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## Learning as Anamnesis in Augustine's De Magistro

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LEARNING AS ANAMNESIS IN AUGUSTINE'S DE MAGISTRO

by

Evan Kramer

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for graduation with Honors in the Philosophy

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All requirements for graduation with Honors in the  
Philosophy have been completed.

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## Learning as Anamnesis in Augustine's *De Magistro*

### § Introduction: *Illumination, Recollection, and Dialectic in Augustine's De Magistro*

Augustine's treatise *De Magistro* is a dialogue between Augustine and his son, Adeodatus, which inquires into the purpose of language, or rather one of its most noble ends, teaching. Augustine contrasts his own position against what can be termed the knowledge transmission theory, according to which the teacher encodes his thoughts into language, or verbal signs, and the receiver, then, decodes these signs into something intelligible, and thus, the student has learned. Augustine refutes this thesis in two principle ways: one explicit, the other implicit. First, Augustine demonstrates that the very nature of a sign qua sign renders this theory of teaching incoherent. Secondly, and of greater interest, the very dialectical exercise in which Augustine and his son, Adeodatus, are engaged throughout the dialogue stands opposed to the knowledge transmission model; in short, the structure of any dialectical argumentation precludes the knowledge transmission model.

In the stead of such a naïve theory of language and pedagogy, Augustine proffers his own alternative. Words do nothing but prompt man to learn. On this model, the teacher seeks not to transfer the contents of his head into his pupil's, but rather to ask probing questions so as to lead his student to understand *for himself* the truth or falsity of that which is uttered. As I will argue, learning for Augustine is nothing other than recollection. This is a controversial claim, however. For while some scholars concede that Augustine uses the language of recollection, they insist that

recollection is merely shorthand for divine illumination, or even more audaciously that Augustine offers his theory of divine illumination as a *substitute* for pagan recollection.<sup>1</sup>

Against this interpretation, it will be demonstrated that such exegetical sentiments fundamentally misunderstand the nature and function of both recollection and illumination. On my proposal, divine illumination and recollection do not represent competing alternatives, but rather both serve distinct but critical roles in the larger context of Augustine's epistemology. Recollection is something that an individual *does*. Illumination is clearly not something the student does, however. What is its status, then? It is decidedly not some grandiose and divine data dump in which the rational subject is merely passive. The passivity of the subject in divine illumination only becomes a conundrum for interpreters when illumination is first misinterpreted. Illumination, I will argue, provides the necessary precondition for any act of recollection. Without illumination, we cannot recollect. If I prove right in this regard, one cannot merely be dispensed for the other as some sort of epistemological alternative; each must be seen as a complement to the other, each essential components of Augustine's epistemology.

Proving the non-identity and complementarity of illumination and recollection will require a more thorough explanation of the nature of each, mostly confining ourselves to Augustine's early works. First, illumination. Unfortunately, many accounts of divine illumination in Augustine do little besides rehearse Augustine's own metaphor, in doing so shedding no further light on what

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<sup>1</sup> The Franciscan interpretation asserts as much in making the claim that God infuses our ideas of intelligible objects in us. Similar or offshoot views litter many treatments of Augustine both by specialists and non-specialists. Even Nash, who has some insightful things to say about illumination, says the following: "Augustine also rejected the view that the forms are acquired through Platonic recollection. In the *Phaedo* Plato thought that man's knowledge of the forms is a result of his having seen them in an existence prior to birth. Plato regarded all human knowledge as a kind of recollection or reminiscence of what the soul had known in a previous existence" (Nash (1969), 81-82). He readily admits right after this that Augustine continues to use this language throughout his career. Nevertheless, he opposes illumination and recollection as if they were rival theories. One of the principle aims of this paper will be to prove not only their harmony, but also their utter indispensability for having a coherent understanding of Augustine's epistemology as a whole.

the metaphor is supposed to actually *mean*. Of course, the reason Augustine communicates his theory in metaphorical form may well be due to the fact that the doctrine transcends our reason, and this quaint metaphor is the best vehicle for communicating the truth of illumination. That being said, more can be said concerning illumination if one combs carefully through the *De Magistro*, and Augustine's early corpus. For Augustine, there is a division between sensible objects and intelligible objects. Sensible objects are the objects of our sense-perception whilst intelligible objects are the objects of the knowledge of our immaterial intelligence, and our knowledge of these is not piecemeal; knowledge for Augustine is a knowledge of a science, a systematic body of knowledge. The essence of illumination is this: illumination is the very intelligibility of the intelligibles, their ordered structure, in light of which particular intelligibles are intelligible. To understand Augustine's doctrine of illumination, it will be necessary to provide the epistemological context for Augustine's theory of divine illumination. Here Augustine's division of the world into two worlds—sensible and intelligible—and his accounts of different cognitive states—opinion, belief, knowledge, and understanding—are of particular importance.

Having explained certain features of illumination, we will be able to adequately address Augustine's doctrine of illumination, for it is my contention that an understanding of illumination is a prerequisite for understanding recollection. Illumination concerns the systematicity and structure of the objects of our knowledge, whereas recollection concerns the process whereby our knowledge of these intelligible objects is itself rendered systematic. Belief and recollection serve a critical function in Augustine's epistemology. In particular, in the *De Magistro* they are key to resolving the difficulties posed by Augustine's Learner's Paradox. Whenever we are given some sign we either know what it signifies or we do not. If we do, we are only reminded. If we don't know, we aren't even reminded, "but perhaps we recollect that we should inquire" (*De Magistro*,

11.36). If there stands no cognitive state midway between knowledge and complete ignorance, how ever are we to proceed? Shortly following, Augustine quotes the prophet Isaiah: “unless you believe, you shall not understand.” Throughout the dialogue Augustine’s inquiry takes as its starting point the beliefs his son, Adeodatus, himself is willing to assent to. Augustine then asks appropriate questions, attempting to bring Adeodatus to see the truth or falsity of that which was initially asserted. Augustine only succeeds in his task when Adeodatus comes to understand *for himself* the rational necessity of what is asserted. When this happens, Adeodatus has recollected the truth within himself. This is recollection, for the truth was elicited from him, not imposed from without. The truth buried in the oblivion of Adeodatus’ memory has been brought to light by the process of learning; Augustine has merely disinterred the truth by skillfully posing the right questions to a competent and eager student (*Soliloquies*, 2.20.35).

Drawing from Augustine’s account in the *Soliloquies*, there are three states or even, as I will suggest, three stages of recollection, which are crucially important for understanding Augustine’s account of learning in the *De Magistro*. In fact, I will argue that they are implicitly—nonetheless, indispensably—present in the *De Magistro*. In fact, whether or not intended as a sequel to the *Soliloquies*, Augustine’s *De Magistro* can be seen as serving a complementary role in developing some of the doctrines found in the *Soliloquies* and even answering questions left unresolved by the dialogue, such as how a “discipline” and “Truth” can be said to exist in an “undisciplined mind” (*Soliloquies*, 2.19.33).<sup>2</sup> Largely following Miner,<sup>3</sup> I will argue that

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<sup>2</sup> “Audio, resipisco, recolere incipio. Sed, quaeso, illa quae restant expedias, quomodo in animo imperito, non enim eum mortalem dicere possumus, disciplina et veritas esse intellegantur.” Trans: I hear, I come to my senses, I begin to recollect. But, please, expedite those things that remain, how a discipline [alt., science] and truth are understood to exist in an undisciplined mind, for we are not able to say that it is mortal.

<sup>3</sup> See Miner (2007).

Augustine sets forth three states of the soul with respect to recollection. The first is oblivion. Here the soul has no immediate access to what is forgotten. Even if the interlocutor should set forth the item buried in oblivion, the soul will have no way to know whether or not that was what he had forgotten. The second kind is a partial-forgetting. Here we know what we are seeking and shall know when we have found it; we can eliminate proposed possibilities, but cannot yet explicitly bring out the precise item of recollection. The final case is recollection proper. Now the object of our recollection can be identified. Here “suddenly the whole thing flashes upon the memory like a light” (*Soliloquies*, 2.20.34).

Now here is the interpretative upshot for understanding the *De Magistro*. First, although these can be termed three states of the soul with respect to recollection, the *De Magistro* presents them further as three stages toward or of recollection. If this is true, one must first render the state of oblivion as pedagogically relevant; it cannot merely represent a domain that is off limits for dialectic, things that shall never again be brought to the mind for understanding. Of course, there may be such things that will forever remain in oblivion and *cannot* be elicited from such oblivion (for example, Augustine’s own example in the *Soliloquies*: whether he laughed shortly after being born). Even in the *Soliloquies*, however, Augustine speaks of the Liberal Arts as “buried in oblivion,” not intending thereby to assert the unknowability of the Liberal Arts (*Soliloquies*, 2.20.35). Even in the *De Magistro*, Augustine gives an example of when the whole of some matter (e.g., the thesis that there is no learning from words) is initially proposed, it is rejected or assent is at least withheld (*De Magistro*, 12.40). However, the teacher directs the student part by part, which parts having become clear and certain through dialectic, render the whole also clear and certain and an object of recollection. These dialectical increments are the object of the second stage of recollection. Often, at this point, more time is spent on proposing and subsequently rejecting

several theses, the student knowing only what proposals constitute the *wrong* position. In the process, the positive nature of what is being sought comes to light, and now the student is finally in a position to recognize the truth of the particular science or object of inquiry as a whole. That which was formerly in oblivion, now comes to light, the student being enabled to explicitly set forth the particular object of his knowledge, learning that *that* was what he was seeking. This is the third and final stage of recollection, recollection proper.

From here, we finally see for ourselves the full implication of Augustine's theory of teaching. Teachers are able to teach as those who have themselves been taught. They themselves have endured the long, arduous process of recollection, having been illumined by the divine light, and being thus enlightened they are able to guide others on the path to knowledge and understanding, though in the final analysis, they cannot tread the path of the pupil for him. Ultimately, it is something he must do, having purified his heart and seeking the Truth earnestly.

For the aid of the reader, I will now provide a brief introduction to the *De Magistro*. The two interlocutors are Augustine and his son, Adeodatus. They begin with an inquiry about the purpose or end of language. Adeodatus' first response is that we speak either to teach or to learn, which is soon revised for the thesis that we speak either to teach or remind—already hinting at the suggestion that learning just is recollection, often at the prompting of another. The discussion about the purpose of language inevitably leads to a discussion as to the nature of language. Augustine takes words to be kinds of signs. The rest of the dialogue is then divided up according to what he considers the proper division of signs to be:

Thus [1] when a question is raised about certain signs, these signs can be exhibited by means of signs. Yet [2] when a question is raised about things that aren't signs, [these things can be exhibited] either [(a)] by doing them [things] after the query [has been made],

if they can be done, or [(b)] by giving signs with which they may be brought to one's attention. (*De Magistro*, 4.7)<sup>4</sup>

This is the most natural way to divide up the remainder of the dialogue itself, as it is the division Augustine himself gives. Moreover, this essay will also refer to the parts of the dialogue according to how they have been marked above ([1a], [2a], [2b], respectively). A fuller explanation of the plan or structure of the dialogue will be given below.

### §1 *Against a Knowledge Transmission Model of Language: The Structure of the Signum*

In establishing his own theory of language and teaching, Augustine takes great pains to refute an alternative, initially plausible theory of the same. According to this theory, the goal of education is to take what the teacher has in his head and put it in the head of his pupil. The teacher simply takes his knowledge, encodes it into language, communicates it, and the student hearing his words then gains that knowledge. Despite its initial plausibility, as further argumentation will bear out, this account is extremely problematic. Augustine refutes this position in two ways. First, he refutes it by an investigation into the nature of signs themselves, demonstrating that the very nature of a sign precludes such a theory of communication and teaching. Secondly, he attempts to reconstruct a more plausible theory of education that better maps onto the actual phenomenon of teaching and learning, the treatise itself being in a way a performative act of his very theory; in establishing his own theory, he negates the knowledge transmission model, which is incompatible with his own. This first way is our concern in this brief, first part.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Crosson (1989).

