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THE METAPHYSICS OF AUGUSTINE AND THE FOUNDATION OF THE CARTESIAN SCIENCE

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ABSTRACT : The aim of this paper is to show to what extent Descartes can be situated within the Augustinian metaphysical tradition and to what extent he has departed from it. To this end, we will argue that Descartes has borrowed his main *Meditations*' arguments from Augustine's philosophy. However, in spite of all factual and textual evidence we will provide against the originality of Descartes' metaphysical discussions, it will be stressed, on the other hand, that in borrowing not only the *cogito* argument, but also some general features of his philosophy from Augustine's works, Descartes intends to frame a metaphysics which will be the ground on his new mechanistic physics. Having this in mind, we will hold that no claim can be put forward against the originality and far-reaching scope of Descartes' philosophical intentions. Indeed, Descartes' purpose is to build a new science under a metaphysics, even though this metaphysics is the Augustinian one.

KEYWORDS: Descartes; Augustine; Metaphysics; *Cogito*; Science.

Descartes' relationship with the thought of Augustine or with the Augustinian tradition is problematic. Although Descartes asserts that he refuses to follow any philosophical tradition because, he tells us, "[...] since my earliest youth I have accepted many false opinions as true ones" (DESCARTES, 1996, AT 7 [*Meditations*], p. 17)¹, he nonetheless seems to have employed some philosophical theses already found in the work of the bishop of Hippo. In fact, according to Menn, "[...] Descartes' philosophy bears many resemblances to the thought of Augustine [...]" (MENN, 1998, p. 4); but rather more important than this is the fact that, "[...] Descartes did intend to build his new philosophy (including his physics) on the old Augustinian metaphysics [...]" (MENN, 1998, p. 16).

To bring to light the resemblances of Descartes's thought to that of Augustine is the first goal of this paper. Arguably, as we will see, on the basis of these resemblances we could call Descartes an Augustinian author, as we do in the case of Arnauld and Malebranche, for instance. Next, we will show what Descartes aims at when walking along the Augustinian metaphysical path. It will become manifest, with the claim that Descartes establishes his new mechanistic physics on a metaphysics of Augustinian inspiration, that Descartes is part of a deeper and wider philosophical project in Early Modern Philosophy.

In the message attached to the text of the *Meditations*, Descartes says to the Theologians of the Faculty of Paris that his metaphysics is grounded on the demonstration of God's and of the human soul's existence: "I have always considered that the questions concerning God and the soul were the main among those which are to be demonstrated

1 "[...] multa, ineunte aetate, falsa pro veris admiserim [...]". 'AT' refers to *Oeuvres de Descartes*, 11 volumes, (Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, eds) Paris: J.Vrin 1996.

by philosophical rather by theological argument” (DESCARTES, 1996, AT 7[*Meditations*], p. 1)². Augustine has also attached great importance on the same two issues. As a philosopher and a clergyman, he emphasizes the priority of these topics on his theoretical researches: “I desire to know God and the soul” (AUGUSTINE, *Soliloquia*, I, 7)³, he says. With this being stated, we may reasonably argue that the convergence of Descartes’ and Augustine’s purposes lies in the fact that both philosophers employ the ‘method of introspection’. The ‘method of introspection’ consists in putting empirical-corporeal considerations aside and in concentrating on the analysis of the ‘inner man’, that is to say, of the human soul. In Augustine’s words: “Do not go abroad. Return within itself. In the inward man dwells truth” (AUGUSTINE, *De vera religione*, XXXIX, 72)⁴. Descartes has, in turn, adopted a similar approach to address the philosophical problems which he was going to deal with, as suggested by the title of his masterpiece: *Meditations on First Philosophy*. After being used in the first two *Meditations*, the ‘method of introspection’ is also evoked at the beginning of the *Third meditation*: “talking just to myself and considering more deeply my own nature, I shall try little by little to reach a better knowledge of and a more familiarity with myself” (DESCARTES, 1996, AT 7 [*Meditations*], p. 34).⁵

Yet if these evidences are not enough to demonstrate the realities of Descartes with the Augustinian philosophy, there is still a great

2 “Semper existimavi duas quaestiones, de Deo et de Anima, praecipuas esse ex iis quae Philosophiae, quam Theologiae ope sunt demonstrandae”.

3 “Deum et animam scire cupio”.

4 “Noli foras ire, in teipsum redi; in interiore homine veritas habitat”.

