked at Daniel.
Shall I call him God? One solitary word and everything changes.

Sartre, *The Reprieve*

On a basic level, this will appear in his treatment of Scriptural command, which directs our love and educates our desire. It is an old hermeneutical point that Scripture will only give us guidance in terms of our own meanings, which will not necessarily be the same as those understood by the community from which the writings arose. So our own understanding of the words prevails: the names and definitions used in that process are importantly influential in how we direct our loves. This factor is not lost on Augustine:

The aim of the commandment is love, a twofold love of God and of one's neighbour. But *if you understand by this* your whole person – mind and body – and your whole neighbour – that is, his mind and body, for a person consists of mind and body – no class of things to be loved is missing from these two commandments. (*doctr. chr.* I.xxvi.27, emphasis mine)³⁰⁷

³⁰⁶ “*Haec enim regula dilectionis divinitus constituta est: Diliges, inquit, proximum tuum sicut teipsum; Deum vero ex toto corde, et ex tota anima et ex tota mente; ut omnes cogitationes tuas et omnem vitam et omnem intellectum in illum conferas, a quo habes ea ipsa quae confers.*”

It is not only the meanings we interpret scripture with that are important for Augustine, though. The way we express our understanding of the world, and (more importantly) the words we use to describe our relationships to one another will play a large role in forming our attitudes, behaviour, and ethical choices concerning other people. What we call one another (mind, body, father, sir, friend, enemy) is by no means an ethically neutral choice. It will have ramifications for the order of love: for use and enjoyment. “And the angel warned the man who was adoring him to adore God instead, as the master under whom he was but the man’s fellow servant.” (*doctr. chr.* I.xxxii.36)³⁰⁸

We saw above (III.2.2: Love and Things) that the use-enjoy distinction can be thought of as a way of talking about the world as a good creation from God at the same time as being able to call a spade a spade, and evil, evil. The usual accusation against Augustine’s solution to the problem of evil is that bad things are clearly very substantial: if we call ethnic cleansing and politically oppressive imperialism “insubstantial”, we stand in severe danger of trivialising it. So it is that Augustine develops this distinction of use and enjoyment to give us an unambiguous attitude to God – that we should forever love and enjoy him – and a twin approach to the world. The world is contingent, only to be used, but it is not inexpedient, since it is indeed useful. In this way also he steers between the Scylla of Manichaean dualism and the Charybdis of Plotinian emanationism. The first undervalues the world and the second ignores its faults.

This interpretation of the use-enjoy distinction tallies well with the way Augustine treats naming. For naming will not only negotiate relationships, but will work on our appraisal and valuing too (e.g. we may describe a changeable person as either flexible or fickle). When we name all things as God’s creations (as any creational monotheistic religion must), we therefore name them as good. Naming them as fallen will correspondingly condemn them as bad. But with such an ambiguous creation to deal with, how do we speak of the world or decide on our attitude towards it?

³⁰⁷ “*Finis itaque praecepti est dilectio, et ea gemina, id est Dei et proximi. Quod si te totum intelligas, id est animum et corpus tuum, et proximum totum, id est animum et corpus ejus (homo enim ex animo constat et corpore), nullum rerum diligendarum genus in his duobus praeceptis praetermissum est.*”

³⁰⁸ “*Et angelus hominem se adorantem monet ut potius illum adoret, sub quo ei Domino etiam ipse conservus est.*” Cf also the discussions on who may rightly be called enemies and neighbours in *doctr. chr.* I.xxix.30, xxx.33

Augustine's solution to this problem involves a correspondence of naming and loving. Just as we saw above our names for things determining our love for them, so they will also help us to direct our love without having to love evil things and upset the value of the world (for we must remember that a correct value and love of things is the summary of the law). The platitude "love the sinner, hate the sin" is not available to Augustine, not just because it is impractical, but also because sin is not a thing that can be loved or hated: evil is insubstantial.

The person who lives a just and holy life is one who is a sound judge of things. He is also a person who has ordered his love, so that he does not love what it is wrong to love, or fail to love what should be loved, ... No sinner, *qua* sinner, should be loved; every human being, *qua* human being, should be loved on God's account; and God should be loved for himself. ... All people should be loved equally. (*doctr. chr.* I.xxvii.28f)³⁰⁹

The fact that these statements come clustered together indicates that Augustine was indeed struggling with the notion of loving people who are bad. The fact that he does so in a book that treats of signs and things, in the book where he overlays the sign-thing distinction on the use-enjoy one, merely confirms that an ordered love of things makes crucial reference to their names, "so that ordering [things] was the same as naming them." (*Gn. litt. inp.* vi.26)³¹⁰: "[It is] as if there are two things, man and sinner. What is called man, that God has made; what is called sinner, that man himself has made." (*Tractati in Iohannis Evangelium* XII.13; parentheses original)³¹¹

There is a sense in which the correlation of naming and an ordered love should not be a surprise to us, for there is an essential part of Augustine's cosmology that unites the two even before we begin to talk of the value-pregnant nature of language. That concept

³⁰⁹ "Ille autem iuste et sancte vivit, qui rerum integer aestimator est: ipse est autem qui ordinatam dilectionem habet, ne aut diligat quod non est diligendum, aut non diligat quod est diligendum, ... Omnis peccator in quantum peccator est, non est diligendus; et omnis homo in quantum homo est, diligendus est propter Deum, Deus vero propter seipsum. ... Omnes autem aequae diligendi sunt:" cf also *Gn. adu. Man.* II.xxviii.42: "And so," they ask, "is the devil good, because he is useful?" On the contrary, *he is evil insofar as he is the devil*, but God who is good and almighty draws many just and good things out of the devil's malice;" (emphasis mine); cf. also *duab. an.* 7.9; *s. dom. m.* I.xv.41; *de fide, spe, et caritate* IV.13

³¹⁰ "ut hoc sit ordinasse ista quod vocasse."

