

How a Flaw in Augustine's Proof of God's Existence Forced Descartes to Write the *Meditations*

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Abstract

Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* is a rewriting or "adaptation" of Augustine's *On Free Choice of the Will*, Book II. The present paper offers a novel analysis of the texts' parallel structures to defend this thesis, then employs that analysis to explain why the parallel has been overlooked. Fixing a serious flaw in Augustine's first proof of God's existence required Descartes to move the proof of external objects to the end of the argument. In spite of this change, however, the two texts are strikingly similar, and thus we must rethink both the nature and mission of modern philosophy.

Introduction

An Augustinian revival inaugurates the Early Modern Era in Germany and France. After three centuries of Aristotelianism, Luther and Calvin rebel by preaching *solo Augustino*, Pascal joins an Augustinian sect, and Descartes rewrites the second book of Augustine's *On Free Choice of the Will*¹ under the new title, *Meditations on First Philosophy*.² That Luther and Calvin were Augustinians is well-known, and Pascal's Augustinianism is easily discoverable by anyone who investigates the topic for a few minutes. That Descartes was an Augustinian, however, has been almost completely ignored until recently. Zbigniew Janowski tells us not only that "it was the Augustinians, almost exclusively who embraced [Descartes'] new philosophy,"³ but also that

¹ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993). Cited hereafter as "*On Free Choice*," with book numbers in Roman numerals, followed by chapter numbers in Arabic numerals.

² René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, 4th ed., trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998). Cited hereafter as "*Meditations*," with individual Meditation numbers in Roman numerals and Adam and Tannery edition page numbers preceded by "A&T."

³ "Il semble donc naturel de se demander pourquoi, les augustiniens presque exclusivement, ont embrassé la nouvelle philosophie comme la leur." Zbigniew Janowski, *Index Augustino-Cartésien: Textes et Commentaire* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2000), Introduction, 15. "L'accueil favorable, voire enthousiaste, de la nouvelle philosophie parmi les augustiniens au XVII^e siècle a conduit des spécialistes de Descartes à déterminer les liens entre la pensée de l'évêque d'Hippone et celle du philosophe français" (ibid., 11). "Même si l'attachement des Jansénistes au cartésianisme fut accidentel, du moins au sens où il n'y avait pas de lien logique entre la théologie de l'évêque d'Hippone et la philosophie de Descartes, parmi tous les ordres du XVII^e siècle, les augustiniens se sont

“without the Bishop of Hippo,” Descartes “would never have created his philosophy, at least in the form that we know it.”⁴ After demonstrating the parallels between the works of Augustine and “the First, Second, Fourth, and Sixth Meditations,” however, Janowski is puzzled to find “no traces of the reading of St. Augustine in the Third and Fifth.”⁵ Contrast this with Stephen Menn’s claims that “[t]he third Meditation is . . . the most distinctively Augustinian portion of Descartes’ work”⁶ and that in Meditations II and III “Descartes is adapting [Augustine’s] line of thought” from “*Confessions* VIII and *De Libero Arbitrio* II.”⁷ In his analysis of Meditation III, however, Menn makes hardly any mention of *De Libero Arbitrio* (*On Free Choice of the Will*), focusing instead on the *Confessions*.

In the following, therefore, I seek to bolster Menn’s case while arguing that its emphasis on the *Confessions* to the exclusion of *On Free Choice* is backward. The *Meditations* are evidence of Descartes’ desire to resurrect Book II of *On Free Choice*. The relationship between the two texts is like that between a novel and its adaptation for the screen. They are the same work, in a sense, but revised for different projects and audiences. Once this is seen, our picture of

avérés les apôtres les plus zélés de la nouvelle philosophie” (ibid., 14–15). “Bien que notre connaissance de la reception de la philosophie cartésienne parmi les augustiniens soit loin d’être complète, on peut néanmoins affirmer que les augustiniens et les Oratoriens en particulier, ont été beaucoup plus « predisposes » à accepter la philosophie de Descartes que d’autres orders religieux” (ibid., 15).