Augustine's aim is to establish that there is no *learning* through signs. So, in order to establish such a thesis, it behooves Augustine to tell us something about signs themselves. In the beginning of [2b], Augustine begins in earnest to explicate the precise nature of the sign. He first asserts the priority of the thing signified to its sign:

Well, if we should consider this more carefully, perhaps you'll discover that nothing is learned through signs. When a sign is given to me, it can teach me nothing if it finds me ignorant of the thing of which it is the sign; but if I'm not ignorant, what do I learn through the sign? (*De Magistro*, 10.33)

Signs are useful and intelligible to us insofar as they can refer back to the things that they signify. In the case of signs whose significate we do not know, however, we are in a very different situation. Augustine's own example comes from the prophecy of Daniel, where the translator of Daniel's prophecy uses the obscure Latin word *sarabarae*.<sup>5</sup> Because of its obscurity, even a native Latin speaker may not understand its meaning. Clearly, just hearing the sound *sarabarae* will not suffice to learn it, for "the word doesn't show me the thing it signifies" (*De Magistro*, 10.33). Since signs cannot *show* what they signify, they will not avail us if we are ignorant of their significate. Put differently, there is no intrinsic signification to most of the signs we human beings employ.

It may be objected here that if someone were to define the word in terms of words that we *do* know, then we could come to know the word, a kind of knowledge by description. Augustine anticipates such an objection:

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<sup>5</sup> Augustine's version reads: "*Et sarabarae eorum non sunt immutatae.*" This is not quite the reading of the, e.g., the Latin Vulgate which reads: "*et sarabala eorum non fuissent immutata*" (Dan., 3:94). Augustine own text was not the Vulgate of Jerome, but the *Vetus Itala*, somewhat misleadingly termed the "Old Latin Bible." In fact, the *Vetus Itala* rather than being a single, uniform collection and translation of the Greek Septuagint and New Testament, refers to a collection of old Latin translations of the Bible circulating around the time before Jerome's Vulgate had been normative. The Vulgate was in production during Augustine's lifetime, but was only made standard after his death. The word *sarabarae* (even perhaps *sarabala*) is intentionally chosen because of its obscurity.

If certain head-coverings are denominated by this name [*sarabarae*], have I learned upon hearing it what the head is or what coverings are? I knew these things before; my conception of them wasn't fashioned because they were named by others, but because I saw them. (*De Magistro*, 10.33)

Augustine asks us to consider the case where we are told that that a *sarabara* is a head-covering. At this point, the meaning might become clear to us. Nevertheless, it only becomes clear to us because we first know what *head* signifies and what *covering* signifies. How did we come to know these? Augustine contends that we came to learn their signification by seeing the things that they signify. In other words, knowledge by description is possible but is ultimately grounded in knowledge by acquaintance.

But how exactly do we come to have such knowledge, viz. knowledge of signs as signs? Just as knowledge of a sign does not bequeath to us knowledge of its significate, so also acquaintance with a thing does not show us its sign; for if such were the case, we would know any given language! For Augustine, there are two elements of a sign: its sound and signification.

Now there are two elements in the sign: the sound and the signification. We don't perceive the sound by the sign, but when it strikes the ear. We perceive the signification, however, by seeing the thing signified. Aiming with the finger can only signify what the finger is aimed at, and it's aimed not at the sign but at the bodily part called the head. (*De Magistro*, 10.34)

The sound itself, not to be confused with the sign, can be learned through sense-perception; for through sense-perception we may be directly acquainted with the sound. When it comes to the relation of signification, however, Augustine states that we perceive it "by seeing the thing signified." Someone might object that Augustine is confused in extending perception to non-sensible things. Let the reader observe, however, that Augustine is using perception in a wider

sense here that comprehends both sensible and intelligible objects.<sup>6</sup> Of course, vision of the thing signified cannot suffice for knowledge of a sign. We must also come to know the relation between some sound and its proper significate, i.e., the signification. This often happens, Augustine believes, through the frequent, nigh simultaneous repetition of certain sounds around their proper objects, usually objects of sense in the case of children. To use Augustine's example: "Yet since 'head' was often pronounced, noting and observing when it was pronounced, I discovered that it was the term for a thing already familiar to me by sight" (*De Magistro*, 10.33). The conclusion Augustine believes we are supposed to draw from this is that "a sign is learned when the thing is known, rather than the thing being learned when the sign is given" (*De Magistro*, 10.33) If signs are not known until their proper object is first known, then it stands to reason that signs will avail us nothing in terms of communicating their content to us. If this is so, then the knowledge transmission model is not only implausible but impossible.

However, Augustine's critique is patient of some objections with regard to the internal consistency of the dialogue; for it seems that *prima facie* Augustine has contradicted certain remarks he has made earlier in the dialogue. First, the explicit goal of [1a] is to demonstrate that "when a question is raised about certain signs, these signs can be exhibited by means of signs" (*De Magistro*, 4.7); here it seems that signs can in fact teach us something, namely other signs, but Augustine seems to indicate that signs cannot teach us anything. Secondly, the conclusion at one point in the dialogue (10.29-31) is that "nothing is taught *without* signs." The resolutions of each of these problems should serve not only to guard Augustine from pain of contradiction, but also to

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<sup>6</sup> Of special interest here is also Augustine's love of recourse to sensible metaphors for explaining supra-sensible phenomena. As we will see, Augustine talks of knowledge by sense-perception and knowledge by intellectual comprehension in parallel terms because for Augustine there is an isomorphic structure to knowledge in both domains. In each case, knowledge is acquired through direct apprehension or acquaintance with the proper objects of each mode of knowing. Of course, the analogy will break down at certain points because of the different ontological status of sensible and intelligible objects.

illuminate the positive doctrine of Augustine in the *De Magistro* about signs, illumination, and recollection.

We will first explain Augustine's claim that "when a question is raised about certain signs, these can be exhibited by means of signs." To understand this claim, we must first consider the division of the dialogue into its proper parts and draw special attention to an important Augustinian distinction. First, the dialogue is quite explicitly set forth, depending upon how you divide it up, either into three parts or into two principal parts with the second part itself containing two parts:

Thus [1] when a question is raised about certain signs, these signs can be exhibited by means of signs. Yet [2] when a question is raised about things that aren't signs, [these things can be exhibited] either [(a)] by doing them [things] after the query [has been made], if they can be done, or [(b)] by giving signs with which they may be brought to one's attention. (*De Magistro*, 4.7)

With King<sup>7</sup> and Crosson, I believe it is more suitable to understand the dialogue as fundamentally divided into two parts, for it makes more vivid the way in which the division of the dialogue maps perfectly with the Augustinian distinction between signs and things, a distinction made throughout Augustine's corpus.<sup>8</sup> If this is kept in mind, then [1a] considers certain signs insofar as they exhibit or show other signs. But because there remains an ontological gap so to speak between things and

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<sup>7</sup> King divided the text according to Crosson. I employ King's translation throughout, at times with my own modifications as indicated.

<sup>8</sup> "All teaching is teaching of either things or signs, but things are learnt through signs. 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; but I do not include log which we read that Moses threw into the bitter waters to make them lose their bitter taste, or the stone which Jacob placed under his head, or the sheep, which Abraham sacrificed in place of his son. These are things, but they are at the same time signs of other things. There are other signs whose whole function consists in signifying. From this it may be understood what I mean by signs: those things which are employed to signify something. So every sign is also a thing, since what is not a thing does not exist. But it is not true that everything is also a sign. Therefore in my distinction of things and signs, when I speak of things, I shall speak of them in such a way that even if some of them can be employed to signify they do not impair the arrangement by which I will treat things first and signs later. And we must be careful to remember that what is under consideration at this stage is the fact that things exist, not that they signify something else besides themselves. (*On Christian Teaching*, 1.2.)

signs, when we consider things themselves, we find signs serving two very different functions. In the case of [2a], where things can be done and so exhibited to the sense, we often can simply ask the thing to be done or shown. However, in the case of [2b], when intelligible objects are under consideration, signs serve to prompt the student such that the objects of knowledge are brought to their attention. As we shall see, this is where recollection will play a pivotal part in Augustine's theory of learning.

With this kept in mind, there is no real contradiction between [1] and [2b]. In [1] Augustine is attempting to delineate some of the possible relationships between certain signs *to other signs* (not to things). On the other hand, in section [2b], Augustine is talking about signs of *things*.<sup>9</sup> The first subset<sup>10</sup> of signs which are signs of other signs concerns those signs of other signs that are non-reflexive and non-symmetrical. The example of this group is the sign or word 'conjunction.' It neither signifies itself (non-reflexive), nor do those things it signifies signify it (non-symmetrical). To speak somewhat less abstrusely, 'conjunction' signifies all conjunctions, such as 'and', 'but', 'for', et al., but since the word 'conjunction' is not a conjunction it does not signify itself. Moreover, the conjunctions listed above do *not* signify conjunction. Secondly, there are signs which mutually signify each other (symmetrical), but their logical extension differs. Augustine's own example is 'word' and 'sign.' Each signifies the other, but they do not share the same extension. Thirdly, there are signs (e.g., 'word' and 'name') whose extension is the same but whose meaning differs. Fourthly, there are words that both have the same extension and meaning. Augustine's example here is the Latin word *nomen* (name) and the Greek word *onoma*, both of

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<sup>9</sup> Here I am indebted to Crosson (1989). In particular, see pp. 122-123 for his explanation of the resolution of the two parts of the dialogue. My own solution is more or less a restatement of his. Of special note is his remark that "Augustine is careful, I believe, never to speak of signs as things."

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of the section, it is best to see Adeodatus' summary (*De Magistro*, 7.20).

which in a grammatical context have the same exact meaning. Lastly, and most importantly for our purposes, in cases two, three, and four from the above taxonomy, signs in these sub-classes are also reflexive: they signify themselves. And hence they can *show* what they signify since what they signify is their sign.

At this point, Augustine remarks that Adeodatus might not see the relevance of their past discussion of signs (*De Magistro*, 7.20). For those of us, however, who have read the entire treatise, we can see that relevance: Augustine is moving toward the thesis in [2b] that signs *of things*, in contradistinction to signs *of signs*, cannot show what they signify, and hence in this case we must seek for a different account.<sup>11</sup> At this point, we are in a position to see that there is no contradiction between [1] and [2b]. The conclusion of [2b] is *not* that nothing can be shown through signs, but that *things* cannot be shown through signs. The conclusion of [1], however, simply states that some signs can show signs.

What, then, of the fact that it is concluded at a certain part of the dialogue that “nothing is taught without signs” (*De Magistro*, 10.31)? Here the answer lies not only in understanding the nature of *this* particular dialogue but the nature of dialogical discourse itself. After their explanation of signs *of signs*, Augustine explains to Adeodatus why they have proceeded in the manner that they have. It seems they have been “playing around and diverting the mind from serious matters” and have taken a somewhat circuitous path “by considering signs rather than the things themselves that are signified” Again, if “this discussion might issue in some important result, [wouldn’t] you want to know straightaway what it is (or at least to hear me say what it is!)”

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<sup>11</sup> Crosson (1987), p. 123.

(*De Magistro*, 8.21).<sup>12</sup> Tacitly, Augustine is arguing that the learning process cannot simply be expedited; there are no shortcuts when it comes to understanding. It behooves us to move “by stages that are suitable to our weak steps” and “exercise the mind’s strength and sharpness.” In fact, as Augustine admits in this very section, “these distinctions now seem much clearer to me than they were when the two of us, *by inquiry and discussion*, unearthed them from whatever their hiding places were” (*De Magistro*, 8.21). What is relevant here is that the clarity (to which Augustine will later add certainty) of some object of knowledge is drawn out *through* inquiry and discussion.

But a dialogue must begin somewhere. Where it must begin of course, in the case of a teacher-student interaction, is with the beliefs of the student.<sup>13</sup> A more thorough account of the role of belief in dialectic is forthcoming when I discuss Augustine’s doctrine of recollection. A briefer account here suffices. For any fruitful dialogue, beliefs provide the appropriate starting point. Having taken the interlocutor or student’s beliefs as a starting point, they are then usually examined by a series of questions meant either to advance or even challenge the beliefs proposed. In challenging the beliefs of the interlocutor, of course, the teacher does not intend to embarrass, confound, or impress his student by his immense erudition, or even to win an argument. For Augustine, the paradigm example of a properly conducted dialectical discussion involves two individuals both seeking after and *desiring* the truth.<sup>14</sup> In order that both arrive at the truth itself,

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<sup>12</sup> A similar thread is found in the *Soliloquies*. There Augustine constantly complains that Ratio moves too quickly, not moving step by step as is suitable to a weak or uninitiated mind.

