

Augustinian-Cartesianism

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Abstract

Of recent, the epistemological and metaphysical similarities between Augustine and Descartes were conveniently forgotten or ignored. For the past two hundred years or so, secular humanists have claimed Descartes as their own. These humanists, particularly post-Enlightenment thinkers, have not only asserted that Descartes's famous dictum, "Cogito Ergo Sum," was the intellectual turning point in Western thought, but that Descartes was directly opposing traditional religious structures of belief and morality. Descartes, they claim, was freeing European civilization from relying on the epistemic authority of God and Christianity; he was making "man the measure of all things." This paper examines just why and how Descartes' broke from the dominant scholasticism of the 16th century, and how he came to adopt the **Augustinian method of "faith seeking understanding,"** through the act of pure contemplation. Specific attention is given to Descartes's epistemological method as manifested in the Discourse on Method and his Meditations which reveals his return to a fundamentally Augustinian epistemology and metaphysics, and a refutation of Aristotelian scholasticism. In so doing, the reader will discover that Descartes never attempted to intellectually establish or validate secular humanism (i.e., "making man the measure of all things), but merely attempted to systematize the Augustinian approach to knowledge. Contrary to common belief, Cartesian philosophy does not begin with an autonomous self, but with God and self. Descartes revitalized the Augustinian philosophic tradition, and made knowing God necessary not only for doing science but for knowing anything at all.

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Introduction

Descartes is a unique challenge for any philosopher. He is both a reaction to and a product of scholasticism and the Aristotelian philosophy that dominated the late medieval world. Descartes embodies the spirit of Renaissance Humanism, the Augustinian metaphysics of the Protestant Reformation, and the philosophical rigor of Medieval Scholasticism (This is not to say that Augustinian theology and metaphysics did not have any place within the Catholic Church, but that the Reformation of Calvin and Luther was, in principle, a shift from a Thomistic to an Augustinian understanding of Christianity. Though no Protestant, Descartes responded positively to this shift in that he employed the theological-metaphysics of Augustine in his own system) (See, Menn 340). As such, there is a tension in Descartes' thought; one that forms, and, in a very real sense, is the foundation of his philosophy. This tension is between the ontological, and thus the epistemological, primacy of God – The Augustinian element –and the psychological primacy of the Cogito (i.e., the individual, thinking-Self) – the uniquely Cartesian element.

Before one attends to this paradox, however, one must first understand Descartes' intellectual context. We will begin by briefly outlining the historical relationship between Cartesian and scholastic epistemology, paying particular attention to the scholastic's outright rejection of Cartesianism. Once the context is set, "Augustinian-Cartesianism," and its view of the relationship between epistemology and ontology, will be explained.

Cartesian and Scholastic Epistemology

While the relationship between Descartes and the *scholastics* was cordial, the relationship between Descartes and *scholasticism* was strained at best. According to Descartes,

The majority of those who in these latter ages aspired to be philosophers, blindly followed Aristotle, so that they frequently corrupted the sense of his writings, and attributed to him various opinions which he would not recognize as his own...and those who did not follow him, did not escape being imbued with his opinions in their youth...and thus their minds were so preoccupied that they could not rise to the knowledge of true principles...they all laid down as a principle what they did not perfectly know (Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, 287-288).

Descartes' critique of scholasticism was multi-faceted. In the first place, he disdained their psychological and epistemological attachment to Aristotelian authority (cf, Descartes, *Meditation on First Philosophy*, 287-288). While Descartes embraced certain aspects of Aristotelianism, such as a belief in the univocity of being and systematic rigor, he was frustrated with the scholastics continued attempts to force Aristotle into their systems. As seen through the philosophies of Scaliger, Leonocino, Schegk, and others, both humanists and scholastics – the dividing line between the two groups is often so muddled – reinterpreted Aristotle so as to fit him into their philosophies and/or make him out to be a pre-Christian sage who accessed Divine Truth. In either case, Descartes was convinced that these interpretations of Aristotle were faulty, but also quite problematic as it led the scholastics to propose principally-absurd and impractical ideas.

