

On the Role of the Simple Natures in Descartes' Metaphysics*

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Résumé : Sur le rôle des natures simples dans la métaphysique de Descartes

Cet article a pour but d'analyser et de critiquer la thèse soutenue par Jean-Luc Marion concernant la relation entre la doctrine des natures simples et la métaphysique cartésienne. D'abord, nous discutons quelques problèmes issus de la méthode structuraliste employée par Marion. Ensuite, nous proposons de démontrer l'impossibilité de convertir des notions épistémologiques (les natures simples) en une notion ontologique (le cogito). Finalement, nous concluons en suggérant que, contrairement à ce qu'avance Marion, pour arriver au cogito, Descartes a adopté une stratégie argumentative qui présente des points commun avec la pensée d'Augustin.

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze and challenge Jean-Luc Marion's thesis concerning the relationship between the doctrine of simple natures and Cartesian metaphysics. First, I will point out some problems with the structuralist method underlining Marion's approach. Next, I will show that it is impossible to turn epistemological notions (simple natures) into an ontological notion (the cogito). Finally, I will conclude by suggesting that, contrary to what Marion thinks, in

* This study was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior - Brasil (CAPES) - Finance Code 001.

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turning the simple natures into the cogito, Descartes adopted an argumentative strategy which presents points in common with Augustine's thought.

Descartes' work *Rules for the direction of the mind*¹ is an unfinished treatise dating from his early career (1628). This work is mostly concerned with methodological issues and scientific problems. The Rule XII, however, unlike the preceding ones, stands out as a turning point in that treatise, for it is exclusively concerned with epistemological issues. That is, the scientific and methodological problems treated in it so far leave room for what we could properly call a discussion of cognitive aspects. In fact, due to this shift in his philosophical interests it is very easy to realize that Descartes is engaging in a much more epistemological path.² In this kind of "second part" of the *Rules*,³ Descartes explains that knowledge acquisition must begin with what he calls "simple natures". According to him, the simple natures are those cognitive notions that are unable to undergo further analysis, and which can be grasped immediately and intuitively by the understanding. Descartes sums up the main theme of the Rule XII as follows:

¹ René Descartes, vol.10/AT X, in *Œuvres de Descartes*, eds. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: Vrin, 1996).

² Descartes' main concern in Rule XII is to explain how one gains knowledge through sensory perception. For this reason, it is necessary to define the elements involved in this cognitive process and Descartes does it in the following way: "As to what concerns the cognition of things, two factors alone have to be considered: ourselves who know and the objects themselves which are to be known. Within us, there are four faculties, which we can use for this purpose, namely understanding, imagination, sense, and memory. The understanding is indeed alone capable of perceiving the truth; but yet it ought to be aided by imagination, sense, and memory [...]. On the side of things to be known, it is enough to examine three things: first, that which presents itself spontaneously; secondly, how we know one thing by means of another; and thirdly, what truths are deduced from them. This enumeration appears to me to be complete and to omit nothing to which our human powers can apply" (*Ibid.*, 411).

³ The first part of the *Rules* includes the Rules I to XI and, as I have already indicated, is concerned with methodological and scientific issues.

Here we shall treat of things only in relation to our understanding's awareness of them, and we shall call 'simple' only those of which the cognition is so clear and so distinct that they cannot be analyzed by the mind into others more distinctly known.⁴

After defining what simple nature is, Descartes goes on to distinguish them into three categories. According to him, there are three different kinds of simple natures: the intellectual, the material, and the common simple natures. The intellectual simple natures are those which can only be grasped by the understanding by means of its 'natural light',⁵ such as the ideas we have of 'knowledge', 'doubt', 'ignorance', 'volition', etc. On the other hand, the material simple natures are the product of sensation and imagination, for they are properties of bodies, such as the notions of 'extension', 'shape', 'movement'. Finally, the common simple natures are subdivided into two groups: the 'real' and the 'logical'. The real simple natures are those which can be applied to both the material and the intellectual simple natures, such as 'existence', 'unity', 'duration', etc. The logical simple natures in turn are those which allow the other simple natures to be linked together by virtue of being 'common notions'; for instance, the fact that two terms that are themselves equal to each other must be equal to a third term.⁶

Nonetheless, in spite of the undeniable Cartesian focus on the epistemological feature of the simple natures, Jean-Luc Marion, a famous Descartes' scholar, believes that one can deduce the metaphysics of the *Meditations* from the Rule XII. According to Marion, to achieve a metaphysical status the simple natures need to be put in the 'right order'. In his view, "[w]ith the doctrine of the simple natures, the *Regulae* is already equipped with all the elements required for articulating the first proposition of metaphysics."⁷ For this reason, Marion holds

⁴ Descartes, *Œuvres*, 418. Translation is my own.