<sup>13</sup> This brings to mind the way Platonic dialogues proceed. Socrates often puts forward no propositions of his own, but simply asks probing questions on the basis of his interlocutor’s beliefs.

<sup>14</sup> Augustine in several places puts great emphasis on the desiderative aspect of knowledge. For example: “To give them as much credit as possible, words have force only to the extent that they remind us to look for things; they don’t display them for us to know. Yet someone who presents *what I want to know* to my eyes, or to any from my bodily senses, or even to my mind itself, does teach me something” (*De Magistro*, 11.36).

the examination of beliefs through a series of questions must elicit *from the student himself* an understanding of whatever is under discussion. In the properly conducted dialogue, the student must be able to either affirm or deny at each step of the argument what is proposed and understand for himself *why* such is or is not the case (preferably, being able to rehearse the conclusions and their arguments, as Adeodatus has done for us at the end of [1a]) (*De Magistro*, 7.19-7.20).

However, at times argumentation often demands of us that we deny some belief, either the one that perhaps initiated the inquiry, or even some other belief maintained in the course of discussion. Often, such beliefs must be aborted on account of the fact that they lead to some unacceptable dialectical result. Now, we can finally begin in earnest to address head on the objection which initiated this somewhat prolix excursus. An examination of the surrounding context supports the interpretation that the tentative conclusion that was drawn, i.e., that nothing is taught without signs, is one of these stillborn dialectical thesis:

[Augustine]: this I should like to know about from you briefly: whether you think of these discoveries in such a way that you can't now have doubts regarding them.

[Adeodatus]: I should hope that by these great detours and byways we have arrived at *certainties*! Yet somehow this question of yours disturbs me and keeps me from agreeing. I think you wouldn't have asked me this unless you had an objection to offer, and the intricacy of these matters doesn't allow me to investigate the *whole* issue and answer with assurance. I fear there is something hidden in these great complexities that my mind is not keen enough to illuminate. (*De Magistro*, 10.31)

The conclusions that they have come to together at the end of [2a], among which is the thesis that nothing is taught without signs, are occasioned by doubt for Adeodatus. He had hoped that their dialectical discussion could have brought them to *certainties*, not possible theses. Part of the issue is that their entire discussion has not been able to bring out the *whole* issue, that is, as we will see more both in this section and in those that follow, knowledge for Augustine is *certain*, and, pace

Nawar,<sup>15</sup> is certain *in virtue of its systematicity*; knowledge is not knowledge of isolated propositions.

The possibility of being mistaken is prevented by understanding the “craft as a whole on the basis of what he has seen” (*De Magistro*, 10.32). The possibility of putting forth contrary arguments and tearing down what at one time seems firm, and thus rendering many students misologists,<sup>16</sup> is mitigated or even neutralized by understanding a discipline or craft *as a whole*. For the aid of the reader, I will quote Augustine’s example in full:

Suppose that someone unfamiliar with how to trick birds (which is done with reeds and birdlime) should run into a birdcatcher outfitted with his tools, not birdcatching but on his way to do so. 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. Now the birdcatcher wanting to show off after seeing the attention focused on him, prepares his reeds and with his birdcall and his hawk intercepts, subdues, and captures some little bird he has noticed nearby. I ask you: wouldn’t he then teach the man watching

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<sup>15</sup> Nawar somewhat unfairly critiques my and Burnyeat’s contention that knowledge is systematic and requires a synoptic view of some science or craft as a whole. Nawar interprets Augustine’s view of knowledge as some kind of quasi-Cartesian infallibilism, supposing that the reason that there is no understanding from words for Augustine is that words cannot provide the right kind of justification. Understanding is a kind of cognition according to which, for Nawar, certain truths are known with certainty and is decidedly *not* about whether or not knowledge is systematic. Nawar is in part right in what he asserts, but entirely mistaken in what he denies. The issue of the “certainty” of knowledge is not an independent issue from its systematicity. In fact, many of the examples Nawar supplies in defense of his theory actually serve to undermine him. For example, in a place we will later examine more carefully, Augustine says, “Do my words then make you as certain as if you were to hear that wise men are better than fools?” (*De Magistro*, 12.40). Nawar takes away from this that Augustine is trying to say that testimony cannot provide infallible justification for what it proposes, whereas understanding or knowledge can (Nawar (2015), 5-6). On his account, this has nothing to do with the interconnectedness of a discipline or science. He has this exactly backwards. The reason that words cannot give understanding is that understanding cannot be communicated through words. When the adroit student considers for himself, the proposition “wise men are better than fools,” he is able to come to a *certain* conviction as to its truth, a certainty, yes, not grounded in testimony, but, furthermore grounded in the a wholistic understanding of each term in the proposition. If you understand what wisdom is and what folly is, you can know *with certainty* the truth that “wise men are better than fools.” The adept student understands that wisdom is a species of virtue and virtues are good. Folly, however, is a species of vice, which is bad. Since it’s a truism that good is better than evil, having deliberated we can know that proposition, yes, infallibly. But it is somewhat misguided in affirming the infallibility of knowledge to discard its systematicity. And as I hope this paper will further demonstrate, we need to simultaneously hold up both the infallibility and wholism of knowledge, with the former being a function of the latter.

<sup>16</sup> “There is a danger that when things we presume are going to stand firm and endure are regularly overturned, we fall into such a great hatred and mistrust of reason it seems that confidence should not even be had in the plain truth itself” (*De Magistro*, 10.31).

him what he wanted to know by the thing itself rather than by anything that signifies? (*De Magistro*, 10.32)

The eager student by watching the birdcatcher in action, performing an exemplary instance of his craft permits the student to know *the thing itself*. By watching the birdcatcher, seeing what he does with each of his instruments, the technique with which he performs his craft, the goal of his craft, etc., the student is able to see for himself and understand what birdcatching is, and, more importantly for Augustine's purposes, he is taught so "not by anything that signifies." Here, however, Adeodatus objects that there remains a kind of ambiguity patient of misunderstanding: "I'm afraid that everything here is like what I said about the man who asks what it is to walk. Here, too, I don't see that the whole of birdcatching has been exhibited" (*De Magistro*, 10.32). Adeodatus here reiterates a worry that crops up earlier in the dialogue. If actions can be shown through themselves, how are we to prevent ambiguity from creeping in? The example Augustine gives is of walking (*De Magistro*, 4.7). Suppose someone starts walking in an attempt to teach his friend either what walking is or what its word signifies. If I only walk once for some distance or other at a certain pace, my onlooker might confuse walking for, suppose, walking this specific distance at this pace. This ambiguity then can be cleared up by further instances of walking, e.g., walking a different distance at a different pace. Nevertheless, the possibility of misinterpretation and ambiguity will continue on indefinitely, for maybe now walking just consists of the set of these two instances of walking at these paces for these distances.

Part of Augustine's response is that, although Adeotatus' objection is granted that in some sense the whole of the craft of birdcatching has not and perhaps even cannot be exhibited in this one instance alone, nevertheless, our onlooker "is so intelligent that he recognizes the kind of craft as a *whole* on the basis of what he has seen" (*De Magistro*, 10.32) Perhaps, there is something

somewhat unsatisfying in Augustine's response, but I would contend that there is something true in what he says. Despite this inherent ambiguity of things and their possibility of being misinterpreted by us, nonetheless, a great myriad of things are in fact understood by mankind, which is evident in the very fact that we share a common language and are able to communicate with one another. In the case of somewhat more advanced issues, an intelligent person is able to somehow sift the relevant factors from the irrelevant factors.

All of this leads Augustine to reach explicitly the conclusion I have already mentioned earlier, namely: "what seemed apparent to us a little earlier—that there is absolutely nothing that can be shown without signs—is false" (*De Magistro*, 10.32). This was not, however, a fruitless pursuit. For this discussion is propaedeutic to what follows, and is in my estimation is the very core of the dialogue. Augustine has already introduced to the reader several things. First, in investigating this—albeit false—thesis, through such an investigation we learned much about signs of signs. Secondly, we have already seen glimpses of the suggestion, which Augustine will develop further in the *De Magistro* and other dialogues, that knowledge is necessary holistic or systematic; that is, knowledge of an entire science, discipline, or craft in the strict sense. And third, having come to understand that signs of things cannot show the things they signify, we understand that knowledge must then be acquired through direct acquaintance with the *things themselves*, to use Augustine's oft repeated phrase. At the moment, these might seem inconsequential, but they will bear much fruit in attempting to understand Augustine's doctrines of both divine illumination and recollection in section [2b]. I will argue in what follows that both of these have at times been misunderstood by interpreters.

## §2 *Divine Illumination*

Divine illumination is a difficult topic in Augustine if for no other reason than that Augustine's treatment of it is piecemeal; he never dedicates an entire treatise to the topic. Nevertheless, the doctrine's presence in the Augustinian corpus, whether explicit or implicit, is ubiquitous. Moreover, a proper understanding of illumination is absolutely critical for a proper and coherent understanding of Augustine's metaphysics and epistemology. And whilst interpretations of the theory of illumination abound, plausible theories, at least according to my reckoning, are scarce. In the history of its interpretation, Augustine's theory has oft been interpreted as a kind of theory of concept acquisition.<sup>17</sup> Such an interpretation, however, is implausible. We are already in a position to see at least one reason for its implausibility. If Augustine has already rejected a knowledge transmission theory of education, what kind of answer would it be to simply transpose the same kind of theory into God as he relates with his rational creature? In contradistinction to such a position, I will be proposing that Augustine's doctrine of divine illumination is nothing other than his theory of Truth.<sup>18</sup> Now, Truth is a technical term for Augustine. I will argue that

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<sup>17</sup> Such is the so-called "Franciscan interpretation." How do we arrive at knowledge of abstract concepts, intelligibles in Augustine's terminology? For Augustine, all our knowledge comes ultimately through direct acquaintance. We are either acquainted with these objects through the senses or by some other means. But Augustine believes that we cannot through the senses be acquainted with intelligible objects (*Eighty-Three Different Questions*, 9; *On Free Choice of the Will*, 2.8.20; *Confessions*, 10.10.17; *Soliloquies*, 1.4.9). So, this must be through some other means. It could be either because these objects of knowledge are innate or latent in us, or because God infuses them in us. It cannot be the former because then we would already always have knowledge, and learning would be impossible, and this is absurd. Ergo, God must infuse in us with knowledge of these things (intelligibles) from without, and this is what is called divine illumination.

<sup>18</sup> I purposely capitalize the word "Truth" here and throughout the piece when referring to what is a technical term in Augustine. I will refer the reader to what follows for exactly what Truth is, but in order to prevent possible misunderstanding, something must be said. Many modern philosophers are apt to restrict the reference of the word "true" to propositions when they correspond to things as they exist in reality. Thus, for someone that thinks this way, Augustine's usage is puzzling. Augustine talks quite often about the Truth and of true things about as much as he speaks of statements being true. Augustine's view of reality is hierarchical, with an ascending order of ontological priority. First, our own judgments are true when they correspond to the way things are in reality. This is in essence the modern correspondence theory of truth. Augustine goes further, second, in asserting that the sensible world or

Truth in Augustine refers to or is identical with the entire world of intelligible objects as they exist as a systematic whole in the mind of God; in fact, Augustine is not shy to even identify Truth with God, thus identifying the world of intelligibles with God himself in some sense. In asserting the necessity of divine illumination, then, what Augustine is in fact asserting is the necessary systematicity of knowledge, where knowledge is identical with understanding, an understanding whose proper object is an entire discipline or science, not isolated propositions. The role of divine illumination on such a theory is twofold. On the one hand, the light of divine illumination, so to speak, is a structural property; speaking slightly less abstrusely, the light of divine illumination is the entire intelligible structure of the intelligible objects. All of this is to say, particular intelligibles or forms are only intelligible insofar as they relate to all other intelligibles in their particular discipline or science, and that science or discipline is only intelligible when understood in relation to all the other sciences or bodies of knowledge. Secondly, this intelligible light of which Augustine so frequently speaks serves as the principle of unity for the entire array of intelligible objects or forms. Such language is suggested when Augustine starts speaking of the Truth as identical to the Dialectic, which Augustine identifies as the science of the sciences.

