PDF hosted at the Radboud Repository of the Radboud University Nijmegen

The following full text is a publisher's version.

For additional information about this publication click this link.
http://hdl.handle.net/2066/79108

Please be advised that this information was generated on 2018-12-31 and may be subject to change.

Reviewed by Vincent Hunink, Radboud University Nijmegen (Netherlands) (v.hunink@let.ru.nl)
Word count: 445 words

Augustine is of course best known for his major works, such as the Confessions and the City of God, and there is no shortage of recent studies on these books. Matters are somewhat different concerning some of Augustine's minor works, many of which still wait for helpful and accessible tools for students.

An example of such a text is De magistro (On the master), a philosophical dialogue dating from around 390 AD. In this intriguing text, Augustine explores the essence of teaching, mostly by discussing the nature of language (the basic means of communication between teacher and pupil), and of 'signs' in general. It is argued, among other things, that words taken by themselves cannot teach anything, and that the truth in the meaning of words is living within people. Augustine would not be Augustine if this truth were not identified with Christ. In the end, the inner truth that is Christ appears to be essential for good teaching.

Although Christian religion is the framework for all of Augustine's writings, De magistro is predominantly philosophical and is mainly concerned with words and language, which makes it a relevant text for students and scholars with interest in linguistics.

Secondly, the text is remarkable as a dialogue between Augustine himself and his young son Adeodatus. It has often even been considered a verbatim transcription of a real conversation, which took place between late 397 and middle 389, when Adeodatus was about sixteen years of age.1

The newly published study by Emmanuel Bermon is a reworked 'dossier d'habilitation' presented at the University Michel de Montaigne - Bordeaux in 2005. After a 50-page introduction, it offers readers a Latin text with facing French translation; the text has been reproduced from the edition by K.D. Daur in the Corpus Christianorum (Series Latina vol 29, Turnhout 1970). The rest of the book, some 500 pages, is taken up with the commentary. It takes the rather unusual form of a running text discussing the text paragraph to paragraph, but without lemmas.

Thus, the commentary is clearly not intended for readers looking for grammatical help, cultural information or rhetorical and literary analysis. Berton rather focuses on the philosophical dimensions of the work. He analyses and discusses the text both within the context of ancient approaches of language (such as ancient grammar or Stoic semantics), and from a modern perspective, using Wittgenstein's Recherches philosophiques as a model. The De magistro, while being called 'chef-d'oeuvre de l' antiquité sur le langage' (p.547), inevitably shows some marked differences from a modern approach such as Wittgenstein's. An ample bibliography and indices conclude the volume. It will be most relevant for personal and institutional libraries of ancient philosophy.
1. The biographical information about Adeodatus is entirely to be drawn from Augustine's works and it is regrettably scarce indeed. The *De magistro* may be said to be the source in which Adeodatus figures most prominently. Except for a longer monologue by Augustine (c. 33-46, likely to be part of a subsequent revision of the text) he remains an active partner in the dialogue until the end. The boy seems sharp-witted, gentle, and eager to learn, a son of whom Augustine is noticeably proud. Possibly, Augustine wrote and published the work as a tribute to Adeodatus, who died young at an unspecified date. Bermon gives the essential data about Adeodatus in his introduction, but in the commentary, he is not concerned with his biography.