⁵ For an analysis of the role of the so-called "natural light" in Descartes' philosophy, see especially chapters 4 and 5 in Deborah D. Boyle, *Descartes on Innate Ideas* (New York: Community, 2009).

⁶ Descartes, *Œuvres*, 419. My own translation.

⁷ Jean-Luc Marion, "Cartesian Metaphysics and the Role of Simple Natures", in *Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, dir. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 119.

that “the transition to metaphysics depends not on any new elements or concepts, but merely on the necessity which links them together – and this necessity depends in turn on order.”⁸ Therefore, one can clearly conclude from this statement that the notion of ‘order’ is so important and decisive in the reading of the French commentator that its employment in the *Rules* would certainly result in the metaphysics of the *Meditations*. In other words, if Descartes had articulated the simple natures in the adequate order, he would have seen his Metaphysics emerging from these epistemological notions. Nothing else would have been required, according to Marion.

In Marion’s assessment, the employment of [the concept of?] ‘order’ in the Rule XII would have allowed Descartes to link together the intellectual simple natures ‘to think’ (*cogitare*) or ‘to doubt’ (*dubitare*) with the real simple nature ‘to exist’ (*existere*). The result of this process of articulating the simple natures in the right order would have led Descartes, already in the *Rules*, to find out and bring forth the first metaphysical truth, i. e., the *cogito*. That is why Marion claims that “[...] the *Regulae* contains the elements of metaphysics (the intellectual simple natures) but not their ordering (their necessary lining with the common simple natures) [...]”⁹ Therefore, the constitution of the *cogito* does not require anything else except the adequate ordering of the simple nature it consists in: ‘to think/to doubt’ and ‘to exist’. For this reason, Marion insists that “what is missing [in the Rule XII] is simply the capacity to establish a necessary order between the simple natures that make up the *Cogito*.”¹⁰ Marion is so confident about the interpretative hypothesis he is putting forward that he even comes to assert that it has a broader range of application, for he thinks that this interpretative hypothesis can be applied not only to the analysis of the constitution of the *cogito*, but also to the analysis of the *Meditations* as a whole: “In fact the *Meditations* can be understood as a paradigmatic array of ordered groups of simple natures necessarily linked together.”¹¹ Thus, for Marion, it is not required that any new element or concept should be added to the Rule XII in order for Descartes to convert the simple natures into the metaphysics of the *Meditations*. Therefore, if Marion’s thesis is correct,

⁸ Marion, “Cartesian Metaphysics”.

⁹ Marion.

¹⁰ Marion.

¹¹ Marion, 134.

one will be able to conclude that nothing new happened in Descartes' thought during the nearly twelve years that separate the *Rules* from the *Meditations*. That is, the Marion's Descartes has always been the same, except for the addition of 'order'.

In my view, Marion is quite right in claiming throughout his analysis that there is a strong similarity between the intellectual simple natures and the properties of the *cogito*. According to him,

[t]he parallelism here is quite obvious: *cognitio* in the *Regulae* becomes *cogitatio* (thought) in the Second Meditation, with a further echo later in the list in the term *intelligens* ("thing [...] that understands"). *Dubium* ("doubt") becomes *dubitans* ("that doubts"); *ignorantia* ("ignorance") probably corresponds to *affirmans/negans* ("which affirms and denies"); *voluntatis actio* ("the action of the will") appears as the two modes of such action, *volens/nolens* (is willing, is unwilling).¹²

After correctly assigning the sources of the properties of the *cogito* to the intellectual simple natures, Marion claims that it will be in the *Meditations* only that Descartes will employ for the first time the 'order of the reasons',¹³ which in his opinion is a necessary and sufficient condition to arrive at the *cogito* argument. That is why he asserts that "[t]he essence of the *res cogitans* is defined in terms identical to the list of intellectual simple natures."¹⁴ So, in Marion's view, the element that is lacking in the *Rules* which will allow the *cogito* to emerge from the simple natures is not due to any new intellectual or philosophical influence acting upon Descartes' mind; on the contrary, it depends only on the

¹² Marion, "Cartesian Metaphysics", 126.

¹³ Of course, this is a clear reference to the classical work of Martial Guéroult, *Descartes selon l'ordre des raisons* (Paris: Aubier, 1953) (*Descartes According to the Order of the Reasons*) on which conclusions Marion seems to base his interpretation of the role played by the simple natures in Descartes' metaphysics.

¹⁴ Marion, "Cartesian Metaphysics", 127. As to what concerns the notion of *res extensa* (extended substance), another key concept in the *Meditations*, Boyle correctly sustains that it "[...] correspond[s] to what Descartes calls the 'purely material simple' [natures] in the *Rules for the direction of the mind*" (Boyle, *Descartes on Innate Ideas*, 119).

internal structure of the text and on the dynamics of its argumentation, that is, on the so-called 'order of reasons'.

