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Stephen Menn
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Descartes and Augustine

This book is the first systematic study of Descartes' relation to Augustine. It offers a complete re-evaluation of Descartes' philosophy, and of the philosophical ideas in Augustine that were Descartes' starting point. *Descartes and Augustine* will engage the attention of historians of medieval, neo-Platonic, and early modern philosophy.

That Descartes was indebted to Augustine is not in itself a fresh discovery. What distinguishes Stephen Menn's book is his detailed demonstration that the key to the *Meditations* is Descartes' use of Augustine's method for establishing a knowledge of God and the soul independent of any theory of the physical world. This method gives Descartes an independent starting point for reconstructing the system of the sciences. Where the scholastics had tried to show that Augustine's metaphysics of God and the soul is compatible with an Aristotelian physics of matter and form, Descartes argues that they are *not* compatible, and that Augustinian metaphysics provides the foundation for an anti-Aristotelian mechanistic physics. Menn gives a detailed analysis of the *Meditations*, showing how the novel form of Descartes' argument arises from the challenge of presenting Augustine's metaphysics in a way that makes it suitable for its new foundational task.

Descartes and Augustine includes a complete reading of the *Meditations*, a historical and philosophical introduction to Augustine's thought and to Plotinian neo-Platonism, and a discussion of the contemporary context of Descartes' earlier and later philosophical projects.

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For Alison

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Preface

The question of Descartes and Augustine is an old one, but it has never been answered satisfactorily, and it seems not to have been studied seriously for more than half a century. My work picks up from studies of Gilson and Gouhier dating mostly from the 1920s; and while I disagree with many of their conclusions, I do so with deep respect for their pioneering work, and I will be happy if this book has the effect of directing scholars' attention back to a line of inquiry that was too soon abandoned.

It may help to explain two things that this book is not. First, although I have already seen my title misstated in print as "Descartes and Augustinianism," the book is not a study of Descartes and seventeenth-century Augustinians, or an attempt to relate Descartes to the Augustinian tradition. I am not sure there was an Augustinian tradition: this phrase suggests a series of thinkers reading Augustine through their predecessors, and distinguished by some common doctrine from thinkers outside the school. There was, in that sense, an Aristotelian tradition. But the history of Augustinianism is the history of the many revivals of Augustine by different thinkers, who have each discovered some new aspect of Augustine's thought, and seen in it a way to answer the philosophical or theological challenges of their own times. In Descartes' time there were many such Augustinianisms, and there was a hope of constructing out of Augustine a new philosophy to replace that of Aristotle. I propose to read Descartes as trying to fulfill that hope.

To understand how Descartes did this, it is more crucial to understand Augustine than to understand (say) Bérulle or Jansen. Now, while we know that Descartes read Augustine, we do not know that his reading was extensive or deep, or that it was early enough to explain the Augustinian features of his philosophy, which go back to 1628–30. I, like most other scholars, think it was; but my project does not depend on that assumption. My first aim has been to understand what attracted Descartes in Augustinianism, that is, to understand what Descartes had been trying to do in his philosophical work, and then how Augustinianism helped him do it. To understand this, we have to understand Augustinianism, and so we have to understand Augustine: it would be impossible to understand Bérulle or Jansen without understanding Augustine first, and understanding Augustine is already a major task. And what Descartes found in Augustine is different from what Bérulle or Jansen found there. So my approach has been, after sketching Descartes' philosophical goals and the expectations

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of his contemporaries (including Bérulle and Arnauld), to study first Augustine's thought, and then the use Descartes made of that thought. Had I chosen to write a longer book, I would not have looked harder for "intermediaries" between Augustine and Descartes, since my judgment is that he simply read Augustine; but I would have gone deeper than I did into the philosophical expectations of Descartes' contemporaries, and especially of his Oratorian friends, which must have influenced *how* he read Augustine. I would be delighted to see this research carried forward.

