

# AUGUSTINE AND DESCARTES ON THE DIVINE LIGHT: A COMPARISON TO PLATO

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Augustine and Descartes are two great figures in the history of Western philosophy, each having made his own major contribution in the field. In view of this Aurelius Augustine (354–430, A.D.) can be considered the father of Christian philosophy, whereas René Descartes (1596–1650, A.D.) is called the father of the modern Western philosophy.

Studies of the philosophy of these figures are particularly abundant. However, inspired by the book *Descartes and Augustine*<sup>1</sup> by Professor Stephen Menn, in this paper I would like to reexamine Augustine's *Confessions*<sup>2</sup> and Descartes' *Meditations on the First Philosophy*.<sup>3</sup> We will ask why, after so many years, they promise to open new pathways between philosophers and theologians; what the two figures have in common in their search for truth, wisdom, and goodness, or the "divine light"; and where they differ in terms of its understanding and implementation. To help make this comparison I would like to employ as point of reference the commonplace of Plato's theory of the divided line and his allegory of the cave. This will make it possible to analyze the processes of inner self development as the path to truth for Augustine and to knowledge for Descartes, to appreciate their convergence upon the divine light, and to see what significance and meanings we can draw today from their distinctive insights for the troubled relation of faith and reason in our times.

This then is a study in four parts: Part I, "Plato," treats the passages in the *Republic* on the theory of forms, the divided line and the allegory of the cave; Parts II and III are on Augustine and Descartes respectively and examine the inner development of their work as it encounters the divine source of the light of the mind; and Part IV compares the two great philosophers with Plato's allegory of the cave to see what they achieved, and they can contribute by their search, and what more needs to be done.

## Part I. Plato

Plato (427–347 B.C.) is the father of Western Philosophy; indeed Whitehead once said that the rest of Western philosophy was but footnotes on Plato. Plato's writings in the form of dialogues are endlessly rich and profound resources for lovers of wisdom to explore, to contemplate and so to find new meanings. His *Republic* is certainly one of the most significant of his great dialogues; its simile of the divided line and allegory of the cave are among its high points.

Plato divided reality into two levels of reality, one lower and the other higher: the objects on the lower level are physical, while on the higher level they are "forms". Forms are transcendent, eternal, intelligible, and archetypal, whereas physical things are spatio-temporal, changing, changeable and sensible. The forms are more perfect and real than physical things, whereas physical objects only imitate and participate in the forms. For instance, a ball is round, a watch is round, a well is round, etc.; there is also an ideal or a form of roundness in my mind. But which of these is the more real? Plato believes that all physical roundness can be changed or is changing, but the idea of the roundness in my mind is permanent and changeless. This idea or form of roundness is imprinted in my mind. The next time I see something which has similar shape, I can compare the shape with the form in my mind and identify the physical thing as round. This is Plato's theory of forms.

In the *Republic* at the end of Book VI, Plato describes a line divided into two unequal sections, each having two unequal subdivisions. The four parts correspond to image (*eikasia*), belief (*pistis*), thought (*dianoia*) and understanding (*noesis*). What does this mean? Through Socrates Plato argues that there are two kinds of reality: visible and intelligible. The first two subsections, image (*eikasia*) and belief (*dianoia*), belong to the visible world, which consists of images as shadows, reflections in water and physical objects, and their originals such as animals, plants, and material things. "As regards truth and untruth, the division is in this proportion: As the opinable is to the knowable, so the likeness is to the thing that it is like?" The last two subsections, thought (*dianoia*) and understanding (*noesis*), belong to the intelligible world in which the soul uses images to reason from hypotheses not up to first principles, but down

to a conclusion on the part of thought. The mind cannot go beyond its hypotheses and has to use images. However, in the last subsection the soul makes its way up to the first principle, proceeding through forms alone, moving from form to form and ending in forms. (See *Republic*,<sup>4</sup> Book VI 508d-510b)

Here the subsections of divided line symbolize different levels of knowledge, truth and forms (goodness). Knowledge and truth are beautiful, but not goodness itself, whereas the Form is the highest good which is the source of all things. Like the sun as regards sight, sight is not the sun, but receives the light from the sun; the sun is not sight, but the cause of sight and is seen by sight.

