

Augustinian Learning and Understanding

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Timothy Valentine's essay undertakes two principal tasks: to give an account of St. Augustine's views on education, teaching, and learning; and to show the contemporary significance or relevance of his views. So far as I can tell from my own (limited) knowledge of Augustine's own writings and from critical commentaries on Augustine I have read,¹ Valentine delivers well on the first task, and I cannot find much to disagree with in his commendably clear account of the Augustinian position. In this critical response, I am therefore largely forced to the remaining option of commenting on the issue of the modern day educational relevance of these ancient patristic views. The trouble here, however, is that what Valentine has to say on this question is confined to a few brief remarks in the last page and a half of his essay. In view of this, I shall: First, offer my own short (albeit largely sympathetic) comment on these remarks; Second, proceed to say something about what may appear to be substantial obstacles to any latter day educational use of Augustine.

Valentine's own comments on the possible contemporary significance of Augustine seem to me to be of rather different weight. For example, while I see no reason to dispute his claim on behalf of Augustine that effective teaching depends on some student willingness or complicity, this is hardly a very illuminating point: Valentine himself admits that it is widely made by others, and it could not therefore add much weight to any case for contemporary reclamation of Augustine's views. Valentine's use of Augustine against Dewey, on the other hand, constitutes a much more substantial point — one to which I am also generally sympathetic. It strikes me that Dewey's dismissal of religion, or of any non-scientific approach to understanding and explanation, is dogmatically reductionist and may reveal no less misunderstanding of science than religion. It is clearly mistaken, at the very least, to dismiss religious views as merely non-rational narratives which are not answerable to canons of rational enquiry and knowledge: there is, for example, a science of religion (as there is not of poems or novels) — theology — which is seriously concerned with the rational evaluation of religious claims. It may be that theology can show many of these claims to be *mistaken* — and I certainly believe that religious claims *can* be mistaken — but that is another matter. Moreover, given my own longstanding skepticism about the value of natural and social scientific approaches to understanding the nature of teaching and learning, I can see no *a priori* reason why the views on these matters of any past religious or other philosophers might not have genuine contemporary relevance and/or application.²

The question that faces us now, however, is that of whether the views of St. Augustine could be put to useful work in contemporary educational theory and practice — and it is here that I have significant misgivings. The chief of these turns on Augustine's widely acknowledged reliance upon a corpus of philosophical doctrines about the nature of mind, meaning, knowledge, and learning which do appear to have been seriously overtaken by modern philosophical events. Indeed,

Valentine could hardly be unaware that the most famous modern quote from Augustine (which space prevents me from reproducing here) occurs as the principal object of criticism in what is perhaps the most celebrated work of twentieth century philosophy: it is in the opening pages of the *Philosophical Investigations* that Wittgenstein takes Augustine to endorse a theory of meaning which he devotes the rest of this work (as well as the rest of his life's work) to critiquing.³

To be sure, Wittgenstein's use of Augustine as a proper target for his criticisms has been the topic of some recent controversy: it has been claimed, for example, that Wittgenstein quotes Augustine out of context in a way that distorts his actual position.⁴ All the same, it is hard to deny that Augustine's views of education, teaching and learning are developed in the light of substantial subscription to views on the nature of mind and knowledge which were to be the prime critical targets of Wittgenstein's later work — as well as the objects of obloquy of other distinguished modern day philosophers. The point here, of course, is not that Augustine's views are simply yesterday's superannuated model. There are older views on the nature of mind, meaning and human enquiry than Augustine's — notably the ideas of Aristotle — which sit fairly comfortably with those of Wittgenstein and other modern philosophers. Similarly, there can be no question of rejecting Augustine solely on the grounds of his religious commitments: there are deeply religious (even Christian) perspectives — for example, that of Aquinas — which would also appear fairly compatible with modern philosophy. The problem is rather that Augustine's Platonic views on mind, meaning, and knowledge can no longer be considered to provide logically coherent accounts (either scientific, theological, or educational) of thought and world or of the relationship between them. I shall devote the rest of this brief response to indicating just one, albeit pivotal, difficulty of this nature.