Although at first sight Marion's interpretation may seem to be a promising way of employing Martial Gu eroult's structuralist method¹⁵ to the understanding of the constitution of Cartesian metaphysics, I think it is nonetheless a problematic one. First of all, in applying the structuralist method Marion neglects the obvious fact that he is turning epistemological notions (the simple natures) into an ontological notion (the *res cogitans* or thinking substance) without adding to them any further element except for 'order', or rather a certain 'logical entailment', the 'order of reasons'. I think that it is reasonable to ask how it is possible to pass from the epistemological realm of the simple natures to the metaphysical realm of the *res cogitans*. Thus, as it is characteristic of the structuralist method proposed by Gu eroult for the reading of Descartes' *Meditations*, Marion does not take into account any external elements or circumstances which may help to get a clear understanding of the process of converting the simple natures into the metaphysical entities of the *Meditations*. On the contrary, in the view of both of these French commentators a successful interpretation of Descartes' *Meditations* needs nothing else but a close attention to the internal structure of the text, following strictly the 'order and connection' of its reasons. That is why Stephen Menn can arguably speak of "[...] Gu eroult's anti-historical conclusions on the method of interpreting Descartes", for "[w]hen Gu eroult explains the text of the *Meditations*, he ignores the historical background completely."¹⁶ As we have seen above, it appears that Marion does the same in his

¹⁵ In his famous book *Descartes' Philosophy Interpreted According to the Order of Reasons*, Gu eroult undertakes to explain the text of Descartes' *Meditations* from a new standpoint. In fact, his aim in this work is to analyze what he calls the 'structures' of the Cartesian argumentation, since, according to him, Descartes' "[...] philosophy is developed as a pure geometry, which owes all its certainty to the internal linkage of its reasons, without any reference to the external reality" (Martial Gu eroult, *Descartes' Philosophy Interpreted According to the Order of Reasons* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 7). In other words, for Gu eroult, the meaning and the truth of the *Meditations* should be sought just in its logical structure. That is why the 'order of reasons' is so important in his analysis.

¹⁶ Stephen Menn, *Descartes and Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 12.

interpretation of the role of the simple natures in the constitution of Descartes' *cogito*.

However successful the structuralist project might have been, I think this method is not the more suitable for carrying out a philosophical analysis. For the structuralist method does not consider the intellectual sources and the historical influences which undoubtedly shape, in one way or another, the thought of any author. This does not mean that by employing the structuralist method one cannot pursue a deep and consistent philosophical investigation. The problem is that, due to its intrinsic 'nature', the structuralist method limits its scope of analysis to the internal dynamics of the text. In doing so, the structuralist method deliberately puts aside and overlooks many important facts and elements which may have contributed to shape its object of study. In other words, from the structuralist standpoint the philosophical work is not a product of the intellectual and historical environment in which it was born. As a consequence of this assumption, one may mistakenly be led to think that the philosophical work has no intention to tackle the problems of the specific historical and intellectual situation in which it was produced. And so, one of the most emblematic features of Western thought is dissolved: the rich and fruitful dialogue in which the great philosophers of all times have engaged throughout the centuries. For these reasons, there seems to be, I think, no great gain to philosophy by making use of such a limited and restrictive method.

The problems concerning the method he employs is not the only criticism one can make of Marion's interpretation. There is also, I think, a great inconsistency in his main thesis, which is related to the structuralist method as well. This second problem arises from the fact that Marion supposes that he can turn epistemic notions into an ontological entity. As we have seen, the French commentator argues that it is possible to convert the simple natures into the *res cogitans* (thinking substance) through a process of logical entailment. However, the simple natures cannot be turned into a true substance, such as the thinking substance, only in virtue of their being put together in an ordained way, because the simple natures are epistemic, not ontological notions. Quoting Descartes' words, Marion himself reminds us that both 'nature' and 'simple' refer exclusively to the cognitive feature of

the things perceived by the mind.¹⁷ Thus, he manifestly acknowledges that the simple natures have no intrinsic relation to ontology.

In fact, the simple natures, as Descartes conceives them, are neither the essence of things nor the elements out of which reality is constituted. Descartes himself is cautious enough to warn us that the epistemological approach should be carefully distinguished from the ontological one: “[...] As to our knowledge single things should be taken in an order different from that in which we should regard them when considered in their more real nature.”¹⁸ Therefore, the notion of ‘simple nature’ is employed by Descartes to analyze perceptual phenomena in general from a psychological standpoint (*in ordine ad cognitionem nostram*). For this reason, the *Rules* establish a sharp distinction between the epistemological and the ontological realm, since it deals not with the question of how things are in themselves (*prout res singulae revera existunt*),¹⁹ but with the question of how we perceive and get knowledge of them.

