

# Descartes, Plato and the Cave

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It has been a commonplace, embodied in philosophy curricula the world over, to think of Descartes' philosophy as he seems to present it: as a *radical* break with the past, as inaugurating a new philosophical problematic centred on epistemology and on a radical dualism of mind and body.<sup>1</sup> In several ways, however, recent scholarship has undermined the simplicity of this picture. It has, for example, shown the considerable degree of literary artifice in Descartes' central works, and thereby brought out the deceptive character of his self-presentation there. In particular, it has revealed the extent of his debts to the Neoplatonist tradition, particularly to Augustine, and of his engagement with the Scholastic commentators of his day.<sup>2</sup> My aim in this paper is to push this interpretative tendency a step further, by bringing out Descartes' indebtedness to Plato. I begin by offering some reminders of the broadly Platonic nature of Cartesian dualism.<sup>3</sup> I then argue that he provides clues sufficient for—and designed to encourage—reading the *Meditations on First Philosophy* in the light of distinctively Platonic doctrines, and in particular, as a rewriting

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Marleen Rozemond, 'The Nature of the Mind', in Stephen Gaukroger (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Descartes' Meditations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 48, for the statement (but not advocacy) of these connections. Amongst the boldest of advocates for Descartes' novelty along these lines, particularly concerning his account of the mind, is Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980). Some of his views will be scrutinized below.

<sup>2</sup> See, in particular, Zbigniew Janowski, *Cartesian Theodicy: Descartes' Quest for Certitude* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000); Stephen Menn, *Descartes and Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Dennis Des Chene, *Physiologia: Natural Philosophy in Late Aristotelian and Cartesian Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> By 'broadly Platonic' I mean those general themes common both to Plato and to the later Neoplatonists.

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of the Platonic allegory of the cave for modern times.<sup>4</sup> It will further be argued that some puzzles about the *Discourse on the Method* can be resolved by recognizing that Descartes there presents himself as a Socratic enquirer after truth. I conclude by drawing attention to some practical benefits that flow from recognizing these linkages.

### **Descartes and the Broad Platonic Tradition**

Cranky old Hobbes complained of Descartes' opening doubts in the *Meditations*, that the author had merely rehashed a lot of old stuff: 'since Plato and other ancient philosophers discussed this uncertainty in the objects of the senses ... I am sorry that the author, who is so outstanding in the field of original speculations, should be publishing this ancient material'.<sup>5</sup> This was not a good beginning to a relationship that had more downs than ups—Descartes castigated Mersenne for showing the *Meditations* to such a 'petty-minded critic' who was also a 'swaggering warrior', and certainly not one of 'the gentlemen of the Sorbonne'<sup>6</sup>—and unsurprisingly it provoked a testy reply. He was not, Descartes replied, 'trying to sell them as novelties', but setting out the problems that the subsequent Meditations were to answer; in particular, he did so because he 'wanted to prepare [his] readers'

<sup>4</sup> Questions of translation will inevitably arise, so, to ease any misplaced worries, or, contrariwise, to indicate uncertainties, I will make use of several different translations of Descartes' works. In the main, these will be: *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) (hereafter CSM); *Descartes: Philosophical Writings*, trans. Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Geach (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1954) (hereafter AG); and *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings*, trans. Desmond Clarke (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books (2000) (hereafter Clarke).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Hobbes, Third Set of Objections with the Author's Replies, First Objection; CSM II, 121 (AT VII, 171); cf. AG for a pithier—more recognizably Hobbesian—version: 'I am sorry that so excellent an author of new speculations should publish this old stuff' (127).

<sup>6</sup> Descartes to Mersenne, 4 March 1641; CSM III, 173 (AT III, 328).

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minds for the study of the things which are related to the intellect, and help them to distinguish these things from corporeal things'.<sup>7</sup>

Descartes' reply reveals the fundamental division at the heart of his thought. This division—here put in terms of the division between intellectual and corporeal things—is perhaps more usefully put in terms of the *powers* of which those things are the *objects*. That is—since corporeal things are the objects of the senses—between the distinct domains of the intellect and of the senses. This division shows up clearly in the doubts of the First Meditation itself. A closer look at that Meditation will bring out its organization into two types of doubt, and so show how Hobbes's impatience has caused him to miss Descartes' strategy.

The doubt of the First Meditation begins by rehearsing some very old chestnuts, perceptual errors. These doubts are, however, really only a curtain-raiser for the principal application of the first kind of doubt. They concern only *specific* failings of sense-perception; as such, they allow replies that call attention to the correcting devices available to any agent. In contrast, the dreaming argument which follows raises a *general* doubt about the senses.<sup>8</sup> Such a general doubt cannot be answered simply by appealing to our capacity for (sensory) self-correction. It can, however, be corrected by reason, as Hobbes points out. However, the second stage of the doubt blocks this form of correction, by raising a *general* doubt about the operations of the intellect. Hobbes completely misses this second stage of the doubt, and so quite misses the structure of the Meditation itself.

This second stage of the doubt, the general doubt about the intellect, seems commonly to be misconstrued: the tendency to speak of it in terms of the evil demon illustrates as much. In fact, the evil demon does not represent a separate stage of doubting at all—it is, as Descartes makes plain, merely a mnemonic, an aid to keeping the *result* of the second stage vividly before the mind.<sup>9</sup> The

<sup>7</sup> Third Set of Objections with the Author's Replies, First Reply; CSM II, 121 (AT VII, 171–2).

<sup>8</sup> The nature of this development is well brought out by Bernard Williams, 'Descartes' Use of Scepticism', in Williams, *The Sense of the Past*, ed. Myles Burnyeat (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 234.

<sup>9</sup> CSM II, 15 (AT VII, 22–3). Williams, 'Descartes' Use of Scepticism' (*The Sense of the Past*, 235–8), is one example of the tendency to treat the demon as itself a stage in the doubt; Stephen Hetherington, 'Fallibilism', *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/f/fallibil.htm>), is an example of someone who rightly sees it as mnemonic.

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second stage of the doubt is introduced by reference to divine omnipotence: it asks, if God can do anything, how can I know that I am not made to make mistakes even about those things that seem indubitable? But (to those tempted to reply that this is to suppose the existence of God) Descartes adds that, if God does *not* exist, the problem is *exacerbated*: if I am the result of chance, how can I believe that my intellectual powers are reliable?<sup>10</sup> In short, the second stage of the doubt is the question whether anyone can know that their intellect is oriented to the truth. Descartes' response, in the First Meditation at least, is that, whether we appeal to religious or to anti-religious grounds, this cannot be known. The intellect is thereby cast into doubt as a whole.

Of course, the Second Meditation will conclude that this general rejection of the intellect cannot be sustained—that there is an indissoluble connection between myself and the intellect, from which the solution to the doubt will ultimately flow. In the meantime, though, Descartes feigns the existence of an evil demon to ward off lazy mental habits, thereby to maintain the radical doubt initially established.<sup>11</sup> The doubts of the First Meditation are, then, structured around the division of the mind into sense and intellect. There are two stages because this fundamental division is presupposed—a presupposition that it will be the business of the *Meditations* as a whole to justify. The *Meditations* begins, then, by forcing the seeker of truth to turn away from the things of the senses to the things of the intellect, then to reach, in the Second Meditation, the first important insight: that the intellect is inseparable from oneself.

This is, plainly, a message with a strongly Platonic air. The faculty psychology around which, from the Second Meditation on, the argument of the *Meditations* is structured—sense, imagination and intellect—is more Aristotelian than Platonic,<sup>12</sup> but, in the end, imagination is assimilated to sense, at least in so far as both are

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For first bringing the point to my attention, I am indebted to A. D. Smith.

<sup>10</sup> CSM II, 14–5 (AT VII, 21–2).

<sup>11</sup> However, the evil demon is not fully defeated until the Fourth Meditation. This is because the demon is designed to be a kind of mirror-reversal of God—more or less the same in intellectual power, but the opposite in moral qualities—and so to embody the problem that the appeal to God must ultimately solve. God must be proven not only to exist (which proof removes the doubt based on chance), but also a non-deceiver: hence the epistemic theodicy of the Fourth Meditation.

<sup>12</sup> *De Anima* III, 1–8 (424b–432a).

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attributed to bodily processes.<sup>13</sup> So the fundamental divide in Descartes' thought, mirroring that between the body and mind, is the division between sense and intellect. The sharpness of this divide, and the requirement that the enquirer's task is to turn away from the senses to the intellect is undeniably Platonic. Indeed, it is central to Plato's message. This is shown most vividly in the famous allegories of the sun, line and cave in the *Republic*: the three allegories all present the message that true understanding requires turning away from the sensed world of change and decay to the eternal truths discoverable by the intellect.<sup>14</sup> And, once this turn is complete, it becomes possible to discover that the rational mind or intellect is quite different in kind from the body and the non-rational powers connected to it—it is divine, created directly by the Platonic God, unlike the making of the body and non-rational powers<sup>15</sup>—and therefore that it is separable from the body, and, indeed, immortal. So, for Plato as for Descartes, the sharpness of the divide between sense and intellect serves to underpin the dualism of mind and body.

