

Enlightened and Eloquent: Augustine on Education

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Elliot Eisner contends that the way we know and experience the world is “shaped by the theoretical language through which we [become] socialized.”¹ More specifically, theories can influence the way scholars understand the historical underpinnings of education. For instance, Christian philosophy, as interpreted by John Dewey, is a monolith. For him, the “link that spans the intervening centuries” between antiquity and modernity is a closed system of thought that seeks truth from authority instead of from nature or human experience.²

I believe this characterization of a long and complex intellectual tradition is misleading, and I offer St. Augustine’s educational theory as evidence. My intention is to show that Augustinian principles reflect a rigorous quest for truth, wisdom, and the happy life, and ought not to be passed over as mere Christian catechism.³ In the first part of this essay, I present Augustine’s view of education, and examine his theory of knowledge, the most distinctive feature of which is the doctrine of “illumination.” In the second part I focus on his ideas regarding formal education. Next, I explain three important Augustinian concepts: the activity of teaching (*docere*), the human being who guides students (*magister*), and the attitude necessary for learning (*studium*). The discussion then turns to Augustine’s idea of “eloquence” (*eloquentia*), which, along with wisdom, is the mark of educated people. I conclude by suggesting how Augustine’s views are applicable to education today.

The doctrine of illumination is a corrective to two common, though erroneous, impressions about Christian educational philosophy. First, Augustine does not argue from the perspective of an ivory-tower academic. On the contrary, he writes as a pastor concerned with the questions of real people who live, work, suffer, and die. His system of thought is eudaimonistic, that is, oriented toward the attainment of happiness. Wisdom, he insists, is necessary to reach this end; moreover, while people in diverse contexts can achieve happiness, the same ethical standard applies to all (*DLA*, 1:9:1-10:1). Second, Augustine maintains that wisdom is not a commodity someone can give to another. Truth is not so much created as it is uncovered.

There are three components to Augustine’s theory of illumination. The first involves the relationship between body and soul, or the functions of the “outer” and “inner” man. Next is his notion of “objective knowledge.” The third part, Augustine’s concept of memory, is based on Greek categories adapted for a Christian context.

In Augustine’s neo-Platonic system, animals surpass inanimate objects because they receive information about the world through their senses. Animals respond to this data by means of “inner sense” for the purposes of self-preservation, nourishment, and so forth. Yet animals are not conscious of themselves. Human beings alone can understand the meaning of their own existence (*DLA*, 2:3).

Augustine tries to explain why thought is a uniquely human activity. For him, man possesses two distinct yet inseparable powers that make him superior to other creatures. He shares with animals a perceptive, “outer” faculty for gathering information about the material world, but unlike them, he exercises an “inner” power to form images in the mind (*Conf.*, 10:6; *DT*, 15:10).⁴ Still, sense perception and image-making are different from reason, or “intellectual sight” (*DT*, 11). By means of this “third thing,” people can share knowledge, something not possible with sense perception (*DLA*, 2:6, 7).

Intellectual sight is the concept with which Augustine accounts for human knowledge. He writes: “Animals cannot attain to that spiritual light with which our mind is somehow irradiated...(O)ur power to judge is proportioned to our acceptance of this light” (*DCD*, 11:27).⁵ This passage echoes the famous allegory of the sun from the *Republic*, in which Plato compares physical vision to understanding. The sun is not vision itself, but rather its cause, inasmuch as it makes things visible and leaves the eye capable of seeing. Similarly, the Idea of the Good renders objects intelligible and causes the mind to know.⁶

Augustine adopts this metaphor, but does not embrace certain aspects of Platonic epistemology; not only are they antithetical to Christian belief, but there is no concrete evidence for them. For Plato, the soul, which exists before a human being is born, possesses knowledge from eternity but loses it at birth. What we call learning is actually a kind of recollection of timeless truth.⁷ Augustine rejects Plato’s idea of the soul’s pre-existence, but he does not disregard the concept of recollection entirely. For him, memory is the intellectual operation that recalls the past, considers the present, and anticipates the future (*Conf.*, 11:20); it is the mind’s virtually infinite capacity to collect, organize, and store knowledge (*Conf.*, 10:8).