5 “[...] meque solum alloquendo et penitius inspiciendo, meipsum paulatim mihi magis notum et familiarem reddere conabor”.

amount of other arguments displayed in the *Meditations* that bears an undeniable resemblance, beyond the aforementioned metaphysical and methodological similarities, with those arguments discussed by the Bishop of Hippo many centuries before. In fact, we have already shown that, in Augustine's work, the act of doubting is a previous condition for reaching any certainty. In his work *On true religion*, Augustine asserts that "everyone who knows that he has doubts knows with certainty something that is true; he is certain about this truth [that he has doubts]. Hence, everyone who doubts whether there is such thing as the truth has a truth about which he cannot doubt" (AUGUSTINE, *De vera religione*, xxxix, 73)⁶. The postulate that the 'natural light' provided by God allows us to reach the truth is also present in Augustine's epistemology: "[...] imbued in some way and illumined by him [God] with intelligible light, [the rational soul] discerns, not with physical eyes, but with its own highest part in which lies its excellence, *i.e.*, with its intelligence, those reasons [...]" (AUGUSTINE, *De Diversis Quaestionibus Octoginta Tribus*, q. 46, 2)⁷. Augustine had also struggled to refute the sceptical arguments concerning the dream, the madness, and the denial of the senses as a trustworthy source of knowledge, as we can see in the long quote below:

You will ask me, "Is what you see the world even if you are asleep?". It has already been said that I call 'world' whatever seems

6 "[O]mnis qui se dubitantem intelligit, verum intelligit, et de hac re quam intelligit certus est: de vero igitur certus est. Omnis ergo qui utrum sit veritas dubitat, in seipso habet verum unde non dubitet".

7 "[...] ab eo lumine illo intelligibili perfusa quodammodo et illustrata cernit non per corporeos oculos, sed per ipsius sui principile quo excellit, id est, per intelligentiam suam, istas rationes [...]".

to me to be such. But if it pleases him [the Academician] to call ‘world’ only what seems so to those who are awake or to those who are sane, then maintain this if you can: that those who are asleep or insane are not asleep or insane in the world. For this reason, I state that this whole mass of bodies in which we exist – whether we be asleep, insane, awake, or sane, or asleep – either is one or is not one. Explain how this view can be false. Now if I am asleep, it might be that I had said nothing; or if the words scape from my mouth while I am asleep, as it sometimes happens, it might be that I did not say them here, sitting as I am, to this audience. Yet the claim itself cannot be false. Nor do I say that I have perceived this because I am awake. You can say that this also could seem so to me while I was asleep, and thus it can be very like what is false. If, however, there is one world and six worlds, then, whatever condition I may be in, it is clear there is seven worlds, and it is not presumptuous of me to affirm that I know this. Accordingly, prove that either this inference or those disjunctions given above can be false because of sleep, madness, or the unreliability of the senses. If I remember them when I awake up, I will admit that I have been beaten. I think it is now sufficiently clear what falsehoods seem to be so through sleep and madness, namely, those that pertain to the bodily senses (AUGUSTINE, *Contra academicos*, III, 11, 25)⁸.

8 “Etiamne, inquires, si dormis, mundus est iste quem vides? Iam dictum est, quidquid tale mihi videtur, mundum appello. Sed si eum solum placet mundum vocare, qui videtur a vigilantibus vel etiam a sanis; illud contende, si potes, eos qui dormiunt ac furiunt, non in mundo furere atque dormire. Quamobrem hoc dico, istam totam corporum molem atque machinam in qua sumus, sive dormientes, sive furentes, sive vigilantes, sive sani, aut unam esse, aut non esse unam. Edissere, quomodo possit ista esse falsa sententia. Si autem unus et sex mundi sunt; septem mundos esse, quoquo modo affectus sim, manifestum est, et id me scire non impudenter affirmo. Quare vel hanc connexionem, vel illas superius disiunctiones doce somno aut furore aut vanitate sensuum posse esse falsas. Si enim dormio, fieri potest ut nihil dixerim; aut si etiam ore dormientis verba, ut solet, evaserunt, potest fieri ut non hic, non ita sedens, non istis audientibus dixerim: ut autem hoc falsum sit, non potest. Nec ego illud me percepisse dico, quod vigilem. Potes enim dicere, hoc mihi etiam dormienti videri potuisse; ideoque hoc potest esse falso simillimum. ; et me, si expergefactus ista meminero, victum esse concedam. Credo enim iam satis liquere quae per somnium et

In the same way, if we take a careful look at the *Meditations*, we will see that both the problems and the discussions put forward by Descartes and Augustine are very close to one another. In fact, like Augustine, Descartes fights against the sceptical doctrine. For this reason, he applies his ‘method of doubt’ to the most traditional arguments delivered by the sceptics. So he will challenge the sceptical argument about the fallibility of the senses – “All that up to the present time I have admitted as the most true and certain I have learned either from the senses or through the senses; but it is proved to me that these senses are sometimes deceptive, and it is wise not to trust entirely in those by which we have once been deceived”⁹ (DESCARTES, 1996, AT 7 [*Meditations*], p.18.)¹⁰, the argument about the dreaming illusions – “How often actually has it happened to me that in the night I dreamt that I found myself in this particular place, that I was dressed and seated near the fire, while in reality I was lying in the bed undressed” (DESCARTES, 1996, AT 7 [*Meditations*], p. 20.)¹¹, so that, he concludes, “[...] I realize that

dementiam falsa videantur, ea scilicet quae ad corporis sensus pertinent”.