In order to make the divided line more graphic and more understandable, Plato uses the famous allegory of the cave to illustrate why the last section is so significant and best of all. Plato invites us to imagine human beings chained in an underground cave and able to see only the images or shadows on the wall in front of them. There was fire at the mouth of the cave which cast the images or shadows. Those in chains were limited to the images or shadows on the wall all their lives and believed these to be the truth or real things. This is equivalent to the visible realm corresponding to the first section of Plato's divided line which he called image (*eikasia*). Others, freed from their chains, were able to look toward the physical objects which gave the shape or outline of the shadows and believed what they saw to be the real or true. Plato called this belief (*pistis*) which was still on the sensible level. Some managed to climb to the mouth of the cave and conceptualize what they had seen through their rational assumptions and reasoning power; this stage Plato called thought (*dianoia*). Eventually some struggled out the cave and reached the fire or source of the light. Here they attained the level of understanding (*noesis*) and were able to experience reality beyond that encountered in the cave. Beyond shadows, physical things and hypothetical reasoning, it is unchangeable, immeasurable, immutable and eternal. It is the truth and the form (goodness), the light which is the source of all things. Arriving there the soul sees things ten thousand times better and enjoys the brilliant light of goodness itself.

It is precisely this light, this truth and this goodness which Augustine and Descartes, each in their own unique or distinctive ways, discovered

to be essential. We shall now proceed to explore how they made this discovery and what it can suggest for the human quest in our days.

## Part II. Augustine

### Brief History

Though there are many descriptions of the life and thought of Augustine, we shall review briefly his personal history in order to situate the points of personal development relevant to our concerns.

Augustine was born in 354 AD in the town of Thagaste in North Africa. His father, Patricius, who owned some property and was a small official, was not Christian; his mother, Monica, was a devout Catholic. Augustine learned rhetoric, literature, natural science, music, etc. and later taught rhetoric in Thagaste, Carthage, Rome and Milan. During his years in Carthage, he became a Manichean, a religion derived from many sources which claimed that it could lead to salvation. The key to its metaphysics was that there were two powers in reality, one good and the other evil.

During his years in Rome and Milan, Augustine gradually gave up this old faith and in 386 began to read some neo-Platonic texts and converted to Catholic. After his baptism, Augustine gave up his teaching of rhetoric and concentrated on church work and biblical writings. In late 388 he returned to Africa. In 391 he went to Hippo, where he was ordained as priest and later became Bishop of Hippo till his death.

Augustine wrote many important works, among which his *Confessions* is considered one of the great works of Western literature. He composed this masterpiece during his first three years as Bishop of Hippo. This work, in the style of a prose-poem, has thirteen books with 278 chapters, directly addressed to “my God and my Lord”. It covers many issues to philosophy, theology, religion, psychology, social theory, etc., but distinctively has a threefold confession: “a confession of sins, a confession of faith, and a confession of praise.”<sup>5</sup>

The first 1-9 books are about his past personal growth from infancy to his conversion. The last four books are precisely on the concerns of his converted mind in relation to memory, time and eternity, form and matter, and creation.

## **“Our heart is restless until it rests in you”**

The *Confessions* is not only about wisdom which Augustine desired and tried to embrace, but also about the truth which was the original source of his being. This he approached “by calling upon” and “by believing in” God through the interior development of his inner world. “If wisdom were found, to abandon all the empty hopes and all the lying follies of my vain desires.” (*Confessions* VI, 11) “In truth, when I call upon him, I call him into myself.” (*Confessions* I, 1)

He examined his sinful infancy, evil-doing youth and the struggles of his early adulthood, but noted that throughout “I wished to mediate upon my God, but I did not know how to think of him except as a vast corporeal mass, for I thought that anything not a body was nothing whatsoever. This was the greatest and almost the sole cause of my inevitable error.” (*Confessions* V, 10) Indeed before his conversion, he was always bothered by the question of evil; he said that in his early life he enjoyed doing things sinful not out of some need, but for the wrong-doing itself. He tried different ways in order to find the answer.

Augustine believed that even an infant is not without sin. As a boy, he wanted to win and to show himself “not out of a desire for better things, but out of love for play.” (*Confessions* I, 10) Though his devout mother wanted him to be baptized his baptism was delayed. “For I, so small a boy and yet so great a sinner.” (*Confessions* I, 12) He was fond of play, committed thefts, told lies and was full of greediness because “I did not see the whirlpool of filth into which I was cast away from before your eyes.” (*Confessions* I, 19)

At his early youth, he “burned to get my fill of hellish things” because of “the corruption of my soul.” (*Confessions* II, 1) Though his mother warned him, he was blinded without seeing that her warnings “were your warnings, and I knew it not.” (*Confessions* II, 3) He enjoyed the association with others who committed crimes with him. In telling the famous story of stealing fruit Augustine said the stealing was not out of need, but rather for the enjoyment of the actual theft. “I should be evil without purpose and that there should be no cause for my evil but evil itself. Foul was the evil, and I loved it.” (*Confessions* II, 4)