Given this markedly Platonic air, it is perhaps a surprise that more is not made of the connection in modern commentary. Recent scholarship has certainly brought out the extent of Descartes' debts to the Neoplatonist tradition, but there has been a surprising lack of interest in the question of how far he saw himself as working in a consciously Platonic vein. Perhaps one reason for this relative neglect—particularly in the non-specialist world of the textbook Descartes, the man who made a radical break with the past—is the common but misleading view that, in the Second Meditation, Descartes introduces a radically new conception of the mind, by including sense and imagination alongside the purely intellectual components of the mind, thinking and willing. However, although there are aspects of Descartes' position that are genuinely new, his views are not the radical innovation that this ‘conflation’ thesis supposes.<sup>16</sup> The first problem is that his conclusion at this point is only provisional: it does not establish that all these aspects are

<sup>13</sup> This conclusion is reached in the Sixth Meditation: CSM II, 54–5 (AT 78–9). See below.

<sup>14</sup> *Republic* 507a–521b.

<sup>15</sup> *Timaeus* 69c.

<sup>16</sup> CSM, II, 19 (AT VII, 28); Clarke 26. For example, see Richard Rorty's claim that Descartes invented a new conception of the mind, in which feeling and thinking are conflated: *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Ch. 1 (esp. 47–54). Some important textual elements which this view skates over, and their significance, are nicely brought out in A. D.

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essential to the mind. The further problem is that this thesis's premature conclusion results in the real significance of Descartes' position being missed.

The Second Meditation's conclusion is only provisional because, in the Sixth Meditation, it is concluded that sense and imagination are separable from the mind, because they belong to the mind only in so far as it is united with a body in that special union of mind and body that is a human being. The essential properties of the mind are thus only the purely intellectual powers of thinking and willing.<sup>17</sup> The significance of Descartes' actual position is missed because the view at which he ultimately arrives is, whatever its distinctive features, also recognizable as a revival of a traditional view—a view, once more, of a distinctly Platonic cast. This can be brought out by recognizing that the point of affirming that it is the same mind that senses and imagines as well as thinks and wills is to affirm the *simplicity* and so *unity* of the mind, a central Platonic doctrine.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the identification of this mind with consciousness, of knowing that one knows, also has Platonic (if not uniquely Platonic) roots.<sup>19</sup> Further, all these aspects of the mind are *activities*, active powers, and so evidence of the soul's *self-movement*—another central (if not unique) Platonic doctrine.<sup>20</sup> Finally, and most telling of all, Descartes' sharp separation of intellect and matter, on which the argument for the immortality of the soul will subsequently be built, echoes and refines Plato's argument, in the *Phaedo*, that the soul is immortal because its

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Smith, 'Berkeley's Central Argument against Material Substance', in John Foster and Howard Robinson (ed.), *Essays on Berkeley: A Tercentennial Celebration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 44–9.

<sup>17</sup> CSM II, 50–55 (AT VII, 71–80); Clarke 57–63.

<sup>18</sup> *Phaedo* 79c–80b. The tripartite soul described in the *Republic* (435e–441c) and *Phaedrus* (246a–b, 253c–254e) may obscure this unity, but they are not incompatible. The rational part of the soul is the soul or mind proper, and it is this which is simple and unified.

<sup>19</sup> See *Charmides* 167a, 169d. There are also many other anticipations in ancient thought (the bulk of which may be traceable back to Plato). The view is implicit in Aristotle, *De Anima* III. 4–5 (429a–430a); and explicit in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* IX. 9 (1170a), and in Epictetus, *Discourses* I. 1.

<sup>20</sup> *Phaedrus* 245c–246a. (In much ancient Greek thought, the idea of the soul is, amongst other things, the idea of the cause of movement in any thing. The soul is, in this respect, a self-mover. See Aristotle, *De Anima*, III. 9–11 (432a–434a).)

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nature is akin to the imperishable intellectual nature of the Forms.<sup>21</sup> In short, Descartes' provisional account, in the Second Meditation, of what he is, although it may have served to obscure his Platonic debts, in fact underlines them.<sup>22</sup> Then, of course, in the Third Meditation, Descartes argues that at least one of his ideas is innate, and thereby revives the doctrine of innate ideas first advanced in the *Meno*.<sup>23</sup> So, both in the way he sets up the stages of the doubt in the First Meditation, and in the conclusions later settled on, Descartes shows a marked attachment to Platonic views.

Amongst recent textbooks, however, although Platonic connections tend to be noted, they equally tend not to be pursued.<sup>24</sup> John Cottingham, in his *Descartes* (1986), seems more interested in the connections than most, but even he ends up playing down their significance. Thus he observes that 'the notion that illumination is to be had by turning away from the senses goes back to Plato', and adds that Descartes' emphasis on the insight afforded by the 'natural light' may be an echo of 'the contrast between the ordinary visible light of the physical world and the intelligible light emanating from God [that] is a major theme in such [Neoplatonic] writers as Plotinus and Augustine'. He concludes, very cautiously, that Descartes' dualism of sense and intellect 'is in accord with the Platonic, or Neoplatonic, tradition which, consciously or not, influenced much of his thinking'.<sup>25</sup>

With the benefit of hindsight, it is now possible to offer a more confident assessment of Descartes' debts to the Neoplatonic or Augustinian tradition. We can now see that some of his use of it was self-conscious and deliberate, while other debts—at least, if he tells us the truth—seem best regarded as indirect, and perhaps not

<sup>21</sup> *Phaedo* 78b-80e; also 100a-107a.

<sup>22</sup> For a more detailed defence of the (traditional) intellectualism of Descartes' conclusion, see Marleen Rozemond, 'The Nature of the Mind', *The Blackwell Guide to Descartes' Meditations*, 48–66. (Rozemond also rejects the other common view about the Cartesian mind, that it is defined by its transparency. She argues instead that it is defined by being non-mechanical. The above emphasis on active powers is consistent with her conclusion.)

<sup>23</sup> *Meno* 81a-d, 85c.

<sup>24</sup> Catherine Wilson, *Descartes's Meditations: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 194; Gary Hatfield, *Descartes and the Meditations* (London: Routledge, 2003), 16, 41, 207.

<sup>25</sup> John Cottingham, *Descartes* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 148. See also his 'The Mind-Body Relation', *The Blackwell Guide to Descartes' Meditations*, 179, 184, 188.

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recognized as such. On the one hand, there is little room for doubt that he knows what he is doing when he adapts Augustine's free will theodicy to provide a solution to the problem of error in the Fourth Meditation. In Platonic fashion, he construes error as intellectual evil, and argues that it arises from the exercise of free will, and so can be similarly prevented: error arises from allowing the will to run ahead of what is clearly and distinctly known; its solution thus depends on keeping the will within the limits of the known. It would be surprising indeed if Descartes could have adapted such a famous and influential view without being aware of its Augustinian origins, so the most plausible conclusion is that, in this respect at least, he is a self-conscious appropriator of the Augustinian tradition. Much the same can be said of his larger uses of the idea of freedom of the will, as it pertains to both divine and human subjects. (This includes, among other things, his account of the creation of the eternal truths.) In all these respects, then, Descartes aligns himself with the Augustinians, and does so at a time when Augustinianism was increasing in influence, and when the resultant theological disputes between the (Augustinian) Oratorians, and the (Aristotelian Thomist) Jesuits made the party lines clear to all.<sup>26</sup> In short, it is very difficult not to think that he was aware that he was aligning himself with the Augustinian camp in theology.<sup>27</sup> In this light, it seems undeniable that Descartes was familiar with the Augustinian text that was central to his purposes: Augustine's *On Free Choice of the Will*. It is also unlikely that such fundamental reliance on a specialist theologically-philosophical work of Augustine's would have been unaccompanied by a wider interest in the man and his opinions, so it seems reasonable to conclude that he was also acquainted with the *Confessions*.<sup>28</sup>

On the other hand, some other debts seem to have been indirect and unrecognized. The most striking concerns the *cogito* argument itself. A very similar argument for the indubitability of one's own

<sup>26</sup> The rise (and later fall) of the Abbey of Port-Royal, beginning with its move to Paris in 1626 and culminating in its becoming a hotbed of (Augustinian) Jansenism from 1636, provides a cameo of the fortunes of Augustinianism in this period. See also Stephen Gaukroger, *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 46–7, 207–8.

<sup>27</sup> See Janowski, *Cartesian Theodicy*, ch. 3.

<sup>28</sup> St Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Anna S. Benjamin and L. H. Hackstaff (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), esp. Books II–III; *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). These two works are frequently invoked by Menn in *Descartes and Augustine* (esp. ch. 4).