On the other hand, this book is also not a *comparison* between Descartes and Augustine, let us say on the *cogito*, or on the nature of the mind, or on the relation between faith and reason. I think the idea of such a comparison is unhistorical. As I wrote in an early section of this book (written before 1989!), a seventeenth-century French thinker could not simply *resemble* Augustine, any more than a twentieth-century Russian thinker could *resemble* Marx. Augustine was part of the background against which Descartes and his contemporaries defined themselves (even those who chose to disagree with him, or to ignore him, or pretended insincerely to be following him). So the task is to understand how Descartes *used* Augustine's thought in his own philosophical project. And this is best done, not by looking at Descartes and Augustine on particular issues, but by looking at Augustine's project as a whole, and at Descartes' project as a whole. For the core of what Descartes took from Augustine was not any particular doctrine, but a hope and a discipline of drawing the mind away from the senses, through a special kind of contemplation of itself, to a special kind of contemplation of God. I will try to explain this in the following chapters.

My aim has been, not simply to settle a historical question of influence, but to use Augustine as a key to understanding Descartes, and especially the rich and puzzling text of the *Meditations*. I had read the *Confessions* and the *De Libero Arbitrio* before reading the *Meditations*: and, after all, so did Arnauld and Malebranche, and (I think) Descartes. So it has been natural for me to take from Augustine a set of questions to ask of the *Meditations*, to the reverse of the many scholars who have begun with Descartes and have looked back to Augustine for "anticipations." Readers who are used to this approach will need some patience, since I am asking them to spend a long time with Augustine (and some time with Plotinus, and some time with Cicero) before I try to give an account of the *Meditations*. If I am right, it will be worth it.

This book began, as a term paper, in the spring of 1984, in an attempt to convince Dan Garber of something that seemed obvious to me but not to him, that Descartes was in some sense an Augustinian. I had no idea how complex the question of Descartes' relation to Augustine would turn out to be. The work has assumed other forms since: it became a Ph.D. dissertation, it generated a number of articles, and, as a book, it has been for some years an object of rumor, expectation, and doubt. (But I console

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myself with the fact that Descartes himself did not publish until he was forty.) The work has profited, in all its forms, from the comments of my teachers, colleagues, and students. I would like to thank especially, for their comments at different stages, Heather Blair, Eyjólfur Emilsson, Dan Garber, Rachana Kamtekar, Alison Laywine, Ian Mueller, Calvin Normore, Eileen O'Neill, and Howard Stein, as well as Terry Moore and Jane van Tassel at Cambridge University Press and two anonymous referees.

While most of this book bears no close relation to anything I have published elsewhere, there are several individual sections whose material overlaps, in different ways, with articles I have published. The closest relation is between Chapter 7 of this book and my "Descartes, Augustine, and the Status of Faith" (in *Studies in Seventeenth-Century European Philosophy*, ed. M. A. Stewart, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp 1-31 that article is essentially an abridgment of Chapter 7, and the somewhat fuller version I give here supersedes what I said there. There is also a close relation between Chapter 8, Section D, and my "Descartes and Some Predecessors on the Divine Conservation of Motion" (*Synthese*, 83, May 1990): in this case the article is not superseded, since it goes further into some issues, from a history-of-science perspective, than the corresponding section of the book. There is a much looser relationship between some material in Chapter 8, Sections B and C, and my "The Greatest Stumbling Block: Descartes' Denial of Real Qualities" (in *Descartes and His Contemporaries: Meditations, Objections and Replies*, ed. Roger Ariew and Marjorie Grene, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), which treats some of the same questions from a rather different perspective: readers interested in the details of Descartes' confrontation with the scholastics, on the problem of sensible qualities and more generally on the ontological composition of bodies, should look at that article as well as at what I say here. Chapter 2, Section A, represents a drastically abridged version of what I did in "The Intellectual Setting of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy" (in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 33-86: readers interested in the broader contemporary context of Descartes' work may wish to look there. Finally, my "The Problem of the Third Meditation" (*American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 67, Autumn 1993) is a popular introduction to some broad themes of the book, with some overlap with Chapter 5.

My language has sometimes been a compromise between English and the language of my authors. I have used the generic "he" more than I would like to, and certainly I have spoken of the collective singular "man" more often than I find natural. More substantially, I have had to borrow several terms from Greek or Latin. Let me here flag some of this terminology, which might risk confusing the reader.