Another argument I would like to advance against Marion’s interpretation concerns the role that the simple natures will play in Descartes’ mature ontology. In his latter ontology, that which is chiefly put forward in the *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), the simple natures will become what Descartes calls ‘mode’ (*modus*). The ‘mode’ indicates the properties which inhere to the substance or the qualities which belong to the substance. Moreover, another fundamental characteristic of the mode is that it has an ‘ontological dependence’ on the principal attribute or essence of the substance in which it inheres. For this reason, the mode cannot exist without relying on the substance’s essence.²⁰ In other words, the mode is intrinsically tied to the substance to which it pertains.²¹ Therefore, the existence of modes necessarily presupposes the existence of a substance and its principal attribute.²² That is why Descartes asserts that one can conceive of the principal

¹⁷ Marion, “Cartesian Metaphysics”, 115-116.

¹⁸ Descartes, *Œuvres*, 418.

¹⁹ Descartes, 418.

²⁰ Marleen Rozemond, *Descartes’ Dualism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 2.

²¹ René Descartes, Vol. 8/AT VIII, art. 56, in *Oeuvres de Descartes*, dir. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: Vrin, 1996), 26.

²² Descartes, (art. 53) 25.

attribute of a substance without conceiving of any of its modes; however, as he argues in the *Notes on a certain broadsheet*,²³ it is not possible to conceive of the modes without considering the principal attribute in which the modes inhere.

Having in mind this ontology put forward in the *Principles*, one can assert against Marion's thesis that in the *Rules* the simple natures cannot play an ontological role because there is no metaphysical notion to which they would be subordinate, as it is the case for the principal attribute and its modes. In the *Rules* the simple natures stand, so to speak, in a 'horizontal' condition of 'epistemological equality' in relation to one another. In order for Descartes to raise the simple natures to an ontological status, it would be required first of all that a notion capable of subordinating all the simple natures to itself exists. This subordinating notion would be responsible for establishing among the simple natures a 'vertical' or 'hierarchical' relation quite similar to that existing between the principal attribute (subordinating notion) and the modes (subordinated notions). But, as I have already stressed, Descartes makes it clear enough that in the *Rules* he is not dealing with any kind of ontological notion whatsoever. In fact, in Rule XII Descartes' main concern is with a sort of 'psychology of perception'. That is why neither the notion of principal attribute nor that of substance can be found in Rule XII. And since, as claims Alquié, "Descartes reduces the substance to its essential attribute [...]"²⁴ without the attribute the substance cannot have a true existence and *vice versa*.²⁵ Thus, there are only 'modes' or rather simple natures in the 'ontology' of the Rule XII, where Descartes himself asserts again that he is not concerned with metaphysical issues, that is, substances, attributes, or modes.

²³ Descartes, Vol. 8B/AT VIII B, 350. For more on this subject see Rozemond, *Descartes' Dualism*, 15.

²⁴ Ferdinand Alquié, *La découverte métaphysique de l'homme chez Descartes* (Paris: PUF, 1950), 6.

²⁵ In fact, in Descartes' view, substance and principal attribute seem to be one and the same thing, "[f]or much of what he says suggests that the principal attribute constitutes the entire substance [...]. On this view there is nothing to the substance over and above the principal attribute, as he indeed suggests in the *Principles* [AT 8B, I, 63]" (Rozemond, *Descartes' Dualism*, 10-11).

According to what was said above, it is plain that in the epistemological approach of the Rule XII there is neither the notion of substance, nor that of attribute, because these notions belong to the ontological realm. In my viewpoint, Descartes will be dealing with ontological issues only after he has put forward his mind-body dualism. As I have already pointed out, according to Descartes' own words, the Rule XII is not concerned with the constitutive elements of reality; on the contrary, its task is just to explain how sensory perception and cognition are brought about in a mechanistic fashion. That is why Descartes has no need to talk about ontological or metaphysical issues in that work: to maintain the simple natures inside their epistemological boundary is sufficient for his purpose in the *Rules*.

Consequently, at this early stage of his philosophical career, the mere act of putting the simple natures in order would not allow Descartes to postulate 'thought' (*cogitatio*) as the principal attribute of the thinking substance (*res cogitans*). For the thinking substance, ontologically understood as a kind of 'subject of inherence' or 'bearer of properties', must exist before the existence of its modes, and not be a consequence of the logical entailment of the latter, as sustains Marion. As we have already seen, the simple natures will play the role of 'modes' in Descartes' mature ontology. In other words, since the simple natures taken as modes presuppose a principal attribute for their existence, it is logically and ontologically impossible to deduce the essence of the substance from the simple natures, as Marion wanted. The subject of inherence, that is, the principal attribute, which represents the nature or essence of the substance, is supposed to have an existence prior to its modes, since the latter are ontologically dependent on the former. For this reason, I believe that the 'metaphysical turn', so to speak, in Descartes' philosophy can only occur when a subject of inherence is postulated. I also believe that this outcome cannot be achieved only by putting the simple natures in a given order. Therefore, in opposition to what Marion holds, I sustain that Descartes' 'metaphysical turn' does necessarily need new elements and concepts.