9 Although it is not our subject here, we agree with Gilson’s claim that the *First meditation* is aimed at being a critique to the scholastic empiricism. Descartes himself hints this interpretation in the synopsis of the *Meditations*, when he says about his ‘method of doubt’ that “[...] the utility of a doubt that is so general does not appear at first; it is nonetheless very great, inasmuch as it delivers us from all prejudices [gotten through or by the senses] and set out for the mind a way by which it can detach itself from the senses” – “[...] tantae dubitationis utilitas prima fronte non appareat, est tamen in eo maxima quod ab omnibus praejudiciis nos liberet viamque facillimam sternat ad mentem ab sensibus abducendam” (DESCARTES, 1996, AT 7 [*Meditations*], p. 12). For more details on this issue, see GILSON, 1951, pp. 184–190.

10 “Nempe quidquid hactenus ut maxime verum admisi, vel a sensibus, vel per sensus accepi; hos autem interdum fallere deprehendi, ac prudentiae est nunquam illis confidere qui nos vel semel deceperunt”.

11 “Quam frequenter vero usitata ista, me hic esse, toga vestiri, foco assidere, quies nocturna persuadet, cum tamen positus vestibus jaceo inter strata!”.

there is never any reliable way of distinguishing being awake from being asleep” (DESCARTES, 1996, AT 7 [*Meditations*], p. 19.)¹², and the argument about madness – “How could I deny that these hands and this body are mine? Maybe I would compare myself to certain people denied of senses, whose cerebella are so troubled by the violent vapours of black bile [...]” (DESCARTES, 1996, AT 7 [*Meditations*], pp. 18–19)¹³. Furthermore, the ‘natural light’ also plays a fundamental role in Descartes’ epistemology: “[...] whatever the natural light shows me to be true by no means can be doubted¹⁴” (DESCARTES, 1996, AT 7 [*Meditations*], p. 38)¹⁵.

Among all those elements which could be mentioned in order to demonstrate the similarities between Descartes’ and Augustine’s argumentation, the one that has mostly impressed his contemporaries was the ‘*je pense, donc je suis*’. Mersenne, after his reading of the *Discourse on Method* (1637), that is to say, before the *Meditations* (1641) had been published, call the attention of Descartes as to the striking resemblance of his so-called ‘*cogito* argument’ with the famous Augustinian thesis ‘*si enim fallor, sum*’¹⁶. Afterwards, having the *Meditations* been printed, it is the time of Arnauld, a follower of Augustine, to tell Descartes that “the

12 “[...] video nunquam certis indiciis vigiliam a somno posse distingui [...]”.

13 “Manus vero has ipsas, totumque hoc corpus meum esse, qua ratione posset negari? Nisi me forte comparem nescio quibus insanis, quorum cerebella tam contumax vapor ex atra bile labefactat [...]”.

14 For instance, the important truth that God is not a deceiver comes from the ‘natural light’: “the natural light teaches us that all fraud and deception necessarily proceed from some defect” – “Omnem enim fraudem et deceptionem a defectu aliquo pendere, lumine naturali manifestum est” (DESCARTES, 1996, AT 7 [*Meditations*], p. 52). God, we know, is a *ens perfectissimum*.

15 “[...] quaecumque lumine naturali mihi ostenduntur [...] nullo modo dubia esse possunt [...]”.

16 See DESCARTES, 1996, AT 1 [letter to Mersenne], p. 376

first thing that I find remarkable is that this notable man [Descartes] has based his whole philosophy on a principle that was laid down by saint Augustine, a man of great intelligence” (DESCARTES, 1996, AT 7 [*Meditations*], p. 197)¹⁷. While in this passage Arnauld is obviously referring to the *cogito* argument, Mersenne has in mind a quotation from Augustine’s *De civitate Dei* –

What if you are deceived? If I am deceived, I am. For he who is not cannot be deceived; and for this very reason I am, if I am deceived. And since I am if I am deceived, how can I be deceived in thinking that I am? It is certain that I am if I am deceived. Since, therefore, I should be, even if I were deceived, for sure I am not deceived by the fact that I have known myself. Consequently, I am not deceived in knowing that I know it (AUGUSTINE, *De civitate Dei*, XI, 26)¹⁸ –,

Arnauld is comparing Descartes’ *cogito* argument with another passage from Augustine, found in the *De libero arbitrio*: “To get started with what is clearest, I ask first whether you yourself exist. Are you perhaps afraid that you might be deceived by this question? In fact, if you did not exist, you could not be deceived at all” (AUGUSTINE, *De libero arbitrio*, II, 3)¹⁹.