⁴ “Mais il convient d’ajouter que, sans l’évêque d’Hippone, le philosophe français n’aurait jamais créé sa philosophie, du moins sous la forme que nous connaissons” (ibid., Commentaire, VII, 173).

⁵ Zbigniew Janowski, *Cartesian Theodicy: Descartes’ Quest for Certitude* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000), 146.

⁶ Stephen Menn, *Descartes and Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 262.

⁷ Menn, *Descartes and Augustine*, 245. “Stephen Menn, for instance, has reinterpreted Descartes’ *Meditations* as a ‘spiritual exercise’ that mimics the ‘ascent’ of *Confessions* VII, a judgement with which Wayne Hankey concurs. Zbigniew Janowski’s great task of demonstrating a definitive Augustinian influence on Descartes catalogues parallel texts and situates the *Meditations* within the concern of seventeenth century Augustinian ‘theodicy’.” Michael Hanby, “Augustine and Descartes: An Overlooked Chapter in the Story of Modern Origins,” *Modern Theology* 19, no. 4 (October 2003): 455. In citing Hankey, Hanby is referring to: Wayne John Hankey, “Stephen Menn’s Cartesian Augustine: Metaphysical and Ahistorically Modern,” *Animus* 3 (1998): 183–210.

the Cartesian revolution, the genesis of modern philosophy, and the *telos* of the very philosophy we are doing today, must be significantly revised.

I. The Augustinian Original

In Book II of *On Free Choice*, Augustine is attempting a theodicy. His first task is to prove that God exists⁸ by building a philosophical tower to heaven. He offers two hierarchies, unites them, and then argues that there is something above them. At the basis of the first hierarchy is our certainty about our own existence. Augustine points out that unless we exist, we cannot be mistaken about the fact that we exist. And yet if we realize this, we must also be alive, and capable of understanding. Indeed, as beings who exist, live, and understand, we are higher than beings who only live and exist, which are higher than beings that only exist.⁹ As humans, therefore, we are the highest beings in the material universe.

The second hierarchy is epistemological in flavor, and attempts to determine which *part* of the human being is highest. The senses, which belong to life, are higher than their merely-existing perceptual objects, and yet lower than the inner sense, which—in its turn—is lower than reason.¹⁰ Human reason, as the highest part of the highest being in the physical universe, therefore, is the highest thing in that universe. The question, however, is whether human reason is the highest thing *simpliciter*. Augustine argues that it is not; *truth* is higher than human reason. To show this, he first attempts to prove that truth is outside human reason—i.e., that it is not just

⁸ Augustine, *On Free Choice*, II.3, p. 33.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 33–34.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 34–35 and II.5–6.

part of the human mind.¹¹ Then, he attempts to prove that truth is neither lower than, nor equal to human reason.¹²

The former proof—that truth is independent of the mind—is modeled on Augustine’s argument that sensible objects are independent of the senses¹³: if two or more people “perceive” an object or truth, it is simpler to assume they both are perceiving the same external thing, rather than each perceiving something internal to herself. By Ockham’s Razor, in other words, we conclude that things perceived by more than one person are independent of their perceivers.

If he is to prove that there is a God, however, Augustine must show that truth is not simply independent of, but is actually *higher* than, the human mind. He does so by arguing that truth is the immutable standard that mutable human reason must live up to.¹⁴ There is something higher than human reason, therefore, and this means that God exists. After all, if God existed, God would be higher than humanity—and, indeed, higher than anything else. Thus, if *truth* is not the highest suprahuman being, this can only be because there is something even higher. This, in turn, is either the highest suprahuman being or it is not. But if it is not, this can only be because there is something higher still, and so on, till we reach God recursively.¹⁵

Augustine’s second argument for God’s existence is part of his attempt to show that all good things come from God. Things are good only insofar as they exist, and exist only insofar as they have form.¹⁶ Forms consist of numbers, says Augustine (prefiguring Galileo and Descartes

¹¹ Ibid., II.8–11.