All of this will be discussed in due course. But since this is a paper on the *De Magistro*, we also want to know, what is the function of illumination in the *De Magistro*? What purpose does it serve in advancing Augustine's project there? Since I want to move toward a comparative study of recollection and illumination, I want to bring to the attention of the reader that it is no accident that divine illumination is first introduced after one of the dialogue's central problems, Augustine's

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sensible things are true insofar as they conform to the intelligible archetypes of the intelligible world. Even the intelligible world is hierarchically ordered, as we will see, insofar as all the intelligibles depend upon some superordinate genus, which constitutes their unity, and ultimately the unity of these depends upon the Truth. This may now be somewhat perplexing, but will hopefully be made clear by the end of this section.

own form of the Learner's Paradox (*De Magistro*, 11.36). Like Plato, Augustine's solution involves a kind of recollection. Moreover, at this critical juncture, Augustine curiously introduces several distinctions between several cognitive states: belief, knowledge, and understanding. Immediately after this, Augustine begins his discussion of illumination *before* following through with an explanation of recollection. The reason Augustine does this, I believe, is because a proper understanding of divine illumination is requisite to proper understanding of recollection, for divine illumination is a necessary precondition for any act of recollection.

To render my own discussion more intelligible, allow me to begin with some Augustinian metaphysics and epistemology in outline. A discussion of illumination proper will follow upon this. In order to make my task easier, I will prove that Truth, the light of illumination, Christ, and God—at least in some respect—are all identical for Augustine.<sup>19</sup> With this in mind, we will be able to comb through the *De Magistro* and other writings in the Augustinian corpus for any other insights they might provide about illumination.

In Platonic fashion, Augustine divides the world into two, sensible and intelligible:

For my purposes, it's enough that Plato perceived that there are two worlds: an intelligible world where Truth itself resides, and this sensible world that we obviously sense by sight and touch. The former is the True world, the latter only truthlike and made to its image. (*Against the Academicians*, 3.17.37)

On the one hand, we have the sensible world: everything that is accessible to the senses; on the other hand, we have the intelligible world: everything that can be accessed by the intellect

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<sup>19</sup> This may strike the reader as a tall order and perhaps more confusing than helpful. Let me clarify and further explain the upshot of proving the above. First, the identity is not absolute. One may not simply replace any statement where one finds these terms and substitute any other. However, in a certain context, i.e., when discussing matters of illumination, Augustine uses such terms interchangeably. Second, careful attention to this phenomenon opens doors into understanding illumination. Such interchangeability within certain contexts makes combing the texts for the properties of illumination easier.

(understanding, mind, etc.). This latter world is the True world, and the other is merely truthlike insofar as it participates in or is patterned after the True world. Access to the proper objects in each of these worlds is attained through direct acquaintance *through a mode cognition proper to the world of which it has knowledge*. As shown above, Augustine's theory of language and his refutation of the knowledge transmission model of learning demonstrates that knowledge can only be had through direct acquaintance. And though Augustine is apt to draw analogies between these two ways of knowing, Augustine is careful to keep their epistemic domains carefully delineated and gives to each a proper faculty to know each of these distinct worlds. Augustine is clear that our access to the intelligible world is *not* mediated to us through some kind of process of abstraction: as he says in the *Soliloquies*, "it seems to me that it would be easier to sail on dry land, than to learn geometry by the senses, although young beginners seem to derive some help from them" (*Soliloquies*, 1.4.9).<sup>20</sup> In support of this, he carefully distinguishes the proper objects of geometry and their simulacra that exist in the sensible world. A geometric line has certain properties that a visible line does not and *cannot* have. Hence, geometric lines cannot exist in reality. If they do not exist in sensible reality, we cannot be directly acquainted with them by sense perception. And since we cannot be directly acquainted with them through sense-perception, it follows that we cannot know them through sense-perception.<sup>21</sup> Hence, there is some other faculty that must apprehend these objects, and this for Augustine is the understanding (otherwise called the intelligence, mind, reason).

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<sup>20</sup> Other examples could be supplied *ad nauseum* (*Eighty-Three Different Questions*, 9; *On Free Choice of the Will*, 2.8.20; *Confessions*, 10.10.17)

<sup>21</sup> And if abstraction is off limits for Augustine, then so go certain interpretations of divine illumination that interpret divine illumination as the divine light tempered to finite existence in the form of some kind of Aristotelian agent intellect that abstracts from particulars universals.

None of this, of course, implies that the two worlds are epistemically or metaphysically unrelated. This would be to misinterpret Augustine. First, if we recall what Augustine said above, the sensible world is made as an image of the intelligible world, and so it stands to reason that that which it is modeled after has something to tell us about its image. Furthermore, following upon the quote above, Augustine says:

Consequently, truth about the former world [the sensible world] is refined and brightened (so to speak) in the soul that knows itself, whereas only opinion, and not knowledge, can be engendered about the latter world [the intelligible world] in the souls of those who are unwise. (*Against the Academicians*, 3.17.37)

“The soul that knows itself” is a soul in possession of knowledge about that intelligible world.<sup>22</sup> Such knowledge is said to “refine” and “brighten” knowledge about the sensible world. Knowledge of intelligibles organizes and structures our sense experience. We can only make any real sense out of our experiences when we have attained to a knowledge of these intelligible objects.

But what exactly are these “intelligibles”, the inhabitants of this strange world called the “True” world? Augustine discusses them in various places, though perhaps most succinctly and helpfully in his *Eighty-Three Questions*:

For in fact the ideas are certain original and principal forms of things, i.e., reasons, fixed and unchangeable, which are not themselves formed and, being thus eternal and existing always in the same state, are contained in the Divine Intelligence. (*Eighty-Three Questions*, 46.)

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<sup>22</sup> I will postpone treatment of this to a latter section. This language about “knowing oneself” is inextricably linked to Augustine’s doctrine of divine illumination.

For Augustine, the “ideas” or “reasons”, are eternal forms after which is patterned this entire sensible world.<sup>23</sup> Wherefore, though Augustine does not here use the word “intelligible,” their function is clearly the same. If it is any aid for the reader, it may be helpful to conceive of these divine ideas or intelligibles as Platonic forms, and indeed Augustine does claim at several times, even here, inspiration from Plato. However, unlike Plato, but like many of his Neoplatonic contemporaries, Augustine places these divine ideas in the “Divine Intelligence.” Moreover, Augustine in the same place describes our soul’s intelligence as illumined with “intelligible light” such that it (i.e., our intelligence) is enabled to see “those reasons whose vision brings to it full blessedness.” And, of course, the proper object of the intelligence is an intelligible.

From here it is now appropriate to ask what is the proper cognitive state that ranges over these intelligible objects? I shall argue that it is both knowledge (*scientia*) and understanding (*intellectus*), for the two in the strictest sense are identical.<sup>24</sup> Understanding is a very obvious candidate for the simple fact that the two words (*intellectus* and *intelligibile*), though unrelated in English, are formed from the same root in Latin. Moreover, there is textual support in abundance, not least of all from the very text under consideration. When first introducing illumination, Augustine begins by bringing to the fore the fact that “regarding each of the things we understand, we don’t consult a speaker who makes sounds outside us...” (*De Magistro*, 11.38). From here, it is clear that the cognitive state of understanding is under consideration. A state which does not at

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<sup>23</sup> Quotes could be multiplied. See also further on: “It is by participation in these [i.e., the reasons, forms, species] that whatever exists in whatever manner it does exist.” (*Idem.*)

<sup>24</sup> I set aside for the moment Augustine’s alternative ontological taxonomy given in the *De Trinitate*. The difference there is fundamentally terminological but not substantial.

all concern sense-perception; in fact, Augustine had just covered such instances before in [2a].<sup>25</sup> What then is consulted, so to speak, with respect to understanding? Augustine uses several terms here completely interchangeably. We are said to consult “the Truth that presides within over the mind itself”, we are said to consult “Christ—that is, *the unchangeable power and everlasting wisdom of God*, and if we are mistaken we cannot attribute “a defect [to] the Truth consulted, just as it isn’t a defect in *light* outside that the eyes of the body are often mistaken” (*De Magistro*, 11.38). Special attention will be given to Augustine’s analogy of light and vision for the intelligible world. For now, however, it suffices to point out that what we are said to consult is the Truth, which in another place Augustine has identified with that intelligible world. From this, it can be asserted that the proper object of understanding is the Truth, the intelligible world, or the menagerie of intelligibles which are its inhabitants.

In one respect, there is a relative paucity of explicit explanation of the different cognitive states (belief, knowledge, understanding, and opinion) in the *De Magistro*. Nevertheless, the dialogue is shot through with assumptions concerning all these cognitive states. Moreover, rather than explicitly, we could say that the *De Magistro* teaches us about these cognitive states dialectically, which for Augustine is the preferable way of treating them, for it occasions understanding in the reader. Nevertheless, Augustine does give us this much explicitly:

Therefore, what I understand I also believe, but not everything I believe I also understand. Again, everything I understand I know; not everything I believe I know. Hence I’m not

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<sup>25</sup> In point of fact, the onus of section [2a] was to demonstrate that certain signs can be shown by “doing them after the query [has been made], if they can be done.” They can be shown precisely because they can be seen or sensed. This is what in part separates section [2a] from [2b]. If knowledge is by direct acquaintance, we can begin to understand how we happen upon knowledge by the senses. But what about knowledge of non-sensible objects? This is why Augustine, I contend, sees illumination and recollection as *necessities*. Hence, it’s a bit curious when interpreters ask the question about whether illumination ranges over sensible as well as intelligible objects (so called, general illumination, which Malebranche ascribed to). Such a conception is very convoluted and fundamentally misunderstands Augustine, as I pray further argumentation will bear out.

unaware how useful it is to believe even many things I do not know, and I also include in this usefulness the story of the three boys. Accordingly, although the majority of things can't possibly be known by me, I still know how useful it is to believe them."<sup>26</sup> (*De Magistro*, 11.37)

From here, it is clear that understanding entails belief and also knowledge, but many things are not clear. What is the proper object of knowledge? Of belief? And also, what are their proper faculties? Is knowledge identical to understanding?

To answer some of these questions, let us turn to a passage from another one of Augustine's nearly contemporaneous treatises. In *De Utilitate Credendi* Augustine says, "What we know, therefore, we owe to reason, what we believe to authority, and what we opine to error."<sup>27</sup> When comparing this passage to what Augustine says elsewhere,<sup>28</sup> we see that knowledge and understanding both share the common characteristic of having "reason" as their standard or mode of cognition. It may also be noted that Augustine draws a distinction between belief and opinion. Belief may be well-grounded if grounded in a proper authority, even if it cannot thereby attain the status of knowledge in the strict sense.<sup>29</sup> Opinion is a kind of groundless or poorly grounded belief.

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<sup>26</sup> Just as Augustine demurred further discussion of the "usefulness of belief," which he dealt within at length in his treatise *De Utilitate Credendi*, so also will I forgo and extended discussion until we begin our discussion of recollection where we will see it is an indispensable part of the dialectical process that ends in recollection and thus understanding.

<sup>27</sup> My own translation of the following: "Quod scimus igitur, debemus rationi, quod credimus, auctoritati: quod opinamur, errori"

<sup>28</sup> "Now I, Reason, am that in the mind, which the act of looking is in the eyes." (*Soliloquies*, 1.6.12) In this dialogue, as well, Augustine sharply contrasts that which is known by the senses and that which is known by the understanding, reason, or the mind. This quote is taken from a section in which Augustine explains the "metaphor" or illumination, comparing it with vision.

<sup>29</sup> When Augustine confesses that he *believes* rather than *knows* that the story of the three youths in the fire happens as the Scriptures narrate it, Augustine is by no means denigrating either historical knowledge or the Bible. In fact, Augustine doesn't believe that the Bible does or can in principle err (see especially his 82<sup>nd</sup> letter to Jerome). One relevant reason for history being denied the status of knowledge is that the acquaintance that an eyewitness had cannot be communicated to another through words. The same point is made below in the main body of the essay.