³¹¹ "Quasi duae res sunt, homo et peccator. Quod audis homo, Deus fecit: quod audis peccator, ipse homo fecit."

is order. For our love needs to reflect the nature of the world³¹² – how God made things with measure, number and order³¹³ – just as our language needs to rightly describe the world.

Consequently every human perversion (also called vice) consists in the desire to use what ought to be enjoyed and to enjoy what ought to be used. In turn, good order [*ordinatio*] (also called virtue) consists in the desire to enjoy what ought to be enjoyed and to use what ought to be used. (*diu. qu.* 30)³¹⁴

Indeed, for philosophers like the Stoics³¹⁵, the very project of language implies a certain order present in the world. We may only describe it insofar as it is a logical world. For the Stoics, and it would seem also for Augustine, the logic of the world is not imposed by a name-giving subject, but read off the world by perceptive semiotic agents. The difference is that the Stoics merely had a faith in the orderedness of things³¹⁶, whereas for Augustine, the world was ordered at creation by a logical God.

For in what language did God call the light day and the darkness night? Was it in Hebrew, or Greek, or Latin, or some other? In the same way we can ask regarding everything he named the language in which he named them. For with God there is pure intellect, without the noise and diversity of languages. Still, “he called” was said in the sense that he made them to be called, because he separated and ordered all things so that they could be distinguished and receive names.

(*Gn. adu. Man.* I.ix.15)³¹⁷

³¹² *doctr. chr.* I.xxvii.28: “*Ille autem juste et sancte vivit, qui rerum integer aestimator est: ipse est autem qui ordinatam dilectionem habet*”

³¹³ *Gn. adu. Man.* I.xvi.26 ; *c. ep. Man.* I.xxix.32; *c. adu. leg.* I.iv.6

³¹⁴ “*Omnis itaque humana perversio est, quod etiam vitium vocatur, fruendis uti velle, atque utendis frui. Et rursus omnis ordinatio, quae virtus etiam nominatur, fruendis frui, et utendis uti.*”

³¹⁵ as echoed by Neoplatonists: “all things make a chain, so that we can speak of things universally” - “*ei de, sēmainetai pantōs gap akolouthei allēlois panta dio kai pantōs*” (Plotinus, *Enneads* II.3.xiv; cf. also II.3.vii). “The Stoics ... see grammar as paralleling nature” Colish 1985a: 57

³¹⁶ cf Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* VII.1.138: “The world, in their view, is ordered by reason and providence ... inasmuch as reason pervades every part of it, just as does the soul in us.”

³¹⁷ “*Qua enim lingua vocavit Deus diem lucem, et tenebras noctem? utrum hebraea, an graeca, an latina, an aliqua alia? et sic omnia quae vocavit, quaeri potest qua lingua vocaverit. Sed apud Deum purus intellectus est, sine strepitu et diversitate linguarum. Vocavit autem dictum est, vocari fecit; quia sic distinxit omnia, et ordinavit, ut et discerni possent, et nomina accipere.*” cf also *Gn. litt. inp.* vi.26, x.33;

As it happens, the notion of a rational and coherent creator is not the only basis for an ordered creation. God is in a sense the ordering principle: at the top of the hierarchy of order, just as he reigns over all values: “Nor does perfect reason use God, but it enjoys him. For God must not be ordered to anything else, because everything which must be ordered to another is inferior to that to which it is ordered.” (*diu. qu.* 30)³¹⁸ So in naming the world we are trying to ascertain the order God intended in it, and mirroring it in our discourse and praxis. In this way, our ordered love is dependent on our appraising language. So we must name the world rightly as well as love it proportionately. For naming, signing, and loving all go together, as they need one another.

III.3.3.2: Contracts

“A civilization runs on words, your reverence. Civilization *is* words. Which, on the whole, should not be too expensive.”

Terry Pratchett, *The Truth*

Unfortunately for Augustine, we do not choose the words we use for things. Although we have seen above that names do influence our attitudes to the world, the practise of naming is obviously limited. In general, our words are chosen for us by the community we live in. Our practical everyday language works on the basis of a contract that we enter into with our linguistic surroundings, i.e. other signing agents (cf. above, I.6.4: Agreement). This is a common insight in linguistic philosophy. De Saussure, who seems to unconsciously follow Augustine in so much³¹⁹, notes “Because the sign is arbitrary, it follows no law other than that of tradition, and because it is based on tradition, it is arbitrary.”³²⁰

If this is the case, then our community will help to determine what kind of things we love and what kind of things we will reject³²¹. A form of use and enjoyment, an attitude to the world, is already served us on the plate of the society we are born into. So, in his conversion account in book VIII of the *Confessions*, Augustine will bring in a

