

## INTRODUCTION

Augustine’s early works *Against the Academicians* (386) and *The Teacher* (389) belong together. In the former, which is directed at Cicero’s *Academica*, he defends the possibility of knowledge against the skeptical arguments of the New Academy;<sup>1</sup> in the latter, directed at Plato’s *Meno*, he offers his theory of illumination to explain how knowledge is acquired. As a pair, they present Augustine’s alternative to the pose of ironical detachment fashionable among late Roman intellectuals.

In late antiquity, philosophy was more a way of life than an academic discipline. Philosophers were organized into schools (*secta*), each with a venerable tradition and its own worldview—one that included specific arguments and points of view as well as positions on such major questions of general interest as the number of stars in the heavens and the nature of God. Some philosophical schools also held esoteric doctrines that were revealed in secret to a novice after he had served the requisite apprenticeship. Philosophers often lived together in communities, adhered to the dictates of a common rule based on their doctrines, and wore distinctive clothing (the philosopher’s mantle) to indicate the school of philosophy to which they belonged. It was not uncommon for people to “withdraw from the world” to pursue philosophy—especially if they had experienced a conversion of some sort. Thus philosophical schools were to all intents and purposes like religious orders.

In Augustine’s view, (Christian) religion and (Platonist) philosophy were engaged in the same enterprise, namely the quest for knowledge: “Just as the Hebrews were prepared for Christianity by the law and the prophets, so too the Gentiles were prepared by Plato and Aristotle. And just as Christianity is the fulfillment of the Old Covenant, so too it is the fulfillment of Greek philosophy.”<sup>2</sup> The difference between them is that Christian doctrine succeeds where unaided platonism fails. Hence Augustine could summarize his views as follows:

I’ve renounced all the other things that mortal men think to be good and proposed to devote myself to searching for wisdom. . . no one doubts that we’re prompted to learn by the twin forces of authority and reason. Therefore, I’m resolved not to depart from the authority of Christ on any score whatsoever: I find no more

<sup>1</sup> Augustine identifies the ‘New Academy’ as the successors of Plato who endorsed skepticism: see *Against the Academicians* 2.5.13–2.6.15.

<sup>2</sup> Spade [1985] Chapter 7.

powerful [authority]. As for what is to be sought out by the most subtle reasoning—for my character is such that I’m impatient in my desire to apprehend what the truth is not only by belief but also by understanding—I’m still confident that I’m going to find it with the Platonists, and that it won’t be opposed to our Holy Writ. [*Against the Academicians* 3.20.43.12–24]

Truth is one, however. It is reached through authority by means of belief and through reason (philosophy) by means of understanding. Philosophy thus proceeds autonomously to attain whatever truth it can. But the internal Teacher<sup>3</sup> is the final arbiter of truth regardless of its source. When Augustine says, then, that he will devote himself “to searching for wisdom,” he is committing himself to a life of philosophizing along platonist lines in the service of Christianity.

In support of this vision of the philosophical way of life, Augustine could look back to a long tradition of christian platonism: Simplicianus and Ambrose in Milan, Marius Victorinus before that, and Origen and Justin Martyr earlier still. Moreover, his apparently extravagant claims for platonism were largely in keeping with a philosophical consensus that was already a century old, for philosophical inquiry over the ages had reached the conclusion that platonism—especially of the sort defended by Plotinus – was the correct view. (Philosophical thought in Augustine’s day “was ‘post-Plotinian’, much as that of our own age is ‘post-Freudian’.”<sup>4</sup>) That is why Augustine does not draw a sharp distinction between philosophy in general and platonist philosophy in particular.

The consensus on platonism, combined with the view that Christianity is platonism perfected, led Augustine to adopt a tolerantly dismissive attitude toward most other philosophical schools: the Peripatetics really have the same system as the Platonists, one that leads to Christianity when improved by philosophical argument; the Cynics can be dismissed because of their

<sup>3</sup> The ‘internal Teacher’ is Christ operating within us to provide knowledge: this is the core of Augustine’s theory of illumination, discussed in *The Teacher*.