Augustine explains that the mind contains material objects, not by drawing them physically into itself, but by retaining their images. To recall is to “shepherd” facts and images from their hiding places in the mind. Abstract knowledge resides in the memory as well. Whether a thought can be expressed verbally or visually, it is distinct from the words or images that give rise to it. Feelings are also stationed in the memory to be recalled later, even when the individual is in the throes of an “opposite” emotion (*Conf.*, 10:14).

While Augustine stands in awe of memory, he finds certain kinds of mental activity problematic. The senses can be deceived, emotions erratic, desires fleeting. These do not constitute a solid basis for certainty. Instead, Augustine searches for truth that is independent of sense perception. Such knowledge falls into three categories: logical truths, mathematical operations, and the awareness of one’s own existence. With respect to the first, Augustine recognizes that some types of knowledge are based on innate ideas, such as the principle of non-contradiction (*DM*, 11:38).⁸ Knowledge of this sort does not originate from sense perception but from the inner workings of the mind itself.

Mathematical operations are certain for two reasons. First, they are eternal, inasmuch as the laws governing addition and subtraction are always true and not subject to interpretation. Second, numbers are not the object of bodily perception.

Augustine insists that the mind can distinguish objects because it already grasps the meaning of “one” (*DLA*, 2:8). Indeed, even when an object is divided, each of its parts is perceived as one.

Third, the way Augustine treats the knowledge of one’s own existence anticipates the Cartesian *cogito*. He writes that every intellectual endeavor, even if it is mistaken, presumes a subject whose existence can never seriously be doubted (*DCD*, 11:26). “Correct” and “mistaken” are predicated of people who in fact exist. It may be reasonable to doubt my perceptions, emotions, and so on, because experience shows that these often deceive me. This much, however, is certain: I, who can be correct or mistaken, nevertheless *am*.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the doctrine of illumination is God’s presence to the soul.⁹ For Augustine, words are signs that point to realities of which the mind already has knowledge, and neither they nor the people who utter them are the source of truth. Therefore, instead of attending to words, the mind seeks truth by turning inward, and discovers an Interior Teacher (Christ) “dwelling in the inner man” (*DM*, 11:38:49).¹⁰ Memory is where God illumines the individual soul (*Conf.*, 10: 25, 26), and helps it grasp “necessary” truths.¹¹

We now proceed to an analysis of Augustine’s educational views, which run through many of his major works. For the purposes of this essay, the discussion is limited to root concepts (*docere*, *magister*, and *studium*, and in the final part of the essay, the term *eloquentia*) taken from five main sources (*Conf.*, *DCD*, *DDC*, *DLA*, *DM*). These terms cover the essential elements of his educational theory: the process itself, the persons involved, and the attitude expected of all concerned. His regular use of specific terms (*docere*, *magister*, *studium*) underscores a certain thematic consistency, while the unequal emphasis on others (*eloquentia*) shows how a particular notion (circa 397) could capture his attention. Limiting the search to these concepts prevents unnecessary repetition of ideas designated by other terms (*disciplina*, *educatio*).

The use of “signs” is integral to Augustinian educational theory. As the title suggests, *De Magistro* examines the encounter between teacher and student, and challenges an imprecise account of the relationship between words and knowledge. He writes: “I now stipulate two reasons for speaking: to teach or to remind others or ourselves... [as] when we’re singing” (*DM*, 1:1:24-25).¹² Words are signs *by* which we know and are not the thing known. To put it another way, we are not trapped in a world of words or concepts. Hence, the sheer multiplication of words cannot impart knowledge when signs are not connected to corresponding realities. For instance, if teacher and student do not share the same language, even valiant efforts to teach or learn may prove futile. Words only have meaning when the student has some experience of a thing or grasps a principle, because words remind the individual of what he already knows.