³¹⁸ “*nec eo utitur, sed fruitur. Neque enim ad aliquid aliud Deus referendus est. Quoniam omne quod ad aliud referendum est, inferius est quam id ad quod referendum est.*”

³¹⁹ cf Kelly 1975

³²⁰ de Saussure 1960 [1916]: 74

³²¹ The following paragraph relies heavily on the argument of Soskice 2002

number of themes that describe his rebirth into a new community, and his re-learning to speak: for example, the lung complaint that deprived him of speech for some time (IX.2); the incoherence of his tears (previously associated with Monica's incoherent prayers: III.11.19); and of course his reinstatement into a speaking community by the words of a childish game (VIII.12), combined with a biblical text. Augustine's conversion was not just that of a philosophical position (which he had already attained in book VII anyway), but a conversion of the will. As such, it is a conversion of both language and community, vindicating O'Leary's instinct that "the attunement of speech to the phenomenality of revelation is a task which goes against the grain of all conventional religious language."³²²

It is for this reason that Augustine will later exhort biblical interpreters to be aware of the assumptions they make about their surroundings that might not be necessary truths, but facts that they have grown to accept – fashionable truths that come and go like seasons of times (*doctr. chr.* III.x.16; xviii.26). He will also warn against community and contracts with demons (*doctr. chr.* III.xxiii.36). "Signs are the conventional, or at least established, means of conveying the wills, intentions, wishes and hence values (or in Augustinian terms the loves and hates) of the society."³²³

It is perhaps for this reason that Augustine talks of bad habits not only in our works, but in our ideas, as we are led astray by the fallen communities into which each child is socialised. Clearly, language is not the only aspect in which our communities lead us astray, but it seems natural to suppose that it is indeed a part of the fallen contract that leads us to valuing things in a wrong way, since our naming affects our ideas:

nor does the flesh fight back out of hatred, but because of the stranglehold of these habits which, after establishing themselves in the stock of our ancestors, have become naturally ingrained. The spirit's aim in subduing the flesh is *to break the perverse contracts* (so to speak) of these evil habits and establish the peace brought by good habits. Even those who are *corrupted by false ideas*

³²² O'Leary 1985: 26.

³²³ Rist 1994: 35

and hate their bodies would not be prepared to lose one eye, ... unless constrained by some greater necessity. (*doctr. chr.* I.xxiv.25, emphasis mine)³²⁴

So when Augustine does appeal to the common judgement of his readers, he does so on the grounds of some truth that is accessible to all, because he can not trust the evaluations made by the societies in which they live and speak:

Nobody is so brazenly stupid as to say, "how do you know that the form of life that is unchangeably wise is to be ranked more highly than the changeable form?" The answer to his question, about how I know, is publicly and unchangeably present for all to behold. (*doctr. chr.* I.ix.9)³²⁵

The Bible, however, rights the naming that takes place in our communities, and therefore helps us to live aright with each other. Our language and institutions affect each other in the give and take of common life, and "faith's discontent with its language unleashes an energy of questioning and reformation ... In contesting a word one may find oneself subverting an institution or changing a way of life."³²⁶ Just as the language and rhetoric of the Bible becomes a prescriptive norm for preachers in the *doctr. chr.* IV, so the words used in the Scriptures will help determine our ways of thinking and speaking in church, leading us to a right assessment of things according to the order laid out in creation. This is only to be expected if both the order of the world and the words of Scripture reflect the mind of God³²⁷.

Thus he finds there [in the holy Scriptures and the divine Law] an abundance of ideas and words which, like the grains, serve partly as an improvement of his conduct in human society, which is

³²⁴ "*nec per odium resistente carne, sed per consuetudinis vinculum, quod a parentum etiam propagine inveteratum naturae lege inolevit. Id ergo agit spiritus in domanda carne, ut solvat malae consuetudinis quasi pacta perversa, et fiat pax consuetudinis bonae. Tamen nec isti qui falsa opinione depravati corpora sua detestantur, parati essent unum oculum vel sine sensu doloris amittere, etiamsi in altero tantus cernendi sensus remaneret, quantus erat in duobus, nisi aliqua res quae praeponenda esset, urgeret.*"

³²⁵ "*Nemo est enim tam impudenter insulsus qui dicat: Unde scis incommutabiliter sapientem vitam mutabili esse praeferendam? Idipsum enim quod interrogat, unde sciam, omnibus ad contemplandum communiter atque incommutabiliter praesto est.*"

³²⁶ O'Leary 1985: 67

³²⁷ Or, as Babcock 1995: 156 puts it, "a pattern of significations that is rooted in *caritas*"

like the fruit-bearing trees, and partly to strengthen faith, hope, and charity for eternal life, which is like the green plants. (*Gn. adu. Man. I.xxiii.40*)³²⁸

³²⁸ “*partim ad concipiendam fecunditatem rationum atque sermonum, tanquam herbis seminalibus; partim ad utilitatem morum conversationis humanae, tanquam lignis fructiferis; partim ad vigorem fidei, spei et charitatis in vitam aeternam, tanquam herbis viridibus,*”

III.3.3.3: Praise and Blame Revisited

[God] leaned
 over and looked in the dictionary
 they used. There was the blank still
 by his name of the same
 order as the territory
 between them, the verbal hunger
 for the thing in itself. And the darkness
 that is a god's blood swelled
 in him, and he let it
 to make the sign in the space
 on the page, that is in all languages
 and none; that is the grammarian's
 torment and the mystery
 at the cell's core, and the equation
 that will not come out, and is
 the narrowness that we stare
 over into the eternal
 silence that is the repose of God.

