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Excerpt
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Introduction

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Descartes and the history of philosophy

Descartes stands at a turning-point in the history of philosophy. The old philosophy of Aristotle had lost its credibility, and the new philosophies of the Renaissance, planned to replace it, turned out to be dead ends. It was Descartes, with such contemporaries as Hobbes and Gassendi, who staked out the road leading, past many further twists and forks, to the philosophy and science of today.

In these circumstances it is natural for modern philosophers to turn back to look at Descartes. Much good interpretive work has been done, and often it has been concerned to compare Descartes' philosophy with the philosophies of his contemporaries and predecessors. Especially in France, which has devoted itself most intensely to the study of its national hero, scholars have investigated the continuity or discontinuity of Descartes' thought with earlier philosophy, particularly in the scholastic and Augustinian traditions. By setting Descartes' thought in relation to these earlier traditions, these scholars have tried to clarify the origin and nature of modern philosophy as such, and of its complicated relations to science and to religion. Both because of his historical importance and because of his intrinsic merit, Descartes is an ideal case study for anyone who wishes to assess the extent of constancy and change, of harmony and disharmony in the history of philosophy; for anyone who wishes to see how far an old philosophy can survive and how much it can contribute in a new scientific or religious setting; and for anyone who wishes to draw a moral for the present and future of traditional philosophy. In this study I will attempt to interpret Descartes' philosophy by understanding its relations to Augustine and the Augustinian tradition. I will try to show what Descartes' goals were and what expectations he was trying to meet in constructing his new philosophy; what intellectual materials the Augustinian tradition provided him for achieving these goals; how Descartes was able to make these old concepts and doctrines useful for his new purposes; and to what extent he preserved them or transformed them in the process.

If we exclude the mathematical disciplines and look strictly at philosophy, then the most important influences on Descartes' thought were Augustinianism and Aristotelian scholasticism. Although the history of Augustinianism and the history of scholasticism interconnect and overlap, Descartes' relation to Augustinianism is very different from his relation to scholasticism, and we can study one without studying the other.

Descartes' attitude toward scholasticism is clearly hostile. Especially in

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its physics, his philosophy runs directly counter to the philosophy of Aristotle, which he hopes to replace in the schools. Certainly, in trying to elaborate a complete philosophy, he borrows many technical details from his scholastic opponents, and a comparative study of Descartes and late scholasticism can throw interesting sidelights on his philosophy. But there is no continuity between the fundamental projects of scholastic and Cartesian philosophy.

It seems much more promising to try to interpret Descartes through his relations with the Augustinian tradition. Augustine was an important authority for the scholastics, more or less harmonized with Aristotle by different thinkers; the Augustinianisms of Bonaventure or of Bradwardine are attempts within scholasticism to remain as faithful as possible to the model of Augustine's thought as these thinkers understand it. But Augustinianism is also much wider than scholasticism; and especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Augustine was the chief human authority and model for many thinkers throughout Latin Christendom who were indifferent or hostile to the thought of Aristotle. Was Descartes one of these thinkers?

On the face of it, Descartes' philosophy bears many resemblances to the thought of Augustine. Indeed, we know of several people who within Descartes' lifetime were sufficiently struck by these resemblances to call them to Descartes' attention.¹ Prominent among these was Antoine Arnauld, the intellectual leader of the Jansenist movement: throughout his long life (1612–94) an upholder of the doctrine of Augustine on all questions, he was also, from his first reception of the manuscript of the *Meditations* in 1640, to be strongly attracted to the philosophy of Descartes because of the connections he saw between this and Augustine. In the *Fourth Set of Objections* which Arnauld sent to Descartes, he finds the relation to Augustine to be the most remarkable thing about the *Meditations*:

Here it first occurs [to me] to marvel [*mirari*], that the most eminent man [Descartes] has established as the first principle of his philosophy the same thing that was established by the divine Augustine, a man of the most acute intellect and entirely admirable [*mirandus*], not only in theological but also in philosophical matters. For in the second book of his *De Libero Arbitrio*, chapter 3, Alipius says, in arguing with Evodius and preparing to prove that God exists, "First, in order that we may begin with the things which are most manifest, I ask you whether you yourself exist. Are you afraid that you will be deceived in this questioning, seeing that you certainly cannot be deceived if you do not exist?" Like these are the words of our author [Descartes]: "But there is I know not what deceiver, supremely powerful and clever, who always intentionally deceives me; doubtless then I too exist, if he deceives me." (AT VII, 197–8)²

¹ For a full list of references, see below, Chapter 2, Section D; and Henri Gouhier, *Cartésianisme et augustinisme au XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Vrin, 1978).