<sup>4</sup> Brown [1967] 102. Augustine describes this consensus in concluding his survey of the history of philosophy in *Against the Academicians* 3.18.41–3.19.42.10: “Plato’s visage, which is the most pure and bright in philosophy, shone forth once the clouds of error had been dispelled—and above all in Plotinus. This Platonic philosopher is considered to be so like Plato that they seem to have lived at the same time. . . there is, in my opinion, one system of really true philosophy. It has finally emerged after many centuries and many controversies, because there have been acute and clever men who taught in their disputations that Aristotle and Plato agree with each other (although they did so in such a way that to the unskilled and inattentive they seemed to disagree).”

lax morality, and the Stoics and the Epicureans dismissed because of their materialism.

Yet there was one philosophical school that claimed to hold no doctrines and that criticized other schools—including the Platonists—for their dogmatism, namely the Academicians. Standing apart from the clash of dogmatic philosophies, these thinkers prided themselves on their restraint and detachment, and on their avoidance of the error into which others had raced headlong. In addition, their school had the sanction of Cicero, who was venerated as the Latin master of literary, legal, rhetorical, and philosophical writing. The late Roman intellectual who claimed to be a Ciceronian skeptic must have been a familiar sight.

Thus for Augustine the live options were Ciceronian irony and philosophical commitment. In his early works they are what engage his philosophical interest.

When Augustine became disillusioned with Manichaeism in 383, he despaired of finding the truth and went through a period of being a skeptic.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, he had an insider's knowledge of skepticism, though he never apprenticed himself to any skeptical school. Eventually his reading of "platonist books" convinced him that skepticism was mistaken. In 386 he resigned as court rhetorician, broke off his engagement to be married, gave up life on the fast track, and went in philosophical retirement to a country-house in Cassiciacum.<sup>6</sup> *Against the Academicians* is the first fruit

<sup>5</sup> Some scholars have questioned this claim, pointing out that from Augustine's autobiographical remarks in *The Happy Life* 1.4 (Appendix 1) and *Confessions* 5.14.25 (Appendix 5), for example, all we may infer is that Augustine was impressed by the Academicians, not that he was an adherent of their doctrines; his "despair at finding the truth" (*desperatio veri inveniendi*), as described in *Against the Academicians* 2.1.1, *Revisions* 1.1.1 (Appendix 11), and *Enchiridion* 7.20 (Appendix 7), need not involve any philosophical allegiance to the Academicians. Yet Augustine was more than sympathetic to them. He writes in —sl *Against the Academicians* 3.15.34.17–20 (emphasis added): "When in my retirement in the country I had been pondering for a long time just how the plausible or the truthlike can defend our actions from error, at first the matter seemed to me nicely protected and fortified, as it usually seemed *when I was peddling it*." Augustine thus defended the view of the Academicians, and did so publicly. This conclusion is reinforced by such remarks as *Confessions* 5.10.19: "There also arose in me the thought that the philosophers called the Academicians had been more prudent than the rest, since they held that everything should be doubted, and made the amount of truth that man is able to apprehend disappear." It is understandable that Augustine should later want to minimize his attachment to the Academicians, as he does in *Confessions* 5.14.25, but we need not follow his example.

<sup>6</sup> Verecundus lent his villa at Cassiciacum, near Milan, to Augustine. But since Augustine did not have the wealth to support himself, he had to take in private pupils

of this retirement, containing, among other things, Augustine's explanation of why he abandoned public life. It is a manifesto written by a former skeptic presenting himself for the first time as a platonist and a christian.

Book 1 is devoted to a debate between Licentius, an Academician, and Trygetius, a non-Academician, about the merits of their respective ways of life. Despite many digressions, which justify Augustine's later characterization of their discussion as "elementary" (1.9.25.39–43), they do manage to explore a challenging topic, namely the nature of happiness and the bearing of error and wisdom on it. But the main business of the dialogue begins in Book 2, with Augustine's own detailed exploration of skepticism and its development within the Academy.

Augustine takes the core of skepticism to consist in two theses, first formulated by Arcesilaus and justified in a particular way.<sup>7</sup> These theses are:

- (1) Nothing can be known.
- (2) Assent should always be withheld.