R S Thomas, from "The Gap"

So it seems that we are in a sorry state. Although we *can* in theory pass through the world and use it to enjoy God, our habits, names, and conventions are all stacked against us. Language is still arbitrary, but we can not simply break with tradition and decide to call a cat a spade and a spade a cigar. We are confined to our traditions (*mus.* II.viii.15; III.ii.3; IV.xvi.20; V.i.1) in exactly that area where reasoning is so arbitrary. One person can not change the tradition and society that dictates our words: it seems Augustine's problem is insuperable.

language is a system of arbitrary signs and lacks the necessary basis, the solid ground for discussion. There is no reason for preferring *soeur* to *sister*, *Ochs* to *boeuf*, etc. ... Of all social institutions, language is least amenable to initiative. It blends with the life of society, and the latter, inert by nature, is a prime conservative force.³²⁹

So pure reason is not a sufficient way out. The argument is already weighted in one direction. In this section, we will examine a small number of ways out Augustine saw, in the form of gracious beauty, community teaching, and praise and blame.

Firstly, it is a common Augustinian theme to note that God's grace stoops to pick us out of our distress, helping us to right our priorities through beauty. If we are not able to employ our reason and judgement correctly, then God will short circuit the process by making good things beautiful, and giving us a predisposition to love the truth.³³⁰

And yet if any man should propose to himself so to love truth, not only that which consists in contemplation, but also in uttering the true thing, which each in its own kind of things is true, and no otherwise to bring forth with the mouth of the body his thought than in the mind it is conceived and beheld; so that *he should prize the beauty of truth-telling honesty*, not only above gold and silver and jewels and pleasant lands, but above this temporal life itself altogether and every good thing of the body ... (*mend. xx.41*)³³¹

Augustine here combines the challenge of loving truth with the reason we would have for doing so: namely, that it is beautiful. It is not unusual to hear him urging that truth should be well expressed (*dial. vii*), and that we should judge our appreciation of beauty, so that we love the good and hate the evil (*mus. VI.ix.23*), but that is not the end of the story. Although the doctrine of original sin will tell us that we are tied up in a web of loves that are variously appropriate and sinful, on the other hand the doctrine of grace tells us that delight naturally comes with truth:

when truths are being demonstrated by a speaker – this relates to the task of instruction – it is not the aim of the eloquence or the intention of the speaker that the truths or the eloquence should in themselves produce delight; but the truths themselves, as they are revealed, do produce delight by virtue of being true. (*doctr. chr. IV.xii.28*)³³²

³²⁹ de Saussure 1960 [1916]: 73f

³³⁰ The whole theory of God's redemptive beauty in creation and discourse, cf Harrison (1992), esp chapter 2

³³¹ "*Et tamen si quisquam proponeret sibi sic amandam veritatem, non tantum quae in contemplando est, sed etiam in vero enuntiando quod in suo quoque rerum genere verum est, et non aliter proferendam ore corporis sententiam, quam in animo concepta atque conspecta est; ut fidei veridiciam pulchritudinem non solum auro et argento et gemmis et amoenis praediis, sed et ipsi universae temporali vitae omnique corporis bono praeponeret;*"

³³² "*quandoquidem cum dicendo vera monstrantur, quod ad officium docendi pertinet, non eloquio agitur, neque hoc attenditur, ut vel ipsa vel ipsum delectet eloquium, sed per seipsa, quoniam vera sunt, manifestata delectant.*"

Another source of help that Augustine refers to, surprisingly enough, is the teacher. This seems a strange move for him to make, considering the earlier attitude towards teachers outlined in the *De Magistro*. It was noted in an earlier chapter (n37 above), though, that teachers were not so rejected in the works contemporary with that dialogue. Indeed, they were recommended in *an. quant.* xviii.32, xxxiii.72; *util. cred.* vi.13; *duab. an.* vii.9. In fact, the use of teachers is not even condemned in the *De Magistro* itself, but rather it is argued that “true advice, ... should be ascribed not to man but to the unchangeable God” (*doctr. chr.* prologue 7)³³³.

We should not call anyone on earth our teacher, since *there is one in heaven Who is the Teacher of all*. Furthermore, He himself will teach us what ‘in heaven’ is – He Who prompts us externally through men by means of signs, so that we are instructed to be inwardly turned toward Him. (*mag.* xiv.46, King’s emphasis)³³⁴

Here it should be noted that Augustine’s picture of the learning of truth also parallels his schemes of love and existence. “With Augustine ... knowledge and love are held together.”³³⁵ Just as whenever we enjoy someone, we do not enjoy them, but the God-ness we find in them (see above, on page 89), without which we would have no truth in us, so whenever we learn some truth, we do not learn it from a teacher, but from God, who is the Truth and the Teacher. “Yet nobody should regard anything as his own, except perhaps a lie. For all truth comes from the one who says ‘I am the truth.’” (*doctr. chr.* prologue 8)³³⁶