The most important technical term is "Nous," which I write as an English proper noun (i.e. in normal roman type, and with a capital N).

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This is intended to represent the Greek word “*nous*,” as used by philosophers including Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, but only in *one* of the senses of that equivocal Greek term, a sense which I discuss in Chapter 3, Section B, and which, according to Plotinus, is the strict sense of the term. “Reason,” with a capital R, is a first approximation. The conventional English translation, “intellect,” is misleading, because “intellect” suggests a rational soul (or rational part or faculty of a soul), whereas *Nous* is supposed to be something existing independently of souls, such that souls have rational perceptions by participating in it or being acted on by it. Those Christian writers (including Augustine) who take up the Platonist concept of *Nous* usually identify it with God; whereas, for most pagan Platonists, it is only one of several divine principles, and even for Christians, it is not simply synonymous with “God,” but picks out one particular way of conceiving God. Augustine’s usual equivalent for “*nous*” in this sense is “*veritas*” (naturally rendered as “Truth” with a capital T), though sometimes he uses “*sapientia*” (Wisdom) or other terms. Some of the ideas I discuss under the head of “the concept of God as *Nous*” (in the Platonists, in Augustine, and in Descartes) are discussed by Gilson under the head of “the illumination theory of knowledge”: but I am chiefly interested in these ideas, not as a way of understanding human knowledge, but as a way of understanding God.

I have also borrowed the Latin noun *cognitio* (plural *cognitiones*), which I italicize as still a foreign word. This does not mean anything special: it is simply the most general Latin word for “knowledge,” including conceptions or apprehensions of all kinds, whether clear or obscure, whether of an object or of a proposition (*scientia* is knowledge in a stricter sense, either of an object or of a proposition, but scientifically certain). As long as this is understood, “knowledge” would be a perfectly good English equivalent for “*cognitio*,” except that “knowledge” is not a count noun, and I often need to speak of one *cognitio*, two *cognitiones*. So, while I will sometimes render the Latin “*cognitio*” as “knowledge,” I will sometimes leave it as “*cognitio*”; I will also sometimes render the French “*connaissance*” as “*cognitio*,” and I will use “*cognitio*” freely in English paraphrases of Descartes’ thought.

I have tried to distinguish between “Platonic” and “Platonist.” The Platonists are members of the Platonic school, the school that tried to extract a systematic philosophy from Plato’s dialogues, which flourished especially from the first through sixth centuries AD; their philosophy is Platonism, and Platonist doctrines are their doctrines, while a Platonic doctrine is a doctrine found in Plato’s dialogues. It is customary to use “middle Platonist” for the Platonists before Plotinus, and “neo-Platonist” for the Platonists of Plotinus’ time and after (most of whom were not in any strong sense followers of Plotinus); I have avoided these terms. Since writers from Augustine’s time through Descartes’, whether or not they read Plato directly, always interpreted him either through late ancient Platonism or through the doxographical reports in Cicero or Aristotle, I am

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more interested in Platonism than in Plato, though naturally any understanding of Platonism starts with Plato. To speak of a writer's being influenced by neo-Platonism (rather than by Platonism) is misleading, inasmuch as it suggests that there was a new philosophy invented by Plotinus (rather than an ongoing ancient attempt to make systematic and defensible sense of Plato), and inasmuch as it suggests that there was some other variety of Platonism available before the eighteenth century.

I have been able to make only minimal changes in the text for this edition, but would like to add some prefatory remarks.

