Augustine’s De magistro: Scriptural Arguments and the Genre of Philosophy

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Abstract
Augustine’s De magistro has been of particular interest to those working on the philosophy of language, as can be seen most recently in Emmanuel Bermon’s Habilitationschrift, published as La Signification et l’enseignement (Paris, 2007). The focus on the philosophy of language has, however, tended to occlude analysis of the argumentative value of Augustine’s quotation of Scripture. Augustine’s Thagaste period (c. 388-391) is a rich resource for pursuing the relationship between Augustine’s philosophical resources and his use of Scripture, as he exhibits a growing interest in and sophistication with Scripture in the years between his Cassiciacum retreat and his time as priest and bishop in Hippo. In this short communication, I have analyzed Augustine’s scriptural citation in mag. 11.37-8, where he first formulates what some have called his ‘doctrine of divine illumination’. Primarily, I demonstrate that the conclusion of Augustine’s dialogue – that is, nothing new can be taught by way of words – is in tension with Augustine’s knowledge that it is Christ who dwells in the inner person. And secondarily, I advance an interpretation of Augustine’s formulation of the doctrine of divine illumination that foregrounds his use of Scripture, comparing the story from Dan. 3 of Ananias, Azarias, and Misahel in mag. 11.37 with Eph. 3:16-7 and 1Cor. 1:24 in mag. 11.38. Augustine, I argue, stops short of offering a full solution to the so-called ‘learner’s paradox’; however, he does provide us with an important example of how Scripture and philosophy are integrated in his thought. While De magistro is written in the genre of his Cassiciacum dialogues, I show that this work also demonstrates Augustine’s practice of thinking philosophically with Scripture. In conclusion, I briefly consider whether this interpretation of De magistro can point us toward possibilities for reading Augustine’s more scripturally-reliant work philosophically.

Introduction

It has often been assumed that when Augustine left his library in Rome, he also parted ways with many of the intellectual aspirations detected in his earlier dialogues, trading them in for the polemical life of a North African clergyman.1

1 I am in debt to the thoughtful comments of Emmanuel Bermon, Stewart Clem, Sarah Coakley, and Tamer Nawar on previous versions of this short communication.
By the time he arrived in Thagaste in late 388, Augustine had already begun to write a text against the Manichaean ‘way of life’,2 foreshadowing the temperament of some of his later works. He continued, however, to investigate the nature of language and learning, interests that seem to fit more comfortably with the Cassiciacum program. It is in this context, in Thagaste before his ordination to the priesthood, that Augustine’s final dialogue, *De magistro* (389/91), was completed.3 In *De magistro* we not only enjoy the fruits of a philosophically inquisitive mind, but can also detect new emphases that will become more pronounced in his later works. Chief among these developments is Augustine’s reliance on Scripture, and in *De magistro* this no more apparent than in his formulation of Christ as the inner teacher (mag. 11.38).

While there is obviously much fruitful historical work to be done on Augustine’s Thagaste period, in this short communication I must restrict my analysis to *De magistro* 11.37-8, where Augustine introduces what some have called his ‘doctrine of divine illumination’.4 The burden of this essay will be twofold. First, I hope to demonstrate that the conclusion of Augustine’s dialogue — that is, nothing new can be taught by way of words — is in tension with Augustine’s knowledge that it is *Christ* who dwells in the inner person, echoing Plato’s famous ‘learner’s paradox’ (*i.e.* ‘Meno’s paradox’).5 And second, I will advance an interpretation of Augustine’s formulation of the doctrine of divine illumination that foregrounds his use of Scripture, comparing the story from Dan. 3 of Ananias, Azarias, and Misahel in mag. 11.37 with Eph. 3:16-7 and 1Cor. 1:24 in *mag.* 11.38.6 In fact, the philosophical puzzle in *mag.* 11.37-8 becomes evident...
only when we closely observe Augustine’s use of Scripture in the dialogue. While Augustine stops short of offering a full solution to the so-called ‘learner’s paradox’, he does provide us with an important example of how Scripture and philosophy are integrated without one ultimately dissolving into the other.