What is *more* apparent in the aforementioned quote is the epistemic divide between Descartes and scholasticism. From his philosophical method and stated beliefs, it is clear that Descartes considered epistemology the most fundamental discipline. Indeed, Descartes' attention to epistemology not only squarely separated him from late Medieval scholasticism and Renaissance Humanism, but has also furnished much of the modern world with the perception that the history of philosophy is the history of rationalism versus empiricism.

Though he was not opposed to the use of sensation in science, he was opposed to sensation as an axiomatic basis for knowledge. According to Descartes, the primary effect of sensation is to “Incite and dispose their soul to will the things for which they prepare their body, so that the sensation of fear incites it to will to flee, that of boldness to will to do battle” (Descartes, *The Passion of the Soul*, 40-41). The sensations were not created to provide us with epistemic certainty. Their purpose is pragmatic and practical; for enjoying the creation and surviving its hardship. Hence, scholasticism's adoption of sensation as its epistemic starting point was intrinsically flawed.

Rather than beginning with clear and distinct ideas, scholastics began with the muddled inferences of sensation. From particulars they inferred generalities. Descartes, however, as we will see, began with what he believes are *intuitively understood*, and thus *certain* axioms, and deduced the consequences. In his own words, “No conclusion deduced from a principle which is not clear can be evident” (Descartes, *The Principles of Philosophy*, 288). Sensation is thus an unfit axiom because not only is sensation subjective, but it is often unclear, contradictory, and/or plainly false. It is at the *most* fundamental level, then, that Descartes breaks from Aristotle.

Nevertheless, though Descartes certainly aided the revival of Rationalism, he cannot be said to fit into the Platonic mold. For Plato, ideas exist eternally in the Realm of Ideas; a realm of pure, simple omniscience. Ideas as *the* primary Reality do not depend for their existence upon any Divine Will. For Descartes, however, the “eternal truths,” as he calls them, are not merely dependent upon the Divine Intellect, but are *equally* dependent upon the Divine Will (Menn 341). In God's eternal counsel (Psalms: 33: 11; Ephesians 1: 11; and Proverbs 8: 14), he willed “once and for all” that two and two equal four. There is no logical priority between God's will and

intellect; they are, as it were, simultaneous in God's eternal nature. Thus, two and two will *always* equal four because God is immutable, and neither can nor will change His essential nature.

Returning to Cartesian epistemology, note Descartes' insistence that science must begin with a presupposed axiom (see, Descartes, *Meditations*, 207-208). Unless the foundation is sure, the structure will collapse. If only the scholastics had chosen a different axiom, they could have avoided so many of the glaring difficulties that pervade their ruminations and diatribes. According to Descartes, knowledge (i.e., justified true belief) begins with two presupposed indubitable axioms. Refusing to acknowledge these self-evident, innate beliefs was the fundamental error of every sort of Aristotelianism. On the contrary, from within the Augustinian metaphysical framework, Descartes posits that awareness of our immortal self (the Cogito) and the existence of the Christian God are *the* two most basic presuppositions, the most foundational axioms, that we depend upon to understand ourselves and the world.

Scholastic Rejection of Cartesianism

In his youth, Descartes studied at La Fleche, a prominent Jesuit institution in Paris (See, Ariew 1-10). Here, he was heavily imbued with scholastic philosophy, particularly Aristotle, Aquinas, and Scotus. The influence of these thinkers was never lost on Descartes. He rejected the nominalism and empiricism of Aquinas and Aristotle while accepting Aristotle and Scotus' understanding of the univocity of being (see, Ariew 2-9). Descartes' relationship with scholasticism was one of a gradual distancing which ultimately resulted in complete separation.

In the mid-1620s, Pierre Berull introduced Descartes to the *Congregation of the Oratory*. Here, he learned Augustinian philosophy, wherein one contemplates God and the self's relation to God without appealing to sensation (more on this later) (Menn 51). Though Descartes had extensive interactions with the scholastics in his youth, as his philosophy changed, the schoolmen (i.e., scholastics) distanced themselves from him. While Descartes probably correctly asserted that many did not understand, misinterpreted, or refused to give him the benefit of the doubt, it is also likely that his presentation of Augustinianism struck many of the schoolmen as true and/or a genuine challenge to traditional Aristotelian thinking.