17 “[H]ic primum mirari subit, Virum Clarissimum idem pro totius suae philosophiae principio statuisset, quod statuit D. Augustinus, acerrimi vir ingenii [...]”.

18 “Quid si falleris? Si enim fallor, sum. Nam qui non est, utique nec falli potest; ac per hoc sum, si fallor. Quia ergo sum si fallor, quomodo esse me fallor, quando certum est me esse, si fallor? Quia igitur essem qui fallerer, etiamsi fallerer, procul dubio in eo, quod me novi esse, non fallor. Consequens est autem, ut etiam in eo, quod me novi nosse, non fallar”.

19 “[...] Prius abs te quaero, ut de manifestissimis capiamus exordium; utrum tu ipse sis. An fortasse tu metuis, ne in hac interrogatione fallaris, cum utique si non esses, falli omnino non posses?”.

Thus, from Arnauld's comment on, it has begun the long history of the affirmation that Descartes had 'borrowed' the *cogito* argument from Augustine, and, for this reason, he would be in some sense taking back the philosophy of the Bishop of Hippo. In truth, all the essential questions about the striking and undeniable resemblances between the *cogito, ergo sum* and the *si enim fallor, sum* have already been raised by Descartes' contemporaries. The recognition of this fact has allowed Etienne Gilson to state that "though other texts of secondary importance have been taken into consideration since that time, nothing has been added to the facts already known" (GILSON, 1951, p. 191.)²⁰.

As demonstrated above, the comparison of some works of Augustine with the *Meditations* of Descartes does make clear the existence of a strong similarity in the arguments of both authors, as well as an almost literal repetition by the French philosopher of certain expressions found in the thought of the Bishop of Hippo, more so in the construction of the *cogito* argument. Based on this compelling evidence, someone who wanted not only to situate Descartes within the Augustinian tradition, but also to deny the role traditionally attributed to him as 'the founder of the modern philosophy' would have an easy task to carry out. From this point of view, Descartes would be a mere epigone of Augustine, given that he would only be repeating what his 'master' had already taught.

However convincing this interpretation of the relationship between Descartes and Augustine might be, there is arguably something very wrong with it. Although the *Meditations* is considered as the main

20 "[B]ien que d'autres textes d'importance secondaire aient été pris en considération depuis cette époque, on n'a rien ajouté d'essentiel aux faits déjà connus".

philosophical work of Descartes and the *cogito* argument is viewed as his most important metaphysical thesis, they constitute neither the whole of the Cartesian new system of thought, nor they stand for the true and deep contribution Descartes believed he was making to the European culture, still dominated by the Scholastic teaching. In what follows, we will show the reason why Descartes ‘borrowed’ the Augustinian metaphysics and what motivations led him to do it.

To begin with, as a matter of fact, there is no proof whatsoever that Descartes really read any of Augustine’s works. For this reason, the debate about whether Descartes read Augustine tends to produce no definite conclusion, but only hypotheses and speculation. Nevertheless, Menn draws attention to the frequently ignored fact that “[...] in France there was no rival to Augustine’s prestige. He was an ineffaceable part of the intellectual background against which thinkers of the seventeenth-century defined themselves²¹” (MENN, 1998, p. 6). Descartes, for instance, had contact with Cardinal Bérulle, the founder and leader of the Oratorians in France, who was thoroughly imbued with Augustine’s thought. This fact happened before Descartes had worked out his metaphysics and might have concretely helped him to shape his project of creating a new philosophy. On the basis of these circumstances, Menn goes further and asserts that Descartes really knew and maybe have read some of Augustine’s works. However, he also admits that it is not possible to say exactly whether “[...] his [Descartes’] reading was deep or extensive [...]” (MENN, 1998, p. ix.). This fact does not prevent Menn

21 Signs of the influence of Augustine upon the French culture in the Seventeenth Century can be notoriously found in thinkers like Arnauld and Malebranche, followers of both Augustine and Descartes.

from laying down the most important thesis of his book, which is: “[...] the entire metaphysics of the *Meditations* is the result of this process of adaptation of Augustinian metaphysics [...]” (MENN, 1998, p. 16.).