Nevertheless, more commentary would be helpful. And indeed, Augustine provides us with some. In his *Retractationes*, reflecting on the above passage, Augustine gives a very helpful explanation:

“There is a great difference between something being held by certain reason of the mind, which we call knowledge and what is usefully commended to posterity by reports or writings.” And a little afterwards: “What we know therefore we owe to reason, what we believe to authority.” It must not be accepted as we are accustomed to say in ordinary speech, i.e., that we know that which we believe based upon reliable witnesses. When we speak more properly, we say that we know only that which we comprehend by certain reason of the mind. When we speak by words more suitable to our ordinary way of speaking, just as it Sacred Scripture speaks, we do not hesitate to say that we know also that which we perceive by the bodily senses and that which we believe on the basis of witness worthy of our credit. Nevertheless, we should understand wherein these two senses differ. (*Retractationes*, 1.14.3)

According to Augustine, we may speak of knowing or knowledge in two ways. First, in the manner of ordinary language. Augustine admits that in our everyday-speech we are accustomed to say that we know such and such an event happened because, let’s say, Suzy told me (and Suzy never lies). In fact, Augustine himself employs such a use at times throughout the dialogue.<sup>30</sup> Of course, this is no affront to Augustine’s philosophical acumen or an accusation of sloppy writing. On the contrary, it very much suits the genre of the treatise, a dialogue. Augustine is trying to bring his son, Adeodatus, to a knowledge of the truth. The way to knowledge often requires that the teacher lead the student to various dead ends, as Augustine in fact does throughout the dialogue and as is common in Platonic dialogues as well. Though Augustine may be approaching a precise, technical use of certain key words, nevertheless, for the sake of advancing the student upon the path to knowledge it behooves the teacher at times to use words according to their ordinary signification, and then step by step to lead them to the proper signification of such words.

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<sup>30</sup> Now is also an appropriate time to confess to the reader that I too have been using the word in a way not completely agreeable to Augustine’s doctrine of knowledge or knowing. For example, I have spoken of knowledge by sense-perception or at times, which if not yet, I hope will become clear, is a kind of category mistake for Augustine.

Secondly, Augustine speaks of knowing in a stricter sense. Most properly, we call that knowledge which is known by “certain reason of the mind.” By itself, this is a somewhat vague expression. Does this exclude the possibility of saying that we know what the senses tell us or that from reliable witnesses we can extract true knowledge of what has in fact occurred in history, even if it be only near history? After all, it seems that in all these instances, if we are doing careful history or subject the appearances of sense-perception to the scrutiny of reason, that we *are* using our reason. Better yet, we might be using *certain* reason, whatever that is supposed to mean. Augustine, however, clarifies that when we are speaking more loosely, just as Scripture speaks in fact, “we do not hesitate to say that we know also that which we perceive by the bodily senses and that which we believe on the basis of witness worthy of our credit.” And so, if it is the case that when we speak loosely we permit of speaking as if we know what we perceive with the bodily senses and what we believe on account of witnesses worthy of our credit, it stands to reason that when we speak of knowledge, *sensu stricto*, these are not genuine instances of knowledge; in other words, for Augustine, knowledge strictly speaking does not range over beliefs that are had or justified by testimony or the bodily senses.

In sum, if that which is known by sense-perception concerns the sensible world, and knowledge is not had by sense-perception, strictly speaking, knowledge does not range over the sensible world. It must then range over the intelligible world. Again, another feature that knowledge shares with understanding. By now, the cumulative case is such that there is ample evidence that knowledge in the strict sense and understanding are identical with one another.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Burnyeat makes the same point apropos the identity of knowledge and understanding (Burnyeat, 1987). He further remarks that the section within our original quote was nested the difference between knowing and believing is presented as a contrast between understanding and believing (*Idem.*, p. 7).

I should now say more about understanding since coming to grips with understanding and its object may prove revelatory for a proper understanding of divine illumination. To reiterate, understanding is necessary wholistic. Augustine eschews knowledge of intelligibles as piecemeal knowledge of isolated propositions. Augustine is quite explicit about this in his *Eighty-Three Questions*:

For this reason, there should be no doubt that there is a *total understanding* which admits of no higher degree, and that, consequently, there is no endless advance in the understanding of anything nor the possibility of one understanding it better than another. (*Eighty-Three Questions*, 32.)

Understanding does not admit of degrees, for understanding by definition is the full comprehension of a thing. As Augustine argues, before the aforementioned quote, “whoever understands a thing to be other than it really is makes a mistake, and everyone who is mistaken does not understand.” All piecemeal understanding requires understanding something “other than it really is.” Therefore, understanding cannot be partial and must be wholistic, systematic. Now, if our understanding of this world must be synoptic or systematic, it stands to reason that the objects of our cognition must also be a part of some interconnected whole.

This last point is a step in the right direction concerning my contention that the light of divine illumination is fundamentally the intelligible structure of the forms. Before advancing this claim, however, I would like to bring forth further textual support for the thesis. To do this, I believe the onus is on me to talk at some length about the very analogy of divine illumination. In doing so, I hope eventually to come full circle and not simply present the metaphor, as some interpreters have been apt to do, but to hopefully actually render it intelligible to the reader, doing

the hard work of actually trying to explain the metaphysical claims being advanced by Augustine by drawing upon further texts in the Augustinian corpus.

Above I quoted the text in which Augustine makes first explicit reference to the doctrine of divine illumination in the course of the argument of the *De Magistro*. There Augustine speaks of us as consulting the Truth or the light in a way similar to how “we consult the light regarding visible things” (*De Magistro*, 11.38). Further applying the metaphor, Augustine says the following about sense-perception:

Now, on the one hand, regarding colors we consult light, and regarding other things we sense through the body we consult the elements of this world, the selfsame bodies we sense, and the senses themselves that the mind employs as interpreters to know such things.

Again, Augustine uses the language of consultation. Let’s pay special attention to the light as used here. We are said to consult the light *that we might perceive colors*. In some sense then, light is that which renders the objects it illumines *visible*. Now, transposing that to the intelligible world, Augustine says:

On the other hand, regarding things that are understood we consult the inner Truth by means of reason. What then can be said to show that we learn something by words aside from the mere sound that strikes the ears?

And so, if we continue to extend the metaphor, just as visible light renders visible things *visible*, so also intelligible light is that which renders intelligible objects *intelligible*. In other words, the intelligible light is that in virtue of which the intelligibles are intelligible at all. We are now in a position to see why Augustine introduces such a doctrine in the course of a treatise about language and teaching. The measure or standard of understanding is *not* the words of another. When the student comprehends something, understands it, he does not *understand*, e.g., a geometric proof, because his instructor has said the right words, or because he, to use Augustine’s phrase, trusts the

words of another—though Augustine is of course quite willing to grant that teachers are of great benefit to the student. Rather, the teacher attempts to lead the mind of the student to the truth of what is uttered for himself, not by consulting his words, but seeing it in the inner light of truth. Just as visible things are seen in the light of the sun, so also in this intelligible light we are able to see *the things themselves* and thus arrive at understanding.

We cannot stop at mere metaphor, however, and neither does Augustine. In virtue of what does this intelligible light render particular intelligible things intelligible? Again, the intelligible light is the intelligibility of the forms insofar as it stands for the entire intelligible structure of the forms. Language of divine illumination is almost always found in conjunction with language about wholeness and systematicity. This is no accident, I believe. See, for example, the following text from the *Soliloquies*: “God, the intelligible Light, in whom and from whom and through whom all things intelligibly shine, which anywhere intelligibly shine. God whose kingdom is that whole world of which sense has no ken” (*Soliloquies*, 1.1.3) The domain of God’s illumination or light is said to be “that whole world of which sense has no ken.” To this world, the senses have no access because the light of illumination is an intelligible light. It is here, moreover, that I believe we see an explicit statement to the effect that God qua intelligible light is the very intelligibility of the forms. To clarify this claim, when I say God is the intelligibility of the intelligibles, the claim I am making is this: God as light is the intelligibility of the intelligibles insofar as he is their source or principle cause, meaning that it is through this intelligible light that anything intelligible is intelligible. This intelligible light, then, is the *sine qua non* of the very intelligibility of the intelligibles and their highest cause. All things that intelligibly shine, i.e., the intelligibles or forms, are said to shine in and through the intelligible light, which is God himself.

But *how* does God serve as this principle of intelligibility? I fear my claim remains hitherto somewhat vague—even with my above qualifications considered. In conjunction with talk about intelligibility, Augustine speaks also of the world as some *whole* when he calls the intelligible that “whole world.” This wholistic, systematic language is deliberate, for it shows up in other places where Augustine talks about illumination.<sup>32</sup> Of course, once we understand that divine illumination is fundamentally intelligible illumination, that is, illumination of intelligible objects, we should be able to understand the connection. Knowledge of the intelligible world, as we have already seen, is systematic knowledge. Now, objective, systematic knowledge is only possible when the object of our knowledge is likewise systematic. Our knowledge of the world outside of us, sensible and intelligible, is not for Augustine the imposition of *a priori* categories of thought imposed upon the world by the limitations of the human intellect. Augustine is in fact an arch-realist; knowledge is only had through immediate, unmediated access to objects of our knowledge, whether sensible or intelligible. Now, this intelligible light is itself intelligible, as Augustine says: “God is intelligible, not sensible, intelligible also are those demonstrations of the sciences; nevertheless they differ very widely” (*Soliloquies*, 1.8.15). God is said to be intelligible whilst, nevertheless, differing in some sense from all other things that are intelligible. Again, Augustine in what follows employs the use of the metaphor of the sun. The sun is visible, but is different from other things in that it is through the sun that all other visible things are visible. The objects of sense cannot be their own light, so to speak, and neither can intelligible objects. The light, then, of illumination—that in virtue of which all particular intelligibles are intelligible—is the ordered structure of the whole.

It might be best to illustrate Augustine’s point using one of his own examples. Immediately after Augustine speaks of us “consulting the light regarding the *whole* matter”, Augustine gives us

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<sup>32</sup> See, e.g., (*De Magistro*, 12.40), a passage I will discuss below.

the following example as something we can know with utter certainty: “wise men are better than fools” (*De Magistro*, 12.40). How do we know this with certainty? Certainly, not some mere vague gut feeling. Rather, we know the following. Wise men possess wisdom and fools do not. Now, wisdom is a virtue and folly its contrary vice. Virtue is a good and its contrary evil. Good is better than evil. Hence, the man that possesses good is better than he who possesses evil. Wherefore, if you understand all that precedes, you should come to the absolutely firm conviction that wise men are greater than fools.

There is to this of course a rather sophisticated metaphysics that ungirds all such kinds of reasoning. Such reasoning presupposes that universals, or forms are divided and separated into certain genera and species, wherein certain logical relations obtain between such genera and their subordinate species. Any metaphysic that divides universals into genera and species has already committed itself to a certain kind of metaphysical wholism about intelligible objects; Augustine’s intelligible world—much like Plato’s own world of the forms—is not something graspable through piecemeal cognition. By this, I mean that the world of intelligibles is not merely some set of all objects capable of being grasped by the intellect but otherwise unrelated. This is why both Plato and Augustine when advancing many philosophical topics prefer the medium of the dialogue. For if knowledge of this intelligible world is systematic, knowledge of it requires a very precise delineation between the exact relations between its objects: what is genus of what, what are the species of these genera, etc.

Our investigation now brings us to a very interesting passage in Augustine’s *Soliloquies*, a discussion of which I hope will serve the following purposes: wrap up our discussion of the systematicity of the intelligible world and simultaneously advance my hitherto unsubstantiated claim that illumination is in part invoked as the principle of unity of the intelligibles. In the course

of a discussion about the exact criteria of what constitutes a true science, Reason, an interlocutor in the dialogue, makes the claim that “the truth of the science rests on that very principle which makes it a science” (*Soliloquies*, 2.11.20). Augustine (the interlocutor) has no reply as to what constitutes a true discipline or science.<sup>33</sup> Reason then proffers the following provocative question: “Does it not seem to you, that if nothing in it [science] had been defined, and nothing distributed and distinguished into classes and parts, it could in any wise be a true science” (*Soliloquies*, 2.11.20). At this point, Augustine now begins to understand.<sup>34</sup> The status of any science as a *true* science, that is to say a science in the proper sense of the term, is predicated on proper division, definition, and distribution. Without this a science, which is the object of knowledge, is not a science at all. Such a position is indistinguishable from Platonic and Aristotelian theories of knowledge, all of which emphasize proper definition, division, and distribution of the constituent parts of a science, parts which are always parts of some integrative whole or body of knowledge.