In his later youth, he said “my soul did not grow healthy” and there “was hunger within me from a lack of that inner food.” (*Confessions* III, 1) He was bothered by such questions as “Whence is evil?” “Is God confined within a corporeal form?” and “Does he have hair and nails?” (*Confessions* III, 7) In searching for answers he first became a Manichean, but later argued that the Manichean view of all in material, corporeal and hence quantitative terms prevented him from knowing and loving God. “I did not know how to love you, for I knew only how to think upon gleaming corporeal things.” (*Confessions* IV, 2) Thus, he considered God to be part of the world and as a corporeal thing; he did not see that God is a spirit and “your spiritual works are above those corporeal things, bright and heavenly.” (*Confessions* III, 6)

By reference to Plato’s divided line we see that Augustine was looking for an answer for his questions on evil and God in the visible subsection. He wished to conceive things whether bodily or spiritual in the same way “that seven and three make ten,” because he “did not know how to conceive except in a corporeal way.” (*Confessions* VI, 4) He did not know that the true interior justice was not according to custom, but by the righteous law of God, and that “my body lives by my soul, and my soul lives by you.” (*Confessions* X, 20) He loved all the bodily things and physical pleasures and looked for answers from without rather than within. Such an earthly way of thinking forced him to think of God as something corporeal and measurable, having existence in space and place. He had no clear ideas about himself. Like those chained in the cave he believed that shadows and physical objects were the true knowledge of the Form and within that realm tried to think of something higher and beyond. He was, as it were, wandering in the cave, studying shadows on the wall and sensible things in order to conceive God. He thought of both God and evil in a measurable corporeal way and could not separate the two because in his sensible vision the infinite good, God who is everywhere, must overlap or interpenetrate evil. Yet he could not be satisfied with this Manichean answer and remained puzzled by the problem of evil: how to explain that God was almighty, all good and infinite, and yet recognize and resolve the problem of evil. There must be something else which transcends visible thinking. As Menn points out, “Augustine says that the principal reason why he had fallen into error was his inability to conceive of anything except

bodies extended in space. Wishing to conceive of God in the most appropriate way, he could only imagine him as an infinite body interpenetrating all other bodies.”<sup>6</sup>

Reading Cicero’s *Hortensius* “changed my affections. It turned my prayers to you, Lord, and caused me to have different purposes and desires.” (*Confessions* III, 4) During his years in Rome and Milan as a teacher of rhetoric, he never stopped searching for a better understanding of his questions; unsatisfied with the Manichean doctrine, he looked for a new answer. In Milan he met Saint Ambrose who had great impact on him. “I heard him, indeed, every Sunday as he was rightly handling the word of truth before the people.” (*Confessions* VI, 3) However, “not yet”: Augustine was still uncertain and still searching.

In the meantime he received some neo-Platonist texts which liberated him from Manichean notion of reality and directed his mind within to discover that his mind was measured by something higher and more perfect than what is corruptible, and that the eternal truth and the universal good were above the changing world. Neo-Platonist spirituality and interiority and its corresponding internal freedom from the external world drew Augustine closer to the Christian Scriptures. Neo-Platonism pulled him out, as it were, from the visible and the corporeal to the third level of the divided line. He began to turn inward to his inner self to look for an answer.

Augustine was influenced by the thought of two neo-Platonists: Plotinus (204/5–270 AD) and Porphyry (c.233–309 AD). Plotinus developed a metaphysics founded in a dichotomy between the intelligible and the sensible. The former was real, unchanging and non-spatial, whereas the later was unreal, changeable and spatial. Further he developed a hierarchy of three existents: the One, the Intellect, and the Soul. ‘The One’ or ‘the Good’ was the ultimate cause of everything. It could not be grasped by sensible things and thought, but was connected to externals through ‘the Intellect,’ which was the Platonic Form. ‘The Intellect’ acted through the cosmic soul, which produced sensible objects and gave life to the bodily organisms. The soul, the lowest intelligible cause, was directly in contact with sensible objects. Plotinus was a dualist about body and soul. Human beings belonged to the sensible world through their physical life, but their soul was rooted in the divine intelligibility and contemplation

and philosophy could help the soul return to its divine root. Plotinus believed that the cosmic realm was a chain of forms and matter and that non-being was the cause of evil. Evil was no more than a defect of being and goodness. The weakness in the soul made humans misuse their free choice and tend to material things, which was the cause of evil.