Conversing with his son Adeodatus, Augustine suggests that the human teacher, “by inquiry and discussion,” helps the student search for ideas within his memory, “unearth[ing] them from whatever their hiding places were” (*DM*, 8:21:4).¹³ Augustine does not give his son anything he does not already possess. Hence it is erroneous

to think that teaching is the transmission of knowledge from one who possesses it to one who does not, or that “the vocal activity of the teacher is... the cause of learning.”¹⁴

This section examines the ideas of *docere*, *magister*, and *studium*, and concludes with a discussion of Christ as the Interior Teacher. The verb *docere* refers to the act of teaching, and some form of it appears sixty-two times throughout the five works. For Augustine, *docere* implies more than the traditional meaning of the English “to teach.” It means searching for truth on all levels, evincing a passion for a subject, and practicing what one preaches.¹⁵

The fact that teachers use words does not mean that memorizing and reciting someone else’s text is teaching (*DM*, 13:41:11-14). The speaker in this case does not say anything on the basis of his own knowledge. If asked to explain what he said, he would be unable to answer, because he is not acquainted with the realities to which his words refer. Genuine teaching, on the other hand, is interactive; teacher and student seek the truth together.

Inasmuch as the teacher “reminds” students of what they already know, effective teaching also means striving to make lessons interesting (*DM*, 11:36:1-4). The object is not to entertain, but to point out connections between things and ideas. In this way, one establishes an environment in which the mind seeks to “know itself and [is] all afire with studious concern” (*DT*, 10:2:5).¹⁶

Augustine recognizes that there is often a dissonance between the intellectual and moral development of human beings. He suggests, for instance, that a teacher may know his subject and yet be unkind to students (*Conf.*, 1:18:18). Such an individual may have mastered a discipline, but remains a beginner when it comes to the lesson of charity. Good teachers avoid disedifying others by “practicing what they preach” (*DDC*, 4:27:60).¹⁷ By living honorably, they prevent the charge of hypocrisy from becoming an excuse for students to reject the wisdom they convey.

Augustine’s idea of the teacher as a “role model” is echoed in the twentieth century by the philosopher Martin Buber, who insists that ethical values are best taught by example, indeed without any intention of teaching. Students, he suggests, are eager to learn skills they can exploit for their own purposes. Morality, by contrast, involves people in their totality, and so ethical lessons, when not practiced, seem artificial. Accordingly, teachers who deal fairly and compassionately with students impart the best ethical lessons.¹⁸

Next, the word *magister* (“the teacher”) is used twenty-nine times in the five works, and indicates both human teachers and Christ (the “Truth within”). Augustine devotes a great deal of attention to the fact that human beings can be teachers, but only in an analogical sense. He points out where the confusion arises, warns against the dangers of an uncritical acceptance of doctrines, and describes the professional obligation of teachers toward their students.

Simply because people do not recognize that God actually teaches them, it does not follow that they have not really learned. They do well, however, to consider the source of their wisdom lest they attribute knowledge to those who are “persons who

have been taught” (*DM*, 14:15:12).¹⁹ Although individuals do not cease to be students once they assume the mantle of instructor, they assume the responsibility of assisting others in the learning process. When a teacher’s words are so well chosen that the truth becomes immediately apparent, students may think that the teacher “gave” them the truth. This is inaccurate, because truth is not given at all; it resides within the individual, student and teacher alike. The “catalyst,” though significant, is dispensable, because students can acquire knowledge by other means. Augustine, for instance, taught himself many things, but concedes that more important (religious) truths eluded him (*Conf.*, 4:16, 55).

The simple fact that human instructors disagree among themselves is reason enough to subject everything they say to scrutiny. For Augustine, teachers err in believing “that it is their thoughts that are grasped, rather than the very disciplines they take themselves to pass on by speaking” (*DM*, 14:45:1-2). An idea should not be thought true simply because it is held by an eminent teacher, but because it withstands the objections of critics.