Augustine (or Reason) presses the matter further: “Tell me now what science contains the principles of definitions, divisions, and partitions” (*Soliloquies*, 2.11.21). The answer is that science in which “are contained the rules of disputation.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, dialectic.<sup>36</sup> From this, it is concluded that:

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<sup>33</sup> I’ll be using them somewhat interchangeably. The word Augustine uses throughout the treatise is in fact *discipline*, a literal rendering of which would be “discipline.” Augustine seems often to reserve the use of the term *scientia* for our knowledge as such. Nevertheless, for Augustine, a *disciplina* is an organized body of knowledge. Hence, the translation of “science,” taken in its classical sense is appropriate.

<sup>34</sup> Now I grasp your meaning: nor does the remembrance of any science whatever occur to me, in which definitions and divisions and processes of reasoning do not, inasmuch as it is declared what each thing is, as without confusion of parts its proper attributes are ascribed to each class, nothing peculiar to it being neglected, nothing alien to it admitted, perform that whole range of functions from which it has the name of science. (*Soliloquies*, 2.11.20)

<sup>35</sup> By disputation, of course, Augustine doesn’t mean a rancorous quarrel, as the modern word may connote. Disputation concerns reasoned argumentation toward some thesis or position.

<sup>36</sup> Augustine in fact defines dialectic in terms of disputation: “Dialectic is the science of disputing well.” (*De Dialectica*, 1)

Grammar [a particular science], therefore, both as a science and a true science has been constituted [a science] by the same art which has above been defended from the charge of falsity. Which conclusion I am not required to confine to grammar alone, but am permitted to extend to all sciences whatever. (*Soliloquies*, 2.11.21)

Here, Augustine makes an interesting claim. Augustine is carefully distinguishing particular sciences from a kind of *summa scientia* or highest science. The science is not simply a science among other sciences, but is rather that in virtue of which any science is a science, for a science can only be such as an organized body of knowledge, properly divided, distributed, and defined. This is in fact Augustine's own explicit claim: "But if they are true on that ground on which they are sciences, will anyone deny that very thing to be Truth through which all sciences are true?" (*Soliloquies*, 2.11.21). Here Augustine boldly identifies dialectic with Truth which he almost ubiquitously identifies with God himself.

This science, then, namely dialectic, serves as the science of the sciences, indeed, their principle of unity. It is an appropriate principle of unity because it is in virtue of this science that all sciences are sciences. Is it a science, however, and not something *sui generis*? Augustine (the interlocutor) begins to worry about this in what follows the above section. Because of its *sui generis* status, Augustine worries about reducing it to a science like the others. While accommodating this worry, Reason advocates the status of dialectic as a science:

[Reason] Your watchful accuracy is indeed most highly to be commended: but you do not deny, I suppose, that it is *true* on the same ground on which it is a theory and science.

[Augustine] Nay, that is my very ground of perplexity. For I have noted that it also is a science and is on this account called true.

[Reason] What then? Do you think this could be a science on any other ground than that all things in it were defined and distributed?

[Augustine] I have nothing else to say.

[Reason] But if this function appertains to it, *it is in and of itself a true science*. Why then should any one find it wonderful, if that Truth whereby all things are true, should be through itself and in itself true. (*Soliloquies*, 2.11.21)

The *sui generis* status, then, of dialectic is not because it is not to be numbered among the sciences. Rather, it is a science *per se*, whereas other sciences are sciences through another, namely through dialectic. All other sciences are conditioned by it, it itself is conditioned by nothing outside itself. It has a kind of scientific aseity, so to speak. Such language, I hope, is reminiscent of God. Augustine wants you to make that very connection. Dialectic is identical with Truth, which Augustine—in other treatises *and* in the *Soliloquies*—identifies with God; and God is the intelligible light in virtue of which all intelligible things shine that intelligibly do shine. The parallel should now be clear. Intelligibles are the objects of our knowledge, which is knowledge of a science. Sciences are true on account of dialectic. Intelligible things and their sciences, which are also intelligible, are intelligible in virtue of the intelligible light. The intelligible light, then, just *is* the intelligible structure of the intelligible world. Because it is on account of this that anything is intelligible that is intelligible, this is, as I have contended, the very intelligibility of the forms or intelligibles. And since it is through this *one* thing that all things are intelligible, it serves also as their principle of unity.

In conclusion, any theory of illumination that is set up as a kind of theory of acquisition of concepts fundamentally misunderstands divine illumination. Divine illumination is the very precondition of the intelligibility of anything that is intelligible. Without it, yes, concept acquisition is impossible. But it is decidedly *not* because divine illumination is the mode through which we gain understanding. This popular sentiment, then, that Augustine's theory of divine illumination runs the risk of rendering the rational agent passive is wholly ill-conceived. In fact,

elsewhere, most especially in the *De Magistro*, Augustine radically opposes this view. Understanding is the proper possession of an individual who must see *for himself* the Truth. He comes to such an understanding through recollection, the subject of what follows.

### §3 *Recollection and its Relation to Illumination*

At this point we are finally in a position to discuss the doctrine of recollection. As with illumination, recollection is an oft misunderstood, even ignored notion in Augustine. Many in fact don't even believe that Augustine has a doctrine of recollection, supposing that he proffers his doctrine of illumination in lieu of recollection. With Miner,<sup>37</sup> I want to affirm that recollection is an indispensable part of Augustine's thought. More to it, though, and what I hope is a contribution somewhat unique to my own project, I hope to elaborate some of the connections between illumination and recollection. Though the concepts are certainly distinct for Augustine, they are by no means unrelated, as we will see.

To discharge my task, first, I want to discuss recollection as it appears in some of Augustine's works, particularly the *Confessions* and the *Soliloquies*, and, second, discuss its role in the *De Magistro*. As to the nature of recollection, Augustine is quite explicit: learning just is recollection (*De Quantitate Animae*, 20.34). But what is it that we recollect? Augustine says that in the recesses of our memory lie dormant "the innumerable principles<sup>38</sup> and laws of numbers and dimensions", i.e., the forms, though they exist in a "dispersed and disorganized" way (*Confessions*,

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<sup>37</sup> Miner (2007).

<sup>38</sup> The Latin here is *rationes*, not *principia*, most commonly the word for principles in Latin. '*Ratio*' is one of the words synonymous for the forms or intelligibles, so in what follows where I use principle, I mean it in exactly this sense.

10.11.18-12.19). Recollection is the process whereby we properly order these innate principles to imitate the ordered structure of Truth, and these principles are the standards by which we make judgments of sensible things and claims that others make. And since it is the art of dialectic that is responsible for proper division, distribution, and definition, it is the means by which the rational subject organizes his soul or the principles of memory.

This dialectical process is put to work in Augustine's *De Magistro*. The three stages of recollection as found in the *Soliloquies* are put to dialectical work in the *De Magistro*. It is here, in the context of [2b] in the *De Magistro* the reader will finally come to see the coherence of Augustine's larger epistemology. It is here that belief, illumination, recollection all coalesce to solve key issues in the *De Magistro*, foremost of which is the Learner's Paradox. It will turn out that right dialectic will provide the solution, the teacher advancing the student part by part to some thesis, the whole of which is only comprehensible when the student has been taken there through suitable steps. The student's own beliefs and understanding will prove critical for this process. All of this and more, of course, requires serious textual evidence and argumentation, which I hope to provide in what follows.

Recollection for Augustine is what it is to learn: "what is said to learning is no other than remembering (*reminisci*) or recalling (*recordari*)" (*De Quantitate Animae*, 20.34). Initial concern may be raised by the fact that Augustine fails to use the word '*recolere*', but opts instead for other words here. The difference is, I contend, merely semantic. Soon I will discuss the nature of recollection from other places, which I hope will dispel what doubts remain concerning my above assertion.

If learning is recollection, then it would be fair to say that the proper end of recollection is understanding in the Augustinian sense. So, if recollection leads to understanding, however

recollection may function, it better have as one of its principle aims a systematic grasp of its object of knowledge; it must render the pupil's understanding systematic. Recollection, in accordance with its etymology, which Augustine is building upon, concerns the gathering, collecting, and organizing our ideas, which exist in us in a dispersed and disorganized manner. These ideas or principles are intelligible objects. Augustine says as much: "Moreover, the memory contains the innumerable principles and laws of numbers and dimensions. None of them has impressed on the memory through any bodily sense-perception" (*Confessions*, 10.12.19). The objects of concern here are contained in the memory and have not been gotten by sense-perception and are hence intelligible. This statement comes in the midst of a section describing the process of recollection, which I will be discussing very shortly. From this, we see that recollection concerns intelligible objects somehow contained in the memory or even innate.<sup>39</sup> Augustine *does* believe that the memory contains after images of sense-impressions, that is to say, the memory is both the storehouse of after images of sense-impressions and these ideas or principles in the memory. Nevertheless, Augustine is careful to exclude those for his present purposes whilst recollection is under discussion because recollection has as its object these intelligible principles or ideas contained in the memory.

Recollection, then, is the proper distributing, dividing, and organizing of these dispersed principles. About such a process, Augustine says this in the *Confessions*:

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<sup>39</sup> Several times I will speak of these ideas as being latent or innate because Augustine's language suggests as much. However, this seems to be inconsistent with Augustine's epistemology. The basic problem is this, a tentative solution to which I offer at the end of this essay. There exists the Truth, which we are capable of knowing. If we know the Truth, we know it because we know the Truth itself, not some simulacrum of the Truth. If we have innate ideas, they are either the intelligibles themselves--- which are constituents, so to speak, of the Truth—or else they are created simulacrum bearing some resemblance to their archetype. They cannot be the intelligibles, for how could the uncreated ideas exist in a created intelligence? Therefore, they must be simulacra of the Truth. This cannot be the case, however. Either way Augustine ends of in ostensible contradiction.

On this theme of notions where we do not draw images through our senses, but discern them inwardly not through images but as they really are and through the concepts themselves, *we find that the process of learning is this*: by thinking we, as it were, gather together ideas which the memory contains in a dispersed and disordered way, and by concentrating our attention we arrange them in order as if ready to hand, stored in the very memory where previously they lay hidden, scattered, and neglected. Now they easily come forward under the direction of the mind familiar with them. How many things in this category my memory carries which were once discovered and, as I have said, were ordered ready to hand—things we are said to have learnt and to know! Yet if for quite short periods of time, I cease to recollect (*recolere*) them, then again they sink below the surface and slip away into the remote recesses, so that they have to be thought out as if they were quite new, drawn again from the same store (for there is nowhere else for them to go). Once again they have to be brought together (*cogenda*) so as to be known; that means they have to be gathered (*colligenda*) from their dispersed state. Hence is derived the word cogitate. To bring together (*cogo*) and to cogitate (*cogito*) are related as words *ago* (I do) to *agito* (I do frequently) or *facio* (I make) to *facito* (I make frequently). Nevertheless the mind claims the verb cogitate for its own province. It is what is collected (that is, by force) in the mind not elsewhere, which is strictly speaking the object of recollection. (*Confessions*, 10.11.18)

First, we should note that Augustine believes that we have immediate grasp of the *concepts themselves*. Much of the language that follows might suggest that Augustine believes that what we possess are abstract particulars that are mere simulacra of their platonic prototypes. Whether or not Augustine's position on this front is ultimately coherent, there is no doubt that he denies that we have only a simulacrum of the Truth; if we have only Truth's likeness we do not have Truth. More proof to this effect, can be found elsewhere. In Augustine's *On Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine appeals to the forms as Truth existing over and above the mind itself. (*On Free Choice of the Will*, 2.10.28; cf. 2.12-33-34). Though we each possess our own minds with which we see the Truth, nevertheless it is the one Truth we see, that stands over and above or minds; it is object, mind independent, and a common standard for adjudication of disputes. Sense-perception on the other hand is private, in that what we have is always a perspective on the object of our perception, a perspective that can be contradicted by another. These intelligibles or ideas for Augustine serve

as the judges whereby we judge sensible particulars and the truth of this or that statement. Likewise, in the *De Magistro* the truth of some proposed proposition is not true because of the teacher's *words*, but because the student sees its truth by consulting the Truth that dwells in the inner man. If these principles are to serve such a capacity, they cannot be imitations of the Truth but must be the very *things themselves*.