In his eagerness to assert the connection between Descartes’ metaphysics and that of Augustine, Menn seems to suggest what has really come about. For the word ‘adaptation’ means neither merely ‘repeating’ nor just ‘copying’. The process of ‘adaptation’ of Augustine’s metaphysics is carried out by Descartes to suit what we can call the ‘instrumentalization’ of the Augustinian thought. In fact, only through a process of adaptation would Descartes be able to make that old metaphysics of the Bishop of Hippo work on behalf of his new project of building a system of mechanistic sciences. To reach this goal, Descartes should get rid of the intrinsic theological content of the Augustinian metaphysics²². Bearing this in mind, we can say that, as an ‘Augustinian’, Descartes should undoubtedly ‘adapt’ the Augustine’s metaphysics, since its simple copy or repetition would be meaningless and ineffective for Descartes’s ambitions to construct a new scientific view of the world grounded on a metaphysics²³.

The capital role played by the metaphysics of Augustine in shaping the mature philosophy of Descartes seems to come to light if we compare the *Regulae ad directionem ingenii* (1628), which we will designate as a ‘pre-Augustinian’ work, with a ‘post-Augustinian’ one, like the *Meditations* (1641). In chapter XII of the *Regulae*, Descartes discusses the conception of what he calls ‘simple nature’ (*natura simplicissima; res sim-*

22 For Arnauld and Malebranche, the theological content of the philosophy of Augustine was not a problem at all.

23 The issue of the scientific purpose of the *cogito* argument is addressed just below.

plex)²⁴. He divides them under three headings: intellectual, material, and common simple natures. Although, as holds Marion²⁵, these concepts give some idea of what the mature metaphysics of Descartes will look like, they would never work as a metaphysical condition by themselves. To become metaphysical entities they would need a previous metaphysical doctrine, which would unify them and subordinate each one to a real substance. Taking Marion's own examples, one substance would be responsible for unifying one intellectual simple nature, like *cogitare* (to think) or *dubitare* (to doubt), with a common simple nature, like *existere* (to exist), and the result would be the notion of *res cogitans*. Since the *res cogitans* is a substance, all the intellectual simple natures would be subordinated to it. The same is true of the material simple natures, which would be unified with and subordinated to another substance, the *res extensa*. Thus, under a metaphysical background, the doctrine of simple natures undergoes a great deal of simplification and cohesion. This synthesis of the wide range of simple natures under ontological, more fundamental principles is not due, as Marion supposes, to just 'ordering' them²⁶. In fact, ordering could by no means change the epistemological notions of simple natures into the ontological conceptions of substance, as the *res cogitans* and *res extensa* are thought to be.

In opposition to Marion's theses, we believe that the true cause lying behind the transformation of the doctrine of simple natures into

24 See MARION, 1992, pp. 115-139.

25 "With the doctrine of the simple natures, the *Regulae* is already equipped with all the elements required for articulating the first proposition of metaphysics [*i.e.*, the *cogito* argument]" (MARION, 1992, p. 119).

26 "What is missing is simply the capacity to establish a necessary order between the simple natures to make up the *Cogito*" (MARION, 1992, p. 119).

the mature metaphysics of Descartes should be assigned to his assimilation of the philosophy of Augustine, probably from his contact with the Oratorians and the Cardinal Bérulle²⁷, as pointed out above. The ‘method of introspection’ was the principal tool Descartes borrowed from Augustine’s thought. All the other striking resemblances between their philosophies can be rightly conceived of as a consequence of the application of the ‘method of introspection’ to solve philosophical problems, like those delivered by the sceptics. So before leaving France and arriving at Holland, Descartes already knew how to achieve his project of working out a new philosophy.

Descartes was many times warned by his readers about the similarity between his *cogito* argument and Augustine’s *si enim fallor, sum*. For his part, he never denied categorically his acquaintance with the texts of the Bishop of Hippo. His most common reaction towards these comments was always to emphasize that the purpose and aim of his *cogito* was thoroughly different from Augustine’s²⁸. We already find this attitude of Descartes in his response to Mersenne’s early observation on this issue, after his reading of the *Discourse on Method* (1637): “[...] Saint

27 These contacts took place after Descartes had worked out his *Regulae* and before the letter sent to Mersenne of April 15, 1630, in which the importance of metaphysics to his physics is for the first time spoken out.

28 There are at least two reasons that explain why Descartes did not admit his ties with the philosophy of Augustine. First, we can say that, as an author who had a ‘foundationalist’ project and, for this reason, wanted to settle a new beginning in philosophy, the idea of relating his philosophy to that of other philosophers would not be suitable for his purpose. Secondly, but not lesser important, it is the fact that the admission of his proximity to Augustine could get Descartes into trouble with the Aristotelian official authorities. Descartes’s reaction to Galileo’s condemnation shows pretty well his anxiety over the disapproval of his works by the Church (that is why he sent a preliminary version of the *Meditations* to the theologians of the Faculty of Paris).