Furthermore, the well-being of their students should be what motivates teachers. Even before he officially accepts Alypius as a student, Augustine is concerned about the youth’s fascination with immoral entertainment (*Conf.*, 6:7:15). By living in a way consistent with his instruction, however, Augustine eventually prevails upon the boy to forsake futile pastimes that dull the mind and weaken the will.

The third category illustrating Augustine’s educational theory is *studium*, or “study.” The word is used one hundred twenty-seven times in the five works, and denotes the content of a discipline, the diligent quest for knowledge, and intellectual zeal.

For the most part, Augustine understands study in the conventional sense: the conscious pursuit of knowledge, whether intellectual or practical. This activity is demanding, which is why Augustine’s mother wanted him to complete his studies unencumbered by the demands of marriage (*Conf.*, 2:3:55).

People study not only to learn for themselves, but to acquire the tools necessary for teaching others (*DDC*, Prologue 1). They do not just memorize a body of facts, but (with the help of God) they discover the intelligibility of the material before them. On the one hand, practical skills can be learned through observation and practice. Augustine offers the example of the fowler, who teaches his “art” (*studium*) simply by letting others watch him (*DM*, 10:32:80-90). The “instructor” in this case has no need of words because the object of knowledge—the skill of catching birds—can speak for itself. On the other hand, words are necessary in order to convey complex ideas. In philosophy, for instance, people grasp speculative knowledge and ethical principles through the use of technical language (*DCD*, 8:4:17).

Studium also implies that one’s knowledge is partial, but through a combination of curiosity and hard work, one can obtain a more complete knowledge of things. That one’s knowledge is provisional is nothing to be ashamed of, according to Augustine, for no human being is omniscient. *Studium* indicates the mind’s openness to truth as it reveals itself (*DT*, 10:1:2-3). The gradual unfolding of the truth has

an energizing effect; the student wants to know “completely,” that is, to integrate previously unrelated bits of information, and attain a more intimate knowledge of God.

Lastly, *studium* denotes an attitude of enthusiasm and humility that students bring to their intellectual endeavors. For Augustine, people must be motivated to learn; they cannot be compelled to become wise (*DLA*, 2:10:12). Education requires both the desire to learn and the mental capacity to do so (*DDC*, 4:9:23). Ultimately, education is related to the human quest for happiness. When students have this as their motivation, other things fall into place, such as classroom behavior (*Conf.*, 5:8:5). The educational environment requires neither heavy-handed domination, nor a “riotous loosening of controls against immature behavior.”²⁰ Good teachers strike a balance between the two. Moreover, if students, like their teachers, realize that their knowledge is partial, they tend to deal patiently with less educated folk (*DDC*, 2:41:62). Intellectual humility does not mean that all opinions are equally valid, but that true wisdom makes one gentle with others, as Plato suggests.²¹

A unique feature of Augustine’s educational thought is his notion of the Interior Teacher. For him, Truth (used interchangeably with “God” or “Christ”) is not an object possessed by human beings, but rather the principle by which they understand and influence their world. Indeed, Augustine does not presume to teach his son; instead, he hopes that God will reveal the answers to Adeodatus’ questions (*DLA*, 2:2:10). Through the words spoken by the human teacher, God draws people beyond the world of passing things, to the realm of absolute life and wisdom (*DDC*, 18:54:80). Virtuous behavior, in turn, is the human response through which people order their relationship to God, themselves, and others.

In the next section, I consider Augustine’s thoughts on eloquence. The art of speaking and writing well occupies a large section of his educational treatise, the *De Doctrina Christiana*. Is his intention merely to justify his own rhetorical skill, or is there some other motivation at work?

For Augustine, *eloquentia* (“skill in writing” or “oratorical ability”) is not within everyone’s grasp, nor should it be. Indeed, if eloquence were the goal of life, lapses in grammar would be the equivalent of sin (*DLA*, 3:22:24). Rather, the value of eloquence is that through it speakers can touch the minds and hearts of many people. Of the seventy-nine times it is used in the five represented works, *eloquentia* is used sixty-four times in the *De Doctrina Christiana* alone. I will (1) show how eloquence goes hand in hand with wisdom; (2) describe its distinctive features; and (3) identify its three levels.