² Arnauld's reference is to Augustine *De Libero Arbitrio* II,iii,7, and the textual citation is correct; the speaker, however, is not Augustine's friend Alypius, but Augustine himself.

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Descartes in his reply (AT VII,219) briefly thanks Arnauld for the citation from Augustine, and moves on to other business. But Arnauld's comment marks the beginning of a long history of philosophers upholding Cartesianism as Augustinianism "in philosophical matters." Probably the comparison most frequently drawn is the one Arnauld mentions here, on the so-called "*cogito*" argument which Descartes shares with Augustine. But this is only one of a great many points of contact, and often the "*cogito*" is cited as a kind of abbreviation for a more general sympathy of metaphysical sentiments between Descartes and Augustine. Even in the passage I have cited, Arnauld says not merely that Descartes shares a certain view or argument with Augustine, but that he anchors his whole philosophy where Augustine does, proceeding to draw the consequences of what Augustine too regarded as the starting-point of our knowledge of God and the world. And indeed the metaphysics that Descartes proceeds to construct upon this base closely resembles the metaphysics of Augustine. Speaking very generally and crudely to establish a framework for discussion, we may note a number of points of contact.

Descartes, like Augustine, believes that metaphysical knowledge, being purely intellectual, is independent of the testimony of the senses, and even somehow opposed to what the senses habitually conceive: thus it cannot be based on inferences from physics, as Aristotle and many other thinkers believe. It will be concerned primarily with God and with the human soul, and not with God and the soul as they may be inferred from sensible objects. The human soul will be known primarily as a thing that thinks: not as an act of an organic body, but as something only extrinsically related to a body. God will be known primarily as the highest object of our thought, not as the governor of the physical world, although he becomes that too when he creates the world. Beyond this, the detailed working-out of Descartes' conceptions of the soul and God, in themselves and in their relation to body, will have many points of contact with Augustine's conceptions: most obviously, both Descartes and Augustine develop strongly voluntarist accounts of both divine and human action. Thus God freely decrees the laws of nature, rather than recognizing them as intellectual necessities to which he must conform; and the human mind too, made in God's image, has a freedom that makes it superior to the law-governed natural order, even while it is limited by the constraints of its natural environment.

If we take metaphysics in the strict sense, as the science of immaterial things or of God and the soul, and distinguish it from loosely "metaphysical" doctrines belonging either to Christian faith or to natural philosophy, then the agreements I have broadly outlined will cover the entirety of Augustinian metaphysics. No one supposes that these are

Arnauld was probably using an edition that referred to the speaker only by the initial "A." Arnauld knew the texts of Augustine very well, but tended, as we shall see again, to cite them in a rather casual manner.

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merely accidental resemblances between the doctrines of Descartes and Augustine; nor are they simply the product of two similar minds in similar situations. A seventeenth-century French thinker could not simply “resemble” Augustine, any more than a twentieth-century Russian thinker could “resemble” Marx. In Protestant Germany, Luther, for whom Augustine was the chief authority after the scriptures, might have come to eclipse his master; in Spain, to a lesser degree, St. Thomas might have done the same; but in France there was no rival to Augustine’s prestige. He was an inefaceable part of the intellectual background against which thinkers of the seventeenth century defined themselves. They might draw on him or pretend to draw on him, they might choose to ignore or even to disagree with him, but they could not “agree” with him on equal terms.