Porphyry was a student of Plotinus and edited Plotinus' teachings with his own insights. He was also responsible for the renewal of Aristotle's philosophical thought. He possessed very broad learning from philosophy to literary criticism, from history to religion. Porphyry held that reason exercised by a pure mind could lead to the true essence of things, the One God. Intellectual activity detached the soul from passions and confusions, and concentrated its activity on the real things: the soul could be purged if it was away from body. He promoted abstinence such as being vegetarian, avoiding sexual activity and being devoted to the contemplation of Being. God contained all things, but was contained by nothing. Degrees of being were also degrees of goodness. The soul was in the median position: it could descend to evil or ascend to goodness. By ascetic acts and retrospective contemplation, the soul could achieve its true fulfillment.

The neo-Platonist views of evil and its immaterialism had strong impact on Augustine. It liberated him from the Manichean understanding of God and taught him that the soul had inherent power of self-knowledge, which could be achieved by putting aside the sensible and physical objects. Thus the soul could be led to the divine light and to truth itself.

By entering into himself to seek out "who I am?" Augustine no longer desired honor, wealth and vanity, but looked for incorporeal truth as instructed by "the books of Platonists." He was by now certain that "you exist, that you are infinite, . . . that you are truly he who is always the same, . . . that all other things are from you . . . of these truths I was most certain, but I was too weak to find my joy in you." (*Confessions* VII, 20) "I knew what a thing of evil I was, but I did not know the good that I would be after but a little while." (*Confessions* VIII, 8)

But when he "enters into his own innermost parts," he is not considering how much room his body or his soul may take up, but only his own thoughts. This reflection on himself leads him to recognize that some of his thoughts are in accordance with truth

or wisdom, and that some of them run contrary to truth. He therefore recognizes that there must be some such thing as truth, which sets the standard for whether he is thinking rightly or not.<sup>7</sup>

Augustine begins by intuiting his own soul, and then this first intuition somehow allows him to come to an intuition of God. Augustine says that this procedure led him to a knowledge of God very different from the conjectures he had previously formed, and that with this knowledge of God he could understand whence evil arose.<sup>8</sup>

Because of the influence of the neo-Platonism Augustine began to think of himself, his soul and God in a non-corporeal way and to conceptualize what they were and how they related to each other. But in Plato's imagery he was still inside the cave or in the third level of the divided line – thought (*dianoia*). He tried with his own measurable power of intellect to reason out the immeasurable and non-quantifiable God; but he was close to the fourth level and its true understanding of the divine light. Thus, his inner struggle was fought “much more bitterly than ever before,” (*Confessions* VIII, 11) He confessed that it was his love of old trifles that delayed him from drawing closer to the highest good. This debate within his heart was only a fight of himself against himself, because people wished to be “light not in the Lord but in themselves.” The heart was still restless because it did not know that “the true light enlightens every man that comes into this world.”<sup>9</sup>

In his *Confessions* Augustine described in detail his struggle and his encounter with the divine light, with God, face to face. When he started reading Scriptures he was at first not as enthused as he later became. “My swelling pride turned away from its humble style, and my sharp gaze did not penetrate into its inner meaning.” (*Confessions* III, 5) With a newly intense desire, he reread the Scriptures and “I saw those pure writings as having one single aspect, and I learned to exult with joy . . . whatever truths I had read in those other works I here found to be uttered along with the praise of your grace.” (*Confessions* VII, 21) “For your teaching is true, and besides you there is no other teacher of the truth.” (*Confessions* V, 6) He turned to himself again and again to look for the inner light in his

soul and found that “I” am only a man and ‘I am not he, but he has made me!’

In particular he found that his mind was measured by truth which enabled him to know and hold to those first principles by which all areas of truth could be explored.

Augustine recognized that beyond corporeal objects, changing and measurable things, there was something higher and truer, something unchangeable and unmeasurable which measured all. This transcended the physical and visible world (Plato’s first and second levels) where he had searched. Looking within he found that as measuring of the mind it must be beyond the mind (Plato’s third level). Where could he find that unchangeable and unmeasurable measure of all?

Here, I would like to recall a story from one of the *Upanishads*. Uddalaka, the father, repeatedly asked his son, Svetaketu, through what could he see; the son answered by the sun; but if there was no sun, then by the moon; if however there were no moon, then by lamp light; finally if there were no lamp light – the son was silent. Then the father taught him: you could see through your heart and your inner soul.