¹² Ibid., II.12.

¹³ Ibid., II.7.

¹⁴ Ibid., II.12.

¹⁵ Ibid., II.6, pp. 40–41; II.15, p. 58.

¹⁶ Ibid., II.17, pp. 63–64.

by mathematizing the notion of form), and if a thing loses its form or numbers, it loses its structure and intelligibility.¹⁷ The problem, Augustine believes, is that things have a “propensity not to exist”¹⁸: they lose their form, or leak their numbers. *And yet*, things remain in existence and continue to function in coherent ways. Thus, there must be some “eternal form” that holds everything together, re-infusing things with form and number, and that is God.¹⁹

Augustine then concludes that since free will is part of the human soul and occupies an intermediate position in the hierarchy of being—and since it is a necessary condition of right living—it must be an intermediate good at least, and thus not only must it come from God, but God must be justified in giving it to us.²⁰

The argument of Book II of *On Free Choice of the Will*, therefore, has the following structure.

- (1) Proof for the existence of the individual (based on being mistaken).
- (2) Exploration of two interlinked hierarchies: an ontology-centered hierarchy (in three levels: existing things, living things, understanding things), and an epistemology-centered hierarchy (in four levels: sensible things, the five senses, inner sense, reason).
- (3) Proof for the existence of things outside the mind (first physical, then intelligible, things).
- (4) Proof for the existence of God above the mind.
- (5) Problematization of the continued, coherent existence of things across time.
- (6) Proof for the existence of God as sustainer.
- (7) Defense of the legitimacy of God’s having given us free will.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, II.16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, II.17, p. 64.

¹⁹ Augustine, *On Free Choice*, II.17.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, II.18–19.

II. Descartes' Adaptation

The *Meditations* are too well-known to require a summary even as schematic as the above. However, we should still remind ourselves of their basic structure. Meditation I presents the epistemological crisis to be solved by Meditations II–VI, where Descartes proceeds as follows. First, he asserts his own existence on the strength of the impossibility of being deceived about that existence.²¹ Then, he describes two hierarchies: one in things (modes, finite substances, and infinite substance) and one in thought (ideas of modes, ideas of substances, and the idea of infinite substance).²² He uses these two hierarchies to prove that God exists outside and above his mind.²³ In a second proof, he then argues that God is responsible for his continued existence across time.²⁴ God, however, is *not* responsible for deception or error, which he traces to free will.²⁵ But God was justified in giving him free will, Descartes argues,²⁶ and so he can finally take up the question of the existence of material objects outside the mind.²⁷ Before he does this, though, he decides to examine his ideas of such objects,²⁸ and in the process discovers a third proof for God's existence.²⁹ He then realizes that he can have knowledge of material

²¹ Descartes, *Meditations*, II, 63–64 (A&T 25).

²² *Ibid.*, III, 73–76 (A&T 40–45).

²³ *Ibid.*, 75–78 (A&T 42–48).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 78–80 (A&T 48–52).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, IV, 81–85 (A&T 52–60).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 85–87 (A&T 60–62).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, VI.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, V, 87 (A&T 63).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 88–90 (A&T 65–68).

objects—including knowledge of their real existence outside of his mind—only because of his knowledge of God.³⁰

Laying out Descartes' argument in Meditations II–VI next to Augustine's argument in *On Free Choice of the Will II*, we see the following.