Precisely because Augustine’s authority was so universal, however, it is doubtful what significance we should attribute to Descartes’ Augustinianism. Descartes is certainly an Augustinian in the sense that he agrees with Augustine’s central metaphysical theses; but in this sense it would have been more surprising, and more illuminating for Descartes’ thought, had he turned out *not* to be an Augustinian. We must do more to clarify the phenomenon of Augustinianism in the seventeenth century before we can use it to locate Descartes. We might begin, crudely, by distinguishing between a wide, *doctrinal* Augustinianism and a narrow, *conceptual* Augustinianism. Most French thinkers in the seventeenth century would be able to assent to Augustine’s doctrinal formulae; but many of these thinkers would interpret the *terms* of these formulae through conceptions drawn from Aristotelian or other non-Augustinian sources. So already, in making a *prima facie* case for Descartes’ Augustinianism, I have tried to indicate not merely doctrinal but conceptual and structural parallels between Cartesian and Augustinian metaphysics. But the question can still be posed whether Descartes is drawing in an essential way on the Augustinian conceptual scheme, or whether he is using the old Augustinian vocabulary with a new dictionary of his own.

Indeed, for half a century the reigning view has been that there is a fundamental break between Descartes and the earlier Augustinian tradition, and that Augustinianism cannot yield the key for interpreting Descartes’ philosophy. Such was the conclusion in the 1920s of Etienne Gilson and Henri Gouhier, and later, from a different point of view, of Martial Gueroult; and while their conclusion has been doubted, nobody has mounted a systematic effort to reassess Descartes’ relation to Augustine. In attempting such a reassessment in the present study, and in using an understanding of Augustinianism to interpret Descartes’ philosophy, I will to this extent be challenging the views of the scholars I have named. But there are positive lessons to be learned from their reasons for discounting the apparent connections between Descartes and Augustine. Some reflections on these scholars’ work will indicate how deeply their interpretations, both of Descartes and of Augustine, have been informed by their own philosophical concerns; and while this should lead us to be

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cautious about accepting their conclusions, it should also lead us to reflect more critically on what it might mean to say that Descartes is an Augustinian. To understand what Augustinianism was, or the variety of things it could have been, we must in the first instance know what Augustine himself thought, but we must also understand the range of stances that seventeenth-century thinkers could take up in relation to Augustine; and we must reflect critically on what we mean in speaking of an Augustinian “influence” on Descartes, who claims to construct a new philosophy using only his own reason, without any appeal to authority.

At the beginning of the twentieth century a number of scholars were drawing connections between Descartes and Augustine or Augustinianism. Even Gilson, in his doctoral dissertation *La liberté chez Descartes et la théologie* (published 1913), had allowed himself to say that the spirit of Descartes’ metaphysics was that “of a neo-Platonic theology, itself renewed by the Fathers and above all by St. Augustine.”³ But Gilson was later to lead a massive reaction against this view, a reaction whose first published statement was the doctoral dissertation of Gilson’s student Gouhier, *La pensée religieuse de Descartes* (originally published 1924).⁴

We know that Descartes, in the years around 1630, had been in contact with Augustinian theologians belonging to the French congregation of the Oratory, and with the founder of that congregation, Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle. There is biographical evidence, including a report of a meeting between Descartes and Bérulle, which has suggested to many scholars that the thought of the Oratory was a formative influence on Descartes’ metaphysics (see below, Chapter 2, Section C). But Gouhier denies this: “Augustinianism and Cartesianism met up with each other, just as Bérulle and Descartes found themselves one day in the same salon; the essential problem of French philosophy in the seventeenth century is perhaps in this paradox of two radically different inspirations producing fruits with so strange a resemblance.”⁵

In asserting that Cartesianism and Augustinianism proceed from radically different inspirations, Gouhier and the mature Gilson require an interpretation not only of Descartes but also of Augustinianism. These two scholars speak in similar ways about Augustinianism, and draw similar consequences for locating Descartes. “Augustinianism, let us not forget, is less a system than a spirit; when it blows, speculations are seen to

³ Etienne Gilson, *La liberté chez Descartes et la théologie* (Paris: Alcan, 1913), p. 160.

⁴ Henri Gouhier, *La pensée religieuse de Descartes*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1972).