Augustine did precisely the same. “I entered into my inmost being” and saw “an unchanging light” above his soul and his mind. “It was not this common light, plain to all flesh, nor a greater light, as it were, of the same kind, as though that light would shine many, many times more bright, and by its great power fill the whole universe.” (*Confessions* VII, 10)

In 386 in the garden of his house in Milan, Augustine made the final decision “in the shifting tides of my indecision” to surrender himself to “my light, my wealth, my salvation, my Lord God.” (*Confessions* IX, 1) It was an unconditional surrendering to “put you on the Lord Jesus Christ.” As he recalled later in his *Confessions* it was a child’s voice calling out “Take up and read. Take up and read” that led him to pick up the Gospel and read the passage which came before his eyes: “Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven, and come, follow me.”<sup>10</sup> Immediately the dark shadow of doubt in his heart fell away. In 387 he was baptized a few days before his mother’s death. From then on Augustine’s heart and soul rested in the *City of God* where he found wisdom, truth and beauty, and above all the divine light.

### Part III. Descartes

It would be too simple to say that Descartes made the same search as did Augustine. However, there are real similarities. Both were looking for the divine light which transcends sensible things, and even indubitable thought. In his major work, *Mediations on First Philosophy*, Descartes established the mind as an immaterial substance and God as an infinite and non-deceiving existence.

#### Brief History

Descartes was born in 1596 in Touraine, France. His father was a provincial government official and landholder; his mother died when he was one year old. He studied at the Collège Royal de La Flèche, run by the Jesuit order, where he received a well-grounded education in the Aristotelian-scholastic tradition, the study of languages and literature, as well as natural science. He left La Flèche and later went to the University of Poitiers, after which he traveled broadly across Europe learning, as he put it, from the book of the world.

During his travels, he met Isaac Beeckman to whom he promised to write down his method. After this meeting Descartes had a series of three dreams which he took as divine approval of his project to found a new science which would bring mathematical clarity to all branches of knowledge.

He continued to travel extensively throughout Europe, and subsequently returned to Paris, where he joined the intellectual elites of the time. Among them were some Augustinian theologians whose views on God and the will were more attractive to Descartes. He was closely associated with Marin Mersenne who later became a central figure in the new philosophy and science in Europe and Descartes' Paris correspondent. At a gathering at the home of the Papal Nuncio in Paris, in responding to an alchemical lecture Descartes illustrated the methodic principles on which his new philosophy would be based. This caught the attention of Cardinal de Bérulle who urged Descartes to develop his philosophy.

As a result in 1628, Descartes went into relative seclusion in Holland where he wrote his major scientific and philosophical works. He

concentrated finally on his meditations on metaphysics or first philosophy which he conceived as providing the foundation for the new science. For this he came to be called the father of modern Western philosophy.

Except for a few short trips to Paris, Descartes remained in Holland until 1649, when he was asked by the Queen Christina of Sweden to come to Stockholm. There he fell ill and died in February 1650.

Descartes' earlier writings concerned method, both in his *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* and his *Discourse on Method for Conducting One's Reason well and For Seeking the Truth in the Sciences*. The latter he exemplified by works in optics, geometry and meteorology. In his later writings Descartes concentrated on how the method was grounded in metaphysically based truths, the Cogito Argument and the proof for the existence of God and the spirituality of the soul. In 1640 Descartes completed his work on *Meditations on First Philosophy* but did not publish it till 1641 in Latin. He dedicated this work to the Faculty of Sacred Theology of the Sorbonne and wrote synopses to introduce its six meditations.

### **“Cogito ergo sum”**

Descartes was educated in traditional scholasticism which attempted to combine Christian doctrine with Aristotelian philosophy. At La Flèche he studied logic, physics, cosmology, metaphysics, morals, theology, etc. After he left school, Descartes rejected Aristotelian philosophy which was based on sensory experience and the physical world. “I will attack straightaway those principles which supported everything I once believed.”<sup>11</sup> However, he always held that there was a systematic coherence in knowledge and a methodological structure which one needed to follow.

Descartes began by attempting ambitiously in his *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* to develop a method of proceeding solely by clear and distinct ideas in order to achieve mathematical certitude for all areas of knowledge. Menn notes that Descartes achieved great success in the mathematics section of his project. However, when he sought mathematical clarity regarding the physical order, he failed to work out a coherent set of rules based solely on pure mathematics. Mathematics opened many

possibilities, but in order to know which of these applied there was need for clear and distinct knowledge of the nature and structures of the physical powers of observation. But as this could not be had without a priori certification of his method he found himself in a vicious circle from which there was no escape. Something more than mathematics was needed; he needed to know the extent of the capabilities of the human mind, “what human knowledge is, and how far it extends.”<sup>12</sup> He needed knowledge especially of the foundations of knowledge which could not be doubted. As a result he never completed his *Rules*, which was published only posthumously. Instead it was at this time that he left Paris and settled in Holland to focus on these deeper more foundational problems and developed his works on *Method* and *Metaphysics*.