(1) was justified by appeal to Zeno's account of truthful perception. Zeno claimed that a perception is truthful when (a) it accurately reflects the way the world is, and (b) it could not be caused by anything other than its actual cause. The skeptics argued that (a) could not be satisfied because things are naturally obscure and so cannot be accurately represented, and that (b) could not be satisfied because things may resemble each other too closely to be reliably distinguished as causes. If (a) and (b) could be satisfied, why, they asked, would there be so many errors and disagreements? They concluded that since no perceptions satisfy (a) and (b), nothing can be known. (2) was then derived from (1) with the aid of two other premises:

- (3) The wise man should not risk error.
- (4) Giving assent to what is not known risks error.

in addition to members of his household. He introduces most of his companions in *The Happy Life* 1.6.139–146: "In the first place there was our mother [Monnica], to whose merit, I believe, I owe all that I am; my brother Navigius; Trygetius and Licentius, fellow-citizens and my students; my cousins Lartidianus and Rusticus—although they had not even been trained in grammar, I didn't want them to be absent, for I thought their common sense necessary to the enterprise I was attempting. My son Adeodatus was also with us. He was the youngest of all, but his abilities promise something great (if my love doesn't blind me!)." Another member of the household was Alypius, Augustine's close friend who had followed him into retirement and who took a leading role in most of the dialogues written at Cassiciacum, including *Against the Academicians*.

<sup>7</sup> Augustine's presentation of skeptical doctrine relies heavily on Cicero. The doctrine, as well as its historical development, is more complex than Augustine makes it out to be. See the Recommended Reading for more information about ancient skepticism.

Two refinements were later made to this core skeptical position by Carneades. First, (1) was restricted to philosophical or theoretical matters; it didn't apply to ordinary everyday concerns. Understanding (1) in this restricted way enabled the skeptic to avoid many of the more offensively counterintuitive consequences of his position. For example, he could now claim to know that he was not a bug!

The second refinement came about as follows. It was objected to (2) that if one assents to nothing, one also will never do anything. Carneades replied that a skeptic can be guided in his actions by “what is plausible (*probabile*)” or “what is truthlike (*verisimile*).”<sup>8</sup> In other words, he adopted the following thesis:

(5) The wise man follows the plausible or truthlike.

Thus the new refined Academician emerges as above all an anti-dogmatist—iconoclastic as regards competing explanatory theories, careful to believe no more than the evidence warrants, free of philosophical commitments. He can comment on other philosophical systems, relieved of the burden of having to defend any himself.

Augustine's arguments against this skeptical position are a mixed bag. His main contention is an attack on the relative plausibility of (1)—he argues at length that it's at least as plausible that the truth can be found as that it cannot<sup>9</sup>—but his conclusion depends on rejecting the distinction between ‘Jones knows that *p*’ and ‘It seems to Jones that he knows that *p*’. Philosophers have found Augustine's supplementary attempt in *Against the Academicians* to identify instances of genuine knowledge more promising. He identifies three kinds of knowledge impervious to skeptical doubts. First, there are logical truths, and in particular disjunctive truths, about the world: we know, for instance, that either it is raining or it is not raining. We know the truth of such disjunctions even without knowing which

<sup>8</sup> See the Remarks on the Translations regarding these technical terms.

<sup>9</sup> Augustine describes to Alypius in 2.13.30.34–43 the conclusion he wants to establish: “Therefore, the question between us is whether the arguments [of the Academicians] make it plausible that nothing can be perceived and that one should not assent to anything. Now if you prevail, I'll gladly yield. Yet if I can demonstrate that it's much more plausible that the wise man be able to attain the truth and that assent need not always be withheld, then you'll have no reason, I think, for refusing to come over to my view.” Earlier, in 2.3.8.39–40, Augustine says that he wants to persuade Romanianus that his views against the Academicians are plausible. He states the conclusion of his argument in 3.5.12.43–44 in the same terms—“It's enough for me that it's no longer plausible that the wise man knows nothing.” He emphasizes several more times that this is his conclusion: 3.14.30.20–21, 3.14.31.45–49, and at the close of his monologue (3.20.43.2–3). See Heil [1972] and Mosher [1981] for the importance of this fact.