The philosophical puzzle

Despite some interpreters’ confidence, there does not seem to be a self-evident way of reading this last dialogue of Augustine’s, for while it was written in Thagaste between 389 and 391, the genre of De magistro is most similar to the Cassiciacum dialogues. On the one hand, Myles Burnyeat has read it as an additional step in the Platonic tradition, comparing it with Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations.7 By reading it as an argument that succeeds or fails on the criteria of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy, Burnyeat might overlook the relatively opaque nature of this genre. On the other hand, Douglas Kries has focused on its allusions to Daniel and Virgil, placing De magistro in the tradition of the Platonic dialogue, where the references and allusions point the reader toward some truth buried therein.8 Such an interpretation might ignore that there are, in fact, arguments (sometimes bad ones) in the dialogue, or that Augustine does the heavy lifting in the last part, which is not a dialogue, but rather a monologue. In my analysis, I want to draw on both reading strategies, but place De magistro in the context of Augustine’s increasingly sophisticated engagement with Scripture.9 I will show that Augustine’s formulation

for Augustine. Emmanuel Bermon’s Habilitationschrift published as La signification et l’enseignement: Texte latin, traduction française et commentaire du De magistro de Saint Augustin (Paris, 2007), has offered an account of De magistro that takes Augustine’s citation of Matth. 23:10 in Retract. I 12 as a starting point. Bermon’s commentary might prove the rule that a philosophical approach such as O’Daly’s and Nash’s, which are guided by contemporary philosophical divisions (e.g. between ontology, epistemology, philosophy of mind, etc.), systematically obscures the role Scripture plays, while a textually-focused account leaves open the possibility for Scripture to play an argumentative role. This is not to discount the value of O’Daly and Nash’s work, for I have learned much from their accounts, but rather to highlight that approaching Augustine’s text with 20th century philosophical divisions in mind can needlessly fracture Augustine’s own thought. My account in this short communication draws on much of Bermon’s work, but I give an even more central place to Scripture than Bermon does, as it is not only a starting point, but also critical for how Augustine’s argument unfolds.

9 This is now a rather well worn path, as Michel Barnes and Lewis Ayres have highlighted Augustine’s scriptural engagement. For the most up to date example of this revision, see Ayres’s Augustine and the Trinity (Cambridge, 2010).
of the ‘interior teacher’ in mag. 11.38 relies – in a new way for Augustine – on Scriptural reference.\textsuperscript{10}

While the connection between scripture and Augustine’s more epistemological and semantic concerns have rarely been highlighted by recent commentators, the very first commentator on this work, Augustine himself, picked out this particular aspect in his brief comments in the \textit{Retractiones}: ‘[In \textit{De magistro}] it is debated, sought, and found that there is no teacher save God who gives humans knowledge, in accordance with what is written by the Evangelist: \textit{One is your teacher, Christ (Matth. 23:10)}’ (I 12).\textsuperscript{11} While some have puzzled over the brevity of Augustine’s comments,\textsuperscript{12} the importance of this gloss suggests, rather, an interesting convergence between the oft-highlighted Augustinian ‘faith-seeking’ and Augustine’s own intellectual engagement with Scripture. There is very little said in this passage, and one has to be leery of over-interpreting the \textit{Retractiones}, but this passage does, at the very least, validate a scriptural inquiry into a philosophical dialogue. In order to understand Augustine’s use of Scripture one must observe where his argument breaks down; however, in order to understand the force of his argument one must first recognize the philosophical value of Augustine’s use of Scripture. In other words, there is an inseparability between a philosophical and scriptural reading of Augustine’s \textit{De magistro}. One must, then, approach this text as a philosophical dialogue that draws on both philosophical arguments and scriptural revelation. Indeed, the substantive philosophical puzzle arises in the convergence of these two approaches.

Augustine’s famous passage regarding Christ as the ‘interior teacher’ comes at a critical stage in his argument concerning the behavior of signs. Augustine has been arguing that signs and manifestations do not teach us, but rather we need to learn through direct appreciation the thing itself and only then can they serve to communicate to us (10.31, 34, 36). Emmanuel Bermon has highlighted the Platonic pedigree to this position, that is, only first-hand appreciation would count as knowledge.\textsuperscript{13} But Augustine’s position on whether only first-hand...
appreciation counts as knowledge is ambiguous, so we have to be careful with this platonic background. According to Augustine, ‘words have value to the extent that they admonish us to search for things, not by furnishing those things for us to know’. Following along with the dialogue, one is not surprised by this conclusion. In 11.38, however, Augustine introduces what must have been intended to be a startling move: ‘He who is consulted teaches; he who is said to dwell in the inner person is Christ, that is, the unchanging power and everlasting wisdom of God, which every soul does indeed consult, but is only disclosed to one insofar as he is able to grasp it on account of his own evil or good will’. In other words, Christ, who is the Truth, dwells in the inner person, and teaches as an ‘interior teacher’, but we are only able to grasp this teaching to the extent that we are morally capable of apprehending it. Setting aside the issue regarding the ethical conditions of knowledge, my query is still with how Augustine can hold the proposition ‘He who is said to dwell in the inner person is Christ’? Is this not an example of something one did not know before these words were communicated through either reading or hearing? During most of the dialogue Augustine and his son Adeodatus follow predictable dialogical patterns of question and answer, but at this point Augustine quotes from Eph. 3:16-7 (‘qui in interiore homine habitare’) and 1Cor. 1:24 (‘Christum Dei virtutem et Dei sapientiam’). But if nothing new can be taught by words, how does Augustine learn that it is Christ who is dwelling in the inner man? Is this Scriptural reference teaching by use of words? Has Augustine undermined his critique of teaching with words by appealing to Scripture?