Augustine [...] does not seem to use it [the *cogito* argument] for the same use that I make” (DESCARTES, 1996, AT 1 [letter to Mersenne], p. 376)²⁹. In another occasion, Descartes not only repeat what he had already said to Mersenne about the essential difference of use between both arguments, but also explains what that distinction consists in:

You have warned me of the passage of St. Augustine to which my “I think, therefore I am” has some relation. I have read it today in the library of this city [Leiden], and I find that he makes use of it to prove the certainty of our being, and then to show that there is within us an image of the Trinity [...], whereas I make use of it to demonstrate that this self, which thinks, is an immaterial substance, having nothing of material, which are two very different things (DESCARTES, 1996, AT 3 [anonymous letter], pp. 247–8.)³⁰.

This passage makes clear that, for Descartes, the parallel between the two arguments is not meaningful, because, although the utterances are very similar to one another, the meaning assigned to them by each author is quite distinct. In other words, this can be expressed by saying that the external resemblance of their ‘formula’ conceals intended thoughts that are, in each case, essentially different.

Whatever one might say, it is undeniable that Descartes – even though he does not admit it openly – has borrowed some fundamental theses from Augustine. For both of them, scepticism has its roots

29 “[...] Saint Augustin [...] ne me semble s’en servir à même usage que je fais”.

30 “Vous m’avez obligé de m’avertir du passage de saint Augustin, auquel mon *je pense, donc je suis*, a quelque rapport; je l’ai lu aujourd’hui en la bibliothèque de cette ville [Leide], et je trouve véritablement qu’il s’en sert pour prouver la certitude de nôtre être, et ensuite pour faire voir qu’il y a en nous quelque image de la Trinité [...]. Au lieu que je m’en sers pour faire connaître que ce moi, qui pense, est une substance immatérielle, et qui n’a rien de corporel; qui sont deux choses fort différentes”.

in sensory experience and the solution to solve this problem lies in introspection. It is through introspection that one can demonstrate the immateriality of the human soul and prove the existence of God. For this reason, we cannot speak of the *je pense, donc je suis* as an original argument created by Descartes; nor can we speak of Descartes as the first philosopher to conceive of the method of introspection or of pure thought as a useful device to overcome the sceptical doctrine. Consequently, we also cannot consider Descartes as the first to establish the distinction between mind and body³¹.

On the other hand, Descartes seems to be quite right when calling our attention to the fact that Augustine's metaphysical argument and his own do not have the same purposes. As Gilson puts it, "[...] under no circumstances can one expect to find in St. Augustine the *je pense* as the foundation of a mechanistic physics of the Cartesian type" (GILSON, 1998, p. 194.)³². Menn, who agrees with Gilson, reinforces Descartes' point: "the aim of the *Meditations* is to show that God and the soul are better known than bodies; but this demonstration has not only the religious and moral utility that Descartes stresses to the doctors of Sorbonne, but also a scientific utility" (MENN, 1998, p. 57.). The 'scientific utility' of the *Meditations* that Menn is talking about comes from the fact that it is also the foundation of the Cartesian mechanistic physics³³.

31 See GILSON, 1951, p. 198.

32 "[...] en aucun cas on ne peut s'attendre à retrouver chez saint Augustin le *je pense* comme fondement d'une physique mécaniste de type cartésien".

33 The first appearance of this theme dates from a letter Descartes sent to Mersenne on 04/15/1630 (DESCARTES, 1996, AT I, p. 144). In our understanding, this letter is extremely important, insofar as it indicates a turning-point in Descartes' philosophy: "[...] To try to know him [God] and to know oneself. It is through this that I have endeavored to begin my studies, and I will tell you that I would not have known how to find the foundations of physics if I had not sought them by this means " – "[...]

That is why we give reason to Descartes when he stresses the fact that he and Augustine have a distinct aim when putting forward the *cogito* argument. We can find further evidence for this difference of purpose in a passage on a letter that Descartes sent to Mersenne, in which he asserts the ‘scientific utility’ of his *Meditations* as well as its anti-scholastic content:

[...] I will tell you, among us, that these six Meditations contain all the foundations of my Physics. Nevertheless, it should not be said, if you please; for those who favor Aristotle would be more difficult to approve of them; and I hope that those who read them will unconsciously acquiesce in my principles, and will recognize their truth before they perceive that they destroy those of Aristotle (DESCARTES, 1996, AT 3 [letter to Mersenne], p. 297-8)^{34 35}.