In order to build a solid and indubitable foundation for all the sciences Descartes began with a universal doubt, but how to start such a universal doubt? In Part II of the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes established four scientific and methodological principles. The first was “never to accept anything as true” until it was so clear and distinct “that I had no occasion to call it in doubt”; the second was to divide the problem into as many pieces as possible in order to analyze them; the third was to synthesize the parts or put them in “an orderly fashion” in order to reconnect them clearly and distinctly; and fourth was to review them thoroughly and completely in order not to leave out anything.<sup>13</sup>

Where could he start his universal doubt? In the first *Mediation* Descartes chiefly discussed those things “that can be called into doubt”, those sensible objects which were direct and immediate to us. Descartes believed that the senses were deceptive, that the images of things in our mind were false, and that stories or fables, oratory and poetry, languages or books, theology and philosophy, and even medicine and mathematics were not trustworthy. Hence we could not tell what was true; was it what we saw with our eyes if our dreams could be equally vivid? In order to make sure that all was clear and distinct, it was necessary to examine all these disciplines, so that we could know “their true worth and to guard against being deceived by them.”<sup>14</sup>

He suggested that people should learn not to believe “too firmly” anything given by examples and custom because they prevented us from reaching true knowledge. “Thus I little by little freed myself from many

errors that can darken our natural light and render us less able to listen to reason.”<sup>15</sup> He pulled out all the old foundations, began again from what could not be doubted, and proceeded exclusively by clear and distinct ideas in order to avoid reasoning falsely.

Once there was nothing more that could be doubted and at the same time a new foundation was needed to start with, where could he begin? Descartes started from the “I” as a thinking thing. “While I wanted thus to think that everything was false, necessarily this truth – *I think, therefore I am* – was so firm and so assured . . . I judged that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking.”<sup>16</sup> Even though “I” was deceived, as long as “I” was thinking then “I” was something. “I am, I exist” was true in my mind whenever “I” conceived it. “I” was a thing to doubt, understand, will, affirm, deny, refuse, imagine and sense.<sup>17</sup> In the second *Meditation* Descartes used the example of wax to assert that only the human mind or the intellect alone perceived the extended, flexible and mutable wax — not seeing, touching or imagining. Descartes developed his cogito argument: ‘I am thinking, I exist’ or ‘ego cogito, sum’ to establish the self as the starting point of his search for his new philosophy and to certify the self as a thinking substance distinct from the body. However, he asked, how I knew that my thinking was not deceiving me? He wanted to see whether these reasons were powerful enough. He said “all I have in mind is that I am driven by a spontaneous impulse to believe this, and that some light of nature is showing me that it is true.”<sup>18</sup> This “light” was not ordinary light, for he had already prescinded from or placed under doubt the physical “light” by which he perceived sensible things. What then is this light? Here Augustine may be helpful.

As mentioned above, Augustine confessed that he was caught by corporeal things, and conceived the senses, the soul and God in the first to third levels of the divided line. That is, he always sought to use a measurable instrument to try to sort out unmeasurable things, or to use ordinary light to see the divine light; hence he could not solve the problem of evil. Descartes, however, was concerned with how to avoid error in knowing truth, how to build an adequate foundation for all knowledge, and where to locate the foundation. It was just at this point that Descartes too recognized that the project of his *Rules* was unrealizable in its original terms and that some further foundation was needed.

Menn argues that after Descartes met Cardinal de Bérulle who “made it an obligation of conscience for him” to work out his philosophy for the benefit of humankind rather than only for mathematics, Descartes went to Holland and worked on nothing but metaphysics. “From this time on Descartes always regards metaphysics, not mathematics or psychology, as the basis of his science.”<sup>19</sup> And it was also possible that Cardinal de Berulle suggested to Descartes to study Augustine as a model. “About this time Descartes turned to Augustine’s central metaphysical ideas,”<sup>20</sup> that is, to Augustine’s understanding of God and the soul. The “ascent from the soul to God gives the core of Augustine’s method or making God intelligible to us.” This is also the core of Descartes’ third *Meditation*. Menn continues his argument that Descartes was drawn to Augustine’s approach precisely by the way his frustration with the project of the *Rules* showed him the need for a “standard for the truth of the soul’s thoughts that would be independent of any prior understanding of bodies.”<sup>21</sup>

Hence like Augustine, even after the first two meditations where Descartes first began by doubting his senses, then his own thinking and finally even a God who might deceive him if imagined as an “evil genius,” he still asked such questions as where he could find that “light” which would never deceive him what metaphysical foundations and absolute sources were there for his undoubtable “thinking thing”; and whether there was a God who was immutable, infinite, unmeasureable in perfection and the source of all things. “I clearly understand that there is more reality in an infinite substance than there is in a finite one. Thus the perception of the infinite is somehow prior in me to the perception of the finite, that is, my perception of God is prior to my perception of myself.”<sup>22</sup>