Contrary to Plato, Augustine denies that rhetoric is a clever manipulation of words with no higher purpose than winning an argument. Rather, there must be a continuity between wisdom and eloquence. The former is the result of learning, and the latter is speech that moves others. Indeed, for Augustine, false eloquence is like a person who is physically attractive but mentally unbalanced. Just as a sound mind is superior to a beautiful body, wisdom is preferable to the elegant use of language (*DDC*, 4:28).

Some allowance should be made, however, for individuals who can effectively deliver someone else's message (*DDC*, 4:29:5). If they admit their limitation with respect to knowledge, they too can serve the truth, albeit in an ancillary role. Such people are like the rhapsode Ion who, according to Socrates, is not so much the practitioner of an art as he is the passive instrument of the Muses.²²

True eloquence, according to Augustine, is speech through which people become aware of, and respond to, God's activity in the world (*Conf.*, 12:26:13). Borrowing from Cicero, he claims that it has three ends: "to teach, to please, and to persuade" (*DDC*, 4:12).

The first goal of eloquence, teaching, "depends upon what we say." No matter how knowledgeable the speaker is, he fails if "he is not understood" (*DDC*, 4:12). Teaching is a "necessity" because it helps listeners acquire knowledge, and it must therefore underlie the higher forms of eloquence. Teaching is the most basic requirement of eloquence, and it may be expressed in what Augustine calls a "subdued," or unadorned mode of speaking. The purpose of this style is simply to deliver a message (*DDC*, 4:17:6; 4:3:40). People can listen to plain speech longer than they can to more sophisticated forms of oratory.

The next goal of eloquence is to delight listeners. The speaker arranges words artfully so as to keep people's attention and elicit agreement (*DDC*, 4:12; 4:25:1). Audiences enjoy the "moderate" style of speaking because it employs attractive metaphors and graceful rhythms, thus allowing Truth to be more eagerly accepted. Listeners eventually sympathize with the speaker, loving what he loves, hating what he hates, and so on (*DDC*, 4:25:9). If teaching is a necessity, pleasure is a "satisfaction" (*DDC*, 4:12).

The third objective of eloquence is to "move" listeners to act (*DDC*, 4:25:9). At the same time, the "grand" style of speaking should teach and please the audience as well (*DDC*, 4:26:36). For Augustine, persuasive speech is a "triumph" (*DDC*, 4:12): listeners remain free, and yet they feel compelled to take moral action (*DDC*, 4:7).

Augustine insists that while teaching is basic to all forms of eloquence, a delightful or grand style of speaking is not always necessary. Indeed, teaching is less about clever speech than about clarity (*DDC*, 4:9:5). The advantage of an eloquent delivery is that it helps speakers reach a wider audience, both zealous students and those who have to be drawn by the power of beautifully spoken words. Once they have learned what they are supposed to know, however, people can love the Truth itself, and not just its verbal expression (*DDC*, 4:11:1).

In the preceding pages, I have outlined Augustine's "philosophy of education." In light of this, I would like to point out several key areas in which Augustinian principles may be relevant to modern education.

In addition to the critique mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Dewey's thoughts concerning the obsolescence of Christian philosophy are most clearly enunciated in *A Common Faith*.²³ It is taken for granted that the relationship between science and religion is one of enmity. For Dewey, the great questions about man and

the world (for instance, their origin and goal) have become associated with authoritative figures, literature, and events to such a degree that they are no longer relevant to “cultivated” people. According to Dewey, this problem is particularly true in the case of Christianity, inasmuch as its explanations have been supplanted by those of the natural sciences. He declares that

nothing less than a revolution in the “seat of intellectual authority” has taken place.... There is but one sure road of access to truth – the road of patient, cooperative inquiry operating by means of observation, experiment, record, and controlled reflection.²⁴

Evidently, the only truth worthy of the name is that which can be ascertained through the application of scientific method. It goes without saying that Christianity is antithetical to the methods and conclusions of scientific investigation.