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 262. This would be (in the words of Lautréamont, describing his hero Maldoror) “as beautiful as the chance encounter, on a dissecting table, between a sewing machine and an umbrella.” If Gouhier seriously means that the resemblances he notices between Descartes’ and Augustine’s philosophies are historical coincidences, then he is the only scholar I know who has ever maintained this. Gilson, in his extremely sympathetic review of Gouhier’s book, rightly points out the historical implausibility of such a conclusion (*Etudes sur le rôle de la pensée médiévale dans la formation du système cartésien* (Paris: Vrin, 1930), pp. 289–94), while agreeing with Gouhier’s main thesis of an opposition between the Cartesian and Augustinian spirits.

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arise where philosophy and religion are not separated, where faith and reason are fused together”; thus “to recognize this spirit in a system, it is sufficient to explicate the doctrine of faith and reason.”⁶ But Descartes does not fuse faith and reason; on the contrary, he keeps them rigorously separate, following the Thomist rather than the Augustinian model. Therefore, say Gouhier and Gilson, Descartes does not share the Augustinian spirit, nor the Augustinian conception of philosophy itself. Thus, as Gouhier puts it:

It matters little that the matter is the same in the two systems; it matters little that the *cogito* is found in the one and in the other; it matters little that the two apologetics have recourse to the same procedures; it matters little that the two dialectics work themselves out beyond the bounds of the sensible world. Should their proceedings be rigorously parallel, should their expressions be identical, above all this there is a *soul* which these resemblances do not touch, and it is to this soul that a study like ours should lead. Understanding the relations between faith and reason in the philosophy of Descartes is not piecing concepts together to reconstruct a fragment of a system; it is placing oneself at the moment where, before every concept, thought engages itself, or is engaged, on a way that closes every other way to it; it is, perhaps, coming up against that portion of individuality which resists analysis and cannot be further defined. The path Descartes followed is not the path that the bishop of Hippo had opened up for Christian thought; all the comparisons of texts that can be made weigh nothing against this fact.⁷

Gilson agrees with Gouhier that the relations between faith and reason are decisive on the question of Descartes’ Augustinianism: in developing a philosophy unconnected with faith, Descartes is “pursuing radically anti-Augustinian ends.”⁸ Gilson continues to insist that the systematic expression of Descartes’ thought, although not its animating spirit, is influenced by Augustine, and by the Augustinianism of Descartes’ Oratorian friends: he thinks that Descartes made use of the Oratorians’ Augustinian metaphysics, but that he transformed it radically in using it for his own ends. Gilson regards Descartes as essentially a mathematical physicist who, wishing to apply his “mathematical method” to the natural world, must pass “idealistically” from thoughts to objects. To execute this pas-

⁶ Gouhier, *Pensée religieuse*, p. 258. So too Gilson: “let us add that the Augustinian filiation of the *cogito*, once admitted, would not authorize us to speak without qualification [*sans plus*] of an *augustinisme de Descartes*; for Descartes remains opposed to St. Augustine on the most essential point of Augustinianism: the relations between reason and faith, and, in general, his idea of philosophy itself. Thus Descartes incorporates into his teaching a whole series of Augustinian theses, although it is not St. Augustine’s spirit that animates him . . . and this explains why, despite everything, the partisans of his philosophy were pleased to underline its agreement with the principles of St. Augustine” (René Descartes, *Discours de la méthode: texte et commentaire par Etienne Gilson* (Paris: Vrin, 1925 [hereafter cited as “Gilson, *Discours*”]), p. 298). Gilson’s insistence here on Descartes’ opposition to true Augustinianism comes in concessive clauses and without argument (“despite everything” – despite what?); he refers to Gouhier’s work for discussion.

⁷ Gouhier, *Pensée religieuse*, p. 258.

⁸ Gilson, *Etudes*, pp. 290–1.

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sage, Descartes requires a metaphysics; and “surrounded by Augustinians, Descartes needed no more than a short conversation to see opening before him the path of a metaphysics along which his method might proceed.”⁹ But when Descartes subjects this metaphysics to the constraints of his scientific method, excluding the fusion of faith with reason, he destroys the spirit of Augustinian metaphysics, and can only scavenge particular Augustinian assertions.