of the disjuncts is true, if the disjuncts are mutually exclusive and exhaustive.<sup>10</sup> Second, there are pure appearance-claims. Rather than asserting that something is the case I can say that it *seems to me* to be the case, and such propositions are directly known to be true. While “There is a book in front of me” may be false, the pure appearance-claim “It seems to me that there is a book in front of me” is unaffected by the unreliability of sense-perception and perceptual illusion, the possibilities that one is dreaming or insane, and so on.<sup>11</sup> Pure appearance-claims, Augustine tells us, are all that perceptual knowledge ever warrants, and we cannot go wrong if we restrict ourselves to what seems to us to be so. Third, there are mathematical truths, which are also independent of sense-perception. They hold whether one is dreaming or awake, hallucinating or clear-headed. (The account of how we know these non-perceptual truths is given in *The Teacher*.) In his later works Augustine adds a fourth kind of indubitable knowledge, anticipating Descartes, namely the knowledge that one exists and that one is alive, even in the teeth of skeptical challenges: “If I am deceived, I exist” (*Si fallor, sum*)—see Appendices 6–8.

Augustine concludes his discussion in *Against the Academicians* by asking how anyone could take skepticism seriously when all one has to say to a skeptic is: “It seems to me that someone can know the truth” (3.16.36.60–62). He reasons that the Academicians were too clever not to have recognized the force of this refutation, and, therefore, they could not have held the skepticism they publicly professed. In fact they held a secret doctrine, namely platonism!<sup>12</sup> His inference was no doubt credible in a world of war-

<sup>10</sup> If the skeptic objects that we have to know that the disjunctions are exclusive and exhaustive, Augustine can reply that this is determined by their logical form. If the skeptic charges that truths about the world presuppose the existence of the world, which is not itself known, Augustine replies that he calls ‘world’ whatever seems to appear to him—so there is no substantive presupposition at stake here.

<sup>11</sup> Apparently the skeptical arguments relied a great deal on undermining the trustworthiness of sense-perception. Augustine begins his discussion of knowledge in *The Trinity* 15.12.21 (Appendix 6) by pointing this out and then setting aside sense-perception as a source of knowledge; he does likewise in *The City of God* 11.26 (Appendix 8). However, he notes that the senses are not so unreliable as the skeptic makes them seem: an oar partially submerged in the water ‘appears’ bent—but, Augustine adds, that’s precisely how a straight oar *should* look in the water, and the same could be said for many other cases (3.11.26.46–56).

<sup>12</sup> Augustine is careful to say that he does not *know* this to be the case but only *thinks* it to be so (3.17.37.3–4); it is a view he finds plausible, but none of the philosophical points he has been making depends on it (3.20.43.1–3). He apparently held this view for the rest of his life. It is the topic of his first extant letter (translated in Appendix 3). And writing to Dioscurus in 410/411, more than twenty years after completing

ring philosophical sects some of whom did have secret doctrines, but it has found no support among modern scholars.

The upshot of *Against the Academicians*, then, is that knowledge is possible. In *The Teacher* Augustine explains how knowledge is acquired by means of a philosophically improved ‘christianized’ version of Plato’s theory of recollection, known as the theory of illumination.

According to Plato’s theory of recollection, all instances of learning are merely apparent. Learning is in reality the soul’s “recollection” (ἀνάμνησις: ‘un-forgetting’) of truths it already possesses: recollection is “recovering knowledge by oneself that is in oneself” (*Meno* 85d4 and 85d6–7).<sup>13</sup> Plato supports his theory of recollection by the vivid example of the dialogue between Socrates and a slave, complete with a running commentary to *Meno* (82b–85b). Socrates sets the slave, who is ignorant of geometry, the problem of constructing a square with an area twice the size of a given square. The slave suggests that a square with sides of double length will have twice the area; recognizing his mistake, however, he proceeds to generate the correct construction, which is obvious from simple diagrams. During the conversation the slave has come to see why his first answer is wrong and why the correct answer is correct. Socrates later tells us that beliefs, even true beliefs, are “not worth much until they are tied down by reasoning about the explanation (αἰτίας λογισμῶ)—and this is recollection, as we previously agreed” (*Meno* 98a3–5).<sup>14</sup> The slave has acquired knowledge by coming to understand the reasons behind the proof. And that, as Plato concludes, is a process internal to the slave.