Like Wittgenstein, Augustine is much preoccupied with understanding as the key to meaning, and with the contribution of understanding to (different sorts of) rational knowledge and enquiry. However, while Wittgenstein frequently attempts to illuminate commonplace notions of knowledge and understanding by asking us to consider how this or that might be taught or learned (which alone commends him to the attention of educational philosophers), Augustine's view of knowledge and understanding leads him to the quite odd view — heavily accented by Valentine and other commentators — that no one can teach or transmit knowledge to another. To be sure, Augustine's claim here is not the absurdly counterintuitive one that I cannot be the recipient of true information or some useful skill under another's tuition: his point is rather that since genuine knowledge entails *understanding*, no one but myself can give me *that*. But what might lead anyone to such an extraordinary — and educationally problematic — view?

Modern analytical philosophy would here encourage us to distinguish different, more and less grammatically and/or metaphysically plausible, versions of the claim that no one can give me understanding. For example, we may surely dismiss (or accept) any interpretation which holds merely that since I am the subject of understanding, no one can understand things for me: this is true, but only trivially so — like the observation that no one can feel my pain. But what should we say of any interpretation which held that understanding consists inherently in some sort of

inner illumination which can have no external (empirical) connections or causes? There can be little doubt that Augustine is given to some such more metaphysically loaded view, or that he holds it largely as a result of his adherence to a dubious Platonic epistemology and/or anthropology. Following Plato, Augustine endorses an austere notion of knowledge as *certainty*, according to which there can be no genuine knowledge of the contingent and potentially delusive world of sensible appearance. Since, for Plato and Platonists, true knowledge consists in the grasp of purely logical relations between abstract, non-sensible or non-empirical forms, the objects of such knowledge can only be denizens of an intelligible realm to which the mind, but not the (bodily) senses, has access: enquiry is an exclusively *intellectual* (perhaps inner) operation upon which no empirical processes (of human association or whatever) can have much bearing.

But practically all of this is called into question by Wittgenstein and most other modern (analytical and non-analytical) philosophers. First, like many other modern philosophers — but also in the spirit of Aristotle's trenchant pre-Augustinian critique of Plato — Wittgenstein questions the equation of knowledge with certainty: there are significant forms of human knowledge and enquiry in which (as Aristotle claims specifically of morality) we should not expect more precision than is appropriate.⁵ Even closer to present concerns, however, Wittgenstein rejects any and all conceptions of mind in general and understanding in particular as private processes unsusceptible of public scrutiny: understanding (he insists) is not a mental process, and to have understood is not to have experienced a flash of inner insight but to have mastered a perfectly public procedure in which one now "knows how to go on."⁶ Moreover, general modern philosophical recognition of the social character of meaning affirms the essentially *internal* connections between understanding, education and teaching — in terms of which it is probably nearer the truth to say that whatever could *not* be taught (at least in principle) could not be understood either. From this viewpoint, although we should continue to rank Augustine among the greatest of past philosophers (even to consider him as required reading on some topics), it may also be doubted whether his views are apt for much useful contemporary educational reclamation.

1. For useful recent explorations of educational aspects of Augustine's philosophy, see Simon Harrison, "Augustine on What We Owe to our Teacher" and Philip L. Quinn, "Augustinian Learning," both in *Philosophers on Education: New Historical Perspectives*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (New York: Routledge, 1998).

2. For a recent expression of such skepticism, see David Carr, "Educational Philosophy, Theory, and Research: a Psychiatric Autobiography," *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, special issue on educational research (35, no. 3, 2001, forthcoming).

3. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), part I, section 1 and fn. 2e.

4. See M.F. Burnyeat, "Wittgenstein and Augustine *De Magistro*," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 61 (1987): 1-24.

5. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925), book I, part 3, 2-4.

6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), part I, esp. sections 152-155 (60e - 61e), but also section 179 (72e-73e).