

Augustine's Influence upon Descartes and the mind/body Problem

The influence of Augustine, whether directly or indirectly, upon the thought of Descartes, has been well known and thoroughly discussed in France during the past fifty years. It is all the more surprising that the English-speaking world, and in particular editions¹ of Descartes' works produced within it, seem largely to be unaware of the fruits of so much scholarship. Some writers at least seem still to ignore the place of Descartes in the history of philosophy, to call him 'the father of modern philosophy' as though he made an *entirely* new beginning, and to read back into his thought the attitudes of the contemporary rationalist and scientist. This observation also applies, in varying degrees, to the other admitted influences upon Descartes, whether stoic, sceptic or scholastic.

The realities of the philosophical situation in Descartes' time seem to have been somewhat different from what the above authors have imagined. R.H. Popkin² has drawn attention to the prevalent sceptical crisis of the times and to Descartes' role as an attempted conqueror of scepticism. Both his belief in Catholicism (which can hardly seriously be questioned), and his concern over the widespread scepticism of his day seem naturally to have led Descartes to seek in Augustine or Augustinism a remedy that could suitably be applied to the situation. Aristotelian scholasticism was discredited, partly by its degeneration into petty squabbles over minor issues, partly by its rigid adherence to Aristotle's outmoded physics and astronomy. The thought of Augustine had none of these disadvantages. It was expressed in language of a literary beauty that appealed to the revived interest in rhetoric of the Renaissance. It was not a rigid, impersonal system expressed in arid terminology, but

1. e.g. *Descartes' Discourse on Method and Other Writings*: a new translation by Arthur WOLLASTON, Penguin Books 1960; *Descartes' Discourse on Method and Meditations*, Library of Liberal Arts, New York 1956 & 1951.

2. cf. *The history of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes* by R.H. POPKIN, Assen 1960, c. 9 and 10.

the earnest search of a questioning mind, developing over a period of years and capable of a deep personal appeal to any reader. Finally Augustine, well before he became a Christian, had been obliged to face the problem of evil as raised by Manicheism, and more especially for Descartes' purposes, the problem of the validity of any certain knowledge as discussed in the writings and teachings of the Academic Sceptics.

Whether Descartes actually read Augustine before formulating his philosophy has been much debated³, but at least it is generally admitted that his contacts with Cardinal Bérulle, Mersenne and the Oratorians brought him into relation with a school of Augustinian thought, and with writings deeply imbued with the spirit of Augustine. Sometimes the parallels between his thought and that of Augustine are so close that verbal comparisons have been made, and it may be apposite here briefly to resume some of the principal points of similarity.

Descartes' cogito has been related⁴ to the following texts of Augustine : *De beata vita* II, 2, 7 (I know that I live) ; *Sol.* II, 1, 1 (I know that I think) ; *De lib. arb.* II, 3, 7, (If I am deceived I exist) ; *De Trin.* XV, 12, 21 (I know that I live), *ibid.* X, 10, 14-16 (If I doubt I live) ; *De civ. Dei* XI, 26 (I know that I am, if I am deceived I am). His desire for the certitude of mathematics has been compared with *Conf.* VI, 4, 6 (I desired all else to be understood like this viz. That seven and three are ten)⁵. His conviction that the existence of God and the soul is more certain than anything else is paralleled in *De anim. et eius orig.* IV, 19, 30 ; *De Trin.* VIII, 6, 9 et 8, 12 ; *De gen. ad litt.* V, 16, 34⁶. His assertion that the notion of perfection cannot come from anything imperfect is found in *De Trin.* VIII, 3, 4 and *De gen. ad litt.* XII, 16, 33 cp. *De Trin.* X, 5, 7⁷. His preference for the term 'mens' as a translation of âme (soul) is compared to Augustine's use of the same term (e.g. *De Trin.* X, 10, 13-16)⁸. Finally, the definition of body as extended in length, breadth and depth is precisely paralleled in *De quant. anim.* 3, 4 ; *De gen. ad litt.* VII, 21, 27 ; *De anim. et eius orig.* IV, 21, 35 ; *Epist.* 166, 2, 4.⁹

3. cf. É. GILSON, *Le rôle de la pensée médiévale dans la formation du système cartésien*, Paris, 1930, esp. p. 191-200 : ' Le cogito et la tradition augustinienne ', and appendix I : ' Descartes, Saint Augustin et Campanella '. Cf. also : *La liberté chez Descartes et la théologie*, Paris 1913, pp. 216-235. L. BLANCHET, *Les antécédents du « Je pense, donc je suis »*, Paris 1920. G. LEWIS, *Augustinisme et cartésianisme*, dans *Augustinus Magister*, II, Paris 1954, p. 1087-1104.

