

Augustine, *The Teacher*¹

[The Purpose of Language]

[1.1] AUGUSTINE: When we speak, what does it seem to you we want to accomplish?

5 ADEODATUS: So far as it now strikes me, either to teach or to learn.

AUGUSTINE: I see one of these points and I agree with it, for it's clear that by speaking we want to teach. But to learn? How?

ADEODATUS: How do you suppose we learn, after all, if not when we ask questions?

10 AUGUSTINE: Even then I think that we want only to teach. I ask you: do you question someone for any reason other than to teach him what you want [to hear]?²

ADEODATUS: You're right.

AUGUSTINE: So now you see that we seek nothing by speaking except to teach.

15 ADEODATUS: I don't see it clearly. If speaking is nothing but uttering words, I see that we do this when we're singing. Given that we often sing while we're alone, without anyone present who might learn, I don't think we want to teach anything.

1. Augustine, *Revisions* 1.12: "I wrote a work entitled *The Teacher* [in 389]. There it is debated, sought, and found that there is no teacher giving knowledge to man other than God. This is also in accordance with what is written by the Evangelist: *Your teacher, Christ, is unique* (Matthew 23:10)." The brevity of Augustine's entry is remarkable. In *Confessions* 9.6.14 he writes: "In our book entitled *The Teacher*, [Adeodatus] there speaks with me. You, Lord, know that all the thoughts put in there in the person of my interlocutor were his, though he was only sixteen years old. I have experienced many more wonderful things in him at other times: I was in awe of his talents." This suggests that Augustine's love for his dead son may have prevented him from making any revisions to *The Teacher*.

2. The addition 'to hear' is taken from Adeodatus's summary below (7.9.7).

AUGUSTINE: Well, for my part I think there is a certain kind of teaching through reminding — a very important kind, as our discussion will itself bring out. Yet if you don't hold that we learn when we remember or that the person who reminds us is teaching, I won't oppose you. I now stipulate two reasons for speaking: to teach or to remind either others or ourselves. We do this even when we're singing. Doesn't it seem so to you? 20 25

ADEODATUS: Not exactly. I would seldom sing to remind myself; I do it only to please myself.

AUGUSTINE: I see what you mean. But aren't you aware that what pleases you in a song is its melody?³ Since this melody can be either added to or taken away from the words, speaking is one thing and singing is another. There are [musical] songs on flutes or on the guitar, and birds sing, and we occasionally make some musical sound without words. This sound can be called 'singing' but can't be called 'speaking.' Is there anything here you would object to? 30 35

ADEODATUS: Nothing at all.

AUGUSTINE: Then doesn't it seem to you that speaking is undertaken only for the sake of teaching or reminding? [1.2]

ADEODATUS: It would seem so were I not troubled by the fact that we certainly speak while we're praying, and yet it isn't right to believe that we teach God or remind Him of anything. 40

AUGUSTINE: I dare say you don't know that we are instructed to pray "in closed chambers"⁴ — a phrase that signifies the inner recesses of the mind⁵ — precisely because God does not seek to be taught or reminded by our speaking in order to provide us what we want. Anyone who speaks gives an external sign of his will by means of an articulated sound.⁶ Yet God is to be sought and 45

3. "Is its melody": *modulatio soni*.

4. Matthew 6:6.

5. In his *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount* 2.3.11, Augustine says that the 'chambers' are the hearts themselves mentioned in Psalms 4:5-6 (Vulgate) = 4:4-5 (RSV) cited below, and that they are 'closed' to the external distractions and temptations that come via the senses.

6. As a technical definition of speaking, a necessary condition is that an utterance be produced which is literally 'articulated' — expelled air intentionally modulated by the muscles of the larynx, palate, tongue, and the like. This sets speaking apart from involuntary sounds, such as snoring or

entreated in the hidden parts of the rational soul, which is called the 'inner man'; for He wanted those parts to be His temples. Have you not read in the Apostle:⁷

50 Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells within you?

and:⁸

Christ dwells in the inner man.

Didn't you notice in the Prophet:⁹

Speak in your hearts and be stricken in your bedchambers; offer up the sacrifice of justice, and hope in the Lord.

55 Where do you think the "sacrifice of justice" is offered up but in the temple of the mind and in the bedchambers of the heart? What is more, one should pray where one should sacrifice. There is accordingly no need for speaking when we pray. That is, there is no need for spoken words — except perhaps to speak as priests do, for the sake of signifying what is in their minds: not that God might hear, but that men might do so and by remembering might, with one accord, be raised to God.¹⁰ Do you hold otherwise?

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cries of pain; see *On Christian Doctrine* 2.1.2 (Appendix 10). Articulated sounds are 'external signs' of something internal, namely the will. Much of the rest of *The Teacher* is devoted to exploring how a given sound can be a sign.

7. I Corinthians 3:16.

8. Ephesians 3:16–17.

9. Psalms 4:5–6 (Vulgate) = 4:4–5 (RSV). The beginning of Augustine's text, *Dicite in cordibus vestris* ("Speak in your hearts . . ."), differs from the Gallican version incorporated in the Vulgate: *Quae dicitis in cordibus vestris* ("What you have spoken in your hearts . . .").