Even though Descartes’ mature philosophy has metaphysical

Tâcher à le [Dieu] connaître et à connaître soi-même. C’est par là que j’ai tâche de commencer mës études, et je vous dirai que j’eusse su trouver les fondements de la Physique, si je ne les eusse cherchés par cette voie”. At this moment, Descartes came to realize that he could ‘instrumentalize’ Augustine’s thought in order to build a new philosophy, and construct a new mechanistic science based on the old metaphysics of the African philosopher. Thus, the ‘pre-Augustinian’ system of the *Regulae* is abandoned and we see the new and mature, ‘post-Augustinian’ thinking of Descartes emerging.

34 “[...] Je vous dirai, entre nous, que ces six Méditations contiennent tous les fondements de ma Physique. Mais il ne le faut pas dire, s’il vous plaît; car ceux qui favorisent Aristote feraient peut-être plus de difficulté de les approuver; et j’espère que ceux qui les liront, s’accoutumeront insensiblement à mes principes, et en reconnaîtront la vérité avant que de s’apercevoir qu’ils détruisent ceux d’Aristote”.

35 A remarkable feature of Descartes’ philosophical attitude consists in never criticizing directly his opponents, above all the scholastics. Unlike Arnauld, Descartes has little interest in polemics and controversies. This particularity of the Cartesian *modus operandi* requires that the scholar must be always alert, if he really wants to grasp Descartes’ often hidden intentions.

roots in the thought of the bishop of Hippo, there are more facts that should be mentioned in order to help us to understand to what extent Descartes's project can be seen as autonomous in relation to that of Augustine. Descartes spent the first nine months of his stay in the Netherlands deepening his knowledge of metaphysical issues. As he tells us, "[...] this is the subject I have studied most of all [...]" (DESCARTES, 1996, AT 1 [letter to Mersenne], p. 144)³⁶. Needless to say, metaphysics plays a prominent role in Descartes' philosophical system, otherwise he would not have written a book which has metaphysics as its main subject. Nonetheless, Descartes actually considers metaphysics as a kind of 'pro-paedeutic discipline' for science. In this sense, metaphysics is understood as a prior learning, a necessary basis to enable one to carry out scientific research. For this reason, he believes that as soon as one has grasped the meaning of the metaphysical speculations, one can stop studying it and finally begin studying what does matter: science. This is exactly what he says to the Bohemian princess, Elizabeth:

Finally, as I believe that it is necessary to have understood the principles of Metaphysics once in his life, because they are the ones who give us the knowledge of God and of our soul, I also believe that it would be very detrimental to occupy too frequently his understanding with meditating on them, because it could not so well be employed in the functions of the imagination and the senses; rather, it is better to content himself with retaining in his memory and in his belief the conclusions which have been drawn from them, and then to employ the rest of the time for study in the thoughts in which the understanding acts with the imagination and the senses (DESCARTES, 1996, AT 3 [letter to Elizabeth] p. 695)³⁷.

36 "[...] c'est la matière que j'ai le plus étudiée de toutes [...]".

37 "Enfin, comme je crois qu'il est nécessaire d'avoir bien compris, une fois en sa vie, les principes de la Metaphysique à cause de que ce sont eux qui nous donnent la

Turning upside down the most common interpretation of his philosophy, which tends to emphasize its metaphysical theses, focusing above all on the *cogito* argument, Descartes stresses, in this passage, what he is mostly concerned with (science), and calls our attention to the ‘danger’ (detrimental; *nuisible*) of metaphysics.

Moreover, more than generally agreed on, it is indeed taken for granted that in the mind-body distinction carried out in the *Second meditation* the main concern of Descartes is to prove that the mind is an immaterial, self-contained entity, which requires no material substrate to exist. In fact, the emphasis given throughout the *Meditations* to the *cogito* argument leads us to this seemingly obvious conclusion. But, in spite of all evidence, what Descartes really strives to demonstrate in the whole work is that the essence of the body is the material extension and, consequently, that there is no soul intrinsically attached to it. In other words, Descartes had engaged in breaking with the scholastic doctrine of hylemorfism, since it was an obstacle to his project of establishing a new science that could be based only on the geometrical and mechanical properties of the nature. Arguably, the breaking with hylemorfism was the only way to legitimate, metaphysically, the foundation of a mathematical physics.

connaissance de Dieu et de nôtre âme, je crois aussi qu’il serait très nuisible d’ocuper souvent son entendement à les mediter, à cause de qu’il ne pourrait si bien vacquer aux fonctions de l’imagination et des sens; mais que le meilleur est de se contenter de retenir en sa mémoire et en sa créance les conclusions qu’on en a une fois tirées, puis employer le reste du temps qu’on a pour l’étude, aux pensées où l’entendement agit avec l’imagination et les sens”.