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existence occurs twice in Augustine's works, in the *City of God* and in *On the Trinity*.<sup>29</sup> Given Descartes' acquaintance with other aspects of Augustine's thought, it would be natural to suppose that he also found this argument in the pages of Augustine's works. However, if he is to be believed—there is no doubt that he was a secretive individual, who typically kept his cards close to his chest—his argument owes nothing to direct engagement with Augustine. The evidence comes from his reply to a letter which draws the Augustinian version of the argument to his attention. After thanking his correspondent for providing him with the reference (to the *City of God* version), Descartes checks it in the library, and then points out that his argument is not identical to Augustine's, since he, unlike Augustine, uses the argument to establish the immateriality of the soul.<sup>30</sup> This letter replies to a question raised by the *Discourse on the Method*, not the *Meditations*, which were at that stage still unpublished. But the letter was sent a few days after Descartes had despatched the *Meditations* to Mersenne; so, unless Descartes is dissembling here, the text of the *Meditations* was already complete and packed off before Descartes discovered the Augustinian parallel.<sup>31</sup>

This does not mean that the similarities are merely accidental; nor that Descartes' employment of the *cogito* was entirely original. Despite his silence on the matter to his correspondent, it seems most likely that he became acquainted with the argument through the work of a contemporary, and reasonable to suppose that the link with the immateriality of the soul was also at least suggested by that work. The contemporary was Jean Silhon (1596–1667), whose work was known to Descartes, and whose *The Immortality of the Soul* (1634) argued, against the arguments of the sceptics, that one's existence is indubitable.<sup>32</sup> He did not argue that this itself implied, or pointed the way to, the soul's immateriality (and immortality); but that this argument appeared in a work dedicated to that topic may well have suggested the connection to Descartes. So, although

<sup>29</sup> *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), XI. 26; *On the Trinity*, ed. Gareth B. Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 10. 7–8. He is not the first to make this point, however: an earlier version of the argument can be found in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* IX. 9 (1170a-b).

<sup>30</sup> Letter to Colvius, 14 November 1640; CSM III, 159 (AT III, 247).

<sup>31</sup> The episode is discussed in Desmond Clarke's recently-published *Descartes: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 209–10.

<sup>32</sup> Clarke, *Descartes: A Biography*, 74, 190.

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it appears likely that Descartes was not entirely candid with his correspondent about the *cogito*'s origins, he is right to point out that he puts it to a use that had not previously been attempted. Nevertheless, the argument is not entirely his own; and, given the influence of Augustinianism in the period, it would not surprise if Silhon's use of the argument is traceable, directly or indirectly, to an Augustinian source. If so, then Descartes' employment of the argument is further evidence of Augustinian influence on his philosophy, albeit, in this case, one not recognized as such.

The moral, then, is that, although there is some genuine room for doubt about his awareness of the full extent of his debts, it remains true that, when writing the *Meditations*, Descartes understood the Augustinian tendency of his philosophy—and, indeed, relied on obviously-Augustinian themes in shaping some of his central arguments. His project there is to marry Augustinian theology with mechanical philosophy in order to provide a complete replacement for the Aristotelianism which underpinned Scholastic theology as well as physics. But Augustinianism is Christian Platonism—a Christian adaptation of Platonism—so the question arises: what then of specifically Platonic influences? Plato was a poor source for materials for the religious justification of the new physics—the *Meditations'* central task—so it might seem at first sight that any great depth of engagement is unlikely. But this is too quick: there is at least one crucial aspect of Platonic philosophy which was more important for Descartes than it was for either Augustine or his seventeenth-century theological followers: its emphasis on mathematics as the key to the real. Unlike Augustine and the Augustinian theologians, Descartes wanted to establish that material nature is mathematical (or mathematizable) in its essence; and for this purpose, Plato was a role-model without peer. The marriage of Augustinian theology with mathematical physics of a mechanical world is nothing other than the marriage of Christian Platonic theology with Platonic mathematical physics: plainly, a marriage made in heaven. In this light, then, it seems very likely that Descartes' Augustinian and physical concerns would have led him directly to Plato himself.

There are also other reasons for thinking it unlikely that the Platonic echoes discernible in Descartes' work are merely the unconscious influences of broad intellectual tradition. He makes it clear, in the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, that he has read the ancients, recommending their writings to those who wish to develop their minds: even though they lived in an ‘unsophisticated and innocent age’, they were able to ‘grasp true ideas in philosophy’.

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and mathematics' because of the 'primary seeds of truth naturally implanted in human minds'.<sup>33</sup> Along the way he refers directly to the works of Plato and Aristotle. He insists that reading them will not by itself make us philosophers, but his point is not that such reading is unnecessary, but that it is insufficient: one also needs to exercise one's own judgement.<sup>34</sup> The background assumption is that those works constitute the core curriculum of a philosophical education. In these remarks, then, Descartes gives the firm impression that he is well-versed in the original writings of the ancients, and not just in those of their Hellenistic or Christian successors.<sup>35</sup>

Descartes thus gives us reason to believe both that he is acquainted with Plato's own works, and that he saw those works as relevant to his own project. There is thus no bar to holding Plato to have been in his mind when composing the *Meditations*. Of course, this does not mean that, where we can discern an echo of a doctrine or expression found in both Plato and Augustine, he had the former *rather than* the latter in mind. Neither need one hold the reverse. What is beyond serious doubt is that there are echoes in Descartes' work of doctrines and expressions to be found in both. Moreover, there is no reason why he could not have been aware of the doctrines of both, and consciously alluded to such doctrines knowing them to be shared. This would be sufficient to bring Plato's works into the picture in their own right. But it seems to me that something stronger can be affirmed: that, from the use he makes of some of the most distinctively Platonic elements in Augustine's writings, he recognizes them as Augustine's *Platonism*, and is keen to emphasize these aspects of Augustine's views *because of* their Platonism. The point is not that Augustine is, for Descartes, merely a Platonist: the free will theodicy, and other aspects of a distinctively Christian Platonism, are not being wished away. The point is, rather, that Descartes is well aware that Augustinianism is both Christian and Platonist; that he recognizes at least the most striking Platonic doctrines and Platonic echoes

<sup>33</sup> *Rules for the Direction of Mind*, Rules Three and Four; CSM I, 13, 18 (AT X, 366, 375–6).

<sup>34</sup> *Rules for the Direction of Mind*, Rule Three; CSM I, 13 (AT X, 367).

<sup>35</sup> He also alludes to the motto said to have been inscribed over the entrance to Plato's Academy—'no one ignorant of geometry may enter' (CSM I, 18 (AT X, 375))—but this motto does not appear in Plato's (or Aristotle's) works, but in later Neoplatonic commentaries.

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when they occur in Augustine or the Augustinians, and so moves easily from Augustinian to Platonic works when his purposes require it; and therefore that Plato is a conscious presence in Descartes' works. The aim of this paper is to make this case. It will focus primarily on the *Meditations*, but will also consider some aspects of the *Discourse*; and it will draw attention to some interpretative benefits generated by bringing Platonic debts into the picture.

### **Broadly Platonic Echoes in the *Meditations***

The grounds for thinking Descartes to have had Plato in mind when composing the *Meditations* go well beyond his emphasis on the sharp contrast between sense and intellect, on the unity of the intellect, and on the dualism that these doctrines support. They include echoes of a number of characteristic Platonic doctrines and themes. In some cases, what is echoed is a distinctive form of expression. Such cases must, of course, be handled carefully, since it is always possible that the resemblances of expression may be owed to accidents of translation rather than to genuinely resembling ideas. But the best way to meet that problem is to present the examples (not neglecting to compare, as far as possible, texts and translations), and to invite the critics' responses.

This section will examine the shared Augustinian and Platonic themes and expressions. We can begin with an example from the *Meno*. Plato there introduces the doctrine of learning as *recollection*: recollection of what the soul knew before birth—before physical embodiment—but has forgotten. The doctrine is implicit in the *Phaedrus*, where the soul before birth is described as seeing the eternal Forms, and also assumed in the *Phaedo*.<sup>36</sup> He seems to have meant it literally. Augustine, in contrast, treats it as metaphorical: in learning, the mind, by attending carefully, organizes disparate memories, thereby making them ready to hand, such that they 'easily come forward under the direction of the mind familiar with them'. He does not suggest, though, that these memories are prior to bodily existence; they are, rather, 'images of all kinds of objects brought in by sense-perception'.<sup>37</sup> Descartes also alludes to the doctrine, and in a spirit which seems to place him half-way *between* his forebears. He remarks, in the Fifth Meditation, that, in

<sup>36</sup> *Meno* 81c-d; *Phaedrus* 248a-e; *Phaedo* 72e.

<sup>37</sup> *Confessions*, 189, 185.