10. Madec [1976], p. 46, n. 9 suggests that this is related to the liturgical text *Sursum cor — Habemus ad Dominum*. The sense of the passage is that collective recitation, whether sung or not, effects a unity among the participants and simultaneously exalts them. See *Confessions* 10.33.49: "I feel that when the holy words are recited in this fashion [*i.e.*, collectively], our spirits are moved more religiously and more ardently to the flame of piety than if they were not so recited."

ADEODATUS: I agree completely.

AUGUSTINE: Then doesn't it trouble you that when the supreme Teacher was teaching His disciples to pray, He taught them certain words?¹¹ In so doing, what He seems to have done is precisely to have taught them how we ought to speak when we pray.¹²

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ADEODATUS: Nothing at all troubles me on that score. He taught them not the words but the things themselves by means of the words. With these words they remind themselves of Whom they should pray to and of what they should pray for, since they would be praying in the inner recesses of the mind, as mentioned (1.2.43–44).

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AUGUSTINE: You understand this correctly. Someone might object that, although we don't produce any sound, nonetheless we do 'speak' internally in the mind, since we think these very words. Yet I believe you're also aware that in 'speaking' in this way we do nothing but remind ourselves, since by repeating the words our memory, in which the words inhere, makes the very things of which the words are signs come to mind.

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ADEODATUS: I understand, and I go along with this.

70 These things often happen. Let's pass over them, as I said, so that I not seem to be stirring up quibbles against words because of the carelessness of hearing, or even of men's deafness. The cases

we listed above are more bothersome, where we can't know the thoughts of the speakers, though we speak the same language and the words are Latin and are clearly heard.

See here: I now give in and concede that when words are heard by someone who knows them, he can know that the speaker had been thinking about the things they signify. Yet does he for this reason also learn whether the speaker has stated truths, which is the question at hand? [13.45] 75

Do teachers hold that it is their thoughts that are perceived and grasped rather than the very disciplines they take themselves to pass on by speaking? After all, who is so foolishly curious as to send his son to school to learn what the teacher thinks? When the teachers have explained by means of words all the disciplines they profess to teach, even the disciplines of virtue and of wisdom, then those who are called 'students'¹⁰¹ consider within themselves whether truths have been stated. They do so by looking upon the inner Truth, according to their abilities. That is therefore the point at which they learn. When they inwardly discover that truths have been stated, they offer their praises — not knowing that they are praising them not as teachers but as persons who have been taught, if their teachers also know what they are saying.¹⁰² Men are mistaken in calling persons 'teachers' who are not, which they do because generally there is no delay between the time of speaking and the time of knowing; and since they are quick to learn internally after the prompting of the lecturer, they suppose that they have learned externally from the one who prompted them. [14.45] 5 10

At another time we shall, God willing, look into the whole problem of the usefulness of words¹⁰³ — which, if considered properly, is not negligible! For the present, I have prompted you that we should not attribute more to words than is suitable. As a result, we should by now not only believe but also begin to understand how truly it has been written on divine authority that we [13] 20

101. "Students": *discipuli*.

102. The supposed 'teachers' are only persons who have been taught by the inner Truth what is true (provided they have been so taught); it is therefore out of place to praise them for their teaching. Augustine offers similar remarks in his *Letter* 19.1 (Augustine to Gaius).

103. Augustine never does so, though parts of *Christian Doctrine* and *The Trinity* discuss the usefulness of words.

should not call anyone on earth our teacher, since *there is one in heaven Who is the Teacher of all*.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, He Himself will teach us what 'in heaven' is — He Who prompts us externally through men by means of signs, so that we are instructed to be inwardly turned toward Him. To know and love Him is the happy life which all proclaim they seek,¹⁰⁵ although there are few who may rejoice in having really found it.¹⁰⁶ 25

Now I would like you to tell me what you think of this whole disquisition of mine. On the one hand, if you know that what has been said is true, then if you were questioned about each of the points you would have said that you knew them. Therefore, you see from Whom you have learned these points. It isn't from me. You would have given all the answers to me were I to have questioned you. On the other hand, if you don't know that what has been said is true, neither I nor He has taught you — not I, since I can never teach; not He, since you still are not able to learn. 30

ADEODATUS: For my part, I have learned from the prompting of your words that words do nothing but prompt man to learn, and that the extent to which the speaker's thought is apparent in his speaking amounts to very little. Moreover, I have learned that it is He alone who teaches us whether what is said is true — and, when He spoke externally, He reminded us that He was dwelling within. With His help, I shall love Him the more ardently the more I advance in learning. 35

However, I'm especially grateful for this disquisition of yours, which you delivered without interruption, for this reason: it has anticipated and resolved everything that I had been prepared to say against it, and you didn't overlook anything at all that had produced a doubt in me; that private Oracle answered me about everything exactly as you stated in your words. 40 45

104. This citation is a compressed paraphrase of Matthew 23:9–10.

105. See *Against the Academicians* 1.2.5.13–14 and the note on that passage.

106. See *The Free Choice of the Will* 1.14.30 and 2.9.26.