*Against the Academicians*, Augustine declares that “the Academicians held the same views as the Platonists” and narrates a compressed version of the history recited in *Against the Academicians* 3.17.37–3.19.42 (*Letter* 118.16–21). He concludes his survey there as follows (118.20.22–28): “Therefore, since the Platonists held views of the sort that couldn’t be taught to men given to carnal pleasures, and since they didn’t have great enough authority among the people to persuade them that their [platonist] views ought to be believed, then, until the spirit is brought to take hold of what had captured them, they chose to hide their doctrine and to argue against those who claimed that they had found the truth, since these men postulated the very discovery of truth in the bodily senses.” The Academicians, therefore, embraced skepticism as a defense against the ‘empirical’ schools of philosophy!

<sup>13</sup> Plato argues that such knowledge must have been acquired by the soul before its present incarnation in this life; Augustine, though he remained neutral on the possibility of the soul’s pre-existence, finds the latter part of this doctrine dispensable and, accordingly, he dispenses with it.

<sup>14</sup> Socrates remarks at 85d7–e1 that if the slave-boy were interrogated “many times and in many ways,” in the end “his knowledge would be as accurate as anyone’s.” See Nehamas [1985] for an account of recollection.

Plato and Augustine do not hesitate to draw the consequences of this insight. Whatever ‘grasping reasons’ may be it is not the result of an external causal process: some students in the classroom understand the teacher’s explanation of the proof and some students don’t; the difference is internal to each student, not found in their identical external circumstances.<sup>15</sup> Teaching as it is usually understood, namely as a process by which knowledge is transferred from one person to another, is therefore not possible.<sup>16</sup> Learning is a purely internal matter. Consider the following example. You recite to yourself the steps of a mathematical proof while attempting to understand it, but without understanding it: you’re merely parroting the proof. Yet in thinking it through you suddenly have a flash of insight and see how the proof works—you comprehend it, and thereby recognize its truth. There is a real difference between your situation while not understanding the proof and your situation after understanding it. We commonly describe this difference with visual metaphors—the ‘flash’ of insight, ‘seeing’ the truth, ‘enlightenment’, and so on. Augustine calls it *illumination*.<sup>17</sup> It is an internal event whereby we ‘see’ the truth.<sup>18</sup> The power that reveals the truth to us, Augustine maintains, is Christ as the Teacher operating within us (*The Teacher* 11.38). The very understanding we have testifies to God’s presence in the world, since the mind is illuminated with knowledge by the inner Teacher.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> It doesn’t help to say that the difference is in the intelligence of the receptive students (an attempt to resurrect the causal account): intelligence may be what allows people to grasp the truths they do grasp, but their grasp of truths is and remains a purely internal matter.

<sup>16</sup> This characterization of ‘teaching’ is not limited to formal teaching situations. It is broad enough to cover any transfer of information. See n. 19 below.

<sup>17</sup> Augustine, following Plato, explains the metaphor of illumination as involving the direct grasp of special objects (*i. e.* Forms) in a public realm only accessible to the mind. Plato held that this took place prior to the soul’s incarnation; Augustine, that it happens during this life—see Book 2 of *The Free Choice of the Will*. Augustine’s account of illumination is the distant but direct ancestor of Descartes’s ‘natural light of reason’.

<sup>18</sup> This formulation is neutral on the disputed question whether for Augustine illumination is that by means of which we are able to exercise our cognitive powers to grasp the truth (as sunlight is that by means of which we can exercise our perceptual faculties to see objects) or the actual comprehension of the truth itself (as seeing itself grasps objects). There are texts on both sides of the question, and *The Teacher* does not resolve it. The same ambiguity pervades our everyday metaphors: in a “flash of insight,” the flash is like something we see by, whereas the insight is like the seeing itself.