<i>On Free Choice, Book II</i>	Meditations II–VI
(1) Proof for the existence of the individual (based on being mistaken). [ch. 3]	(1') Proof for the existence of the individual (based on being deceived). [III]
(2) Exploration of two interlinked hierarchies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an ontology-centered hierarchy (in three levels: existing things, living things, understanding things) [ch. 3] • an epistemology-centered hierarchy (in four levels: sensible things, the five senses, inner sense, reason). [chs. 3, 5–6] 	(2') Exploration of two coordinated hierarchies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an ontology-centered hierarchy (in three levels: modes, finite substances, infinite substance) [III] • an epistemology-centered hierarchy (in three levels: ideas of modes, of finite substances, of infinite substance). [III]
(3) Proof for the existence of things outside the mind (first physical, then intelligible, things). [chs. 7–11]	(3') relocated to end
(4) Proof for the existence of God above the mind. [chs. 12, 15]	(4') Proof for the existence of God outside (and above) the mind. [III]
(5) Problematization of the continued, coherent existence of things across time. [chs. 16–17]	(5') Problematization of the continued, coherent existence of the individual across time. [III]
(6) Proof for the existence of God as sustainer. [ch. 17]	(6') Proof for the existence of God as sustainer. [III]
(7) Defense of the legitimacy of God's having given us free will. [chs. 18–19]	(7') Defense of the legitimacy of God's having given us free will. [IV]
	(3'') Proof for the existence of (physical) things outside the mind (bolstered by a third proof of God's existence). [V–VI]

Table 1: The parallel structures of *On Free Choice, Book II*, and Meditations II–VI

The structures of the two texts match up remarkably well, except that Descartes splits Augustine's third step in two, moving the proof for the existence of physical things to the end of the argument, and bolstering that proof with a new argument for God's existence. The other part

³⁰ Ibid., 92 (A&T 71); VI, 96–97 (A&T 77–80).

of Augustine's third step—regarding the existence of God (or “truth”) *outside* the mind—was then combined with the step in Descartes that parallels Augustine's fourth step (the proof that God, or “truth,” is *above* the mind).

There are at least five reasons why this parallelism between *On Free Choice* and the *Meditations* has been overlooked. First, *On Free Choice* is not widely-known. Second, *On Free Choice* is a work of theodicy, while the *Meditations* is most often read as a work of epistemology and ontology. Third, the proof of external sensible objects has been relocated to the end of Descartes' argument from near the beginning of Augustine's. Fourth, in support of that proof, Descartes adds a third, quasi-Anselmian argument for God's existence. And fifth, Augustine's first proof of God's existence seems radically different at first sight from Descartes'.

I cannot speculate on the reasons for the relative obscurity of *On Free Choice*, but the *Meditations* are being recognized now more than before as a work of theodicy (as evidenced by Menn and Janowski). That Descartes would add an argument for God's existence to his source material is not surprising, furthermore, if I am correct that he is trying to revitalize and bolster Augustine's case—especially since he adds this new proof where it can support the weakest part of Augustine's argument. I do wish, however, to say something more substantial about the relation between Augustine's first proof for God's existence and Descartes' first proof, as well as about Descartes' reason for relocating the argument for external, material objects to the end of the text.

Descartes, like Augustine, begins with an epistemological proof of God's existence, and then proceeds to a cosmological proof. The first proof in both cases is an attempt to prove that God is outside of, and on a level above, the mind. Likewise, the first proof in both cases centers around the question of how the mind engages with its objects. Furthermore, both first proofs

depend on two hierarchies, one more ontological and the other more epistemological. In Augustine, the two hierarchies are intimately interrelated. In Descartes, the two hierarchies are strictly correlated.

Descartes' first proof of God's existence, therefore, is much more similar to Augustine's first than initially meets the eye, and leads directly into a second proof that is strikingly similar to Augustine's second. The second proof in both texts argues that God must exist as a continual, sustaining cause, since things have an inherent tendency to cease existing. Augustine does not try to explain where tendency comes from, but Descartes does: time is a discrete quantity. As each moment ceases to exist, so does everything in it. If a thing is to make it from one moment to the next, therefore, it must be recreated each time.³¹