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discerning truths about ‘shape, number, motion, and so on ... it seems that I am not so much learning something new as remembering what I knew before; or it seems like noticing for the first time things which were long present within me although I had never turned my mental gaze on them before’.<sup>38</sup> This is plainly an allusion to the doctrine of recollection.<sup>39</sup> He does not, however, suggest that this way of talking is to be taken literally, and certainly does not offer it as evidence of disembodied existence. To this extent he is on the side of Augustine rather than Plato. On the other hand, it is of mathematizable objects that he speaks here, rather than of ‘images ... brought in by sense-perception’, so it does seem as if Descartes has Platonic as well as Augustinian views in mind at this point. To put it another way: it seems as if he wishes, in particular ways, to emphasize the Platonism in Augustinianism.

Two further aspects of this example underline this tendency. In the first place, it is striking that, in the passage just quoted from the Fifth Meditation, Descartes should speak of ‘mental gaze’: an expression which evokes precisely the metaphor of mental vision—of knowing as seeing with ‘the mind’s eye’—that is a cornerstone of Plato’s allegory of the sun.<sup>40</sup> The expressions ‘mind’s eye’ and (mental) ‘gaze’ are also employed by Augustine, the latter of these in a passage concerned with that allegory’s central concern, the dependence of experienced reality on the divine.<sup>41</sup> So here Descartes employs a manner of expression also employed by Augustine, a manner of expression with a pronounced Platonic air. Moreover, Descartes’ employment of this idea goes beyond mere expression, since it is clear that he supposes the path to clear and distinct ideas to include a settled mental gaze upon the objects of the intellect. In fact, one can go further: Descartes’ very term for the immediate act of knowing, to intuit (Latin *intueri*), means ‘to look, gaze at’.<sup>42</sup> He employs the term knowing full well that his use is at odds with established terminology—but does not apologize. He says instead: ‘If anyone should be troubled by my novel use of the term “intuition” ... I wish to point out that here I

<sup>38</sup> CSM II, 44 (AT VII, 64); cf. Clarke, 52.

<sup>39</sup> Hatfield also notices this allusion (*Descartes and the Meditations*, 207).

<sup>40</sup> See *Republic* 508d. AG renders this passage as ‘mind’s eye’ (101), Clarke merely as ‘attention’ (52).

<sup>41</sup> *Confessions*, 111, 126.

<sup>42</sup> *Rules for the Direction of Mind*, Rule Three; CSM I, 13n (translators’ note).

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am paying no attention to the way these terms have lately been used in the Schools. For it would be very difficult for me to employ the same terminology, when my own views are profoundly different. I shall take account only of the meanings in Latin of individual words ...’<sup>43</sup> In other words, the term ‘intuition’ can be taken at face value; the idea of mental gaze is to be taken seriously.<sup>44</sup>

Secondly, in his remarks on memory quoted above, Augustine links images with sense-perception—another recognizably Platonic theme. The connection is no accident, since, although learning is itself described in terms of the organizing of images, the *knowledge* that this is what learning is is discerned ‘not through images but as they really are and through the concepts themselves’.<sup>45</sup> Rational insight is not a matter of images. Plato concurs. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates denies that rational theories make use of images; and the creation-story of the *Timaeus* makes it clear that images belong to the non-rational realm.<sup>46</sup> In similar vein, Descartes also insists that rational thought is not a matter of images. This is implicit in his connection of clear and distinct ideas with the mathematizable rather than the sensory. It is explicit in the explanation of the difference between the intellect and the imagination, summed up in the famous example of the chiliagon in the Sixth Meditation: the chiliagon can be thought, even though it cannot (except confusedly) be imagined—that is, it cannot accurately be *imaged* in the mind.<sup>47</sup> So, despite speaking of intellection as a kind of mental gaze, Descartes is clear that the analogy has its limits: mental gaze is not directed at mental images.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>43</sup> *Rules*, Rule Three; CSM I, 14 (AT X, 369). The passage concludes: ‘when appropriate words are lacking, I shall use what seem the most suitable words, adapting them to my own meaning’. But this does not apply in this case, since here there is an appropriate word.

<sup>44</sup> See also *Rules*, Rule 5 Heading, where there is a further occurrence of the term ‘mind’s eye’: CSM I, 20 (AT X, 379).

<sup>45</sup> *Confessions*, 189.

<sup>46</sup> *Phaedo* 100a; *Timaeus* 71a-72b. The remarkable philosophical physiology of the *Timaeus*, with its startling conception of the liver as the ‘mirror’ of the mind, is probably the inspiration for Augustine’s metaphor of the memory as ‘the stomach of the mind’ (*Confessions*, 191).

<sup>47</sup> CSM II, 50-1 (AT VII, 71-3).

<sup>48</sup> This is completely missed by Rorty, who mistakenly supposes that the ‘optical metaphor’ indicates a conception, or picture, of mind as a ‘glassy essence’—a picture ‘which literate men found presupposed by every page they read’ (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 39n, 42-3). The very rationalism of the early modern rationalists should be enough to

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These examples show Descartes self-consciously employing obviously-Platonic ideas. Consequently, it seems difficult to believe that, in cases like these, his source is Augustine or Augustinians *rather than* Plato. It seems far more likely that, in so far as he was aware of the works of others, by inserting the clues identified here he intended to signal Platonic debts. In fact, one piece of indirect evidence suggests that Augustine himself is not in view at this point. This is because, in his discussion of his debts to the Platonists, he finds much to emphasize about his *differences* from them.<sup>49</sup> The differences have to do with the details of the Christian gospel—which, obviously, he did not derive, and could not have derived, from Platonism. Given this fact, it is striking that, neither in the *Meditations* nor elsewhere in his philosophical writings, does Descartes say anything comparable: his philosophically-based theological commitments, for all their compatibility with Christianity, have no *specifically* Christian content. His conclusions are silent on revealed religion, let alone on the special Augustinian concern with human helplessness and the need for divine illumination; in these respects his philosophical theology is as Deist as it is Christian.<sup>50</sup> Given that his aim in writing the *Meditations* is to

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show that it *could not* have been their conception; the discussion above shows that it *was not* Descartes'. Similarly, the *Timaeus'* physiology—in which ‘mirroring’ is restricted to the appetitive realm, where it is the function of the liver, in contrast to the rational functions seated in the head—is enough to show that it was not Plato’s either. In fact, neither was it the early modern empiricists’ conception. For them, in so far as the mind could be thought of as a mirror, to that extent it was a *distorting medium*: see, e.g. Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), II. viii. 16. Rorty even quotes a passage from Bacon illustrating the point, without noticing that it undermines the idea of a ‘glassy essence’; in fact, he has extracted the term and idea from Shakespeare, not from any philosophical text (42). Berkeley aside, the empiricists *shared* the rationalists’ conception of philosophical knowledge as a rational (non-imaginistic) grasp of the essences of things, but *denied* the rationalists’ conclusion that we possessed such knowledge. Their imaginistic accounts of mental content carried with them—and were recognized so to carry—a marked sceptical tendency. (If ideas are images, then the mind is limited by what those images can contain.) For one attempt to bring out some of these linkages, see Stephen Buckle, ‘British Sceptical Realism: A Fresh Look at the British Tradition’, *European Journal of Philosophy* 7 (1999), 1–29.

<sup>49</sup> *Confessions*, 121–2.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Gaukroger, *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography*, 207.

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show that his physics contains no threat to the Christian religion, and even that it offers it better support than the Aristotelian-derived physics and theology of the Schools, this is a significant omission, one which suggests that he does not have the *Confessions* in view at this point. But, even if this conclusion is resisted, it remains true that this silence indicates one way in which Descartes diverges from Augustine (and, presumably, the seventeenth-century Augustinians) in a Platonic direction, and so offers indirect support for holding that his tendency to emphasize distinctively Platonic parts of Augustinianism does bespeak the intention to signal specifically Platonic as well as Augustinian debts. Some further examples, to be discussed below, will help to firm up this conclusion, because it will be argued that they all point, if in varying degrees, to the Platonic allegory of the cave. Before considering those examples, however, it will first be useful to draw attention to a striking turn of phrase in the *Meditations*; a phrase which brings the cave clearly into view.

### **Turning the Mind Around**

It was observed above that Descartes' contrast between the senses and the intellect, and of the importance of turning from the former to the latter, has a markedly (albeit broadly) Platonic air. No less striking is his way of putting the point. He says: 'the mind must be turned away carefully from those [sensory] things so that it can perceive its own nature as distinctly as possible'.<sup>51</sup> Terminology of this broad kind—of *turning away* or *turning around* the mind—is frequently to be found in Augustine's works, including in the *Confessions* and *On the Free Choice of the Will*. The metaphor is, says Menn, 'constantly repeated'.<sup>52</sup> There is good reason, then, to suppose that Descartes found it in these works, and adapted it for his own purposes accordingly. However, the expression so faithfully preserves a distinctively Platonic turn of phrase that it would be immediately obvious to anyone acquainted with the relevant passage in Plato's works. The passage in question is—as might be anticipated—Plato's own treatment of the contrast between sense and intellect in his discussion of the meaning of the allegory of the cave. Plato there describes the precondition for escaping from the cave to be the turn from the senses to the intellect: 'the mind as a

<sup>51</sup> Clarke, 27.