Here Descartes says something similar to Plotinus. As mentioned in the above section on Augustine, Plotinus established a hierarchy of One, Intellect and Soul, among which the soul was the lowest and connected with sensible things through the cosmic world. Descartes claimed “I have been so constituted as a kind of middle ground between God and nothingness, or between the supreme being and non-being.”<sup>23</sup> In order to be certain that God was the only source for the tangible things, the only truth for the illusive images and the only standard for all sciences, Descartes turned to discovering or uncovering the existence of God by noting that the idea in him about the existence of God was the most true, the most

clear and distinct. This could not be found from the senses or corporeal objects. Rather, he took up Augustine's approach of withdrawing into himself, the thinking thing, to "distinctively conceive God by conceiving him as the immutable standard for our mutable mind, and in proving the existence of God as the cause of this conception in our mind."<sup>24</sup> If we followed this divine standard and did not turn away from it, we could not go wrong. Here it is no longer the earlier inference of the Descartes' *Method IV* "cogito ergo sum," but the direct intention that doubting is thinking, that thinking is being, and that being is at root God: *Cogito, sum, Deus est*, as would note Ferdinand Alquié.

In *Meditation III* Descartes employs causal theory to prove the existence of God. He grouped thought in "certain classes" and argued that something could not come from nothing, but only from what possessed equivalent reality. The ideas of corporeal things were contained in "I" formally as "I" was a thinking thing, and eminently as "I" was a substance. "The very nature of an idea is such that of itself it needs no formal reality other than what it borrows from my thought, of which it is a mode."<sup>25</sup> But the objective reality of the idea of the infinite and all perfect was so great that "I" alone could not be the cause of that idea formally and eminently; there must be something else outside of "I," which was the cause of that idea. I could not cause the idea of God which was infinite, independent, supremely intelligent and powerful, and creates everything that exists. Since "I" am a finite substance, "I" could not conceive something infinite because "there is more reality in an infinite substance than there is in a finite one".<sup>26</sup>

Arguing from a cosmological point of view, Descartes asks from what source "I" derive my existence: from myself, my parents, or other things which contained less perfection than God. If from myself, "I" would have all the perfections "I" needed. Since "I" am nothing but a thinking thing "if such a power is in me, then I would certainly be aware of it. But I observe that there is no such power; and from this very fact I know most clearly that I depend upon some being other than myself."<sup>27</sup> My parents gave "me" my body, but they did not generate my thoughts or ideas or myself as a thinking thing. It is also impossible that the less perfect things created me as "I" had the idea of God in my mind and "nothing more perfect than God, or even as perfect as God, can be thought or imagined."<sup>28</sup>

In *Meditation V* Descartes argues from an ontological point of view that since pure and abstract mathematics was most certain, it could also be applied to proving the existence of God. “God’s nature that he always exists is something I understand no less clearly and distinctly than is the case when I demonstrate in regard to some figure and number . . .”<sup>29</sup> The existence of God is one of His perfections. “I” as an imperfect and finite being am not free to think of God without existence, “a supremely perfect being without a supreme perfection, as I am to imagine a horse with or without wings.”<sup>30</sup> Further the existence and essence of God were inseparable, just like a mountain and a valley which were inseparable from each other and like a triangle which contained three angles. By nature if “I” perceived something clearly and distinctly, it could not but be true. “I” perceive clearly and distinctly that there was a God not as a deceiver, and that everything else depended on him. Then “I” concluded that my perception was necessarily true. “And thus I see plainly that the certainty and truth of every science depends exclusively upon the knowledge of the true God.”<sup>31</sup>

In sum, Descartes found the divine source which could assure his “*cogito ergo sum*” and never deceive him, but rather give him faculties of reasoning, perceiving, judging, etc., upon which he depended entirely. Like Augustine, Descartes also started from the senses (the visible level of the divided line) and advanced to the “thinking thing” (the third level) till he found the divine light (the fourth level), which not only created him but also gave him the intellectual idea of God, as “the mark of craftsman impressed upon his work.”<sup>32</sup>

### **Afterthought**

From the above analysis of Augustine and Descartes we learn that both go back to their inner self to search for the light, both believe that there is something higher and greater than their soul and mind, both attribute that highest to God, the infinite and eternal creator of all things, and both find the divine source for Augustine’s restless heart and Descartes thinking thing.