The conclusion of Gilson and Gouhier, that Descartes’ thought is radically anti-Augustinian, follows directly from their interpretation of Augustinianism as a certain “spirit,” as Christian devotion expressing itself through reason. But this interpretation of Augustinianism is not forced on us by the historical facts, and Gilson and others, in adopting it, have been influenced by the philosophical controversies of their own times. Gilson is especially open about his motives. In his essay “The Future of Augustinian Metaphysics,” he is explicitly aiming to preserve Augustinianism as a still-living tendency in Christian philosophy from “the two most dangerous temptations imperiling the integrity of its essence . . . Cartesian idealism and modern ontologism.”¹⁰ When Gilson speaks of “Cartesian idealism” as a still present philosophical option, or speaks of Descartes’ “mathematical method,” he is thinking of the secular philosophers of the Third Republic, notably Léon Brunschvicg, who claimed Descartes as their forerunner. By contrast with the Cartesian corruption of Augustinianism, Gilson praises as true Augustinians the Catholic philosophers of his own time who tried to show that reason could not form an autonomous system of thought apart from grace: “to deny the sufficiency of reason is as essential a function of Augustinianism as to deny the sufficiency of nature, and the possibility of a philosophy developing itself validly without worrying about the data of revelation is the radical negation of St. Augustine’s *De Utilitate Credendi*, of his whole doctrine, indeed of his whole experience.”¹¹ Gilson’s point is not that a Christian philosophy can never develop itself as a complete scientific system, for he thinks that Thomism is a (true) system of this kind. But Thomism is the *only* complete or scientific Christian philosophy; Augustinianism is essentially incomplete, and its value is not in any scientific contributions but precisely in reminding us of the incompleteness of human reason. Augustinian philosophy is valuable for its “spirit,” as a discipline of intellectual devotion, but when (as in its Cartesian versions) it leaves aside this “spirit” and sets itself up as a precise scientific system, and thus as a rival to Thomism, Gilson is quick to denounce it as a corruption.

Gilson is led, in part by his position in the twentieth-century French debate on philosophy and religion, to give historical interpretations of

⁹ Ibid. p. 200.

¹⁰ “The Future of Augustinian Metaphysics,” in *A Gilson Reader: Selected Writings of Etienne Gilson* (New York: Image Books, 1957), p. 85.

¹¹ Gilson, *Etudes*, p. 290.

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Augustinianism, scholasticism, and Cartesianism that deny Descartes any but a superficial appropriation of the earlier traditions. Gueroult comes to the same conclusion from an apparently very different starting-point. Gueroult protests against what seems to him the arbitrariness of previous interpretations of Descartes, and pursues instead a method of investigation that he claims to derive from Descartes' own maxims on the interpretation of his philosophy, and that does not depart from the Cartesian texts to consider broad currents in the history of philosophy. But Gueroult, just as much as Gilson, is influenced by the contemporary situation: standing on the secularist side of the debate, he wishes to claim Descartes as the founder of modern critical idealism, from Kant and Fichte to Husserl and Brunschvicg.

The statement of this principle ["that nothing can be known before intelligence, for it is from intelligence that things can be known, but not conversely"] ushers in the era of modern idealism and reverses the Scholastic point of view. Together with the rejection of all that is not certain in the eyes of intelligence, it shows incontestably, despite quibbles of detail, that as early as the *Rules* Descartes was aware of the need for methodological doubt, of the Cogito, and of the unity of knowledge.¹²

This unity of knowledge, the result of a reason that has recognized its own autonomy, determines the form of Descartes' system as a "unified and monolithic block of certainty . . . established, like mathematics, by a rigorous chain of propositions according to the order of reasons."¹³ The philosophy that results from this order of reasons has cut its links with earlier philosophy, and can no longer be described in terms of Augustinianism or scholasticism, or any other previous figures or movements. We must interpret Descartes' philosophy as Descartes himself constructed it, as "a pure geometry," without reference to anything outside the system.