To reign in the discussion again, we note secondly that Augustine identifies what follows as the “process of learning.” This process of learning for Augustine seems to consist in gathering together and by consequence organizing these latent principles existing in the memory. In the English, much here is lost. He uses several terms here synonymously: *colligere*, from whence the word “recollection” is ultimately derived, signifying a kind of collecting but also signifying at times in an extended way remembrance, especially when the prefix *re-* is affixed to it; *recolere*, which signifies recollection, and again has the sense of a gathering together, but can also mean to remember in an extended sense; and *cogere* primary meaning of which is collection or gathering together. When an English speaker hears “recollect,” he often first thinks of *remembering* or *recalling*. As Augustine here makes clear, the roots of both Latin words both have the sense of gathering together. It is true that the words may often be employed in the sense of remembering something, but they mean this only in an extended sense and not in a primary and literal sense. Augustine even goes as far as to say that thinking or cogitation (*cogitation*) just is recollection in the strict sense. He gets there by way of etymology. When the frequentive suffix *-ito* is affixed to *cogere*, one gets the word *cogitare*, i.e., cogitate or think. If Augustine is right about the etymology, then thinking would mean something roughly like a continually or frequent gathering or collecting. This whole section ends with the suggestion that this, i.e., these latent principles or intelligibles are the proper objects of recollection.

From here we can see again the confusion involved in making illumination and recollection into rival views. One is a theory of Truth, the other of learning. The function of recollection is the proper division, collecting, organizing of the latent principles that dwell in our memory. How they got there is a good question, though not the subject of this essay.

How does one go about recollecting? How can we systematize these innate principles so as to arrive at knowledge? The answer, I believe, is dialectic, most ideally dialectical conversation. Before proceeding, two things should be noted. First, just as dialectic is the organizing science or principle of the sciences, so also it is that which organizes our own knowledge. Evidence for this assertion is found above in the language of “collection”, “gathering together”, etc., which is similar, albeit not identical, language to what Augustine uses above when describing dialectic. Second, this dialectical process is worked out within the *De Magistro* itself.

A fruitful launching off point here will be Augustine’s discussion of the three states or what I’ll call the three stages of recollection. First, I want to discuss the three stages of recollection as found in the *De Magistro*. Next, I want to defend them *as* stages in the recollective process. Lastly, I want to apply this to section [2b]<sup>40</sup> of the *De Magistro* and show that this last section works out dialectically the theory of recollection espoused in the *Soliloquies*.

In the second book of the *Soliloquies*, Augustine propounds the three stages of recollection:

[Reason]: For suppose you have forgotten something, and others were wishing that you should recall it to memory. They therefore say: Is it this, or that? Bringing forward things diverse from it as if similar to it. You indeed do not see that it is not this which you desire to remember. And, nevertheless, you do see that it is not this which is said. When this

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<sup>40</sup> “Yet [2] when a question is raised about things that aren’t signs, [these things can be exhibited] either [(a)] by doing them after the query [has been made], if they can be done, or [(b)] by giving signs with which they may be brought to one’s attention.”

happens, does it seem to you at all to be oblivion? For this very power of distinguishing, whereby the false suggestions made to you are repelled, is a certain part of recollection.

[Augustine]: So it seems.

[Reason]: Such therefore do not yet see the Truth; yet they cannot be misled and deceived; and what they seek, they sufficiently know. But if anyone should say that you did laugh a few days after you were born, you would not venture to say it was false: and if he were an authority worthy of credit, you are ready, not, indeed, to remember, but to believe; for to you that whole time is buried in most authentic oblivion. Or do you think otherwise?

[Augustine]: I thoroughly agree with this.

[Reason]: This oblivion therefore differs exceedingly from that, but that stands midway. For there is another nearer and more closely neighboring to the remembering and rekindled vision of the Truth: the like of which is when we see something, and recognize for certain that we have seen it at some time, and affirm that we know it; but where, or when, or how, or with whom it came into our knowledge, we have enough to do to search our memory for an answer. And if this happens in regard to a man, we also inquire where we have known him: which when he has brought to mind, suddenly the *whole* thing flashes upon the memory like a light, and we have no more trouble to remember. Is this sort of forgetfulness unknown to you, or obscure?

[Augustine] What plainer than this? Or what is happening to me more frequently?  
(*Soliloquies*, 2.20.34)

I shall explain the three stages in the order that Augustine presents them in the text above, but will later prefer a reordering them, that makes clearer in what order the stages manifest themselves in reality. First, we have the case where “you neither see that it is not this which is suggested.” In this case, one does not yet recall what he is searching for but knows enough in order to discriminate false suggestions from ones that are on the right track. Most of us are familiar with such a phenomenon. Many times one may be at a loss regarding some word or thing they are trying to recall, and all his friends begin firing off suggestions. He may say “no, it’s not that” or “it’s something like that but not it.” Next, we have what this translation calls “authentic oblivion.” In this case we don’t even know what we are looking for. Suggestions at this point will avail us nothing. Augustine’s example is whether he laughed a few days after he was born. Such a memory

is irrecoverably lost and, though his parents may insist he did so, Augustine cannot recollect such an event. Lastly, we have recollection proper. This is like the moment when your friend hits upon the right suggestion and all of a sudden, it's eureka. You know for *certain* that that is what you were searching for. At least in *this* case, it is a psychological certainty. In matters of recollection proper (i.e., of intelligible objects) this is a kind of epistemological certainty, which Augustine describes as a flash of light illuminating the memory, making plain and clear the object of our recollection.

If the reader will indulge a brief excurses, the language of light here cannot be ignored. To those familiar with Augustine, it brings to mind the light of illumination. Because through much ardor, perhaps, we have organized and rightly ordered, distributed, and defined the latent principles residing in the memory, our soul has in some sense come to resemble the intelligible structure of that other world of which, to wax Augustinian, sense has no ken. In this way, I believe, we can make sense of the passages in Augustine where he describes persons as having been illumined.

Let's bring our attention back to the stages of recollection, now in what I believe to be their proper order. First, we have oblivion. Second, we have that which stands mid-way between oblivion and recollection proper, at which point we are able to discriminate between alternatives but do not know for certain what we are recalling, though if someone should mention it, the whole affair would immediately flood back into our mind. While I wish to affirm with Miner that these are at the very least *states* of the soul with respect to recollection, I wish further to assert that they are in fact stages of recollection, stages of recollection dialectically employed in the course of Augustine's *De Magistro*, as we will see.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Miner (2007) pp. 438-439.

There are several obstacles to advancing such a claim, however: the first is terminological, the second concerns the very example Augustine himself uses. First, Augustine speaks of many things being in oblivion. In English the word ‘oblivion’ has the connotation of something wholly lost so as to never be recovered, or even destroyed, obliterated. The word ‘*oblivio*’ in Latin, however, simply signifies forgetfulness. (Hence, to say, ‘I forget’ in Latin, one could say ‘*obliviscor*’.) In truth, this isn’t really a serious objection. The second issue is potentially more serious. The example Augustine uses, that he laughed sometime after his birth, suggests that those things being in oblivion are lost so as never to be recalled. No amount of effort would seem to avail Augustine so as to remember that event.

Such an interpretation is immediately ruled out by what follows in the *Soliloquies*:

Such are those who are well instructed in the liberal arts; since they by learning disinter them, *buried in oblivion*, doubtless, within themselves, and, in a manner dig them out afresh: nor yet are they content, nor refrain themselves until the *whole aspect of the Truth*, of whom, in those arts, a certain effulgence already gleams forth upon them, is by them most widely and most clearly beheld.” (*Soliloquies*, 2.20.35)

The objection stated a little earlier now falls flat—though we still must inquire in what way the illustration was relevant. It falls flat because the liberal arts are an object of recollection. If being buried in oblivion implies they are irrecoverable, then Augustine would be wrong to speak of them here as “buried in oblivion.” From this it is clear that not everything residing in oblivion is incapable of recollection. What do we make then of Augustine’s example? The relevance of the example, first, is not the particular object of recollection. Whether Augustine laughed or not is sensible, but Augustine also speaks of the liberal arts which are intelligible. Either of these are able to be buried in oblivion, so to speak. The relevance consists in our lack of capacity for discrimination; when something lays dormant in that “authentic oblivion,” we simply have no

ability to discriminate truth or falsehood—and in the *De Magistro*'s case, we may even assert its falsehood, though this is grounded in our ignorance.

We cannot continue without also taking note again of the language of “wholes” that is characteristic of illumination and as we are also seeing now, recollection. The end of recollection is “the whole aspect of Truth.” The aspiration of the soul in the recollective act is a synoptic view of the very structure of intelligible being. But here is a good point also to dispel a potential worry about Augustine’s epistemology, which, if true, would prove devastating. In Augustine’s wholism, is he denying the possibility of anything less than the whole comprehension of the entire intelligible structure of the forms? This passage, I believe, is revelatory. Even the liberal arts are said to shine with a certain effulgence. The liberal arts taken as a whole and divided into their various proper disciplines can be said to be lights in their own right to some degree, for each is its own unity containing its own principles, uniting a discipline as a discipline or science. Within the context of the Truth as it exists as a whole, there are contained numerous sub-wholes and under these perhaps more. In a word, Augustine’s view of knowledge is wholistic but also hierarchical. In conceiving of knowledge as a systematic whole, then, he does not just see it related as an infinitely large web of relations between intelligibles. This hierarchical ordering, though systematic, allows for incremental progress toward full vision of the Truth. To illustrate what I mean by hierarchy, consider man. Under the classic definition, man is a rational animal. Man is a species of the genus animal, differing between other animals insofar as he is rational. The genus animal provides the overarching unity of all the particular kinds or species of animals. Furthermore, animal is itself a genus of body; an animal is an animate body, and so body is a further genus uniting both the species of animate and inanimate bodies.

A fuller explanation of these three stages is in order. I believe that the best way to explain the three stages of recollection is to witness them in action. To do this, we need not look further than the *De Magistro*. In one respect, we can see the *De Magistro* as advancing the claims of the *Soliloquies*. In the *Soliloquies*, Augustine proves that the soul is immortal because Truth, which is itself imperishable, resides within the soul. This elicits the question how Truth can exist in an “undisciplined mind” (*Soliloquies*, 2.19.33). We already know the answer, recollection. The undisciplined mind may contain the ideas, the constituents of the Truth, but the undisciplined mind contains them only as a disorganized aggregate, which needs to be organized through dialectic. In the *De Magistro*, Adeodatus is this “undisciplined mind” that Augustine is trying to instruct. This instruction takes place throughout the entirety of the dialogue but time prevents a full examination. I believe that the entire matter is helpfully summarized in section [2b] during Augustine’s final monologue.

Concerning the dialectical process, Augustine says this:

Now it often happens that someone denies something when questioned about it, and is brought around by further questions to admit it. This happens because of the weakness of his discernment. He can’t consult that light regarding the whole matter. Yet he is prompted to do it part-by-part when he’s questioned about the very parts that make up the whole, which he didn’t have the ability to discern. If he’s guided in this case by the words of his questioner, the words nevertheless do not teach him, but raise questions in such a way that he who is questioned learns within, corresponding to his ability to do so. (*De Magistro*, 12.40)

Again, we have the language of parts and wholes, so critical to understanding what Augustine is doing here. Often there is some thesis set forth—the example Augustine uses in what follows is the very thesis of the dialogue, that “nothing can be taught by words”—which the interlocutor initially denies but comes around to accepting at some point in the dialogue. The reason he earlier

denied this is because of his previous obliviousness; at which point, we would say he is at the stage of oblivion, at which the only appropriate response when question about the thesis would have been “I don’t know.” His initial denial was not then grounded in any substantive epistemological certainty. When yet in this state, he can be said to be in a state “of weakness of discernment.” He is not yet in a position to grasp the “whole” of what is set forth to him. At this point, to use the language of the *Soliloquies*, the truth of thesis remains yet buried in oblivion.

