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# THE STRUCTURE OF THE DE MAGISTRO

Journal of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, 15 (1989), 120-127

... to diverse judgments about the basic thesis (even apart from the fact that the latter is so brief that it is almost impossible to describe it in a few words, whereas the former is so long that it is almost impossible to describe it in a few words).

... to divide the dialogue into two parts, the first of which is concerned with language and the second with the question of teaching. This is the structure of the conversation which Augustine sets out in the opening paragraphs of the dialogue ( §§ 1-37). But this is not the structure of the conversation as a whole, for the latter is divided into three parts by taking these three paragraphs as the starting-point. The first part of the conversation is concerned with the question of teaching and the second with the question of language. The third part of the conversation is concerned with the question of the nature of the sign. This is the structure of the conversation as a whole, and it is this structure which I shall try to show is the simplest, most logical and indicated in the text.

Journal of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, 21 (1975), p. 63.

## The structure of the *De magistro*

The interpretation of the *De magistro* has given rise to diverse judgments about the division and import of its parts, despite general agreement on the basic thesis of the dialogue. The latter agreement is not surprising, since (even apart from the conclusion stated in the text) Augustine himself in the *Retractationes* tells us what the purpose of the conversation is — although his description there is so brief that it seems little else can be learned from it :

« ...in quo disputatur et quaeritur, et invenitur, magistrum non esse, qui docet hominem scientiam, nisi Deum...<sup>1</sup> »

This brief characterization can tempt the reader to divide the dialogue into two sections : the discussion in which it is found that there is no teacher of *scientiam* except Christ, the inner light (§ 38 ff.), and everything preceding it (§§ 1-37). This is the division which F.J. Thonnard in fact made in his translation for the Bibliothèque Augustinienne.<sup>2</sup>

G. Madec, beginning by taking his bearings from the structure of the conversation itself as distinguished from its content, found « deux points de repère d'ordre formel », namely the summary by Adeodatus (§§ 19-20, with Augustine's comments § 21) and the transition to the *oratio perpetua* of Augustine (§ 32)<sup>3</sup>. But having noted that B.R. Voss divided the dialogue into three parts by taking these two reference points as transitions<sup>4</sup>, Madec reminds us that the « objet propre » of the book is the thesis of the interior Teacher, « comme on peut le vérifier en lisant...les *Retractationes* », and decides that the first part of the *oratio perpetua* — prior to the introduction of the thesis of the interior Teacher at § 38 — should be relegated to « l'entretien préparatoire ». Hence he rejoins Thonnard in beginning the second part of the text with § 38.

1. *Retractationes*, 1.12.

2. *Oeuvres de Saint Augustin*, vol. VI, (Paris 1941), p. 15, 103.

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not given more words (chap. 2). Adeodatus is dubious about whether this is possible without using some kind of signs (e.g. gestures), but Augustine gets him to agree that perhaps some actions, under certain conditions, can be shown in response to a « what is... » question (e.g. « what is walking » – provided one is not walking when the question is asked) (chap. 3).

At this point (beginning of chap. 4), the substantive part of the dialogue begins, with a threefold division of the topic. Understanding this division and its subsequent implementation is crucial :

« Cum ergo

[1] de quibusdam signis quaeritur, possunt signis signa monstrari

[2] cum autem de rebus quae signa non sunt [quaeritur],

[2a] aut eas agendo post inquisitionem si agi possunt,

[2b] aut signa dando per quae animadverti queant. »

There are three possible cases, divided into two alternatives. If we are asked about signs, they can be shown by signs ; if on the other hand we are asked about things which are not signs, they can be shown either by doing them after being asked, if they are the sort of things which can be enacted ; or (if they are not) they can be shown by giving signs which direct attention to the things.

This threefold division commands the whole of the remainder of the dialogue. Part [1] is discussed from §§ 4.7 to 8.21, and concluded by a summary of what has been determined and some reflections (on the meaning of what has transpired) by Augustine. Part [2a] is discussed from §§ 8.22 to 10.32, and concluded by a summary and again some reflections by Augustine. Part [2b] is discussed from §§ 10.33 to 14.46, and concluded by a summary and some reflections by Adeodatus.

Each of the three divisions arrives at a conclusion about signs and showing. The conclusions may be stated as follows :

[1] some things (namely, signs)<sup>9</sup> can be shown by signs

[2a] some things can be shown without signs (namely, actions and natural things)

[2b] no thing can be shown by its sign (i.e. its name)

It may appear that [1] and [2b] are inconsistent, but they are not, because [1] is about signs and not natural things, and because [2b] is about the proper name of a thing (*sua signa* : § 10.33). There is, so to speak, an ontological gap between the proper name or sign of something and the thing itself : the sign (signifier) is one thing, what it signifies is another.

But, as the discussion of the first division makes abundantly clear, there is a proper subset of signs which are mutually signifying. Indeed, the whole point of

9. Augustine is careful, I believe, never to speak of signs as things (*res*) in the discussion of the first division. I have used the English term here for the sake of bringing out the similarity and difference of the three conclusions.

that discussion is to discriminate such a subset. Adeodatus summarizes (§ 7.20) what they have learned :

1. there are signs of signs which are non-symmetrical and irreflexive : they cannot be signified by the signs they themselves signify – e.g. « conjunction ».