<sup>19</sup> The theory of illumination is at its most plausible with mathematics, where the objects

Plato presents us with the dialogue between Socrates and the slave in the *Meno* to draw attention to such underlying issues, but he undermines his case. When Socrates emphasizes to Meno that he isn't telling the slave anything but merely asking questions (*Meno* 82e2–3 and 84d1–2), generations of readers have immediately countered with the objection that information can be conveyed through leading questions.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, so the objection goes, Socrates does teach the slave—that is, he provides him with knowledge he did not previously possess: Socrates *transfers* information to the slave, thinly disguised in interrogative form. Augustine describes this common-sense alternative, the 'information-transference account' of teaching, in his *Homilies on John the Evangelist* 37.4.14–24 (commenting on *John* 8:19) as follows:<sup>21</sup>

When there is an idea in your heart it differs from [any] sound, but the idea that is in you seeks out the sound as though it were a vehicle to come across to me. Therefore it clothes itself in the sound, somehow gets itself into this vehicle, travels through the air, comes to me. . . . You've said what you were thinking and uttered those syllables so that what was hidden inside you would come to me; the sound of the syllables conveys your thought to my ear; through my ear has your thought descended into my heart.

You encode your thoughts into language and utter the appropriate sounds; I hear your utterances, and, knowing the language, I decode them back into ideas. That is how knowledge can be transferred from your mind to mine. Why subscribe to Plato's theory of recollection when the information-transference account explains the mistake in his argument and is plausible

of knowledge are necessary truths that typically deal with ideal objects, such as perfect circles. How far it extends is disputed. (The dispute is exacerbated by disagreement over what should count as knowledge in the first place.) The view that it is fully generalizable to all instances of knowledge is called 'general illumination' and the view that it is needed only for special cases, such as advanced knowledge in the various disciplines, is called 'special illumination'. The scope of divine activity in illumination is also problematical. Does God have to directly act in each instance of knowledge, or merely ordain the world in such a way that humans can be knowers? These matters are discussed in Nash [1969].

<sup>20</sup> According to Plato and to Augustine, the impossibility of teaching has as a consequence that even directly telling the slave the correct answer doesn't count as teaching. This begs the question, of course, if Plato's example is construed as an argument—but that's a good reason for not taking it as an argument at all.

<sup>21</sup> See also *On Christian Doctrine* 2.2.3 (Appendix 10): "The only reason for our signifying, *i. e.* giving signs, is to bring forth and to transfer into another's mind what is happening in the mind of the person giving the sign." In the translation 'idea' renders *verbum*, since Augustine is talking about his theory of the inner mental Word.

in its own right?

Augustine takes on the information-transference account of teaching by offering an analysis of *language*, the medium through which knowledge is said to be transferred. The result of Augustine's semiotic investigations in *The Teacher* is that language is inadequate to the task. We come to know linguistic facts through language—that two words mutually signify one another, say—and we acquire beliefs about nonlinguistic items through language, from the testimony of others. That's all. We can't acquire knowledge about nonlinguistic items through language. Without language to serve as a medium, the information-transference account cannot work, and so Augustine is free to present and argue for his alternative, namely the theory of illumination. Most of *The Teacher* is given over to the analysis of language, including our abilities to know items through language and independently of it. Language, therefore, is the topic of *The Teacher* and explains the structure of the dialogue.<sup>22</sup> The importance of the theory of illumination, and especially of Christ the inner Teacher, shouldn't obscure this fact.

Language, according to Augustine, is a system of *signs*. Signs include a wide range of linguistic and nonlinguistic items: words, inscriptions, gestures, symbols, icons, statues, flags. Three elements are involved: the *sign*, which may be any sort of object; the semantic relation of *signifying*, which is what a sign does, roughly like our notion of meaning; and its *significate*, which is the item signified by the sign.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, a sign signifies its significate—when a word is linked to a thing, the word becomes a sign, the thing its significate; and the linkage is accomplished by the semantic relation of signifying. The paradigm case of signs is proper names: a proper name (sign) names (signifies) its bearer (significate), so that meaning is taken to be a kind of labeling of things.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> I have adopted the analysis of the structure of *The Teacher* presented in Crosson [1989]. Augustine's roundabout method—for which he apologizes in 8.21, and which he explains in 12.40—has pedagogical motivations: his audience must be properly prepared before it can understand and accept the theory of illumination.