Nonetheless, by denying Marion's interpretation of the metaphysical role of the simple natures I do not mean to suggest that there is a thorough gap between the *Rules* and the metaphysics presented in the

Meditations, as it was vehemently held by Alquié.²⁶ I think Alquié is right in claiming that the *Rules* as a whole have a clear concern with methodological and scientific issues,²⁷ as I have already pointed out. However, Descartes did not abandon the notions of simple natures when he left that work unfinished. On the contrary, these notions will play a fundamental role in the constitution of the notion of *res cogitans* and *res extensa* in the *Meditations*. That is why I must now agree with Marion when he states that “[a]t the very least we have to admit that, if the *Regulae* does not actually unfold a Cartesian metaphysics, it nonetheless articulates its fundamental concepts and assigns them a primary importance.”²⁸ These ‘fundamental concepts’ are of course the simple natures. In fact, later on, after being raised to a metaphysical status in the *Meditations*, the simple natures will reappear as the modes of the thinking and extended substances in the *Principles*. But in order for this ‘metaphysical turn’ to be achieved, Descartes will need to work out a notion of ‘subject of inherence’ that is clearly absent from the *Regulae*.

Thus, it will be by claiming that the notion of a subject of inherence is absent from the *Rules* that I will answer Marion’s question: “why does Descartes not undertake to provide at least a sketch of his metaphysics in the *Regulae*, given that he has already got the requisite conceptual material at his disposal?”²⁹ In the *Rules* Descartes has not yet worked out the metaphysical notion of a subject of inherence, that is, the concept of a principal attribute or substance. It is true that Descartes had at his disposal as early as the *Regulae* the notions of simple natures which will be turned into the modes of his mature ontology presented in his *Principles of philosophy*; nonetheless, he has not yet at his disposal the subject of inherence in which the modes-simple natures will inhere, that is, the notions of mind and its principal attribute, i.e., thought,

²⁶ “The *Regulae* does not [...] contain any trace of metaphysics. On the contrary, the uncertainty which remains in that work about the nature of the mind, and its tendency to assume all truths under the same program shows plainly that, when he wrote the *Regulae*, Descartes’ thought was still operating at a purely scientific level” (Alquié, *La découverte métaphysique*, 78).

²⁷ See Stephen Gaukroger, *Descartes’ System of Natural Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 7-10.

²⁸ Marion, “Cartesian Metaphysics”, 118.

²⁹ Marion, 118.

body, and its principal attribute, i.e., extension. In other words, he has not yet worked out his conception of mind-body dualism. As Boyle cautiously puts it, “[...] there is little evidence that at the time of writing the *Rules* Descartes had clearly formulated his doctrine of two substances.”³⁰

Discussing the issue of whether an extended substance can be individuated by motion, a mode of body in Descartes' mature ontology, Normore raises exactly the same question I am asking Marion: “[...] How something can be made to be what it is by something logically posterior to it and ontologically dependent on it.”³¹ So, in my view, it is not by a mere process of putting together in an orderly way the simple natures that Descartes will arrive at his metaphysics. One can arguably say, as Marion does, that the *Rules* put forth the logical and conceptual elements, that is, the simple natures, elements on which Cartesian metaphysics will certainly be built. However, it is missing, I think, the methodological element that will enable Descartes to bring about the subject of inherence presupposed by the modes in his mature ontology. Of course, the methodological element that is lacking in the *Rules* will not be provided by the structuralist method based on ‘order’, as proposed by Marion.

I agree with Marion's statement according to which the simple natures will be employed in the *Meditations* to shape the notion of *cogito*. I think we can take it as an unquestionable fact. On the other hand, I do disagree with Marion because he does not offer any compelling reason as to how the process of subordination among the simple natures occurs. In other words, Marion does not explain how the intellectual simple nature ‘thought’ (*cogitatio*) has come to occupy the central place among the simple natures that constitute the *cogito*. Marion himself clearly states what is at stake here, when he says that “[...] the items presented in Rule XII as a list of concepts, *without any internal organization or ontological implication*,³² will reappear in the Second Meditation as an unfolding of the properties of *cogitatio* (thought) precisely because *from*

³⁰ Boyle, *Descartes on Innate Ideas*, 9-10.

³¹ Calvin Normore, “Descartes and the Metaphysics of Extension” in *A Companion to Descartes*, eds. Janet Broughton and John Carriero (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 281.

³² My emphasis.

this point onward thought has the status of a thing or res."³³ This fact described by Marion is completely true, but unfortunately he does not tell us what is the reason that explains it. We are thus left with the impression that everything happened miraculously: from the *Rules* to the *Meditations* an epistemological notion (*cogitatio*) has suddenly become an ontological entity (*res cogitans*).