Contrary to the caricature that Christian philosophy relies exclusively upon authority in its search for truth, Augustine insists that the mind arrives at knowledge in two ways: with the help of the senses, and through its own structures (*DT*, 15:12:21). Augustinian principles are in no way incompatible with the quest for scientifically verifiable knowledge. At the same time, Augustine recognizes that the truth human beings desire is deeper than scientific fact; as they reflect upon their experience they become aware of a goal in life. Augustine is fascinated by the process of “leading out” (*educare*) what lies within the soul. Human instructors play an important, albeit secondary role, in helping their students attend to their Interior Teacher (“Truth”).

Second, according to Augustine, a teacher can do nothing unless a student desires to learn.²⁵ This idea is consistent with other mainstream educational theories, both ancient and modern. Plato believes that compulsory learning is ineffective,²⁶ and Dewey himself insists that students must “find [things] out for themselves.”²⁷

Furthermore, for Augustine, human thought is not simply a reaction to external stimuli; it is a spiritual activity by which people transcend their own bodiliness. Truth is not subject to change, and can be shared by many individuals; hence, Augustine would not subscribe to the notion that one “creates” one’s own experience. Strictly speaking, the mind does not create anything, but rather discovers and appropriates knowledge.²⁸ Moreover, education is not the same as “training.” An animal, for instance, can “learn” to balance a ball on its nose; only human beings are aware of their own existence, of the laws governing the world, and of a source of truth that makes genuine learning possible.

Finally, by good teaching one instills within students some sense of moral responsibility (*DDC*, 4:12:29.) Augustine is convinced that truth illumines the mind and strengthens the will, and so education can never be thought of as a merely intellectual endeavor. People are flesh and blood creatures, with feelings and personal histories. It is not enough that truth makes sense intellectually; it must inspire individuals as well.

1. Elliot Eisner, “The Primacy of Experience and the Politics of Method,” in *Educational Researcher* 17, no. 5 (1998): 15.

2. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1966), 280-81.

3. In order to save space, I will use the following abbreviations: *Confessions (Conf.)*, *De Civitate Dei (DCD)*, *De Doctrina Christiana (DDC)*, *De Libero Arbitrio (DLA)*, *De Magistro (DM)*, and *De Trinitate (DT)*. These abbreviations will be followed by book, chapter, and line.
4. Bruce Babacz, *Augustine's Theory of Knowledge* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1981), 190-91.
5. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. M. Dods (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 169-70.
6. Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 508b-e.
7. Plato, *Phaedo*, "The Collected Dialogues of Plato," ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 76c-d; *Meno*, 81-84.
8. Vernon J. Bourke, *Wisdom from Augustine* (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1984), 109.
9. Mary T. Clark, *Augustine* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1994), 112.
10. Augustine, *The Teacher*, trans. Peter King (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 139.
11. Vernon J. Bourke, *Wisdom from Augustine*, 109.
12. Augustine, *The Teacher*, 95.
13. *Ibid.*, 122.
14. George Howie, *Educational Theory and Practice in Augustine* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1969), 185.
15. *Ibid.*, 139, 144, 146.
16. Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1990), 290.
17. Augustine, *On Christian Instruction*, trans. John J. Gavigan (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1950), 230.
18. Martin Buber, "The Education of Character," in *Between Man and Man* (London: Kegan Paul, 1947), 104-7.
19. Augustine, *The Teacher*, 145.
20. John Dewey, "Democracy in Education," in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), 233.
21. Plato, *Sophist*, 230c-d.
22. Plato, *Ion*, 533e.
23. John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 30-32.
24. *Ibid.*, 31, 32.
25. Howie, *Educational Theory and Practice in Augustine*, 159.
26. Plato, *Republic*, 536e.
27. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 280.
28. Eisner, "The Primacy of Experience and the Politics of Method," 15.