Roger Ariew, however, notes that schoolmen such as Libertius Fromondus, Plempius, Pierre Bourdin, Jean Baptiste Morin, among others, labelled Cartesianism, particularly the aspect of methodological doubt, as impractical and antithetical to virtuous living (see, Ariew 188-201). That "impracticality" was a primary criticism of Cartesianism gives credence to the notion that his work deeply disturbed his peers. Their silence and inability to grapple with Descartes' epistemological thesis indicates that they were struck by something profoundly true or horribly false in Descartes' writings, but were unable to figure out what it was. There was something in Descartes that the schoolmen, because of their ancient ties with Augustinian thought, knew to be true. It was a truth that shook their worldview to the core, and for that reason, rather than facing it head on, Cartesianism was banned, first by the theology faculty at the Sorbonne, and later by the Jesuits as part of their Counter-Reformation (Ariew 156).

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What was this potential truth that so perturbed the Aristotelians? In Descartes's words, "Finally, if there be still persons who are not sufficiently persuaded of the existence of God and of the soul...I am desirous that they should know that all other propositions, of the truth of which they deem themselves perhaps more assured, as that we have a body, and that there exist stars and an earth, and such, are less certain" (Descartes, *The Discourse on Method*, 175). Following Augustine, Descartes maintained that belief in God and in the immortal soul are more certain than the world of sensation. These two metaphysical truths are more epistemically sure than the entire corpus of Aristotelian science.

From Augustine, Descartes acquired four crucial philosophical tools. First, the method of sensation-independent contemplation. As previously mentioned, Descartes was introduced to this method at the *Congregation of the Oratory* (cf, Menn 139-141). Given that Descartes was already seeking for the foundation of a universal system of mathematics, – an empirically-independent discipline – he was naturally disposed to the method of pure contemplation, and thus his shift from Aristotelian to Augustinian metaphysics was inevitable. In the Augustinian understanding of contemplation, God and the soul are thought of as entities that are unaffected by and exist independently of sensation (cf, Menn 139-141). Neither God nor the human soul require bodies to exist. Human beings are *essentially* mind, and thus Augustine believed that one knows oneself intuitively: if one quietly contemplates oneself, one will know *clearly* that one exists independent from other things (Bubacz 50).

This idea was picked up by Renaissance Humanists and Descartes. Indeed, not only were the *Meditations* written in an Augustinian philosophical manner, but they propound the Augustinian notion that mankind's understanding of God and the soul are innate (Augustine, *Confessions*, 222, 228 and 236). Therefore, our intuitive awareness of God and our individual selves is the only logical epistemic starting point (Descartes, *The Meditations*, 108-109). Following Augustine, Descartes proposed that the axioms of God and the soul have both formal and objective content. That is to say, both concepts *contain* the necessary predicates for deducing justified true beliefs *and* those predicates that are necessary for providing the epistemic conditions which make sensation credible (see, Taylor 130-133).

This introduces Descartes' second appropriation of Augustine: the principle (epistemological aspect) and method (ontological aspect) of faith seeking understanding (cf, Augustine, *On Christian Belief*, 136-140). Christian theology is (most of) the content of Augustinian philosophy. After having spent most of his life seeking knowledge only to become deeply skeptical, Augustine realized that all knowledge was based upon basic presuppositional beliefs (i.e., axioms) (see, Menn 187-189). Knowledge and rationality begin with faith. “[Augustine] began to think that he could pass from ignorance to knowledge only by passing through an intermediate stage of belief” (Menn 188). For him, the only axioms that could satisfy the knowledge-criteria were the belief in the Christian God and the immortality of the soul (Augustine, *Confessions* 3; *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans* 460). Descartes pronounced the same metaphysical commitment in the *Dedication* to the *Meditations*. His stated purpose in writing the *Meditations* is to prove that all knowledge can be deduced from the definition of God and the immortal soul. Again, in Cartesian and Augustinian metaphysics, God and the Soul are not undefined, de-contextualized concepts. The definitions are contained in the concepts and are innately known (or, at the very least, are continuously revealed by God: *The Illuminator*) (Another way of stating this is to say that humans are born with the knowledge of the Christian God and their individual selves. Intellectually assenting to these two fundamental presuppositions is *necessary* if people are to be consistent in their thinking and if they are to make sense of the world around them). Hence, the third and fourth principles that Descartes adopted from Augustine are the two transcendental concepts of God and the immortal soul. Descartes employs an Augustinian ontology and an Augustinian epistemology, thus making it a fundamentally Augustinian metaphysic.