However critical I may have been of Marion's thesis about the relationship between the doctrine of the simple natures and Descartes' *cogito*, I think there is still a possibility of accepting his statements on that issue under certain conditions. But first, before presenting this possibility, it is necessary to get rid of Marion's structuralist reading of Descartes' Rule XII. This is a very important methodological step because it will allow us to take into consideration Descartes' intellectual context and thus we will finally be able to assess the philosophical influences which may have acted upon his thought. For, as stressed by Rozemond, "[...] it is important for understanding Descartes to acknowledge that, like that of any thinker, his thought was embedded in the intellectual climate of his time. So consideration of historical context is very instructive about his views and arguments."³⁴

Bearing Rozemond's claim in mind, we now have to investigate what were the most influential ideas and thinkers in Descartes' time. In doing so, it is possible to find out that the intellectual environment in France was mostly influenced by the thought of Augustine. In fact, according to Menn, "[...] in France there was no rival to Augustine's prestige. He was an ineffaceable part of the intellectual background against which thinkers of the seventeenth century defined themselves."³⁵ Two good examples of this fact are the philosophers and theologians Antoine Arnauld (1612-1694) and Nicholas Malebranche (1638-1715), who started their careers as Augustinians and eventually became Cartesians, since both of them believed that Descartes himself was an Augustinian thinker.

Given this intellectual context, it is natural that in Paris Descartes might have met many modern would-be followers of Augustine. The most important among them certainly was the cardinal Pierre de Bérulle

³³ Marion, "Cartesian Metaphysics", 126. That is, as a substance or the principal attribute of the *res cogitans*. My emphasis.

³⁴ Rozemond, *Descartes' Dualism*, xii.

³⁵ Menn, *Descartes and Augustine*, 6.

(1575-1629), the founder of the Oratory,³⁶ who played a decisive role in spreading the doctrine of Augustine at Descartes' time. In fact, "[i]t was Bérulle, more than anyone else, who had been instrumental in the revival of the Augustinian view."³⁷ At the time they met, Bérulle seems to have introduced and urged Descartes to study the thought of Augustine. It seems pretty fair to say that "Augustinianism was clearly an option open to Descartes [...]."³⁸ Accordingly, I strongly believe that this encounter with Augustinianism in Paris will not be without consequences for Descartes' philosophy. In what follows, I will try to show that Augustine's philosophy played a decisive role in shaping Cartesian metaphysics.

After his meeting with the cardinal Bérulle, Descartes moved to the Netherlands where, as he tells Mersenne in a letter, he spent his first nine months studying metaphysics: "It is with this [metaphysics] that I tried to begin my studies, and I can say that I would not have been able to discover the foundations of physics if I had not looked for them along that road. During my first nine months in this country [the Netherlands] I worked on nothing else."³⁹ As this letter makes clear, his stay in the Netherlands marks a turning point in Descartes' thought, for from this moment on metaphysics, as he himself suggests, will occupy a central place in the philosophical system he is going to build. In fact, fifteen years later in the *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), his most accomplished work, he will claim that metaphysics is the root of his system.⁴⁰

Thus, with the 'discovery' of the realm of metaphysics and its integration into his philosophical system it is then possible to clearly discern two phases in Descartes' philosophy: the 'pre-metaphysical' phase and the 'post-metaphysical' phase. The pre-metaphysical phase of Descartes' career begins with the meeting and collaboration with Isaac

³⁶ Religious institution founded in 1611 in Paris which adopted the theological doctrine of Augustine.

³⁷ Stephen Gaukroger, *Descartes, an Intellectual Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 207.

³⁸ Gaukroger, 207.

³⁹ Descartes, *Œuvres*, Vol. 1/AT I, 143-4.

⁴⁰ Descartes, Vol. 9/AT IX, 1.

Beeckman (1618-9)⁴¹ and ends with the unfinished work *Rules for the direction of the mind* (1628-9). His main concern during this period is with scientific and methodological issues. It is during this period that Descartes develops along with Beckmann his mechanical approach to natural philosophy. The second phase of Descartes' intellectual life begins at the very moment he realizes that metaphysics can be laid down as the foundation of physics. This second phase begins when Descartes was introduced to Augustinian thought by the cardinal Bérulle in Paris, after which, Descartes moved to the Netherlands. In this country, I think, following the suggestion given by the cardinal, Descartes will read and become acquainted with the works of the Bishop of Hippo. For at this moment the principal concern of his philosophical research is to find a metaphysics in which the mechanical science he had been building during the previous period of his career can be grounded. It was thus that his first nine months in the Netherlands were spent.