A possible scriptural solution

At first glance, it seems Augustine has, indeed, undermined his own critique. Several commentators have suggested that Augustine sets up the problem of ‘historical knowledge’ (cognitio historicra) in 11.37 and provides his solution n’existe pas quelque chose comme une connaissance historique ou une connaissance transmise par la parole d’une autre personne’.” E. Bernon, La signification et l’enseignement (2007), 463.

‘Hactenus uerba ualuerunt, quibus ut plurimum tribuam, admonent tantum, ut quaeramus res, non exhibent, ut norimus’ (11.36, 1-3); W.M. Green, ed. Sancti Aurelii Augustini, CChr.SL 29 (1970), 194.

‘De uniuisis autem, quae intellegimus, non loquentem, qui personat foris, sed intus ipsi menti praesidentem consulimus ueritatem, uerbis fortasse ut consulamus admoniti. Ille autem, qui consulitur, docet, qui in interiore homine habitare dictus est Christus, id est incommutabilis dei uirtus atque sempiterna sapientia, quam quidem omnis rationalis anima consulti’ (11.38, 44-50).

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(in the various ways this is interpreted) in 11.38. But in order to see the contrast between Augustine’s use of Dan. 3 in 11.37 with the Pauline passages in 11.38, we need to look briefly at the discussion of sarabarae in 10.33-11.36. In 10.31-2 Augustine presents a rather humorous example of a birdcatcher, but Adeodatus catches it as yet another instance of the query about what it is to walk (3.6). In concluding this brief episode Augustine concedes to Adeodatus’ objection, and suggests that their earlier position – that there is nothing that can be shown without signs – is false, since they both established that some things can, indeed, be taught without signs. Augustine, however, takes this new position – that some things are shown or taught through themselves without a sign being given – another step: nothing is learned through its sign. This new position is proven, for Augustine, by the quandary regarding sarabarae in Dan. 3:94. However, once Augustine discovers that sarabarae pick out ‘head coverings’, has he learned either what the ‘head’ is or what ‘coverings’ are?

This question takes us back one step to how Augustine had originally become acquainted with ‘head’ or ‘covering’. When ‘head’ was first heard by Augustine he was just as ignorant of what it signified as the above example regarding sarabarae. But, since ‘head’ was often heard, and he could note the context in which it was heard, Augustine realized that it was the term for something with which he was already acquainted. The conclusion Augustine draws from this case is that a sign is learned from the thing with which one is already acquainted, not the thing from the sign being given: ‘Ita magis signum re cognita quam signo dato ipsa res discitur’ (10.33, 132-3). Augustine, then, rehearses the previously given suggestion that one can learn what ‘head’ is by someone pointing a finger. But now this fails for a more complex reason than previously given in 3.5-6: it is not only that pointing to something as a sign could be confused with pointing as a sign for the activity of pointing itself, but that the finger can only


19 ‘Facias per me licet nec tantum nihil resisto, uerum etiam faueo; uides enim ab utroque nostrum id effici, ut quaedam quidam doceri sine signis queant falsumque illud sit, quod nobis Paulo ante uidebatur nihil esse omnino, quod sine signis positi ostendi. Iam enim ex his non unum aliquid aut alterum, sed multa rerum animo occurrunt, quae nullo signo dato per se ipsa monstretur’ (10.32, 101-7).

20 ‘Quid? Quod si diligentius consideremus, fortasse nihil iniuenies, quod per sua signa discatur’ (10.33, 114-5).