This interpretation of teaching the truth bears working out: we can see, for example, that just as something without God can neither exist or be good (see above, III.1: Cosmology), and nothing that exists can be hated (above, on page 87), so nothing evil can be learnt or taught:

³³³ “*Noverat enim ille vir, ex quacumque anima verum consilium processisset, non ei, sed illi qui est veritas, incommutabili Deo tribuendum esse.*” Cf. also *Io. eu. tr.* XIV.8: “*Quia nemo hominum potest dicere quod veritatis est, nisi illuminetur ab eo qui mentiri non potest*”

³³⁴ “*ne nobis quemquam magistrum dicamus in terris, quod unus omnium magister in coelis sit. Quid sit autem in coelis, docebit ipse a quo etiam per homines signis admonemur et foris, ut ad eum intro conversi erudiamur.*”

³³⁵ Louth 1983: 5

³³⁶ “*quanquam nemo debet aliquid sic habere quasi suum proprium, nisi forte mendacium. Nam omne verum ab illo est, qui ait: Ego sum veritas;*” cf also *ibid* II.xviii.28: “*imo vero quisquis bonus verusque christianus est, Domini sui esse intelligat, ubicumque invenerit veritatem,*”

Augustine: since, in fact, knowledge is imparted or awakened in us by learning, and it is only in this way that something is learned. Or do you have a different idea?

Evodius: I think that only good things come to us by learning. ...

Augustine: Consequently, evil is not something learned, and it is pointless for you to ask who it is that teaches us wrongdoing. (*lib. arb.* I.i.2)³³⁷

So while we learn from God whenever we learn the truth, that by which we know something is true – that by which we judge, but which we ourselves do not judge – turns out to be God himself (*lib. arb.* II.xii.34, xiv.38). But in order to get to God, we have to pass through a number of truths before we get to the stage when “the sharp and strong vision of the mind beholds a number of immutable truths known with certainty, it directs its gaze to truth itself” (*lib. arb.* II.xiii.36)³³⁸.

[Augustine:] In order to contemplate eternal truth in a way that will enable us to enjoy it and cling to it, a path through temporal things, suited to our infirmity, has been marked out for us, namely, that we accept on faith past and future events so far as this suffices for men on their journey towards things eternal. (*lib. arb.* III.xxi.60)³³⁹

[Augustine:] But if ignorance and difficulty are man's natural state, then it is from this condition that the soul begins to progress and advance towards knowledge and a state of rest until the happy life is fully realized in it. (*ibid.* III.xxii.64)³⁴⁰

Given these correlations, then, it is not at all surprising to find that truth and wisdom are things that we are meant to love – more specifically, they are things to be enjoyed:³⁴¹

³³⁷ “*siquidem scientia per illam datur aut excitatur, nec quisquam nisi per disciplinam aliquid discit: an tu aliter putas? E. Ego per disciplinam non nisi bona disci arbitror. ... non igitur discuntur mala, et frustra illum a quo male facere discimus, quaeris;*” Similarly, knowledge cannot be evil: cf *lib. arb.* I.vii.17

³³⁸ “*sic fortis acies mentis et vegeta cum multa vera et incommutabilia certa ratione conspexerit, dirigit se in ipsam veritatem,*”

³³⁹ “*Sed ad contemplandam veritatis aeternitatem, ut ea perfrui eique inhaerere valeamus, infirmitati nostrae via de temporalibus procurata est, ut quantum itineri sufficit ad aeterna tendentium, praeterita et futura credamus*”

³⁴⁰ “*Ignorantia vero et difficultas si naturalis est, inde incipit anima proficere, et ad cognitionem et requiem, donec in ea perficiatur vita beata, promoveri.*”

[Augustine:] Since it is in truth that we know and possess the highest good, and since that truth is wisdom, let us see in wisdom our highest good. Let us make it our aim to enjoy fully, for happy indeed is the man whose delight is in the highest good. (*lib. arb.* II.xiii.36)³⁴²

In this way it is a good deal easier to understand the distinction between pre-fall interior inspiration and post-fall use of external truths. It is because humanity had turned away from God, no longer enjoying and participating in God, that it needs corporeal signs to climb back through the system (of love, existence and signification) to the one who may be enjoyed.³⁴³ At other points, Augustine would describe this as falling from existence, goodness, beauty, etc. In the *De Genesi adversus manichaeos*, though, it is described as turning from the light of truth:

Hence, they became hidden to themselves so that they might be troubled by their wretched errors after they had left the light of truth which they were not. For the human soul can be a partaker in the truth, but the truth is the immutable God above it. (II.xvi.24)³⁴⁴

So the teacher of truth is an important way of apprehending God in the world for Augustine. It both tells us what needs to be loved, and leads us to God himself. We also have evidence to believe that, in general, he did not hold to that definition of teacher under attack in the *De Magistro*. Not all teachers necessarily use words, nor do we imagine their students are meant to acquire exactly that information and knowledge that they have through the mediation of words. In another early work, for example, he describes teaching thus: “Disciple: For imitation seems to me to be so much a part of the arts that, if it is removed, nearly all of them are destroyed. *For masters exhibit themselves to be imitated, and that is what they call teaching.*” (*mus.* I.iv.6, emphasis mine)³⁴⁵

³⁴¹ Indeed, according to *Gn. adu. Man.* II.xxvii.41, the fullness of knowledge is charity.