This book was written and revised between 1984 and 1996. At some point I decided that if I was going to finish the book, I would have to stop reading new literature in the field. This had the unfortunate consequence that some of my comments in the preface about the *status quaestionis* may have looked like criticism of Gareth Matthews' *Thought's Ego in Descartes and Augustine* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), a book which I had in fact avoided reading; I wanted to compare notes at the end, and to discover whether Gary and I had independently confirmed each other's results. No criticism was intended, and I think it is an excellent book. I would have spoken differently in the preface if I had been aware of the details of Gary's work, and my book would have benefited from some distinctions that he draws. But our projects are quite different. Gary is not interested in the question of influence (or, as I would put it, of Descartes' *use* of Augustine), but in the different ways that Augustine and Descartes ask first-person questions and make use of a distinctively first-person perspective in their philosophical projects. So he concentrates on the first two Meditations and comparable texts in Augustine, whereas for me the mind's path to self-knowledge is important especially as the beginning of its path to knowledge of God (both to knowledge of God's existence and to clarifying the concept of God as "Truth" or *Nous*). We also have significant differences on topics that we do both treat at length, notably in the first Meditation, especially about the functions of the examples of dreaming and of the deceiving God or evil genius. I hope to pursue the discussion elsewhere and to comment more fully on the relations between the two books.

The book has received many reviews, which have generally been thoughtful and sympathetic. But I am concerned about the way that many of them construed my overall aim in the book; and some clarifications here might help. Some thought my aim was to prove that Descartes was an Augustinian, i.e. to show that his views were very similar to Augustine's. This was not my aim: I have no interest in classifying philosophers, and I see nothing to be gained by arguing that someone was very like someone else. (I do think comparisons can be useful in bringing out differences that might otherwise pass unnoticed, and Gary Matthews has done good work this way.) The point of working through the *Meditations* against the background of texts from Augustine was not to exhaust the reader with similarities between Descartes and Augustine, but to try to

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understand the philosophical work of the *Meditations* by seeing how Descartes used Augustinian philosophical materials, and how he could do something new and important with them. Obviously Descartes' philosophical project—aimed at constructing a new system of the sciences, including a mechanistic physics—is very different from Augustine's. Descartes' proofs of the existence of God are also importantly different from Augustine's, and I try to show how Descartes is led to these distinctive proofs by the constraints of making the Augustinian concept of God serve as the foundation for a scientific system. Then again, Descartes' engagement with scepticism is also much deeper than Augustine's, and I hope to have made an important contribution in Chapter 5 to understanding Descartes' use of sceptical arguments (which is quite unlike Augustine's). But, I think it is a mistake to read the *Meditations*—and in particular the proofs for the existence of God—as driven by an attempt to overcome the sceptical arguments of the first Meditation. The *Meditations* arose from Descartes' attempt to resolve the crisis of the project of the *Rules* by adapting the Augustinian metaphysics as a foundations for his physics; the third Meditation (as a way of proving God's existence, and more importantly of clarifying the Augustinian concept of God) falls naturally out of this project, and the arguments of the first Meditation are developed precisely to show that the arguments of the third through sixth Meditations are the only path to science. But to see this it is necessary to take the third Meditation and *De Libero Arbitrio* II arguments for God's existence more seriously than readers usually do, and by thinking through these arguments to recapture the concept of God as *Nous* that they are designed to isolate. I hope that my book will bring people to do this. But here I am falling into the attitude that I make fun of Descartes for on p.401.

Finally, I would like to flag the most important error I have noticed in the book, my acceptance of Baillet's dating of Descartes' encounter with Bérulle to the fall of 1628. Generiève Rodis-Lewis' *Descartes, Biographie* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1995; translated as *Descartes: his life and thought*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998) has convinced me that the meeting actually took place in fall of 1627, and that Descartes' resolve to retire to solitude to begin constructing a new philosophy, and to base it on a metaphysics of Augustinian inspiration, dates to the winter of 1627–8. He would not have moved to the Netherlands immediately, but only in the fall of 1628. The composition of the last stages of the *Rules*, the abandonment of the *Rules* as a framework unsuited to Descartes' new conception of his project, and the composition of Descartes' earliest treatise on metaphysics would probably all date to 1628 or 1629. I do not see here reason for doubt about the main lines of my reconstruction of Descartes' turning, in the late 1620's, to Augustinian-style metaphysics as a new foundational discipline, or about the nature of Bérulle's influence. But more thought about the last stages of the *Rules* and their dating, and about the relations between Descartes' foundational work and his detailed scientific studies around this time, might shed more light.

