In its most general sense, dialectic is the quest for intelligibility; it is the art of producing or of leading the mind to insight into the universal. As a thing of the mind, dialectic is not an object in any spatio-temporal sense but is, rather, a movement among universals or meanings. As a movement among, or a movement to meanings, dialectic deals with symbols the symbols belonging to a language. Symbols compose its instrument. Whether this instrument is sufficient to produce the desired insight or whether it is merely necessary as leading toward such an insight is a problem which is no part of the present task. Now, St. Augustine, if I understand him aright, was convinced that there exists a kind of natural dialectic of symbols within a language. Thus, one who enters in on the use of a language cannot but be seized by its natural dialectic, unless he be missing in some element of his natural endowment or unless he determinedly resists this impulse. Let us see how this dialectic might operate.

First we ask: What does a symbol signify? Obviously symbols signify many different things. St. Augustine said a symbol is a thing which is made to stand for another thing. Evidently the things of which he is speaking are incomplete in some sense, and the mind, recognizing this incompleteness, is carried beyond to that which completes them, to their meanings, since directedness to completion seems to be an indefeasable part of the human endowment. But any meaning to which a symbol might ordinarily be directed is incomplete, for the good reason that this meaning in its turn may also serve as a symbol. For instance, h-o-u-s-e means the material structure, a dwelling. Such a structure may in turn mean or refer us to the family which inhabited it or to its members, e.g., to their character; consider for instance the house of Tudor; such a family may refer us further to the reign of royal authority, and so on.

It would seem that the answer to our question is that a symbol may signify another symbol If this is the whole truth, then the
operations of the mind in making symbols will never come to rest, for each term will be relative, merely a symbol for another thing which becomes a symbol in its turn. Such in fact is the situation which usually meets us in the natural sciences. St. Augustine has suggested another illustration. In discussing beauty he has pointed out that all men seek for that which they enjoy. But the enjoyable things are those which are beautiful, beautiful things are those which are well proportioned, well proportioned things are those which are numbered...perhaps the series might be carried on without stopping, "For withersoever you turn, by certain marks imprinted on her works, Wisdom speaks to you...so that whatever delights you in the mind or body or allure through the bodily senses, is numbered."1 Thus, numbers, being intelligible, seem to signify wisdom; however, wisdom being more intelligible yet, would seem to signify something beyond it even more clearly than numbers do. There may be no end to the series. Hence, we cannot say in any final sense what it is that a symbol signifies.

This argument is doubly destructive. If there is no term to the series of symbols signifying other symbols, and further if symbols are the intellect's tool for reaching understanding, then this failure to find a term to the series of symbols suggests that there is no term to the series of intelligibles. Hence, there may be no term in which the need of the intellect for understanding may find its satisfaction. The intellect may be engaged in an endless and therefore senseless pursuit of the thing which fully satisfies its need. Hence, its fitting attitude should be despair.

St. Augustine avoids such vicious relativism by the doctrine of symbols developed in the De Magistro and the De Doctrina Christiana. He shows that a symbol does not teach, does not of itself refer to anything at all. The intelligence of an intellect must always mediate between the symbol and the thing symbolized. Without this mediation, the symbol would at best be merely a signal or sign to which a cat or a bird might respond. But the human or conceptual intelligence moves from the symbol in a unique manner to the signified. A human symbol is a very strange thing indeed. Ordinarily it is in no sense the thing signified, nor does it share in the nature of the thing signified. It, nevertheless, refers the intellect to the being meant or to that kind of being. Sufficient for the present to note that the symbol accomplishes this reference by way of the concept (or image) of the signified. And this concept or