³⁴² “*Imo vero quoniam in veritate cognoscitur et tenetur summum bonum, eaque veritas sapientia est, cernamus in ea, teneamusque summum bonum, eoque perfruamur. Beatus est quippe qui fruitur summo bono.*”

³⁴³ Hence children who cannot speak are helpless to nurture their inner life – *trin.* XIV.v.7

³⁴⁴ “*Ergo ad seipsos absconderunt se, ut conturbarentur miseris erroribus, relicto lumine veritatis, quod ipsi non erant. Particeps enim veritatis potest esse anima humana: ipsa autem veritas Deus est incommutabilis supra illam.*”

³⁴⁵ “*Nam video tantum valere in artibus imitationem, ut, ea sublata, omnes pene perimantur. Praebent enim se magistri ad imitandum, et hoc ipsum est quod vocant docere.*”

In this way, teachers that are trying to elicit a certain practise (in this case, that of speaking well) will not necessarily make use of the transference of information. Correspondingly, the aim of the teacher will be an ordered love. This was true even at the time of writing of the *De Magistro*: “Furthermore, all practical instruction in this matter has this for its aim, that, renouncing and restraining this kind of movement, we turn our will from the instability of temporal things to the enjoyment of the everlasting good.” (*lib. arb. III.i.2*)³⁴⁶

So the teacher’s place fits in well with the picture we have been working out of love and language. In fact, for Augustine, one of the main roles for teaching is parallel to the role of language in society (cf *ord. II.xii.35*, quoted above, on page 47). It works as a kind of cement to communities, enabling the loving flow of intercourse to lead us all to God:

Moreover, [without human teaching] there would be no way for love, which ties people together in the bonds of unity, to make souls overflow and as it were intermingle with each other, if human beings learned nothing from other human beings. (*doctr. chr. prologue 6*)³⁴⁷

On the basis of these two boons (beauty and teaching), we can show a major Augustinian solution to the problem of disproportionate love: praise and blame (cf above, II.4.2: Understanding). For the teacher is not there to teach mere cold facts, but instead to “communicate what is good and eradicate what is bad”³⁴⁸ (*doctr. chr. IV.iv.6*). How else is this to be done but by praise and blame? As Augustine prays, “If only I only spoke when preaching your word and praising you!”³⁴⁹ (*trin. XV.xxviii.51*) “[Augustine:]

³⁴⁶ “*omnisque de hac re disciplina utilis ad id valeat, ut eo motu improbato atque cohibito, voluntatem nostram ad fruendum sempiterno bono, a lapsu temporalium convertamus*” cf. also *trin. XV.xi.20*: “Here too, if it is a true word, it is the beginning of a good work. And a word is true when it is begotten of the knowledge of how to work well,” (*Sed etiam hic cum verum verbum est, tunc est initium boni operis. Verum autem verbum est, cum de scientia bene operandi gignitur.*)

³⁴⁷ “*Deinde ipsa charitas, quae sibi invicem homines nodo unitatis astringit, non haberet aditum refundendorum et quasi miscendorum sibimet animorum, si homines per homines nihil discerent*” It is perhaps a lack of this kind of discourse that led to the downfall of Babel in Augustine’s interpretation, since although they had one language, their minds were dissonant: *doctr. chr. II.iv.5*

³⁴⁸ “*et bona docere, et mala dedocere.*” cf also xvii.34: “*Qui ergo nititur dicendo persuadere quod bonum est,*”

³⁴⁹ “*Sed utinam praedicando verbum tuum, et laudando te tantummodo loquerer!*”

Nevertheless, all things are rightly deserving of praise by the very fact that they exist, since they are good inasmuch as they exist.” (*lib. arb.* III.vii.21)³⁵⁰

Similarly, God’s order is reflected not simply in our describing the world, and our naming, but in our praising and blaming. This insight came quite early to Augustine. It is most clearly exemplified in *uera. rel.* (xli.77f):

Do not be surprised if I call [corruptible things] beautiful things, for everything is beautiful that is in due order. As the apostle says: “All order is of God”. We must admit that a weeping man is better than a happy worm. And yet I could speak at great length without any falsehood in praise of the worm. I could point out the brightness of its colouring, the slender round shape of its body... Every existing thing however lowly is justly praised when it is compared with nothingness.³⁵¹

These two activities also involve the gracious beauty of the world that gives us delight in the things that are good, for praise is a beautiful thing (cf the notes on making praise beautiful in *doctr. chr.* IV.xxvi.56f): “[God] has sanctioned the homage of the human voice, and chosen that we should derive pleasure from our words in praise of him.” (*doctr. chr.* I.vi.6)³⁵²

Likewise, praise and blame sort out the good from the bad, untangling the ambiguity of creation (being both created and fallen) we saw above (on page 103). For praise does not necessarily attribute goodness to any one thing, but to its characteristics – praising it insofar as it is of God, and blaming it insofar as it has fallen:

[Augustine:] Hence it is clear that the very thing whose vice is being blamed is itself deserving of praise because of its nature, and that we must therefore acknowledge that, in blaming their vices,