4. cf. É. GILSON, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine*, Random House, pp. 40-42 and notes 14-23 ; *Discours de la Méthode*, texte et commentaire par É. GILSON, Paris 1947, p. 295-298.

5. É. GILSON, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine*, p. 229 and n. 24.

6. *Discours de la Méthode*, p. 358.

7. *Ibid.* p. 314-316.

8. *Ibid.* p. 307-308, and É. GILSON, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine*, p. 269, n. 1.

9. É. GILSON, *op. cit.*, p. 45-46, and n. 7-8.

But what of the mind/body relationship? Descartes disavows the Platonic metaphor of a pilot in a ship¹⁰, and seems to employ scholastic terminology on occasions when he describes the soul as the form and even the substantial form of the body¹¹, but E. Gilson has made it clear that such language was employed to avoid offending theologians. The Aristotelian-scholastic view of soul and body as incomplete substances which combine to form the one substance 'man' is completely contrary to Descartes' insistence that mind is entirely distinct¹² from body, and that both constitute complete substances in themselves.

If neither the Platonic nor the Aristotelian views of the mind/body relationship were adopted by Descartes, was there any other view of it that he might have utilised? At first Augustine does not seem to offer any real alternative, and Gilson's analysis of his views reveals him as vacillating between a Platonic description of mind/body relations, and a description influenced by Scripture, which brings him nearer to an Aristotelian account of the matter¹³. However, further research has been carried out by E.L. Fortin in a work¹⁴ in which he analyses fifth century views of the mind-body relationship. He shows that the respective definitions of body¹⁵ as extended in length, breadth and depth, and of soul¹⁶ as essentially a thinking substance were characteristic of the period. Dealing with Augustine in particular, Fortin notes that while Augustine retracts his adherence to Plato's theory of recollection¹⁷, yet he insists that the human soul is the nearest thing to God¹⁸. As to its relation to the body, apart from general¹⁹ discussions of the topic Augustine seems at times to lean towards a Platonic conception²⁰, at times to envisage a substantial union close to that of Aristotle²¹, and at times to consider the union neither accidental nor substantial but hypostatic i.e. personal²². The principal text associated with the latter view

10. e.g. *Discours de la Méthode*, p. 59, l. 13.

11. *Ibid.* p. 430-435.

12. *Ibid.* p. 33, 8; 308-309.

13. E. GILSON, *The Christian Philosophy of St Augustine*, p. 44-48, n. 1-11.

14. E.L. FORTIN, *Christianisme et culture philosophique au cinquième siècle : La querelle de l'âme humaine en Occident*, Paris 1959.

15. *Ibid.* p. 85, n. 1.

16. *Ibid.* p. 88-89.

17. *Ibid.* p. 89, n. 5 (*Retract* I, 4, 4; I, 8, 2 in relation to *De quant. anim.* XX, 34, *De Trin.* XII, 15, 24).

18. *Ibid.* p. 101-105 (*De Civ. Dei* XI, 26, 1; *De quant. anim.* 34, 77; *De beata vita* I, 4; *En.* in *Ps.* 145, 4; *De gen. ad litt.* X, 24, 40).

19. *De civ. Dei* XIX, 3, 1; *De moribus eccles.* I, 4, 6.

20. *De moribus eccl.* I, 27, 52; *De quant. anim.* XIII, 22.

21. *De ord.* II, 11, 31; *De quant. anim.* XXV, 47-49; *De civ. Dei* XIII, 24, 2; *De Trin.* XV, 7, 11.