<sup>52</sup> Menn, *Descartes and Augustine*, 174.

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whole must be turned away from the world of change until its eye can bear to look straight at reality'.<sup>53</sup> Just as in Augustine's works, then, Plato puts the problem in terms of the need to *turn the mind around*.

Is there reason then to think that Descartes employed the phrase knowing its Platonic as well as Augustinian use? There is no direct textual evidence, but a case is not hard to make. The Augustinian literature is concerned with theodicy and with the need for personal salvation, whereas the Platonic passage from which the expression derives is concerned with the need to turn from the senses to the intellect if fundamental truths are to be found. Descartes' concern is the same as Plato's; so his use of the expression in the very same context as Plato's original employment is either a happy accident—of adapting Augustinian concerns to epistemology, and thereby unwittingly returning to the very Platonic concerns out of which Augustinian theology arose—or it is the knowing appropriation of the Platonic viewpoint itself. The latter is surely the more convincing alternative, especially if it is supposed that the route to Plato was *through* the Augustinian works: that *their* Platonic echoes jogged Descartes' memory, and returned him to the Platonic works themselves.

It might be objected at this point that too much weight is being placed on resemblances between *translations*; and, indeed, on translations from sharply different languages: ancient Greek and early modern Latin. The point is a fair one, so some attention to translators' decisions is necessary. In the case of Plato, things seem pretty straightforward, at least in the sense that the translators seem to be of one mind in translating the key terms—*strephein* and *perigōgē*—as 'turn' or 'turn around'.<sup>54</sup> Paul Shorey's translation for the Loeb Classics includes a phrase that other translators leave out, presumably because of its obscurity, and therefore unsuitability for a student text. But including the phrase is very useful here. It runs as follows: the soul must be turned around 'like the scene-shifting periaict in the theatre'. Shorey suggests that the reference is

<sup>53</sup> *Republic* 518c-d. (Except where otherwise indicated, quotations from this work are from Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2nd ed. (revised), 1987).)

<sup>54</sup> The passages themselves are sometimes quite convoluted, with much word-play on the idea of turning around. The translations checked, apart from the Penguin edition, are those by Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004); and Paul Shorey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935 (Loeb Classical Library)).

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probably to the ‘triangular prisms on each side of the stage. They revolved on an axis and had different scenes painted on their three faces.’<sup>55</sup> If he is right about this, then Plato’s whole way of putting the point is vividly literal-minded: the mind must be turned around in just the way the stage props have to be turned around. The unanimity of the translators here is, then, not surprising.

In the case of Descartes’ Latin, things are not quite so straightforward. His words are: *mentemque ab illis diligentissime esse avocandam*.<sup>56</sup> They can be translated thus: that the mind should be turned away very carefully from those things. However, the key term here—*avocandam*—can be translated not only as ‘turned away’, but also as ‘diverted’, or ‘withdrawn’, or ‘removed’.<sup>57</sup> Plainly, there is more ambiguity in Descartes’ choice of phrase than in Plato’s, and so more scope for resisting the thought that the former is a deliberate echo of the latter. Nevertheless, the range of variations is not great, and it is noteworthy that the modern French translation renders the passage in such a way as to preserve the sense of an echo. That translation renders the above passage as: *il faut ... détourner très scrupuleusement l'esprit*.<sup>58</sup> The sense of ‘turning around’ survives. So, although it cannot be said that there is no room for disagreement here, there does seem to be a sufficient case for holding that the discernible echo of Plato’s cave in the English versions of Descartes’ text is not merely an artifact of the translations.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Shorey, 134n.

<sup>56</sup> AT VII, 28.

<sup>57</sup> The other main translations take these other options: ‘the mind must be carefully diverted from ...’ (CSM II, 19; AT VII, 28); ‘the mind’s attention must be carefully diverted from ...’ (AG, 70); ‘I must be most diligent about withdrawing my mind from ...’ (Descartes, *Meditations, Objections, and Replies*, ed. Roger Ariew and Donald Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), 15).

<sup>58</sup> Descartes: *Méditations métaphysique*, présentation et traduction de Michelle Beyssade (Paris: Librairie Générale Française (Le Livre de Poche), 1990).

<sup>59</sup> See also *Rules*, Rule 5 Heading, in Clarke’s translation: ‘the whole method consists in the order and arrangement of those things to which the mind’s eye must turn so that we can discover some truth’ (*Discourse on Method and Related Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books (1999), 130 (AT X, 379); repeated in *Descartes: A Biography*, 88). Other translations have: ‘on which we must concentrate our mind’s eye’ (CSM I, 20); ‘upon which we must turn our mental vision’ (AG, 157).

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However, it might further be objected that, whatever the terminological resemblances, the Platonic echo cannot be taken too seriously, since, for Descartes, the mind must be turned *within*, rather than, as in Plato's account, outward to the Forms which exist beyond the heavens.<sup>60</sup> But this objection can be met, because the contrast is overdrawn. Although Plato holds that the Forms do exist outside the heavens, nevertheless our access to them, in our mortal lives, is by attending to what is within us. We can know the Forms by recollecting the traces of them, lying dormant in our memory until brought forth by a skilful midwife. This is the plain message of the slave boy example in the *Meno*.<sup>61</sup> Presumably, it is also why Augustine is able to say, of the Neoplatonist works with which he was familiar: 'By the Platonic books I was admonished to return into myself.'<sup>62</sup> So 'turning within' and 'turning the mind around' seem simply to be different ways of saying the same thing: turning from the senses to the intellect. So these different expressions provide no good reason for abandoning the thought that, with these remarks, Descartes is signalling, not merely broadly Platonic debts, but parallels with the allegory of the cave.<sup>63</sup>

There is also one other passage where Descartes makes use of the idea of turning the mind around. This is in the penultimate paragraph of the First Meditation. In introducing the need to suppose the existence of the evil demon, he says 'I think it will be a good plan to turn my will in completely the opposite direction'.<sup>64</sup> In this instance it is the will, rather than the mind as a whole, that is to be turned around. Moreover, it has a moral, rather than purely intellectual, dimension, in that the turn is from goodness (of God)

<sup>60</sup> *Phaedrus* 247c-e.

<sup>61</sup> *Meno* 82a-86b. See, e.g., Lawrence Nolan and Alan Nelson, 'Proofs for the Existence of God', *The Blackwell Guide to Descartes*' Meditations, 113–4.

<sup>62</sup> *Confessions*, 123. Note that this passage undermines Rorty's claim that Descartes invented the idea of the 'mind-as-inner-arena'—and, indeed, his sense of a contrast between that notion and 'mind-as-reason' (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 61).

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Cottingham, 'The Mind-Body Relation', *The Blackwell Guide to Descartes*' Meditations, 179.

<sup>64</sup> CSM II, 15 (AT VII, 22). The other translations render the passage in much the same way: 'I think I shall not act badly if, having turned my will around in exactly the opposite direction, ...' (Clarke, 21); 'I think it will be well to turn my will in the opposite direction' (AG, 65); 'it seems to me I would do well to deceive myself by turning my will in completely the opposite direction' (Ariew and Cress, 12).

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to evil (the demon). For these reasons, it seems sufficient to regard the passage as involving only the purely Augustinian employment of the expression.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, the passage does serve to emphasize the expression's appeal for Descartes; and the fact that what is at issue is the guarding of an intellectual insight against distraction from non-intellectual sources means that the distinctively Platonic links cannot be entirely discounted.

### **Further Intimations of the Cave**

At the end of each Meditation, Descartes pauses to survey what has been achieved therein. This is a formal device, reflecting the concluding review characteristic of religious meditations, and one of the ways in which the self-consciously meditative structure of the *Meditations* is emphasized.<sup>66</sup> The concluding review of the Third Meditation, however, displays more than this very general feature. Pausing after completing his first argument for God's existence, Descartes says this:

I should like to pause here and spend some time in the contemplation of God; to reflect on his attributes, and to gaze with wonder and adoration on the beauty of this immense light, so far as the eye of my darkened intellect can bear it.<sup>67</sup>

This passage goes beyond the general Augustinian theme of divine illumination to provide an undeniable allusion to the allegory of the cave in the *Republic*. Plato emphasizes there that eyes accustomed to the darkness of the cave must at first be dazzled by the brightness of the lights that illuminate the truth: first by the fire in the cave, then, once outside the cave, by the sun itself.<sup>68</sup> The similarity between Descartes' comment and the *Republic* passages is

<sup>65</sup> Cf. *On Free Choice of the Will*, II. xix.

<sup>66</sup> See, most importantly, Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, in *Personal Writings*, trans. Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1996), 279–358. Desmond Clarke points out (*Descartes: A Biography*, 28–9) that the *Spiritual Exercises* were a standard part of the La Flèche curriculum, and that their aim—to break established habitual patterns of thinking (208)—makes them a suitable model for the *Meditations*. It is also worth noting that they include sets of rules for the direction of the mind (*Personal Writings*, 348–58).