³⁵⁰ “*Omnia tamen eo ipso quo sunt, jure laudanda sunt; quia eo ipso quo sunt, bona sunt.*”

³⁵¹ “*Nec miremur quod adhuc pulchritudines nomino: nihil enim est ordinatum, quod non sit pulchrum; et, sicut ait Apostolus, omnis ordo à Deo est. Necessè est autem fateamur meliorem esse hominem plorantem, quam laetantem vermiculum: et tamen vermiculi laudem sine ullo mendacio copiose possum dicere, considerans nitorem coloris, figuram teretem corporis, ... Omnis autem natura quamvis extrema, quamvis infima, in comparatione nihili jure laudatur.*”

³⁵² “*admisit humanae vocis obsequium, et verbis nostris in laude sua gaudere nos voluit.*”

we are bestowing praise upon the natures, upon those natures, that is, whose vices are being blamed. (*lib. arb.* III.xiv.41)³⁵³

In what is perhaps Augustine's most eloquent description of these two paradigmatic values of language (*doctr. chr.* I.xxix.30), there is portrayed a theatre (notably the same context as his later argument for language being conventional and based in community: *doctr. chr.* II.xxv.38), where one person tries to bring around a neighbour to the love of a certain actor. The passage is reminiscent of Plotinus' image of the dance of life (*Enneads* III.2.xvff), where the world's order is demonstrated in the actors' various parts. For Plotinus, the order is seen in the singers' song, but Augustine concentrates on the audience's reaction. "This Universe is good not when the individual is a stone, but when everyone throws in his own voice towards a total harmony, singing out a life – harsh, imperfect though it be." (Plotinus, *Enneads* III.2.xvii)³⁵⁴

Augustine's allegory will bear teasing out: a large group of people, their attention taken by something going on before them, of a different order of reality to them, a different story, and some choose to love it, "as it were a great good, *or even the supreme one*"³⁵⁵, whereas some reject it, hate it, or love it less.

In the context of this quasi-ecclesiastical gathering, the ones having their love surely directed also have a determined attitude to those around them, who are not the direct object of their love, but sharers in their enjoyment. So the lover "also loves those who share his love, not on their account, but on account of the one they equally love".³⁵⁶ On the other hand, "If he finds anyone antagonistic, he violently hates that person's hatred of his hero, and goes all out to remove it by whatever methods he can."³⁵⁷

³⁵³ "Vitium autem, dicere coeperam, non aliunde malum est, nisi quia naturae adversatur ejus ipsius rei cujus est vitium. Unde manifestum est hanc eandem rem cujus vitium vituperatur, natura esse laudabilem; ita ut omnino hanc ipsam vituperationem vitiorum, naturarum laudem esse fateamur, earum scilicet quarum vitia vituperantur." cf also *trin.* VIII.iii.4, quoted above on page 103

³⁵⁴ "kai to holon touto kalon, ouk eidinos [MacKenna reads lithos] eiē ekastos all ei ton phthoggon ton autou eisphero menos suntelei eis mian armonian zōēn kai autos phōnōn, elattō de kai atelesteran."

³⁵⁵ "et tanquam magno vel etiam summo bono"

³⁵⁶ "omnes diligit qui eum diligunt secum, non propter illos, sed propter eum quem pariter diligunt;"

³⁵⁷ "si autem contravenientem invenerit, odit in illo vehementer odium dilecti sui, et quibus modis valet, instat ut auferat"

It is clear that both the language (“on account of”) and the shape of the argument (“hate that person’s hatred”) parallel the order of love we have already been speaking of. That is how he loves. The way he speaks is in praise.

The more passionate he is in his love,
 the more he tries by whatever methods he can to make his hero loved
 by a greater number of people,
 and the more he desires to point him out
 to a greater number of people.

If he sees someone unenthusiastic he rouses him with his praises as much as he can.³⁵⁸

So praises work in community as the way we use our language (note the parallelism between loving and pointing out (*ostendere*)). This is clearly important since it is the way teaching works in a community, but also shows us how we act in respect to one another’s worship, allowing our neighbour to “pass through” their own neighbour, namely us, in order to attain to God. In praise, we do not only make signs to point to God, but we become a sign towards God.

But a holy person or a holy angel restores us when we are weary and when we desire to rest in them and stay with them, using either the resources which they have received for their own sakes or those which they have received for our sakes (but in either case they have certainly received them); and then they impel us, thus restored, to go to the one by enjoying whom we likewise are made happy. (*doctr. chr. lxxxiii.36*)³⁵⁹

Just as importantly, this model of praise and blame reveals the Christian community as a redemptive community, insofar as it is defined by using things and names to point in the right direction. For, “the new people called to an eternal inheritance use the language of the New Testament” (*de sermone Domine in monte II.v.17*)³⁶⁰. If our

³⁵⁸ “*et quanto est in eius amore ferventior, tanto agit quibus potest modis, ut a pluribus diligatur, et tanto pluribus eum cupit ostendere; et quem frigidiorum videt, excitat eum quantum potest laudibus illius;*”

³⁵⁹ “*Sanctus autem homo et sanctus angelus etiam fessos nos atque in se acquiescere et remanere cupientes, reficiunt potius, aut eo sumptu quem propter nos, aut illo etiam quem propter se acceperunt, acceperunt tamen; atque ita reffectos in illum ire compellunt, quo fruentes pariter beati sumus.*”

³⁶⁰ “*Utatur ergo voce Novi Testamenti populus novus, ad aeternam haereditatem vocatus*”

names inform our treatment of things, and names are determined by the society in which they arise, then a community of praise is exactly what is needed in order to acquire a well ordered love. It is in this that Augustine shows his genius: in the multi-faceted use of language to signify and move towards the one that all signs ultimately signify. So we name what is bad, name what is good, in order to see what is God in the disciplines of blame, praise, and silence.