21 ‘Nam si quaedam capitum tegmina nuncupantur hoc nomine, num ego hoc audito aut quid sit caput aut quid sint tegmina didici?’ (10.33, 119-22).

22 ‘Etenim cum primum istae duae syllabae, cum dicimus “caput”, aures meas impulerunt, tam nesciui quid significarent, quam cum primo audirem legeremem sarabaras. Sed cum saepè diceterur “caput”, notans atque animaduertens, quando diceterat, repperi vocabulum esse rei, quae mihi iam erat uidendo notissima. Quod priusquam reperissem, tantum mihi somus erat hoc uerbum; signum vero esse didici, quando cuius rei signum esset inueni, quam quidem ut dixi non significatu, sed aspectu didiceram’ (10.33, 124-32).
signify the thing at which the finger is pointing (i.e. the head, not the sign). Consequently, Augustine could not have come to know the thing by the pointing of the finger because he was already acquainted with the thing, nor could he have come to know the sign, for the finger is not even pointed at the sign. This difficulty highlights not only the questionable efficacy with which signs signifying in meaningful ways, but also the possibly unwarranted connection between what Augustine already knows about ‘head coverings’ with the word sarabarae. How, then, does Augustine know that sarabarae pick out ‘head coverings’? This, of course, is similar to the puzzle with which we started (how does Augustine know that Christ is the interior teacher?). Augustine, however, knows that this present identity could still be objected to on the grounds that it is only by sight (i.e. direct appreciation) that we can know that sarabarae are head coverings. Therefore, Augustine considers the story as a whole, transitioning toward knowledge of non-corporeal objects.

The question now seems to be: how can Augustine learn something that he did not immediately perceive as an object of sight? In 11.37 Augustine presents a distinction, borrowed from the Platonic tradition, between belief and knowledge. The occasion for this distinction is whether we accept the story of how Ananias, Azarias, and Misahel were delivered from King Nebuchadnezzar and his flames by their faith and religion (11.37, 21-4). Augustine admits that he believes (credere) rather than knows (scire) that ‘everything we read in that story happened at that time as it was written’. This distinction is further defended by a contrapositive reading of the Old Latin version of Isa. 7:9: ‘Unless you believe, you shall not understand’ (‘Nisi credideritis, non intellegitis’). Augustine goes on to offer an analysis of understanding, knowing, and believing: ‘That which I understand, I also believe; but not everything I believe, do I understand. However, everything which I understand I know; not everything which I believe do I know’. Anticipating his argument in De utilitate credendi 10.23, Augustine says that it is, however, still useful to believe many things that he does not know (11.37, 40), suggesting his argument is not

23 ‘Nam illa intentio digiti significare nihil aliud potest quam illud, in quod intenditur digitus; intentus est autem non in signum, sed in membrum, quod caput vocatur. Itaque per illam neque rem possim nosse, quam noueram neque signum, in quod intentus digitus non est’ (10.34, 143-9).
24 ‘Quas tamen cum iam nouerim, sarabaras illas adhuc usque non noui’ (10.35, 159-60).
26 ‘Haec autem omnia, quae in illa leguntur historia ita illo tempore facta esse, ut conscripta sunt, credere me potius quam scire confiteor’ (11.37, 32-4).
27 ‘Quod ergo intellego, id etiam credo; at non omne, quod credo, etiam intellego. Omne autem, quod intellego, scio; non omne, quod credo, scio’ (11.37, 37-9).
28 I am indebted to Stewart Clem for pointing this out to me.
so much rational, but rather practical. Moreover, while the majority of things cannot be known, Augustine still knows how useful it is to believe them. The conclusion is that so-called ‘historical knowledge’ is, in fact, merely belief – it is not something he knows by direct appreciation. In other words, the story from Daniel is something that cannot be known, but rather must be believed. But how do the references from Eph. and 1Cor. escape such criticism? As we saw above, Augustine’s identification of Christ as interior teacher did not seem to be grounded in an account of how he might be able to know that it is Christ who is identified as such. He did, however, recognize this sort of difficulty in 10.35, when he asked how he knows that sarabarae pick out ‘head coverings’. These two identifications – Christ as ‘interior teacher’ and sarabarae as ‘head coverings’ – seem to operate along the same lines, and should thus be subject to the same scrutiny. As we have seen, these two identifications are obviously not similarly scrutinized, so how then are we to account for such a divergence? Looking back at the puzzle with which we started, we can identify two relevant features of Augustine’s doctrine of divine illumination. The first and more general feature is that Christ and a concept such as ‘interior teacher’ are not corporeal objects, and thus they escape the epistemic requirements of knowing corporeal objects. And the second, more specific feature is that Christ and ‘interior teacher’ are not historical objects, that is, they are not fixed at any one point in time (T1) such that at (T2) one would no longer have knowledge of an object as present. Comparing Augustine’s reading of Dan. 3 with his reading of the Pauline passages, we see, in the case of the former, that sarabarae are still subjected to the conditions of knowing corporeal objects that are no longer present, while, in the latter, Christ as the interior teacher is neither a corporeal claim nor a claim about a past object. Augustine’s knowledge of Christ as interior teacher, then, does not have an obvious analogue in the earlier discussions of the dialogue. But do these differences justify Augustine’s exclusion of Christ as interior teacher from the scrutiny of the rejected positions? In other words, how does Augustine know that it is Christ who is the interior teacher if not by way of words? Augustine never explicitly draws our attention to this puzzle, possibly because this would be too directly didactic for the genre of a philosophical dialogue. Augustine does, however, leave us a resource for distinguishing between Dan. 3 and the Pauline passages. In mag. 12.29, Augustine makes a distinction between the sensible (carnal) and the intelligible (spiritual). Applying this to Augustine’s use of Scripture in 11.37-8, the difference between the two epistemic stances toward Scripture becomes apparent: Dan. is read with sensible perception, while Eph. and 1Cor. are read with intelligible perception. In the ‘plot’ of the dialogue, it is at the point of Augustine’s shifting his way of reading