The difference, furthermore, between the two first proofs, can be explained as a result of Descartes' need to move the proof of sensible objects. Augustine's proof that physical things exist outside the mind depends on the existence of multiple minds that each perceive the same objects. However, while Augustine's version of the *cogito* is capable of proving that the individual's mind exists, it is not capable of proving that minds other than the individual's exist. And the same problem plagues Augustine's proof that the truth exists outside the mind. Since we cannot know—based only on the *cogito*—that multiple minds exist, we cannot know that multiple minds perceive any given truth, and thus cannot prove that any truths exist outside the mind. Thus, Descartes is forced to reverse the order of proof—moving from God to external objects, rather than from external objects to God—and must reframe the first proof of God's existence not as an epistemological proof based on intersubjective experience, but as an

³¹ Descartes, *Meditations*, III, 78–79 (A&T 48–49).

epistemological proof based on causal reasoning from the intrinsic nature of his own, personal, ideas.

In summary, Augustine's argument in *On Free Choice*, Book II, has a fatal flaw, but Descartes apparently does *not* think that this flaw invalidates its argument. The flaw can be fixed while leaving the rest of the book largely intact. Descartes sets out, therefore, to show how this can be done, and the result of his revision is the book we call the *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

But why should Descartes want to vindicate Augustine? Perhaps he believes a restoration of Augustinianism in philosophy—with Augustine's mathematical view of form—could do for science what it had recently done in the Protestant Reformation for religion. Perhaps it could break the hegemony of Aristotle and Thomas, and thus create the freedom Descartes needed. And if Augustinian reasoning about the will was central to the revolution of Luther and Calvin in theology, it was the logical place to begin for the revolution of Descartes in science and philosophy.

III. Relevance

If I am right about the *Meditations*, we now have even more evidence that Descartes is but one part of a larger Augustinian revival. This means, first, that we must rethink the history of Western philosophy. Augustine was a Neoplatonist, and his thousand-year reign with Boethius over European thought had only ended a few centuries before Descartes. The reinstatement of Augustinianism in the 1600s, therefore, was not a revolutionary beginning so much as a restoration after a temporary interregnum. If the *Meditations* are an adaptation of Book II of *On Free Choice*, in other words, then they merely make another move in the perennial dialectic

between “Platonic” and “Aristotelian” eras, rather than dividing time into “BD” and “AC” (“Before Descartes” and “*Anno Cartesii*”).

Second, while everyone in the present era seems to be grateful to Descartes for ending the tyranny of Scholasticism, the one goal that we all seem to share is a repetition of the Cartesian revolution—but this time against Descartes himself. It is imperative then that we understand exactly what we are revolting against. If I am right that we have misunderstood the opponent in terms of whom we have defined ourselves and our mission, we must rethink not only who we are but what we are doing. For example, perhaps today’s revolt against Descartes should be a return to Aquinas and Aristotle, and so perhaps we all should be making common cause with the Catholic Neoscholastic thinkers who never bought into the Cartesian revolution in the first place.

Third, if I am right about the *Meditations*, it is time for us to understand philosophical revolutions as rollings-forward rather than steppings-upward. The point at the bottom of a wheel moves backward relative to the point at the top. Similarly, philosophical revolutions move ahead by going back. Every movement toward something new is based on a return to something prior. The priority involved is not always temporal; sometimes it is logical or ontological, for example. But every revolution claims to be “getting back to what has true priority.”

Fourth, if the book that set the tone and task of modern philosophy was not an exercise in radical beginnings, but rather an exercise in renewal *by way of* the reclamation and updating of an earlier work, is it likely that this task has been completed? Might it be time for someone to adapt the *Meditations* for our anti-Cartesian age? Might it even be time for an entire “translation project” whereby historians of philosophy go through the works of the past, refreshing and reworking them for modern readers?

And finally, might it be time to reevaluate the “secondary” status of commentators and exponents? If the most famous example of self-consciously trying to inaugurate a new tradition was actually a self-conscious rewriting of an older text, perhaps to study and expound historical philosophy is not to wallow in the past, but to begin the most progressive work of which a philosopher is capable.