<sup>67</sup> CSM II, 36 (AT VII, 52); emphasis added.

<sup>68</sup> *Republic* 515c-516b, 518 c-d.

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undeniable. Moreover, the very placement of the remark, at the end of the Meditation where the meditator has first understood God to exist, corresponds precisely to the stage in Plato's allegory where the cave-dweller comes face to face with the sun. It seems, then, that, in this passage, Descartes goes beyond merely appealing to Platonic themes; that here he is positively encouraging comparisons with the Platonic allegory.

Some other passages also lead us to the cave, if by an indirect route. One of these is an echo of the *Meno*. In the Second Meditation, Descartes offers a brief description of body as 'anything that can be limited by some shape'.<sup>69</sup> This echoes—if in reverse—the definition of shape Socrates offers in the *Meno*: 'shape is ... the limit of a solid'.<sup>70</sup> If this is accepted as an allusion to the *Meno*, then another passage, at the end of the Fifth Meditation, suggests the same source. Descartes argues there that only knowledge of God is able to *anchor* his beliefs based in clear and distinct perceptions, making them 'true and certain knowledge' rather than 'merely unstable and changeable opinions' (that is, even if true).<sup>71</sup> This echoes the *Meno*'s conclusion, where true opinions are seen to be inferior to knowledge because they are changeable: 'they run away from a man's mind, so they are not worth much until you tether them by working out the reason'.<sup>72</sup> The *Meno* then concludes that knowledge is true opinion that has been tethered to reality. But this way of putting things brings us back to the *Republic* and to the cave: the escaped cave-dweller comes to see that the Form of the Good is that on which all things depend, and so the ground of all reality.<sup>73</sup> The allusion to the *Meno* in the Fifth Meditation thus brings us, if indirectly, back to the cave and its central themes.

In fact, the Fifth Meditation tethers knowledge in just the way one would expect of a Christianized Platonism. For Descartes, all knowledge of things—that is, all knowledge beyond immediate self-awareness—is tethered by knowledge of a necessarily-existing, non-deceiving God;<sup>74</sup> and this characteristic Cartesian preoccupation with the *epistemological* necessity of a non-deceiving God,

<sup>69</sup> Clarke, 25; cf. CSM II, 17 (AT VII, 26).

<sup>70</sup> *Meno* 76a.

<sup>71</sup> Clarke, 56. Cf. CSM II, 48 (AT VII, 69).

<sup>72</sup> *Meno* 97e-98a; a similar account is offered at *Theaetetus* 201c-d.

<sup>73</sup> *Republic* 509b, 517c.

<sup>74</sup> This conclusion, and its significance for Descartes' project, is brought out well in Williams, 'Descartes' Use of Scepticism' (*The Sense of the Past*, 244–5).

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driven by the idea that error itself is a kind of evil, is itself traceable directly to Plato. In Book II of the *Republic*, Plato argues that ‘being deceived in one’s own mind’ is hated by gods as well as men, and, because the gods have no reason to lie, ‘there is no falsehood at all in the realm of the spiritual and the divine’.<sup>75</sup> If one adds the Christian doctrine of divine omnipotence to this conclusion, then it follows that God has no reason to create beings that will introduce falsehood—error-proneness—into reality. The all-too-human capacity to go astray is therefore a problem for theodicy. It is therefore no accident that, at this point (in the Fourth Meditation), Descartes should call on Augustine’s free-will theodicy in order to solve the problem of error.<sup>76</sup> But that intellectual error should *itself* be a problem seems to come directly from Plato, rather than Augustine: for the latter, evil does not seem to include morally-innocent intellectual malfunctioning. If this is so, then the Fourth Meditation shows a self-conscious awareness of the Platonic, and not merely Augustinian, intellectual tradition.

Finally, that most famous of Cartesian arguments, the dreaming argument, is also traceable to the cave.<sup>77</sup> There are quite a few places where Plato treats mental confusion as analogous with dreaming: in the *Republic*, but also in the *Timaeus* and *Theaetetus*. The *Timaeus* passage leads somewhat wide of our purposes, so can be set aside.<sup>78</sup> So we can begin with the *Theaetetus*. In that dialogue, Socrates asks, ‘what evidence could be brought if we were asked at this very moment whether we are asleep and are dreaming all our thoughts, or whether we are awake and talking to each other

<sup>75</sup> *Republic* 382a-383b. (The problem itself is likely to sound excessive to Anglophone ears; mainly because, I suggest, it was effectively banished from British philosophy by Locke. Locke’s insistence, in the introductory chapter of the *Essay*, that the inaccuracy of our knowledge of the world is not a fit subject of complaint—‘the Candle, that is set up in us, shines bright enough for all our Purposes ... Our Business here is not to know all things, but those which concern our Conduct’ (*Essay*, I. i. 5-6)—seems to be directed against just this Platonic and Cartesian concern.)

<sup>76</sup> See Janowski, *Cartesian Theodicy*, *passim*; Menn, *Descartes and Augustine*, Ch. 7.

<sup>77</sup> Augustine does mention the illusory nature of dreams, but not the difficulty of distinguishing them from reality. He treats them simply as misleading experiences we have when asleep: *Confessions*, 41; *On the Trinity*, 11. 4, 12. 14.

<sup>78</sup> *Timaeus* 52b-c. The passage refers to a misguided condition brought about by ‘spurious reasoning’ rather than by the senses, as in the other passages.

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in a conscious state'?<sup>79</sup> This passage could hardly be more Cartesian in spirit. Descartes' argument in the First Meditation seems nothing less than a paraphrase. That argument concludes: 'I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep'.<sup>80</sup> An additional striking, if circumstantial, point is that, in the immediately preceding exchange, Plato has Theaetetus treat dreamers and madmen as parallel cases; similarly, Descartes leads up to his dreaming argument by first considering the case of madmen.<sup>81</sup> It seems very difficult to deny, then, that Descartes knew the *Theaetetus* passage, and deliberately reproduced its argument in the First Meditation.<sup>82</sup>

Fortified with this conclusion, we can turn to another significant Platonic discussion of dreaming: the famous passage in the *Republic* in which Socrates contrasts true philosophers with the lovers of sights and sounds. Socrates there treats reliance on the senses as akin to dreaming. The passage (with Glaucon as interlocutor) runs as follows:

'Those who love looking and listening are delighted by beautiful sounds and colours and shapes, and the works of art which make use of them, but their minds are incapable of seeing and delighting in the essential nature of beauty itself.'

'That is certainly so', he agreed.

'And those who can reach beauty itself and see it as it is in itself are likely to be few.'

'Very few indeed.'

'Then what about the man who recognizes the existence of beautiful things, but does not believe in beauty itself, and is

<sup>79</sup> *Theaetetus* 158b-c. (This translation is from Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987).)

<sup>80</sup> CSM II, 13 (AT VII, 19); Clarke 19.

<sup>81</sup> *Theaetetus* 158b; cf. CSM II, 13 (AT VII, 19); Clarke 19.

<sup>82</sup> Another possible derivative from the *Theaetetus* is the wax example of the Second Meditation. This may owe something to the provisional account there of the mind as a wax block (191d-196c). Of course, Descartes could easily have decided to use that example because it was, as he presents it, simply under his nose at the time. But it is worth noting that the *Theaetetus* passage concerns issues at the heart of the *Meditations*: the active, rather than passive, nature of the mind; the causes of error; and knowledge and opinion. But, whatever one thinks of this possibility, it is certainly not anything as strong as an *allusion* to the *Theaetetus*.

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incapable of following anyone who wants to lead him to a knowledge of it? Is he awake, or merely dreaming? Look; isn't dreaming simply the confusion between a resemblance and the reality which it resembles, whether the dreamer be asleep or awake?

'I should certainly say that a man in that state of mind was dreaming.'

'Then what about the man who, contrariwise, believes in beauty itself and can see both it and the particular things which share in it, and does not confuse particular things and that in which they share? Do you think he is awake or dreaming?'

'He is very much awake.'

'And so, because he knows, we can rightly call his state of mind one of knowledge; and that of the other man, who holds opinions only, opinion.'

'Certainly.'<sup>83</sup>

This passage makes it plain that, for Plato, those who rely on their senses rather than their intellect, and who therefore achieve only opinion rather than knowledge, are as if dreaming. Descartes' dreaming argument in the First Meditation serves precisely the same ends: to rely on the senses alone is to be unable to distinguish dreaming from reality.<sup>84</sup> The Platonic passage thus ties dreaming to the senses to the possibility of error in just the way that Descartes does. Given the Platonic connections already discovered, then, it seems more than likely that Descartes was aware of the passage; for present purposes, the important point is that the discussion of which it is a part, the contrast between true philosophers and lovers of sights and sounds, is the passage which prefaces the three allegories of the sun, the divided line and the cave. Moreover, the discussion which follows the allegories twice refers back to this equation of dreaming with being deluded by the senses.<sup>85</sup> If, then,

<sup>83</sup> *Republic* 476b-d.