The practical difference between the two philosophers lie in Descartes' use of complete methodological doubt – is unnecessary in Augustine's context – and in his attempt to systematize knowledge into a universal science. Nevertheless, Descartes was undeniably the first of the Early Moderns to be an Augustinian metaphysician. Descartes' epistemological position is best summed up in the *Discourse*, and it is worth quoting at length:

For how do we know that the thoughts which occur in dreaming are false rather than those other which we experience when awake, since the former are often

not less vivid and distinct than the latter?” And though men of the highest genius study this question as long as they please, I do not believe that they will be able to give any reason which can be sufficient to remove this doubt, unless *they presuppose the existence of God [italics added]*. For, in the first place, even the principle which I have already taken as a rule, viz., that all the things which we clearly and distinctly conceive are true, is certain only because God is or exists, and because he is a Perfect Being, and because all that we possess is derived from him: whence it follows that our ideas or notions, which to the extent of their clearness and distinctness are real, and proceed from God, must to that extent be true...But if we did not know that all which we possess of real and true proceeds from a Perfect and Infinite Being, however clear and distinct our ideas might be, we should have no grounds on that account for the assurance that they possessed the perfection of being true (Descartes, *The Discourse*, 175-176).

Though it comes from the *Discourse*, this statement provides a precise summary of what happens in the *Meditations*. There, Descartes employs methodological doubt in order to separate the concepts of God and the Self from sensation, and “everything that depends on the philosophy of Aristotle” (Menn 55). In *Meditation One*, Descartes exposes the extremely dubious nature of an empirical epistemology (Cf, Descartes, *The Meditations*, 219-224). Whether it is because one is just a brain in a vat or because of the subjectivity of sensation, empirical data can always be doubted. Logically, then, in *Meditation two* Descartes builds on this point by revealing that mind is more certain than materiality. Not only can thinking not be doubted, - to doubt is to think - but apart from thinking, sensation could provide no knowledge whatsoever. Sensation works with particulars, and unless something within us unifies these particulars it is impossible to know that a man is the same man today and tomorrow. The mind is what unifies experience and gives understanding. Mind is more certain than body (Cf, Descartes, *The Meditations*, 225-233).

In *Meditation three*, Descartes, having disposed of the meditator's false presuppositions, begins to formulate his metaphysical principles. First, the meditator is introduced to the cogito, and then to the concept of God. The cogito is introduced first because self-consciousness is our inevitable *psychological*, starting point though it is not sufficient (see, Ariew 60-64, 196). As the earlier quote from the *Discourse* revealed, the cogito depends upon something else for its existence. God is the most clear and distinct idea. Descartes therefore asserts that the existence of the Christian (omnipotent, omni-benevolent, omniscient, all-perceiving, Truth Himself) God is the most basic belief and the cause for the *cogito's* existence and self-awareness. God is the essentially personal-Mind who generates the ontological relation between minds and the world. By itself, the cogito does not nor could it provide any deductions or inferences. On its own, it's a blank slate. Only when it is ontologically harmonized with and epistemically substantiated by the Divine Mind and concept of the Christian God does the cogito become an intelligible axiom and a truly self-aware individual (cf, Descartes, *The Meditations*, 233-249).