22. E.L. FORTIN, *op. cit.*, ch. III, p. 111-128: Le Néoplatonisme et l'union de l'âme et du corps. This paper was written before I read: J. PÉPIN, *Une nouvelle source de saint Augustin : le ζήτημα de Porphyre sur l'union de l'âme et du corps*, in *Revue des Études anciennes*, t. 66, 1964, p. 53-107.

is *Epistle 137* to Volusian²³, sect. 11 & 12. Here Augustine defends the union of God and man in Christ by pointing to the union of soul and body in the one person of the individual man. If, he asserts, we take for granted the fact that soul and body unite to form one person, we should find no difficulty in the notion of the union of the Word of God with a human soul. The latter case involves the union of two incorporeal realities, whereas the former involves the union of incorporeal and corporeal — a much more difficult conception. The important point about this passage of Augustine is the fact that the metaphor used to describe the union of soul and body is 'mixture²⁴' (*mixtura*, *permixtio*, *mixtio*, *commixtio*) or 'being mixed' (*permisceri*, *misceri*, *commisceri*). Fortin produces parallel texts from Nemesius (*De natura hominis*)²⁵ and Priscian (*Solutiones*)²⁶ which give evidence of the same metaphor. All three authors warn us that liquids so mix as to appear to lose their identity, although in reality water and wine can be separated by the use of a sponge dipped in oil; but at any rate light and air are mixed and united without loss of identity or confusion²⁷. Between parallel subsistence and mixture involving loss of identity lies a third possibility, that of union without confusion. The sources for this view are, according to Porphyry's *Quaestiones Commixtae*, the teaching of Ammonius Saccas, the master of Plotinus²⁸.

Now when Descartes speaks of the union of soul and body in *Meditation VI*²⁹, he uses similar terminology. He argues from the mutual experience³⁰ of soul and body in feelings of hunger, thirst and pain, to their close union, rejecting the Platonic image of a sailor in a ship³¹. He goes so far as to use the metaphor of mixture (*permixtum*) to express the unity (*unum quid*) that is made up by soul and body. The feelings of thirst, hunger, pain etc. are nothing other than confused (*confusi*) modes of thinking that arise from the union and as it were mixture (*permixtione*) of the mind with the body³². Note that the term 'confused' is applied to the *feelings* experienced by soul and body together, but not to the union itself of soul and body. I am still a thinking substance (*res cogi-*

23. Cf. also *De gen. ad litt.* III, 16, 25; *De civ. Dei* XIX, 12, 3.

24. e.g. "Ergo persona hominis *mixtura* est animae et corporis".

25. NEMESIUS, *De natura hominis* 127-128, P.G. t. 40, col. 592 B. Cf. H. DÖRRIE, *Porphyrios' "Symmiktia Zetemata"*, München 1959, p. 45 ff.

26. PRISCIAN, *Solutiones*, ed. Bywater, *Suppl. aristotelicum*, t. 1, 2, p. 50-52. Cf. H. DÖRRIE, *op. cit.*, p. 47 ff.

27. Cp. PLOTIN, IV, 3, 22. Cf. H. DÖRRIE, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

28. Cf. e.g. *Stoicorum Veterum fragmenta* II, 471, II 473, ed. H. v. Arnim, esp. p. 155, l. 25-29, for the origins of the terminology.

29. Ch. ADAM — Paul TANNERY, *Œuvres de Descartes*, vol. VII, p. 80-81.

30. Nemesius and Priscian employ the term 'sympathy'.

31. "Docet etiam natura per istos sensus doloris, famis, sitis etc... me non tantum adesse meo corpori ut nauta adest navigio, sed illi arctissime esse conjunctum et quasi permixtum, adeo ut unum quid cum illo componam".

32. "Nam certe isti sensus sitis, famis, doloris etc... nihil aliud sunt quam confusi quidam cogitandi modi ab unione et quasi permixtione mentis cum corpore exorti".

tans) distinct from my body. Descartes himself³³ raises the question as to how this can be, and how the soul can be affected by the body and vice-versa, since they are entirely different natures : he replies that it is very difficult to explain, but experience, which is very clear on this point, suffices.

More pointed is the objection brought by Pierre Gassendi against this passage (in *Medit.* VI obj. v). He asks how this ' conjunction and as it were mixture or confusion '³⁴ can apply to an unextended thinking subject. ' For there is no mixture unless by parts that can be mixed together from both elements '³⁵. And surely there must be a proportion between the parts ? But what sort of union between the corporeal and incorporeal can be understood ?³⁶ Do we grasp how stone and air are so put together, e.g. in pumice, that a genuine composition results therefrom ? And yet there is a greater proportion between stone and air, which is itself also a body, than between body and soul or a completely incorporeal mind.