2. there are signs which are symmetrical (mutually signifying) but whose logical extension is different – e.g. « sign » and « word ».

3. there are signs which are symmetrical and whose extension is the same, but whose meaning is different – e.g. « word » and « name ».

4. there are signs which are symmetrical and whose extension is the same and whose meaning is the same – e.g. « name » and « nom ».

5. finally, the quick-witted Adeodatus now notices that in the case of 2, 3, and 4, not only are such signs symmetrical, but (as we would say, by transitivity) they must also be reflexive, i.e. must also signify themselves. Hence there is no « ontological gap » in these cases, and that is why some signs can show what they signify : because they signify themselves.

After this summary by Adeodatus, Augustine comments that the younger interlocutor cannot yet see the relevance and importance of this topic of signs signifying signs, but that he should be patient and trust his father. We who have read the dialogue see that relevance : what Augustine is aiming toward in part three of the discussion is the thesis that signs of things cannot show what they signify, unlike these distinctive signs of signs. So it is not that signs can never show what they signify – these signs can – but that signs of things cannot similarly show what they signify.

The discussion now turns (§ 8.22) to the second alternative to be considered, and it is this section which has proven to be the most misleading for interpreters. Augustine says :

« Age, iam ergo illam partem consideremus, signis non alia signa significantur, sed ea quae significabilia vocamus. »

This is the second use of « consideremus » : the first marked the beginning of the discussion of the first division<sup>10</sup>. Here we are beginning the second alternative. But as we have noted, the second alternative has two subdivisions, and before Augustine begins the examination of either of those, he has to identify and set aside an ambiguity which is in principle always present in talking about *significabilia*.

First (*primum*), he says, tell me *utrum homo homo sit*. The issue hidden in this straightforward-looking question takes Adeodatus some time to get a firm grasp on (§§ 8.22-24). Between the use of signs to signify signs and the use of signs to

10. Cf. 4.7 : « In hac igitur tripartita distributione prius illud consideremus, si placet, quod signis signa monstrantur... »



signify things there is a possible use of signs which has thus far not come into view: the sign may not signify another (sign or thing) at all, but merely show itself, as a sound. Then the question above could be taken in something like the following sense: Tell me whether the two syllables « ho » and « mo » are the two syllables « ho » and « mo »<sup>11</sup>?

The reason why this always-possible construal does not normally occur to us is that there is a *regula loquendi* which naturally prevails in speaking, namely that our attention is spontaneously directed to what is signified rather than to the sign. Why does the distinction of this way of taking signs arise only here, with the beginning of the discussion of the second alternative? Because, as Adeodatus notes (§ 8.23), in the consideration of the first division, the sign and the thing signified were the same, and so the possibility of our attention going exclusively to one or the other did not arise.

Normally also, the semantic context indicates which way of signifying is intended by the speaker (i.e. whether the sign is to be taken as signifying itself as a sign or as signifying a thing).

This possible ambiguity having been distinguished and set aside, Augustine resumes the inquiry into the second alternative, i.e. [2]. Recall that we are considering the alternative where signs do not signify other signs, but rather where signs signify what we are calling *significabilia*; more specifically, we are considering how the latter can be shown.

Augustine says he now (§ 9.25) wants Adeodatus to understand (*Iam ego intelligas volo*) that the knowledge of things signified is always to be ranked above signs, because signs exist for the sake of knowing and not vice versa. For example, we do not teach in order to speak but we speak in order to teach. Such being the case, if it should turn out that we can teach without signs, so much the better. Signs will then be only a regular condition but not a necessary condition of teaching.

Can we in fact teach anything without using signs? It is only at the end of § 9.28 that the discussion reaches this core of the inquiry into the second part of the threefold division. Augustine's language makes it clear that we are not beginning a new division, but proceeding along the same path:

« Quare iam illud magis magisque discutiamus, quale sit genus rerum quas sine signis monstrari posse dicebamus per seipsas... »

The tentative summary (§ 10.31) recapitulates the conclusions of this section of the dialogue: 1) nothing is taught without signs, the result reached in §§ 10.29-30; 2) knowledge is preferable to signs, 3) if not always to things themselves (from §§ 9.25-28). (The clarification of the possible ambiguity of taking signs as

11. Note that for this to be a *question*, the other words (« utrum...sit ») have to be taken as signifying. Otherwise, as Augustine points out, we would only have a string of syllables, i.e. of sounds.

syllables is not mentioned, because what it did was to set aside a possible misunderstanding rather than to advance the inquiry). Augustine adds some reflections on the danger in such an inquiry where we are criticizing and rejecting opinions previously held: the danger that one may fall into a distrust of even the most clearly manifest truth. For now he leads Adeodatus to see that what the latter had agreed to before, namely that nothing can be shown without signs, is false. Not only can men exhibit certain actions in response to a question about those actions – given sufficient intelligence in the questioner – but God and nature show us (*ostendit*) thousands of things without any signs.