How did Descartes carry out his studies in the Netherlands in order to find out a metaphysics which could ground his physics? Did he only sit and 'meditate' as he seems to suggest it in describing his 'metaphysical path' through the *Meditations*? Or, rather, did he read the work of some author who could teach him how to conduct his research and shape his metaphysical thought? Although Descartes in the *Meditations* seems to suggest the first option, in my view, there is more evidence for the truth of the second option. Apparently following the suggestion made by the cardinal Bérulle, the author Descartes chose to read was Augustine. Even if I have to admit that there is no absolute proof to show that Descartes was really reading Augustine's works in the Netherlands, there seems to be striking evidence in Descartes' *Meditations* that it might have happened. In fact, as extensively argued by Stephen Menn, both Descartes and Augustine developed a metaphysics whose principal aim was to gain knowledge of God and the soul.⁴² For

⁴¹ Isaac Beeckman (1588-1637) was a Dutch natural philosopher "[...] who introduced Descartes to a quantitative micro-corpuscularian natural philosophy, one that he [Descartes] was to reshape and make into his own very distinctive system of natural philosophy" (Gaukroger, *Descartes' System of Natural Philosophy*, 6).

⁴² Descartes announces to the theologians of the Faculty of Paris what are the main issues he will be dealing with in the short treatise he sent them.

both of them, the knowledge of the soul is the first step towards the knowlegde of God. And both of them, as we will see below, employ a very similar argumentative strategy to arrive at the knowlegde of the soul or of their own existence, namely the *cogito* argument. This argument, besides being aimed at undermining the skeptical worries concerning the possibility of acquiring knowledge, sets for both of them the path towards the proof of God's existence.⁴³

One might ask why it is so important for my reading to take into consideration the hypothetical influence of Augustine's thought over seventeenth-century France and more specifically on Descartes' philosophy. The answer to this question is very simple and straightforward: because this fact can provide an alternative account for explaining the transition from the simple natures to Cartesian metaphysics, as well as for solving the difficulties I have found in Marion's approach. As is widely known, Augustine seems to have put forward a kind of argument quite similar to the Cartesian *cogito*. In fact, according to Etienne Gilson,⁴⁴ the Bishop of Hippo had already put forward at least six times what Charles Taylor⁴⁵ calls a 'proto-cogito' argument. As we will see just below, one can arguably sustain that the 'Augustinian *cogito*' has an undeniable similarity with the modern version of that argument presented in Descartes' *Meditations*. That is why, in my view, it was under the influence of 'Augustine's *cogito*' that Descartes found the inspiration to link the simple natures together so that he

According to the French philosopher, "I have always considered that the questions concerning God and the soul were the main questions among those which are to be demonstrated by a philosophical rather than by a theological argument" (Descartes, *Oeuvres*, Vol. 7/AT 7, 1). Augustine in turn states his deep "[...] desire to know God and the soul" (Augustine, *Soliloquiorum libri duo*, I, 2. 7).

⁴³ For more evidence on Augustine's influence on Descartes' thought, see William Teixeira, "The Metaphysics of Augustine and the Foundation of Cartesian Science", *Cadernos Espinosanos* 37 (2017): 291-313; Catherine Wilson, "Descartes and Augustine" in Broughton & Carriero, *A Companion to Descartes*, 33-51.

⁴⁴ Étienne Gilson, *The Christian philosophy of Saint Augustine* (London: Golancz, 1961), 41-2.

⁴⁵ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

could shape his own *cogito*. In order to make clear how the thought of the Bishop of Hippo might have influenced the constitution of Descartes' *cogito*, I will be examining in what follows two paradigmatic passages of the work of the African philosopher in which he presents this so-called 'proto-*cogito*' argument.

In Augustine's *City of God* we find the most famous statement of what came to be known as 'the Augustinian *cogito*.'⁴⁶ The passage, aimed at being a refutation of the skeptical claims, runs like this: "What if you are deceived? If I am deceived, I am. For he who is not cannot be deceived; and for this very reason I am, if I am deceived. And since I am if I am deceived, how can I be deceived in thinking that I am? It is certain that I am if I am deceived."⁴⁷ Of course, Augustine has in no way framed this argument by means of the notions of simple nature. This kind of notion was not at his disposal. Nonetheless, if we apply the notion of simple nature to analyze Augustine's anti-skeptical argument above I think we could arrive to the very same and unexpected conclusion drawn by Marion from his structuralist-like standpoint concerning the Cartesian *cogito*. In fact, by applying the notions of simple nature to analyze Augustine's argument we could say that the bishop of Hippo has linked the intellectual simple nature 'to be deceived' (*fallor*) together with the common simple nature 'to be' (*sum*). Thus, like Descartes, Augustine is conditioning the certainty of his existence (*sum*) to the possibility that he can be deceived through an intellectual act (*fallor*). So if we apply Marion's analysis to the reading of Augustine's so-called *cogito* argument we can see that there is a striking similarity between what Augustine did and what Descartes will do in his *Meditations* by putting the intellectual simple nature 'to doubt' (*dubito*) together with the common simple nature 'to exist' (*existere*).