Descartes' reply is hardly satisfactory ; having employed the metaphor of mixture, he refuses to allow any enquiry into the *kind* of mixture envisaged here. ' So here when you wish to compare the mixture (permixtionem) of soul and body with the mixture of two bodies, it is sufficient that I reply that no comparison should be set up between such things because they are totally diverse ; and parts are not to be imagined within the mind, from the fact that it understands parts in body '.

In his ' instantia ' (sect. II) Gassendi rightly reproaches Descartes with failing to answer the searching questions he has put. The point is ' whether mind and body are totally diverse or not, that is whether the mind is a fine body, or completely incorporeal '³⁷. Since Descartes considers the mind incorporeal, the precise question was ' how can things totally diverse from bodies be mixed together (permisceri) like bodies, or even with bodies themselves ? '³⁸.

This exchange of views between Descartes and Gassendi seems to show first that Descartes was using a metaphor of ' mixture ' which he did not repudiate but either could not or did not care to explain, and secondly

33. cf. ADAM and TANNERY, *op. cit.*, vol. V, p. 163 : " Sed quomodo hoc fieri potest, et quomodo anima affici potest a corpore et vicissim, cum sint diversae plane naturae ? Hoc explicatu difficillimum ; sed sufficit hic experientia, quae hic adeo clara est, ut negari nullo modo possit ".

34. " ista coniunctio, et quasi permixtio aut confusio ".

35. " Neque enim est mixtio sine partibus commiscibilibus utrinque ".

36. " Et cum compositio, conjunctio seu unio, inter partes aliquas fit, nonne debet esse proportio inter partes huiusmodi ? Quatenam vero corporeae cum incorporea intelligi potest ? ".

37. " Quaestio est utrum mens et corpus sint toto genere diversa, annon ? hoc est, an mens sit corpus tenue ; an prorsus incorporea sit ? ".

38. " At nonne haec ipsa fuit quaestio, quomodo res toto genere diversae a corporibus, permisceri possint instar corporum, aut cum corporibus quoque ipsis ? ".

that Gassendi, in his criticism of it, suggested an example close to that of the fifth century authors (stone and air as against light and air), although he adds the words 'or confusion'³⁹ to Descartes' description of union, thus indicating no knowledge of a theory of unconfused union. This is not surprising, since presumably neither Descartes nor Gassendi had available to him the combination of fifth century sources gathered together by E. Fortin. Hence Descartes' use of the metaphor of mixture could be mere coincidence or indirectly derived from some fifth century source. The latter possibility seems somewhat more likely; otherwise Descartes could have answered Gassendi by saying that the metaphor was merely meant to suggest a close union, and that other terminology might be just as suitable. If an ultimate fifth century source is postulated, then Augustine is perhaps more likely than others, in view of Descartes' contacts with Augustinism.⁴⁰ At any rate it remains significant that the only theory of mind/body relations which seems to involve similar definitions of mind and body to those of Descartes, and to employ a similar metaphor to express their union, is the neoplatonic theory of 'unconfused union' as found in Porphyry, Augustine, Nemesius and Priscian.

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39. cf. Gassendi's objection note 33.

40. Cardinal Bérulle at least was aware of the Theory of personal or hypostatic union of soul and body, as G. Lewis indicates: *Augustinisme et cartésianisme*, in *Augustinus Magister*, II, p. 1095, note 5, where she quotes from his *Œuvres complètes*, Paris 1644, p. 350.... "Et ce mélange si parfait est sans confusion de natures; car chacune demeure différente et en son essence et en ses puissances et en ses opérations. Mais elles sont admirablement unies en subsistance et en l'unité d'une même personne composée de deux natures si différentes". This passage occurs in *Discours XI*, 7 (de l'état et des grandeurs de Jésus), where Bérulle compares the union of two natures in Christ to the 'mélange sans mélange' of soul and body in man cf. *Œuvres Complètes* ed. Migne, Paris, 1856, p. 366-7.