Augustine was primarily concerned with the question of evil whereas Descartes emphasizes the problem of avoiding erroneous knowledge. One

is looking for religious freedom, the other for the liberation of human reasoning. Both start from senses and move to the inner self till, in terms of Plato's allegory, they both escape the cave and arrive at the fourth level where they see the truth or the divine light. By this both were enlightened with a real sense of truth and knowledge (or understanding) beyond the senses, imagination and intellect (reasoning). This ability of understanding is somehow given and embedded in the human mind. Thus, Augustine finds a path to religious liberation, where Descartes proceeds to apply human rationality empowered by the divine light. One rests in the kingdom of God to praise the eternal and infinite; the other uses the divine light to enlighten the human mind and assure the scientific exploration of the world.

The way taken by Augustine directs his restless heart to the kingdom of God, where he sees the real things with real knowledge, real truth and real beauty. Thereafter he continues to reside there under the brilliant sun to contemplate and praise God in a saintly manner. In some contrast, when Descartes meditates upon his self he too locates it in the divine light, but he does not stay there. Rather he returns to the third level in order to apply his thought and reasoning now certified by the divine light. He resides there to live his "cogito" and "sum" as an undoubted "thinking thing".

Augustine and Descartes have done what they could with their own understanding of truth, wisdom and the divinity in their own circumstances. Each has developed his own way to reach the highest good and to bring to humanity their own brilliant contributions.

Menn argues that Descartes used Augustine's interior approach to God to resolve his difficulties and based science on this conception of God as reflected in his *Meditations*. The core of Augustine's approach for making God intelligible to man by ascent from the soul to God was also the core of Descartes' *Meditations*, especially his third *Meditation*. Menn's reading of Descartes provides a new angle to look at the Father of Modern Western Philosophy and opens a new approach to the study of his works. In this light we see that something significant had been omitted in the Cartesian reading of Descartes and that we need to go back to reexamine the texts and bring them forward for today. It is not that Descartes' project of a universal *mathesis* did not continue, but that it continued not against religious vision but as based thereupon. This is most important for

the contemporary concern to work out a more adequate relation, of science to religion, of reason to faith or to reasoning in faith.

Over a millennium has passed since Augustine, and more than 400 years have gone by since Descartes. Through the examination of the history of modern philosophy, we learn that the thought of modernity, based on Descartes' own thinking, contributed greatly to human development and human history, especially to its scientific achievements. However, there has been also a negative impact expressed by the terms "rationalism" and "iron cage" (Weber). This might be due to the error of reading Descartes exclusively rather than inclusively; to selectivity rather than openness in relating man and God, thereby setting reason against religion; and to our narrowly rationalistic rather than hermeneutic understanding of the project of the Father of Modern Philosophy

I would like to end this paper by pointing to the remainder of Plato's allegory of the cave. The continuation of his account notes something of special importance. Some had struggled out of the darkness of the cave and its restrictively visible and measurable understanding of truth to reach the divine light and the goodness, or the real understanding of truth. But they were obliged to return to the cave in order to bring back the light, the truth and the goodness to the ones who still lived in the darkness and believed exclusively in sensible things. This the enlightened ones did at the risk of their life. Plato argues that this is because they "are better and more completely educated than the others and are better able to share in both types of life." Because "you have seen the truth about fine, just and good things, you will know each image for what it is and also that of which it is the image."<sup>33</sup>

It is indeed good to enjoy the sun and the divine light; it is good to strengthen human knowledge and intellect. But the most needed thing is for those who are thus enlightened to contribute to their fellow beings, to go back to the cave whence they came in order to bring light to the darkness, to educate the enslaved, and to enlighten the ignorant hearts. That is real education, real Enlightenment, and the better way to be.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Earlier he published a summary of his views on Descartes and Augustine as “The Problem of the Third Meditation,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. LXVII, No. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Translated, with an Introduction and Notes, by John K. Ryan (New York: Image Book Doubleday, 1960).

<sup>3</sup> Translated by Donald A. Cress, fourth edition (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube and revised by C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1992), Book VI, 509e-510b.

<sup>5</sup> Ryan, Introduction, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> “The Problem of the Third Meditation,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. LXVII, No. 4, p. 545.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 545.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 544.

<sup>9</sup> John 1:9.

<sup>10</sup> Matt, 19:21.

<sup>11</sup> René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis, Indian: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), p. 60.

<sup>12</sup> Menn, p. 540.

<sup>13</sup> Descartes, p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>19</sup> Menn, p. 543.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 543.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 548.

<sup>22</sup> Descartes, p. 76.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>24</sup> Menn, p. 550.

<sup>25</sup> Descartes, p. 74.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>33</sup> Plato, 520c.

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