References

References to the works of Descartes (and to the Objections to his *Meditations*) are to *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, nouvelle présentation (Paris: Vrin, 1974–83). This will be cited as “AT,” followed by volume and page numbers, e.g. “AT VII,3.” “AT IX₂,20” means page 20 of Part 2 of Volume IX. Sometimes I cite only the page number if the rest of the information is obvious from the context.

Exception: the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* will sometimes be cited by Rule number, and the *Principles of Philosophy* by Part and paragraph numbers, in the forms “Rule 6,” “*Principles* II:8” (with a colon rather than a comma, to avoid confusion with AT references).

Adrien Baillet’s *Vie de Monsieur Descartes* (Paris, 1691) will be cited by volume and page numbers, in the form “Baillet I,324.”

References to the works of Augustine are to the classic edition of the Benedictines of St. Maur, originally published in 1680 and reprinted many times since. Works will be cited by the title of the work, followed by the book, chapter, and paragraph numbers of the Benedictine edition, or however many of these exist: e.g. “*De Libero Arbitrio* II,iii,7,” “*De Quantitate Animae* xiii,22.” These chapter and paragraph numbers are given in most modern editions. I will cite only one passage, *De Beata Vita* 4, where there is a serious difference in meaning between the reading of the Benedictine edition and modern scholarly opinion, and in this case the problem of the proper reading will be discussed in the text. I accept a minority view on the correct reading of *De Libero Arbitrio* II,xi,32; again, references will be given in the text, though no great issue hangs on this. I often abbreviate the title “*De Libero Arbitrio*” as “DLA.” The best modern editions of Augustine are generally those of the *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* and the *Corpus Christianorum* where available. I have used W. M. Green’s *Corpus Christianorum* edition of the *De Libero Arbitrio* (*Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina*, vol. 29, Turnholt: Brepols, 1970), and Martin Skutella’s Teubner edition of the *Confessions* (revised by H. Juergens and W. Schaub, Stuttgart: Teubner, 1981).

Plotinus will be cited from A. H. Armstrong’s Loeb edition (essentially reproducing the text of Henry and Schwyzer), by Ennead and treatise number, chapter number, and line number; sometimes I also give the title of the treatise: thus “Plotinus *On Nous, Ideas, and Being* (V,9,3,14–15).”

REFERENCES

Owing to a complex transmission history, there is a special situation in the treatise IV,7, *On Immortality of Soul*: between Chapters 8 and 9 are five chapters numbered 8.1 through 8.5, and there may thus be citations of the form “IV,7,8.3,10.”

Porphphy’s *Life of Plotinus*, printed with editions of Plotinus, will be cited as “VP” (= *Vita Plotini*), followed by the chapter number.

Plato, Aristotle, and Plutarch will be cited by the numbers and letters of their classic pagination, reprinted in modern editions of their works; when necessary, the line number will also be given. Alternatively, I will cite the works of Aristotle, by title, book number, and chapter number, in the form “*De Anima* III,5.” Cicero, Sextus Empiricus, and Diogenes Laertius (abbreviated “DL”) are cited in the same form as Augustine. The fragments of the Stoics are cited from the edition of Hans von Arnim, *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1903–5); this will be cited as “SVF,” followed by volume and fragment number. The works of Thomas Aquinas and other scholastic authors will be cited by the traditional divisions (book and chapter, question and article, etc., as appropriate).

Translations are mine unless otherwise noted. For the authors who are most closely discussed, Descartes, Augustine, and Plotinus, I have preferred to translate very literally, and to clarify any resulting difficulties through my explication of the text. It is thus rare that I reproduce the text of any existing translation: but I have looked at translations, and I have not tried to avoid being influenced by them. I would therefore like to extend general credits to the following translations:

A. H. Armstrong, Plotinus (Cambridge, MA, and London: Loeb Classical Library, 1967–88)

Anna S. Benjamin and L. H. Hackstaff, Saint Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964)

John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–91)

Donald Cress, Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980; the third edition, 1993, incorporates some of my suggestions)

Valentine Rodger Miller and Reese P. Miller, Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1983)