How then is the student to proceed? Ideally the student has an instructor who can ask the right questions in order to *prompt* the student to consider the whole incrementally, through parts presently intelligible to the student. These parts, presently intelligible to the student, clearly take us into the second stage of recollection, where the student possess at the very least the power of discrimination. Ideally, the teacher teaches to use Augustine’s words, as one having been taught. Because of this, the teacher himself knows the way, so to speak, to full understanding of what is under consideration. He knows all its proper parts, what is subordinate to what and what is coordinate, all of which are necessary to understanding that whole that is under consideration. The adroit teacher, then, is able to discern where the student is on the path, so as to lead him toward full understanding.

Unavoidably, dialectic must begin with the beliefs of the student. Without the cognitive state of belief, the Learner’s Paradox remains insoluble. For the aid of the reader, I will quote the paradox in full:

This is a truthful and solid argument: when words are spoken we either know what they signify or we don’t; if we know, then it’s reminding rather than learning; but if we don’t know, it isn’t even reminding, though perhaps we recollect that we should inquire. (*De Magistro*, 11.36)

The dilemma as stated leaves us with the options that we either know or don't know something with nothing between, and with at least the ostensible conclusion that teachers are pointless. Furthermore, the conclusion seems to deny the possibility of learning or progress in knowledge. Not incidentally, this leads Augustine not much later to state the dictum, quoting the Prophet Isaiah, "Unless you believe you shall not understand" (Isaiah 7:9). Belief for Augustine is a complex cognitive state that has several facets, many of which are explained in Augustine's treatise *De Utilitate Credendi* or *On the Usefulness of Believing*. For our purposes, we will focus strictly on its use insofar as it bears on our topic, recollection and dialectic. Belief here has as its end understanding, a systematic grasp of intelligibles. The crux in solving the paradox—i.e., in opening the way for the possibility of learning—is positing a cognitive state mid-way between complete ignorance and knowledge: this is belief. Some of the beliefs we have are true and some are false, but it is not until they are subjected to dialectic that we can find this out.

Belief, then, provides us the dialectical starting point. And this is indeed the starting point of dialectic in the *De Magistro* as it often is in Platonic dialogues. Augustine is training the mind of his son, Adeodatus, and moving him along the dialectic path towards full comprehension of the thesis under dispute. Augustine does not so much propound doctrines to Adeodatus to be believed. Rather, he begins where Adeodatus is at, with his own beliefs, moving out from there by asking probing questions. After such questioning, we often discover that our beliefs are confused, disorderly, or even contradictory. Many of us if left to our own devices, may never properly attend to these issues unless prompted by another. And this is where the teacher comes in. The teacher is able, having taken inventory of the student's beliefs, perhaps, to ask the right questions so as to cause the student himself to attend to his beliefs in such a way that he might make proper sense out of them, discerning whether or not they are true or false, comport with other beliefs they hold,

or contradict first principles. Not all beliefs are alike, however. Not all beliefs are suitable starting points. For example, Adeodatus at certain points finds the thesis of the dialogue implausible, i.e., that there is no learning from words. As Augustine makes clear in the aforementioned passage, the student at this point when attending to the *whole* of the thesis is in fact unable to do so in any way so as to form a proper judgment, although he may form a hasty opinion as to its falseness or verity. He is simply not as yet in the right epistemic condition to do so.

The proper starting point, therefore, is not just any belief. Rather, they are those beliefs, given our epistemic condition, over which we possess the power of discrimination. At this point, to recall again the passage from the *Soliloquies* about recollection, we know sufficiently what we seek and cannot be deceived concerning it. And so, it is here that we see the second stage of recollection, where the pupil is capable of exercising the power of discrimination, whereas above, where the student rashly forms a judgment concerning the whole (thesis), we see an example the first stage, where the whole matter remains at the moment inaccessible to the learner, buried in oblivion, so to speak. In the case of oblivion, the state of the soul of the inquirer is such that he is not able to discern the truth or falsity of a claim—even if he believes he can. In the second stage of recollection, the object of our inquiry is dialectically accessible. We have the requisite knowledge, the right disposition, such that we are able—perhaps after some prompting—to rightly consider the proper dialectical parts or possibilities of some thesis. Consider Augustine’s own example, given immediately after Augustine’s introduction of the part-whole language given in the quote a few pages above:

For example, if I were to ask you about the very matter at issue, namely whether it’s true that nothing can be taught by words, at first it would seem absurd to you, since you aren’t able to examine it as a whole. It would therefore be necessary to ask you questions suited to your abilities to hear the Teacher within you. Thus I might say: “The things I’m saying that you admit to be truths, and that you’re *certain* of, and that you affirm yourself to

know—where did you learn them?” Maybe you would reply that I had taught them to you. Then I would rejoin: “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?” Surely you would deny it and reply that you do not believe the former statement, or even if you did believe it that you do not know it; whereas you know the latter statement with utter certainty. As a result, you would then understand that you hadn’t learned anything from my words, neither in the former case (where you did not know although I was asserting it) nor in the latter case (where you knew quite well), seeing that when questioned about each case you would swear the former was unknown and the latter known to you. Yet at that point you would be admitting the whole that you had [initially] denied. You came to know that the [parts] in which it consists are *clear* and *certain*—namely, that whatever we say, the hearer either (a) doesn’t know whether it is true; (b) knows that it is false; or (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. We have established that the one who doesn’t know the thing, the one who knows that he has heard falsehoods, and the one who could when questioned have answered precisely what was said, have each clearly learned nothing from my words. (*De Magistro*, 12.40)

Consider first the statement that “wise men are better than fools.” Augustine says that we know this to be true with “utter certainty.” Such a certainty is not grounded in the words of another but is grounded, I will argue, in things previously known. While belief provides the dialectical starting point, it is not the criterion of truth. Augustine does not fill out *why* we know the statement “wise men are better than fools” with utter certainty, but his reasoning can be easily filled out. Keeping in mind my analysis above of the same example,<sup>42</sup> the statement is able to be broken down into smaller constituent parts. Wisdom is a species of virtue and folly of vice. Virtue is a good of the soul. Good is better than evil. This analysis of course cannot go on *ad infinitum*. Understanding each of these parts renders the whole intelligible. Eventually, we must arrive at some principles that cannot themselves be proven, call them what you will, first principles, first truths. It seems that Augustine’s own theory of knowledge presupposes the existence of such principles. This is

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<sup>42</sup> See pp. 32-33.

why in part we are not said to be taught by a teacher, for the knowledge is elicited from the student *ex praecognitis*, from things previously known, similar to how the slave in the *Meno* is taught geometry (*Meno*, 82b-86b). It is on the basis of these previously known things that the student is capable of discriminating truth and falsehood in the second stage of recollection, false suggestions from ones that are on the right track. He has not yet arrived at the truth but cannot be deceived by false suggestions.

If asked the right questions, the student will, step by step, be able to arrive at full knowledge of the truth. This is the third stage of recollection. Consider from above what I believe to be a recapitulation of the Learner's Paradox meant to illustrate Augustine's doctrine. We come to understand that the thesis, that there is no learning from words, is true because we perceived that the constituent parts of the thesis have become clear and certain to us. The student, being properly prepared, rightly disposed, and possessing the requisite knowledge, is now able to understand the whole of what he earlier denied. With respect to the present thesis, we have three options: (a) we either don't know whether the thesis is true; (b) know that it is not true; or (c) know that something is true. In the first case, our only options are that we believe, have an opinion, or doubt something. In case number two, we reject what we know to be false. Thirdly, we, as Augustine says, "bear witness to the truth." If my discussion about recollection in the *De Magistro* has been hitherto opaque, I hope at this point one can see the connection between the *De Magistro* and the theory of recollection in the *Soliloquies*. Each of these three cases quite clearly corresponds to the three stages of recollection. The first stage is that of oblivion. When some potential object of knowledge is tucked away in oblivion, we *cannot* have knowledge or understanding concerning it. The two species of non-understanding for Augustine are belief and opinion; belief is grounded in testimony worthy of our credit and opinion is grounded in some error. This is exactly what Augustine says

in his analysis of (a). In the second stage, Augustine says that we cannot be deceived concerning the truth, though we may not have not yet have it before our mind. If we cannot be deceived, then it follows that we *know* that this or that suggestion is false when offered to us. Again, this is the exact point Augustine is making about (b) above. The last instance is where one “bears witness to the truth.” In this case, we *know* something to be true. Knowing something is the culminative act of learning, which just is recollection, and hence (c) is nothing other than the final stage of recollection.

Of course, the student may not yet be ready for this stage in the dialectic. Therefore, it is important to remember that recollection is always relative to the item of knowledge we are attempting to recollect. Suppose you have a student aspiring to knowledge of high level mathematics, though at present he has no knowledge of mathematics. A good teacher wouldn't dare to teach them haphazardly, but systematically by way of some kind of curriculum. The teacher would presumably begin by teaching the student how to count, then arithmetic, algebra, and so on, upwards towards calculus, and then on to high level mathematics. Though the goal of the student may be some kind of high level discipline of mathematics, he is not at liberty to bypass the inferior levels. And so, these lower levels of mathematics are themselves objects of recollection towards which the student strives. At every level, the light of Truth, so to speak brightens and more and more of the discipline is accessible to our gaze, disinterred from the oblivion and obscurity of its former abode.

In concluding our analysis of the Learner's Paradox and recollection, let us note several things. First, Augustine has advanced that our knowledge proceeds from things previously known while nonetheless admitting the possibility of progress in knowledge or learning. Augustine believes that we somehow contain virtually or eminently in our memory the principles of the

knowledge of all intelligible things. Some of these, first principles, are known with utter certainties, whereas many of our notions or concepts of the other principles or ideas are perhaps confused and disorderly. Progress in knowledge is had by recollection. Recollection is the process whereby we properly order these latent principles by way of dialectic. Dialectic properly divides and distributes these parts into a coherent whole, using those *clear* and *certain* principles as its judges. In a sense, the memory contains virtually or eminently all the knowledge about intelligibles a rational agent could possess, albeit in a hitherto disorganized manner, and it is in this sense that Truth is said to exist in an “undisciplined mind.” When the rational soul has properly ordered these innate principles, the structure of his knowledge now bears resemblance to its archetype, the intelligible structure of the intelligible world, in virtue of which his soul can be said to be enlightened. Second, notice how even in the passage above the *De Magistro* is a performative act of the very theory of recollection. The student having come to understand with clarity and certainty the parts of the thesis, now is in a position to understand with conviction, a conviction according to truth, that there is in fact no learning from words. The true teacher was within because one only understands when he grasps the intelligible structure of Truth for himself, something no teacher can impart in any mechanical way. The point, of course, is that this is not just the case with this particular instance of learning in the *De Magistro*, but is in fact how *all* learning takes place.

#### §4 *Conclusion*

A couple things may be said in conclusion. Though many of my interpretations of Augustine’s doctrines may prove inadequate or incomplete, there are several things that can be said in favor of my interpretations. First, I believe it has been proven without doubt that Augustine believes in recollection *and* illumination. Second, and building upon this, they are not competing theories; not only are they compatible, but they are indispensable to Augustine’s epistemology:

Augustine's doctrine of recollection is unintelligible without illumination. And so, my positive contribution, I hope, is not only proving their compatibility, but their complementarity. In doing so, we have made clear certain aspects of the nature of each. Illumination may be more, but it is at the very least not *less* than that intelligible light which renders all intelligible objects intelligible; it is their principle of unity and intelligible structure. Recollection is not the theory that we merely have forgotten the intelligible objects and need but strive to remember them. Recollection involves the application of dialectic to structure the knowledge of the rational soul, such that its own structure images that of the intelligible world. This starting point of inquiry and recollection requires the subjection of the interlocutor's beliefs to dialectical tests. Though the teacher may greatly avail the student through skillful prompting, ultimately understanding is an act proper to each learner. No one can learn for you. The student, rightly disposed, must draw from his own resources within to arrive at understanding. In doing so, he will discover that the teacher is not he who sounds without, but he who dwells in the inner man, proving indeed that there is no learning from words.

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