<sup>23</sup> In Latin as in English there is a tempting word to use in connection with signs: *significatio*, signification. This term is ambiguous, referring either to the property possessed by the sign in virtue of its activity of signifying, or to the significate (or class of significates) of a sign. Augustine uses 'signification' in both senses in *The Teacher*. He doesn't define 'signifying' in *The Teacher*, but does so implicitly in *On Christian Doctrine* 2.1.1 (Appendix 10): "A *sign* is a thing that of itself causes something else to enter into thought beyond the appearance it presents to the senses."

<sup>24</sup> The attempt to construe meaning solely in terms of naming, using the model of proper names, has serious difficulties. (This is the account Gilbert Ryle derisively called the

Augustine's main argument against the information-transference account of teaching is initially posed as a version of the learner's paradox: I cannot know that a sign is a sign unless I know what it signifies—but then I learn nothing from the sign; my knowledge of its significate is presupposed in its being a sign in the first place (*The Teacher* 10.33). Knowledge is derived from things directly. Nor can ostensive definition help us to break out of this paradox, since ostension is equally a conventional sign and so presupposes knowledge. Words can at best prompt us to look for things, from which we derive our knowledge (11.36).

It might be objected that I do learn from others, namely by their reports and their descriptions. Augustine argues that this is mistaken on two counts (11.37). First, what is signified by the words in a narrative account must already be known to us; if not, the words don't enable us to know the things. Second, and more telling, from narrative description all we get is belief rather than knowledge. Hence teaching cannot succeed in conveying knowledge from one person to another, as the information-transference account of teaching holds.

Augustine proposes his theory of illumination and Christ as the Teacher within (11.38–12.40) as an alternative. The test of truth is inside, Augustine argues. What gets conveyed from one person to another are at best putative knowledge-claims that each recipient judges for himself. In items perceived by the senses, we have knowledge when the sensible object itself is present to us.<sup>25</sup> In items perceived by the mind, we look upon these "immediately in the inner light of Truth" and know them. Roughly, each person grasps conceptual truths, to the extent he or she is able, without recourse to experience or external testimony.

Augustine offers several further counterexamples to this information-transference account of teaching, cases in which the speaker is not transferring his thoughts to the hearer: mishearings, deception, slips of the tongue,

'Fido'-Fido account of language: the dog's name 'Fido' picks out the actual dog Fido itself, a claim that works for pets and not much else.) See Burnyeat [1987] and Kirwan [1989] Ch.3 for a discussion of Augustine's proposal in modern terms. Even Augustine seems to be aware that not all he wants to say can be said with this model in mind, for at one point he introduces an element that looks suspiciously like the *meaning* (intension) of a sign; see the note to *The Teacher* 7.20.55–57.

<sup>25</sup> Augustine is puzzled over the case of 'past sensibles': how can we know things that happened in the past, given that the objects themselves are not present but only their representations are? His tentative answer is that we know past objects as past through these (present) representations of them, but this knowledge must be individual. This is an intimation of problems that will eventually be dealt with in the *Confessions*; see O'Daly [1987].

misunderstandings, and the like. Yet even if we put these cases aside and allow that the speaker's thoughts are known to the hearer, Augustine remarks, the hearer does not thereby learn whether what the speaker has said (or thought) is true. The test of knowledge is still within each person; signs can at best lead to knowledge only of other signs, not of signifiable things that are not signs. Only illumination can serve as the test of truth, which is an essential ingredient in knowledge. Augustine closes his monologue by declaring that his theory of illumination should be self-validating: you can recognize its truth by looking within!

Taken together, *Against the Academicians* and *The Teacher* offer complementary sides of a single extended argument for the possibility of genuine knowledge, one that mattered crucially to Augustine at the beginning of his constructive exploration of platonism and Christianity. They lay the foundation for a new intellectual type of late antiquity: the committed non-dogmatic philosopher. But neither Augustine nor his successors could live the life so brilliantly sketched in these early dialogues. The classical world was disintegrating, and it needed people like Augustine in public life. They were not enough in the end. Augustine died while Hippo, the town of which he was the bishop for nearly forty years, was under siege by the Vandals. It was left to later generations to explore and develop Augustine's account of knowledge, and by then a new conception of (dogmatic) philosophy had arisen.