<sup>84</sup> And, of course, the cure he ultimately offers, in the Sixth Meditation, is, as his reply to Hobbes's First Objection shows, equally Platonic: one must turn from the senses to the intellect. It is once I have grasped the nature of things, and so the causes of experience, that I can reliably distinguish the two. See CSM II, 61–2 (AT VII, 89–90); Clarke 70.

<sup>85</sup> *Republic* 533b-c, 534c-d.

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Descartes was aware of these passages, as seems very likely, it seems *equally unlikely* that he would have been unaware of the famous allegories they bookend; and *highly unlikely* that he would have failed to see their relevance for his project. It seems, then, possible to conclude, with some confidence, that the intimations of the cave detected in this section were intended by their author precisely as such.

In this and the preceding section, it has been argued that the *Meditations* displays features that not only show it to be embedded in the broad Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition, but that also plausibly indicate a direct engagement with Plato's dialogues, and especially with the allegory of the cave and its main themes. The examples offered in support of this view are merely those which have struck the eye of an interested reader; if they are thought to add up to a strong case, then there is good reason for confidence that more such examples could be found.<sup>86</sup> The examples found also seem sufficient to raise a further question: whether there might be not only specific echoes, but also significant *structural commonalities*, between the *Meditations* and any of Plato's works. It does seem to me that this is so. In particular, it seems to me that the number of those echoes that hint in the direction of the allegory of the cave encourage a possibility that will be defended in the next section: that the overall plan of the *Meditations* is in fact *modelled on* the allegory of the cave.

## **The *Meditations* as a Rewriting of Plato's Allegory of the Cave**

Socrates and Glaucon agree, in the passage from the *Republic* quoted above, that the everyday preoccupation with the particular things revealed by the senses is a state of illusion, comparable to dreaming. This passage, with its Cartesian air, belongs, as noted above, to the discussion which introduces the three allegories of the sun, line and cave. So there is some reason to think that Descartes fossicked around in that part of the *Republic* in which the cave and other allegories appear. If we compare the message of the

<sup>86</sup> One other aspect possibly traceable to a Platonic source is the comparison, in the Sixth Meditation, of the soul in the body with the captain of a ship. This may derive in some way from the story of the ship's captain of *Republic* 488a-489e. (It is certainly a reply to Aristotle, *De Anima* 413a.)

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allegories—and, in particular, the structure of the most detailed, the allegory of the cave—with the structure of the *Meditations*, we will find some striking parallels; parallels sufficient, in my view, to warrant the conclusion that, in that work, Descartes was engaged in the deliberate attempt to rewrite the cave allegory for modern times.

The first task is to summarise what those allegories aim to teach. The three allegories themselves all deal with related aspects of the need to turn from the senses to the intellect: the allegory of the sun introduces the extended analogy between sensory and mental seeing, and between the sun as source of sensory seeing and the Good as source of mental seeing. It also affirms that, just as the sun is the source of life, so the Good is the ground of being for everything that exists. The allegory of the divided line offers a more detailed picture of the kinds of ‘seeing’ possible, and offers a hierarchy of forms of illusion and insight. So, to the allegory of the sun it offers an account of everyday illusion, and identifies the ladder one must climb to reach enlightenment. However, it does not acknowledge an external source of intellectual insight or security, and so for this reason is less relevant for our purposes than the sun or the cave.

The cave itself begins with its striking picture of human life as imprisoned in a world of darkness and shadows. Those who free themselves and turn around discover copies of real things, lit by a fire, to be the sources of their experience; upon making their way out of the cave they discover the real things themselves, lit by the sun. Finally, they become able to look upon the sun itself, and then come to discover it to be the source of life of all living things, and, indeed, the source of intelligibility of everything that is. Thus enlightened, they then return to the cave, where their knowledge of reality frees them from illusions and makes them the fittest guides for human life. In this allegory, as in the allegory of the sun, the sun represents the Good, the source of all knowledge and indeed of all being; and, as in the allegory of the divided line, the necessary path to enlightenment is the turn away from the world of sensory illusion to the world of purely intelligible things. The cave also adds two details that are important here: the turn to the intellect first discovers copies rather than real things, lit by fire rather than the sun; and, secondly, enlightenment is not the end of the journey, but the preparation for the return to the cave, where, for the first time, the illusions of the human situation can be identified for what they are, and human life then properly managed for the good of

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all.<sup>87</sup> So the moral of the three allegories, brought to completion in the allegory of the cave, is this: everyday life is sunk in illusion because of its dependence on the senses; turning the mind around to intellectual things discovers copies of reality; discovery of these copies sets us on the path to discover real things; reality is dependent on the Good, the ground of all being; this discovery enables us to return to everyday life and manage it properly, because we have been freed from illusion and error.

The path sketched in the *Meditations* is much the same. The first application of the doubt, to the senses, leads to the discovery that one's state is akin to dreaming. The second application, to the intellect, seems, *at first*, to reduce the mind to total scepticism; but closer examination, in the Second Meditation, shows that the intellect cannot be doubted in its entirety: the *cogito* is the first step in determining that the intellectual powers—doubting, willing, etc—cannot be separated from the meditator. Indeed, closer inspection still reveals that even sensory experience itself depends on intellectual acts. So the meditator discovers at this point that the mind must be turned towards intellectual things, and thereby discovers that the mind is best known of all: it has come to know itself.<sup>88</sup> This leads to the examination of the contents of the mind in the Third Meditation. This examination leads, first, to the conclusion that many of my ideas are either my own creations, or else copies of things outside me. The conclusion itself depends on my possession of a *natural light*: an inner ‘fire’ by which I am able to discover some truths. I then discover that one of my ideas must be regarded as a *copy of a greater reality*: the idea of God is a copy of the eternal reality that is God. The idea of God is thus the discovery of a copy of reality itself, by means of which the meditator is able to get out of the cave, and to discover the perfect being which is its source. But, as in Plato’s account, the vision of reality is dazzling to an unaccustomed eye: the meditator at this

<sup>87</sup> The ascent to beauty described in the *Symposium* (208e-212a) is the other Platonic passage most akin to the allegories. It was much-admired by the Neoplatonists, and, indeed, may well be what Augustine has in mind in his discussion of the ‘Platonic books’ and their influence on him (*Confessions*, 123ff). However, that passage bears most comparison with the allegory of the sun; the cave offers a more detailed progression, and, above all, a return—and Descartes’ account matches the latter in both these respects.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. *Charmides* 167a, 169d.

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point pauses ‘to gaze with wonder on the beauty of this immense light, so far as the eye of my darkened intellect can bear it’.<sup>89</sup>

To discover that God exists is not yet to discover the relationship of God to what exists—that is the task of the Fourth and Fifth Meditations. The Fourth Meditation begins by isolating a criterion for knowledge in clear and distinct perception (a kind of mental gaze upon eternal truths). It then comes to recognize a close connection between truth and goodness—as Plato’s account proposes, in the *Phaedo* as well as the *Republic*.<sup>90</sup> Descartes then argues that human error arises through the *misuse* of our human *freedom*. This Augustinian argument has, however, an overtly Platonic resolution: error is avoided if will is kept within the bounds of the understanding; which is to say, *mutatis mutandis*, that reason must rule in the soul; that the spirited (wilful) part must accept the rule of reason and co-operate with it, not oppose it.<sup>91</sup> This solution establishes that God is not a deceiver.<sup>92</sup> Our clear and distinct ideas themselves are thus free of error. The human capacity for knowledge is thus grounded in a non-deceiving God.

The Fifth Meditation follows. It has often been regarded almost as an unnecessary detour, but it falls into place against the background of a Christian Platonist conception of Creation: material things exist because brought into being by God; but, in order to exist, to be created, their essences (Forms) must first be thought in God’s mind. Creation is the process in which God, the ground of all being, first thinks these essences and then brings them into existence through his creative volition. Thus Descartes proceeds here by determining what things *can* exist, by being first clear and distinct ideas: he concludes that the essence of material things can be coherently conceived if it is identified with the mathematizable properties of extension, its location and motion. He then needs to determine how such an essence—such a possible existence—can be grounded; and this means, whether the God who has been discovered to exist is, like the Form of the Good in Plato’s scheme, the ground of the existence of all contingent being. This is the task of the ontological argument, which goes beyond the conclusion of the cosmological argument to establish the *necessary*

<sup>89</sup> CSM II, 36 (AT VII, 52).

<sup>90</sup> CSM II, 40 (AT VII, 57–8); *Phaedo* 97b-99c. Cf. John Cottingham, ‘The Mind-Body Relation’, in *The Blackwell Guide to Descartes’ Meditations*, 188.

<sup>91</sup> *Republic* 441e.

<sup>92</sup> *Republic* 382a-383b.