So the conclusion of the second division [2a] is that many, many things can be shown without signs, and that men can do this in respect to human actions, while God and nature do this with respect to the things of nature.

The third part of the threefold division – *aut signa dando per quae animadverti queant* – begins with the *oratio continua* of § 10.33. The first two parts began with the word *consideremus*: the third and last occurrence of that word comes at the beginning of § 10.33. This section begins with the thesis that nothing is taught (i.e. shown) by its proper sign, *sua signa*, its *nomen*. And the reason for that is that the knowledge of the thing is not only independent of its sign, but is necessarily prior to the sign being a sign, i.e. being (in the case of a word) a sound capable of signifying.

That priority being established, Augustine goes on to show how men can draw our attention to things present or remembered by using words. And this, as he has already remarked in § 1.1, is a kind of teaching, and a very important kind, which consists in reminding people of something<sup>12</sup>. So we can be taught, in this sense, to know (*scire*), but this kind of teaching and knowing is of external things, of individual things or kinds of things. Moreover, for this kind of teaching and learning, no reference to the interior Teacher is necessary.

But when it comes to understanding (*intelligere*) the truth of the universal essential relations of things signified, neither can man exhibit these by his actions nor are they shown by God and nature in the world. We can indeed by our words direct the attention of the mind to such significations, but only because they have been shown by an inner light, by the light of truth which illumines the inner man. In this case it is beyond our power and beyond the power of external nature to show or exhibit or manifest the realities signified.

The only things which our words about intelligible things can accomplish by themselves – and this only under certain favorable circumstances – is to exhibit what the speaker is thinking. But this is not what we normally call teaching. In a wonderful phrase which should be carved over the doorway of every school, Augustine says:

12. « At ego puto esse quoddam genus docendi per commemorationem, magnum sane, quod in hac nostra sermocinatione res ipsa indicabit. » *Loc. cit.*

« Nam quis tam stulte curiosus est, qui filium suum mittat in scholam, ut quid magister cogitet discat? »

In the last section of the dialogue, Adeodatus summarizes what the words of Augustine's *oratio perpetua* have alerted him to see — to see for himself, illumined by the interior Teacher. And he then reflects on the meaning of what he has learned, in words which recall the then-enigmatic statement of Augustine in § 8.22 about God as the goal of their inquiry into signs.

I have tried to show that the *De magistro* is divided clearly and logically into three parts, following the threefold division of § 4.7: how we can respond to questions about [1] signs, by showing (teaching) them by signs (§§ 4.7-8.21), and to questions about things signified [2a] by showing the things without signs (§§ 8.22-10.32) or [2b] by giving signs which direct attention to the things (§§ 10.33-14.46). Wijdeveld and Madec both employ this threefold division, but they take [2a] and [2b] to be dealt with in what I have argued is only part [2a]. This requires Madec to invert the order of the last two divisions to make any sense of the text: he takes the third division (my [2b]) to be discussed in §§ 8.22-9.28, and the second division (my [2a]) in §§ 10.29-30. So far as I can see, he gives no reason for this inverted order.

There are at least four logical reasons for the division which has been proposed here. First, [2b] (§§ 10.33-14.46) eminently instantiates the third part of the threefold division: *signa dando per quae animadverti queant*. Second, it sets apart the *oratio perpetua* by itself as forming a single coherent division. Third, the conclusion of § 10.32 is clearly the end of the second division (this is what leads Madec to invert the order of [2b] and [2a]). Fourth, it takes account of the indication of the *consideremus* as occurring only at the *incipit* of each of the divisions<sup>13</sup>.

Reading the dialogue in this way also makes clearer, I think, that its argument cannot be summarized adequately by saying that Christ is the only teacher of man. What Christ alone teaches, as the *Retractationes* says, is *scientiam*. But if to teach is to show, to exhibit, to manifest, then even apart from being capable of teaching by giving signs that draw attention to things signified, each of the divisions concludes that men can show or exhibit [1] signs by signs, [2a] actions by performing them, and [2b] their thoughts by words. None of these indeed are important for the *vita beata* (§ 8.21) which is understanding the Truth taught interiorly by Christ, the teaching that responds to the human heart's desire.

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13. There are, if I am not mistaken, nine other occurrences of forms of *considerare*: *considera*, 3.5; *considerare*, 4.7 and 6.17; *consideratione*, 8.23; *consideres*, 9.28; *considerans*, 10.29; *consideratis*, 10.31; *considerant*, 14.45; and *consideretur*, 14.46. To give any significance to this observation is to attribute to Augustine a care in composition of which I believe he was quite capable.

SUMMARY: The dialogue *De magistro* has commonly been divided by editors and commentators into two fundamental parts: a conversation with Adeodatus on the signs of language and on what they signify, and then, as the crux of the work, a discussion (or rather an *oratio perpetua* by Augustine) on Christ as the Interior Teacher. This essay argues that the dialogue is more properly divided into the three parts indicated in § 4.7. One of the conclusions which follows from this division is that men can teach in the strict sense of the word, namely showing or exhibiting what is signified, but that Christ alone teaches scientiam.