That is why, after laying down the principles of his metaphysics, Descartes does not go on deepening and developing his new conception of the soul – the *res cogitans* – into a rational psychology; likewise, his proof of God’s existence is not driven to further considerations which would result in a theology. On the contrary, what we always find in Descartes’s works after the presentation of his metaphysics is the turning of his attention to scientific issues. This very planning is displayed in the most important works of Descartes: the *Discourse on Method*, the *Meditations*, and the *Principles of Philosophy*. According to Descartes himself, his metaphysics must be followed neither by a science of the soul (rational psychology) nor by a science of God (theology), but rather by a science of the body (*res extensa*), that is to say, a philosophy of nature or a physics. It is in light of these facts that we can assert that the metaphysics of Descartes is a ‘propaedeutic’ discipline for his mechanistic science.

Bearing all these discussions in mind, we can say that the conclusions drawn by the critic of Descartes’ philosophy who focuses his attention exclusively on the Cartesian metaphysics, particularly on the *cogito* argument, are quite shortcomings – but not false at all –, given that he would not be taking into account its most fundamental part, *i.e.*, Descartes’ natural philosophy or science. Gaukroger puts forward persuasive reasons to explain why some critics have behaved this way towards Descartes’ philosophy:

[...] Descartes’ foundationalist metaphysics is so notoriously problematic that it is difficult to get beyond it to what it is supposed to provide the foundation for, and, in any case, if the foundations are not viable, there would seem to be little to be gained in asking what plausible systematic connection there could be between them and what is built upon them” (GAUKROGER, 2002, p. 1).

We are in agreement with Gaukroger's claims. But we also believe that any serious attempt to assess a systematic philosophy, like Descartes', should contemplate the whole body of works. This seems to be the most suitable approach to enable one to bring to light the meaning of Descartes' philosophical intentions. Therefore, the great mistake of Descartes' critics is precisely to carry out a partial analysis of his philosophy. In what concerns the relationship between Descartes and Augustine, no fair and reasonable statement can be made by a scholar acting so.

Even though we cannot prove that Descartes happened to have direct contact with Augustine's works, we must finally conclude that it seems to us undeniable that he incorporated some arguments and theses of the bishop of Hippo. Facing a sceptical environment, both of them found the weapons to fight this doctrine in the evidence of pure thought, which led them to employ the 'method of introspection': my external senses can always deceive me, but I can never be deceived in thinking that I exist. On this truth, the sceptic can cast no doubt. It is on the basis of this Augustinian argument that Descartes will create his famous *cogito* argument, the 'Archimedean point' of his philosophy. But what distinguishes Descartes' purposes from those of Augustine is the fact that the French philosopher does not restrain his investigations within the boundaries of metaphysics. For him, metaphysics is just a first step in the direction of what really matters: natural philosophy or physics. In his view, it is not worth wasting one's lifetime reflecting about metaphysical questions. Instead, after having reflected on them, it is just necessary to keep the metaphysical conclusions in mind and move on to the practical matters, that is to say, science. For these reasons, we have argued that Descartes' philosophical project as a whole is quite distinct from that of Augustine and, except for what relates to metaphysics,

cannot be confused with the theological-philosophical project of the bishop of Hippo. In fact, we cannot find in Augustine a metaphysics sustaining a mechanistic system of sciences. That is the point.

A METAFÍSICA DE AGOSTINHO E A FUNDAÇÃO DA CIÊNCIA CARTESIANA

RESUMO: O objetivo desse artigo é mostrar em que medida Descartes pode ser situado dentro da tradição metafísica agostiniana e em que medida ele afastou-se da mesma. Assim, demonstraremos que Descartes tomou emprestado da filosofia de Agostinho os principais argumentos de suas *Meditações*. Todavia, a despeito de todas as evidências factuais e textuais que serão fornecidas contra a originalidade das discussões metafísicas de Descartes, enfatizaremos, por outro lado, que os propósitos de Descartes ao tomar emprestado de Agostinho não somente o argumento do *cogito*, mas também algumas características gerais de sua filosofia visam estruturar uma metafísica que será o fundamento de sua física mecanicista. Tendo isso em mente, defenderemos que não se pode fazer nenhuma alegação contra a originalidade e o amplo alcance das intenções filosóficas de Descartes. Com efeito, ele pretende construir uma nova ciência sob uma metafísica, ainda que essa metafísica seja a de Agostinho.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE Descartes; Agostinho; Metafísica; *Cogito*; Ciência.

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