In *Meditation Three*, one must read carefully lest one mistake Descartes' theistic apologetic as a mere reformulation of the ontological argument. It is far more nuanced. Aspects of the ontological argument are utilized only to reveal that human minds are imperfect and *require* something perfect in order to know what they know. Ideas are always thought in relation to a standard of comparison. Ideas of good and bad, beautiful and ugly, warm and cold, only have meaning in relation to an ultimate standard of comparison, which, of necessity, is perfect. Descartes argues that this standard must be transcendental. Thus, the standard is God. When Descartes proceeds to ask whether a mind which innately possesses the idea of God can live supposing there were no God, he responds with a resounding “no”! According to Descartes, we

are ontologically and thus epistemologically dependent upon God: “Because I am conscious of no power to hold myself in existence, I cannot be my creator or sustainer” (cf, Descartes, *The Meditations*, 246).

Descartes here distinguishes himself from scholasticism in two substantial ways. First, he does away with their insistence that the world is composed of many metaphysical entities; varieties of *forms* and thus varieties of ontic relations. Instead, Descartes posits that the world is composed of mind and body. God is in *direct* and *continuous* interaction with minds and bodies. Second, like the scholastics, and any orthodox Christian, he believes that the knowledge of God is innate. Descartes accuses scholasticism of inconsistency because it claims that the idea of God is innate, yet epistemologically beings with sense particulars. Descartes believes this methodology is faulty. If the knowledge of God's existence and God's nature is an innate concept, then it *must* be the first epistemic principle; the most basic presupposition (Descartes, *Objections by Some Learned Men to the Preceding Meditations*, 165).

The attentive reader will notice that in Cartesianism, as in Augustinianism, there is an unbreakable tie between epistemology and ontology. The epistemic method of faith seeking understanding assumes that the *ontological* and the *epistemological* are foundational aspects of Reality itself and are inter-dependent. To study ontology is to investigate “being” itself. To study epistemology is to study “knowledge” itself. This assumes that both knowledge and being are *real things*. To study ontology and epistemology, one must study deontology and epistemology. To study being, one and one's thoughts must be! To study knowledge, one must know one's thoughts and know one exists! In Augustinianism and Cartesianism, “ontology” and “epistemology” are not merely the names of the branches of philosophy, but are part of the metaphysical structure of Reality. Hence, the mind can never completely separate the two conceptions. Consequently, then, in the final three Meditations, Descartes begins to construct the particulars of a universal science based upon the axioms of God and the cogito. Of significance is Descartes' insistence that knowledge of the physical world is the knowledge of ideas. Ideas represent physical extension, and are how the world is relayed to the mind. Ideas are the objects of knowledge. To illustrate how Descartes derives knowledge from the definition of God, let us conclude by looking at his understanding of physical motion (Ariew 137).

Beginning with God, Descartes asserts that in the definition of God is the concept of immutability. Since God is immutable, the world is immutable, and thus static. In order for motion to occur, more than one body must collide. For this to begin, God must initiate it. Thus, God causes one body to collide with another, and physical motion begins. Nevertheless, God, as the world's sustainer, continuously recreates the world, and thus, metaphysically speaking, continuously recreates motion. This does not negate the fact that physical motion is caused by bodies continuously colliding, but Descartes contends that behind the scenes God is continuously generating motion. If God withdrew His sustaining power, the world and motion would cease to exist. Both body and mind both depend upon God for its continued existence.

Descartes is Augustinian insofar as he perceives of God and the immortal soul as the ontologically and epistemologically necessary first principles. Separating himself from the scholastics and Aristotelians, Descartes revived the Augustinian tradition, and gave it its first systematic expression. His reformulation of Augustinianism was indeed novel, and for that reason it was quite disconcerting to many schoolmen. It is quite probable that it was their unfamiliarity with Augustine that caused the schoolmen, and proceeding philosophers such as Spinoza, to misinterpret Descartes. While there are undoubtedly problems with Cartesianism, these problems must be addressed within Descartes' Augustinian framework. As Descartes addressed the epistemological flaws of scholasticism, so the Meditator must address Descartes. One must assess the axioms and metaphysical framework before attending to the empirical particulars.

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