

## ST. AUGUSTINE ON CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE (396-426)

St. Augustine's philosophy of language was influenced by Plato in particular, to whose ideas he gives a Christian slant in a way that was to prove very influential in turn. Arguing that things are learned by signs (108) (i.e. words denote things), he begins by distinguishing between things and signs. He argues that though all signs are things, not all things are signs. **Things** are mostly that which is not used to signify something else (108) (although some things are also signs of other things [108] of which gives several examples drawn from the Bible). On the other hand, the whole use (108) of **signs** is in signifying, like words. For no one uses words except for the purpose of signifying something (108). Signs are thus things used to signify something else (108) as a result of which while every sign is also a thing (108), not every thing is a sign (108). In short, all signs (e.g. words) perform a symbolic function (in that they always represent something), while some things (e.g. a cross) also perform a symbolic function (in this case, Christ's death and resurrection).

Augustine goes into greater details concerning the **symbolic nature of objects**. The most important *things* in this world are those which point beyond themselves to or signify the world beyond this: we should use this world and not enjoy it, so that the invisible things of God being understood by the things that are made may be seen, that is, so that by means of corporal and temporal things we may comprehend the eternal and spiritual. (109) In other words, some objects are signs that signify or, to use a term popularised by the Romantics later, *symbolise* the world beyond this. Some corporal and temporal (or physical) objects, that is, reflect eternal or spiritual (or non-physical) objects. Such symbols remind us that the whole temporal dispensation was made by divine Providence for our salvation (109).

Augustine goes into greater details concerning the **symbolic nature of signs**. Any *sign per se* is a thing which causes us to think of something beyond the impression the thing itself makes upon the senses (111). Some signs are natural (111) while others are conventional (111). The former are those which, without any desire or intention of signifying, make us aware of something beyond themselves, like smoke which signifies fire (111). Such signs have no will to signify (111). Conventional signs, on the other hand, are those which living creatures show to one another for the purpose of conveying . . . the motion of their spirits or something which they have sensed or understood. Nor is there any other reason for signifying, or for giving signs, except for bringing forth and transferring to another mind the action of the mind in the person who makes the sign. (111)

Even signs given by God and contained in the Holy Scriptures are of this type also, since they were presented to us by the men who wrote them (111). Given his faith in the holiness of the men who wrote the scriptures and who viewed themselves as merely a medium through which the will of God (112) is passed, St. Augustine never questions that even these signs are also open to interpretation.

Augustine argues that there are two kinds of signs: some are **visual** in nature and appeal to the sense of sight (e.g. a nod of the head) as a result of which all of these things are like so many visible words (111). Others are **auditory** in that they appeal to the hearing: most of these consist of words (111) which have come to be predominant among men for signifying whatever the mind conceives if they wish to communicate it to anyone (111). To ensure their preservation, oral signs are also written down by means of letters (111). This is because vibrations in the air soon pass away and remain no longer than they sound (111). It should be noted in all this that, for Augustine, thought can occur without language. In other words, we do not need words in order to think. Ideas pre-exist language. As a result, written signs are representations of sounds which are in turn representations or reflections of ideas which men have in their minds prior to language. Whether oral or written, signs are merely tools for communication by which men convey ideas to each other.

St. Augustine acknowledges that both visual and auditory signs take two forms: literal and figurative. **Literal** signs are used to designate those things on account of which they are instituted (113), for example, the word *rose* is used to designate or name a particular kind of flower. **Figurative** signs occur when that thing which we designate by a literal thing is used to signify something else (113), for example, when we use the sign *rose* to refer to a particular kind of flower which may in turn be thought to signify or symbolise God's love. It is figurative language which is largely responsible for the many and

varied obscurities and ambiguities (112) which cloud communication, Augustine warns.