Conclusion

This work started by arguing that signs are not necessarily a negative, sinful thing for Augustine, based on an interpretation of *De Magistro*. The line of argument then proceeded towards signs of the mind and signs of scripture, in order to discern their appropriateness for the task in hand. The conclusion was reached that signs are good when used as steps towards God. In the final section it was proposed that the system of signification parallels the various hierarchies of ontology and love, such that the world exists by God, is loved because of God, and points to God. This signification works according to Augustine's sign theories: signs can advert to causes, signs can be true, signs can be corporeal or otherwise³⁶¹. "It is, however, important to know what kind of likenesses these lower things have to those higher realities. There is, you see, no other route along which reason can rightly direct its course and its efforts to move from here to there." (*gn. litt.* IV.iv.9)

In the introduction, I apologised for the inevitable omissions made in this essay. Unfortunately, there can be no justification (except perhaps for the limits of space) for not going into all the tantalising and philosophically suggestive areas of sign theory Augustine touches upon: the relation of the inner word to speech intentions³⁶²; miracles and signs³⁶³; the possibility of a Messianic slip of the tongue³⁶⁴; sacramental signs³⁶⁵; the grammar of praise and blame³⁶⁶.

Possibly the most obvious lacuna, though, is that there has been no sustained treatment of the material to be found in *De Trinitate*. There are two reasons for this: the first is that I found nothing in the work to contradict the theory outlined above, and the second, that any interpretation of that great piece of literature requires a great deal of contextualisation and recapitulation of earlier argument, so intricate and rewarding is the thinking lying within it.

³⁶¹ Cf. Someone's knowledge as sign in *trin.* XIV.viii.11

³⁶² *an. quant.* xxxii.65f; *trin.* XV.xi.20

³⁶³ *Io. eu. tr.* XXIV.1

³⁶⁴ *Io. eu. tr.* XXVII.8

³⁶⁵ *Io. eu. tr.* LXXX

³⁶⁶ *lib. arb.* III.v.15

For example, Augustine seems to hold to the same relation of signs to desires that has been elucidated above (cf esp. III.3.2: Causing), even further explaining it in terms of the tension between the signs own existence and that of the signified:

The more therefore the thing is known without being fully known, the more does the intelligence desire to know what remains; if it only knew that there was a vocal sound like this and did not know that it was the sign of something, it would not look further for anything else, having already perceived as much as it could about a sensible object by sensation. But as it knows that this is not just a vocal sound but also a sign, it wants to know it completely; and no sign is completely known unless it is known what thing it is the sign of. If a man then earnestly, enthusiastically, and persistently seeks to know this, can he be said to be without love?³⁶⁷ (*trin.* X.i.2)

It is interesting to note that Augustine probably started work on this book shortly after laying aside work on the *De Doctrina Christiana*, which provided most of the material for section III: A Sign of Ascents. In the light of what we have been saying about signification as a way of understanding the world as created, a way of worshipping God in and through the lives we live in the place we are, Augustine's description of his method in *De Trinitate* may sound familiar:

I quote this passage [Wis. 13.1-5] from the book of Wisdom in case any of the faithful should reckon I have been wasting time for nothing in first searching creation for signs of that supreme trinity we are looking for when we are looking for God, going step by step through various trinities of different sorts until we eventually arrive at the mind of man. (*trin.* XV.3)³⁶⁸

In this way, we can discern Augustine's theory of signs as a founding insight to his thought. In his search for God, he treats everything as a sign, stopping at nothing,

³⁶⁷ "Quo igitur amplius notum est, sed non plene notum est, eo cupit animus de illo nosse quod reliquum est. Si enim tantummodo esse istam vocem nosset, eamque alicujus rei signum esse non nosset, nihil jam quaereret, sensibili re, quantum poterat, sentiendo percepta. Quia vero non solum esse vocem, sed et signum esse jam novit, perfecte id nosse vult. Neque ullum perfecte signum noscitur, nisi cujus rei signum sit cognoscatur. Hoc ergo qui ardenti cura quaerit ut noverit, studioque accensus insistit, num potest dici esse sine amore?"

³⁶⁸"(*Sap.* XIII, 1-5). Haec de libro Sapientiae propterea posui, ne me fidelium quispiam frustra et inaniter existimet in creatura prius per quasdam sui generis trinitates quodam modo gradatim, donec ad mentem hominis pervenirem, quaesisse indicia summae illius Trinitatis, quam quaerimus cum Deum quaerimus." - for signs as images, cf *trin.* XV.x.18, xii.22.

going further at every point, that he might somehow find a glimpse of God, signified in the world “*through a mirror, in an enigma*” (1 Cor 13.11f).

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