While it is clear enough that Gueroult is interpreting Descartes through the perspective of the mathematical idealism of the early twentieth century, this does not settle whether Gueroult is right or wrong, because it does not decide how far this modern idealism is genuinely Cartesian. Certainly Descartes presents his teaching as a "new philosophy," and certainly he disdains to appeal to authority: especially in the *Meditations* he offers the fundamental principles of his philosophy as the results of a solitary reason meditating with itself, which any rational being should be able to reproduce. Gueroult is right that Descartes wants his philosophy to be both historically new and rationally autonomous, and any interpretation that misses these concerns has missed the point. But what precisely Descartes' concerns entail, and how far he puts them into practice, are themselves matters for historical interpretation, which we must not allow Gueroult's idealism to preempt. By examining first Gueroult's statement

¹² Martial Gueroult, *Descartes' Philosophy Interpreted According to the Order of Reasons*, tr. Roger Ariew (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 1, p. 3.

¹³ Gueroult, 1, p. 5.

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of his method, and then the texts of Descartes that he cites in support of it, we may see how far these texts justify Gueroult's "analysis of structures," and his disregard for history.

Gueroult undertakes, in his book *Descartes selon l'ordre des raisons*, to explain the text of the *Meditations*. There are, he says, two techniques for explaining a philosophical text, "textual criticism itself and the analysis of structures."¹⁴ Textual criticism, which Gueroult takes in an extremely broad sense to include "problems of sources, variations, evolutions, etc.," has already been handled by Gilson, Gouhier, and Laporte; but this is only preliminary to understanding a philosophy, and it is time to get on to the analysis of structures. The structure of the *Meditations*, in particular, is given by a strict "order of reasons," in which each "thesis enunciated before another is a condition of that other."¹⁵ We can understand Descartes' meaning only by analyzing the complex structure relating each sentence of the *Meditations* to each earlier and later sentence, since the meaning of each assertion is determined by the whole system to which it belongs.¹⁶ Conversely, nothing outside this order of reasons can contribute to determining the meaning of anything inside it; and so "we can draw the conclusion, which is no longer entirely Gilson's, that everything in Descartes' philosophy is new, even what appears to be old."¹⁷ But in fact Gueroult has arrived at much the same conclusion as Gilson's, that "even when the two philosophies [of Descartes and Augustine] employ the same

¹⁴ Gueroult, 1, p. xviii.

¹⁵ Gueroult, 1, p. 6. Gueroult is apparently basing himself on a text of the second Replies (which Gueroult cites earlier on the same page), where Descartes says that the proper order for demonstration "consists only in that the things which are put forward first ought to be known without any help from the things that follow, and then that all the rest should be arranged in such a way that they are demonstrated only from the things that precede them" (AT VII, 155). But this is just a description of the logical order that would normally be followed in, say, a geometry text (the model that Descartes cites in context). Descartes is not saying what Gueroult apparently takes him to mean, that the proof (or interpretation) of a proposition depends on *every* proposition that precedes it, but merely that it does not depend on any proposition that comes after it.

¹⁶ "[N]o single truth of the system can be correctly interpreted without reference to the place it occupies in the order" (Gueroult, 1, p. 6); "thus philosophy is developed as a pure geometry, which owes all its certainty to the internal linkage of its reasons, without any reference to external reality" (p. 7). In speaking of a "pure geometry" (as opposed to an applied or physical geometry), and in saying that the meanings of the terms in such a theory are determined by the logical structure of the theory, rather than by reference to something given in experience independently of the theory, Gueroult is apparently alluding to David Hilbert's philosophy of geometry, and suggesting that Descartes' metaphysics has the same autonomous status as Hilbert's geometry. For Hilbert, the axioms of a geometry are not propositions that we perceive to be true once we understand the meanings of the terms; on the contrary, the axioms are free stipulations of reason, and the meanings of the terms are determined by the axioms rather than vice versa. A term is "defined" only by the whole theory derived from the axioms; "every axiom contributes something to the definition, and hence every new axiom changes the concept" (letter from Hilbert to Gottlob Frege, p. 40 in Frege's *Philosophical and Mathematical Correspondence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980)).

¹⁷ Gueroult, 1, p. 284.