29 ‘Quare pleraque rerum, cum scire non possim, quanta tamen utilitate credantur scio’ (11.37, 42).
Scripture that he breaks out of his problem of learning. To put it in more theological terms, it is with intelligible or spiritual perception that one can gaze beyond the scriptural text itself to Christ. In other words, sensible or carnal perception is limited to belief of historical corporeal objects, while the belief resulting from intelligible or spiritual perception points beyond itself to knowledge. It is important to recognize that this analysis does not suggest that Augustine offered a solution to the so-called ‘learner’s paradox’. Rather, Augustine applies the epistemic distinctions that arise from the platonic paradox – that is, the distinction between belief of an historical corporeal object and belief of a non-historical incorporeal object – to his reading of Scripture. This distinction is achieved not didactically but rather by demonstration.

Conclusion

My main point in this short communication has been to show how Augustine makes what is now a familiar suggestion – Christ is the inner teacher – through a subtle shift in his scriptural reading strategy. The different treatments are, of course, grounded in certain epistemic stances, so the epistemological readings of this passage given by Bermon and Burnyeat are not completely without warrant. But by reading De magistro exclusively as an ‘epistemological’ problem in any contemporary sense, one might obscure the subtle role Augustine’s use of Scripture plays within his argument. This is, in one sense, an excusable mistake, as the genre of a philosophical dialogue can suggest to a contemporary reader a distinction between philosophical argument and scriptural revelation. But, as I have shown, no such distinction seems tenable in this dialogue. In fact, by imposing such a distinction between philosophy and Scripture a reader is likely to misunderstand either the philosophical argument or the kind of solution Augustine advances in the dialogue.

As one looks to Augustine’s more mature work, a scriptural reading of the doctrine of divine illumination in mag. 11.37-8 can shed light on the philosophical subtleties of his later doctrinal work, which relies heavily on Scripture. The similarity is not simply a shared epistemic foundation, but rather a similarity of practice. In other words, in De magistro we can see an early attempt to think philosophically with Scripture. Many of the distinctions – e.g. belief/knowledge and carnal/spiritual – that surface in De magistro reappear throughout Augustine’s work with different emphases. Whereas in his later work Scripture is foregrounded and the philosophical argument often operates below the surface, here in De magistro philosophy is foregrounded and Scripture is operating below the surface.

By highlighting the use of Scripture in De magistro, a philosophical dialogue, we are able to excavate the inseparability, for Augustine, of Scripture and philosophy. This maneuver not only clarifies the argument of De magistro, and its
possible failure, but it also points us toward a resolution within the dynamics of reading Scripture itself. Moreover, it also highlights possibilities for reading Augustine’s more scripturally-reliant work philosophically, providing a glimpse of how both theological speculation and scriptural commentary are inseparable aspects of his ‘Christian philosophy’.