In the dialogue *On the free will* (*De libero arbitrio*), Augustine puts forth once again his proto-*cogito* argument. He now emphasizes an important fact, also stressed by Descartes, that the certainty of one's own existence must be proved at the very beginning of the philosophical inquiry. Thus, the certainty of one's own existence becomes a kind of 'philosophical principle'. That is why no doubt can subsist on this issue: "To get started with what is clearest I ask first whether you yourself

⁴⁶ For more on this subject, see Gareth B. Matthews, *Augustine* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 34-42.

⁴⁷ Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, XI, 26, <http://www.augustinus.it/latino/>.

exist. Are you perhaps afraid that you might be deceived by this question? In fact, if you did not exist, you could not be deceived at all.”⁴⁸ Besides trying to establish a kind of ‘Archimedean point’ in which he would be able to ground the discussions he will engage in, as Descartes will do in his *Meditations*, we can also analyze Augustine’s passage in terms of simple natures. Following Marion’s reading of Descartes’ *Meditations* in light of Rule XII, it is easy to identify that Augustine is once again linking together the intellectual simple nature ‘to be deceived’ (*fallor*) with the common simple nature ‘to exist’ (*sum*). From these considerations, we can see again that for Augustine the linkage of the simple natures will also guarantee the establishment of the first metaphysical truth, that is, the certainty of one’s own existence. So in order to prove that we do know something with certainty, “[...] Augustine makes the fateful proto-Cartesian move: he shows his interlocutor that he cannot doubt his own existence, since ‘if you did not exist it would be impossible for you to be deceived.’”⁴⁹

In light of this textual evidence found in Augustine’s works and taking into consideration the suggestive studies on metaphysics carried out after his meeting with the Augustinian cardinal Bérulle, I think it is possible to challenge Marion’s thesis, according to which “the transition to metaphysics depends not on any new elements or concepts, but merely on the necessity which links them [the simple natures] together – and this necessity depends in turn on *order*.”⁵⁰ However, it may be possible to accept this thesis under the condition that the decisive influence of Augustine over ‘Descartes’ metaphysical turn’ be acknowledged. This means that one should acknowledge that Descartes not only linked the simple natures together in order to arrive at the *cogito* argument, as Marion sustains, but also that, when Descartes decided to become a ‘metaphysician’, he was probably acting under the Augustine’s influence. In fact, as we just saw, in putting the simple natures in order, he was following a pattern of argument very common in Augustine’s thought. That is why – in opposition to Marion’s view – I do believe that there were without doubt “new elements or concepts” at Descartes’ disposal when he finally came to realize that he could bring forth the *cogito* argument, ‘the

⁴⁸ Augustine, *De libero arbitrio*, II, 3, <http://www.augustinus.it/latino/>.

⁴⁹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 132.

⁵⁰ Marion, “Cartesian Metaphysics”, 119.

first principle' of his philosophy, as Antoine Arnauld puts it in his objections to the *Meditations*,⁵¹ by means of the linkage of the simple natures. And these “new elements and concepts” were borrowed from Augustine’s work.

I now think that I can conclude this paper by asserting that it is not an absolutely new philosophy that will emerge in this so-called ‘post-Augustinian phase’, as the case of the conversion of the simple natures into the *cogito* and the remaining of the project of a mechanical science developed in the ‘pre-Augustinian phase’ makes clear. Nonetheless, it seems that from this moment on, that is, from his acquaintance with Augustine’s thought, Descartes’ philosophy will be animated by an introspectively oriented metaphysics quite similar to that elaborated by the bishop of Hippo, as it is extensively shown by Menn.⁵² As we can see in the *Meditations*, this introspectively oriented metaphysics has at least two fundamental anti-Scholastic aims. By allowing Descartes to ‘withdraw the mind from the senses’, this introspectively oriented metaphysics has helped him to undermine Scholastic hylomorphism and the empiricism associated with Peripatetic thought as well. As a result of this ‘inward turn’, themes of crucial importance to Cartesian metaphysics will appear, such as a nativist epistemology and a dualist ontology of mind and body. In discussing these ‘post-Augustinian themes’, scholars, aware of this introspective shift in the spirit of Descartes’ philosophy, should not make the same mistake – as Marion did – of referring to works of the ‘pre-Augustinian phase’ in order to solve problems of the ‘post-Augustinian phase’. I would thus like to suggest that scholars should take into consideration these two phases of Descartes’ philosophy, for they will help them to prevent a very common tendency to study the Cartesian system in a structuralist-like manner, as if it had a linear development, which could lead them stray in their research. It will also allow them to have a better understanding of the development and constitution of Descartes’ thought.

⁵¹ “The first thing that I find remarkable is that this famous man [Descartes] has based his whole philosophy on the very same principle that was laid down by St. Augustine [...]” (Descartes, Vol. 7/AT VII, 197).

⁵² “The *Meditations* arouse from Descartes’ attempt to resolve the crisis of the project of the *Rules* by adapting the Augustinian metaphysics as a foundation for his physics” (Menn, *Descartes and Augustine*, xiv).

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