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being of God.<sup>93</sup> It is only once this conclusion is in place that the meditator is in a position to return to the cave.

The Sixth Meditation is the return to the cave: the return to the material world, armed with the necessary tools for working out what each thing is. Thus this Meditation establishes, first, the existence of material things; it then sorts out the origins of the various powers that go to make up the strangest thing in this world, the duality that is the human being, and the material causes of its proneness to error. Armed with this knowledge, the meditator has the tools for avoiding error; but, being now back in the cave, and subject to its imperatives, error cannot always be avoided. In the end, then, the meditator's insights include recognition of the weakness of human nature.

The moral of Descartes' tale is thus, in one important respect, less optimistic than Plato's: for the Christian Platonist, human frailty cannot be wholly overcome, and this is part of what is learnt by re-entering the cave.<sup>94</sup> In another way it is more optimistic, in that the epistemological and other limitations that are part and parcel of the mind-body duality do not undermine the *usefulness*—the survival value—of the 'teachings of nature' built into the bodily mechanisms.<sup>95</sup> Thus the sketch of the human condition offered in the Sixth Meditation is more positive than the Platonic picture of embodied life as disorder, as imprisonment within corrupt matter.<sup>96</sup> Other differences can also be noted. One important one is the form of the *Meditations* themselves: its character as a religious exercise, in the manner of Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*, and other comparable works. These differences show that it would be a mistake to suppose that the structural parallels pick out all that is distinctive in the *Meditations*. Nevertheless, they are not nothing: they are not *merely* the inevitable features of any rationalist rejection of empiricism. It is true that rationalism must reject any criterial role for the senses, and so in this sense 'turn away' from the senses to an intellectual standard. It must also, having established this standard, then return to the world we sense to show how it is better explained thereby. Nevertheless, the parallels between the *Meditations* and the cave go well beyond such stock features: the

<sup>93</sup> See Jorge Secada, 'The Doctrine of Substance', and Gary Hatfield, 'The Cartesian Circle', in *The Blackwell Guide to Descartes' Meditations*, 71–2 and 140–1, respectively.

<sup>94</sup> CSM II, 61–2 (AT VII, 88–90).

<sup>95</sup> CSM II, 56–7 (AT VII, 80–3).

<sup>96</sup> See e.g. *Phaedo* 118a; *Phaedrus* 250c.

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distinct echoes, such as the difficulty of gazing upon God; the structural similarity of the whole story, including the return to the cave; and, not least, the central role accorded to God as ground of knowledge and reality. All these factors add up to revealing the *Meditations* to be, not only a work in the Platonic tradition, but a deliberate rewriting of the allegory of the cave.

### **The Socratic Enquirer of the *Discourse***

What then of the *Discourse*? Is it possible to discern distinctively Platonic echoes there as well? I think this is possible, and seeing so helps to remove at least one puzzle about the work. In Part One, Descartes famously claims to have learnt nothing from his teachers, a claim which has perplexed many modern scholars, some of whom have expended considerable labour to show that it is not true. So why should he say it? An explanation immediately presents itself if we suppose him to be self-consciously Platonic, and wishing to signal the fact. It is this: in his opening remarks the author is not aiming simply to communicate truths about his education, but to signal that he is a Socratic enquirer; that, just as Socrates (in the *Apology*<sup>97</sup>) found no satisfaction from those contemporaries who styled themselves as wise, nor (in the *Phaedo*<sup>98</sup>) from the great theorists of the Greek intellectual tradition, and so had to seek it for himself, so the modern Socratic must do likewise, and set aside conventional views in order to see the world aright. Indeed, if one compares the Cartesian with the Platonic passages, parallels are discernible. Like Socrates, Descartes presents us with a brief intellectual autobiography which charts his passage from an initial eagerness for knowledge, to disappointments, to the discovery of his own ignorance; from books to the world to the importance of knowing oneself; from doubt and confusion to the discovery of a new method.<sup>99</sup> It is also striking that the method Socrates proposes in the *Phaedo* bears one resemblance to the Cartesian method: to

<sup>97</sup> *Apology* 21a-23b.

<sup>98</sup> *Phaedo* 96a-100a.

<sup>99</sup> Descartes, *A Discourse on the Method*, Part One (CSM I, 112–6; AT VI, 4–11).

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treat as false whatever cannot be accepted as true.<sup>100</sup> In short, there is good reason to suppose him to be presenting himself as a Socratic, engaged on the quest for knowledge of the true and the good.<sup>101</sup>

If we shift attention to Part Six of the *Discourse*, which, with Part One, serves to bookend the strictly philosophical parts, three other remarks catch the eye on the lookout for Platonic echoes. First, Descartes claims there that, unlike the mere ‘speculative philosophy taught in the schools’, his investigations will help ‘to secure the general welfare of mankind’, in particular ‘the maintenance of health … the chief good and the foundation of all the other goods in this life’. This echoes Socrates’ requirement, in the *Phaedo* autobiography, that true knowledge must concern itself with the highest goods.<sup>102</sup> Secondly, Descartes says, of Aristotle’s ‘most passionate contemporary followers’, that they are ‘mediocre minds’ who, in their manner of philosophizing, ‘seem to resemble a blind man who, in order to fight without disadvantage against someone who can see, lures him into the depths of a very dark cellar’; in contrast, his publishing his own principles is like ‘opening windows and admitting daylight into that cellar where they have gone down to fight’.<sup>103</sup> Considered in isolation, these remarks would seem simply to be a vivid metaphor; in light of the Platonic echoes already discovered, however, it is not fanciful to see here, once again, an echo of the cave.<sup>104</sup> Finally, Descartes also mimics Socrates’ most notorious claim, that he is a public benefit and so should be subsidized by the public (or at least, public-spirited) purse:

if there were someone in the world who was known for sure to be capable of making discoveries of the greatest importance and

<sup>100</sup> *Phaedo* 100a. The standard for taking as true is not the same, however: for Socrates it is agreement with the least vulnerable theory; for Descartes (in the *Discourse*), whatever is clear and distinct, and so beyond doubt: *Discourse*, Part Two (CSM I, 120; AT VI, 18).

<sup>101</sup> Cf. Stephen Gaukroger, ‘Introduction’, in *The Blackwell Guide to Descartes’ Meditations*, 1.

<sup>102</sup> *Discourse*, Part Six (CSM I, 142–3; AT VI, 61–2); cf. *Phaedo* 97c-d.

<sup>103</sup> *Discourse*, Part Six (CSM I, 147; AT VI, 70–1).

<sup>104</sup> It is also possible to detect another echo of the cave in the *Rules*. Descartes remarks there that ‘those who are accustomed to walking in the dark weaken their eye-sight, the result being that they can no longer bear to be in broad daylight’; *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Rule Four (CSM I, 16; AT X, 371).

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public benefit, and that for this reason other men tried in every way possible to help him to achieve his ends, I do not see how they could do anything else for him, except to provide him with financial support for the experiments and observations he would need to make ...<sup>105</sup>

If this is not a Socratic allusion—in a context, moreover, of self-defence against possible public criticism—then it is a remarkably ham-fisted way of losing friends. One must presume it to be the former! So these examples, together with the autobiographical sketch of Part One, show that the *Discourse* also can be illuminated by taking seriously the thought that Descartes saw himself as a modern descendent of Plato; that he composed his works with an eye over his shoulder at the works of his illustrious predecessor, and accordingly dropped hints of the relationship into his own works.

### **Some Benefits of Recognizing the Platonic Connection**

To bring Plato back into the picture when interpreting the Cartesian corpus has a number of advantages. With respect to the *Discourse*, some of these are obvious: Descartes' otherwise-puzzling remarks about his education in Part One immediately fall into place, and some curious passages in Part Six are also illuminated. No doubt other allusions can also be found therein; should they be found, they too can be expected to throw light on otherwise-puzzling passages.

With respect to the *Meditations*, the advantages are, in part, of this incidental kind—throwing light on isolated passages—but they also make a difference to understanding the work as a whole. The first and most obvious effect is that, by recognizing its structural dependence on the allegory of the cave, the overall ambition of the *Meditations* is immediately made clear—indeed, vividly so. In fact, because the basic shape of the cave allegory, and its message, are so easily grasped, bringing it into view immediately enables the reader of the *Meditations* to maintain focus on the forest and not just the trees: on Descartes' overall purposes, and how his arguments serve those purposes, rather than merely on the argumentative details. To spell out the most obvious implication: keeping the allegory in mind immediately shows that the First and Second Meditations are

<sup>105</sup> *Discourse*, Part Six, in Descartes, *A Discourse on the Method*, trans. Ian Maclean (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 59 (CSM I, 148; AT VI, 73); cf. *Apology* 36c-37a.

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almost entirely preliminary—finding the way out of the cave—and so cannot, except with considerable care, be treated as Descartes' settled conclusions.<sup>106</sup>

Next, it becomes equally clear that the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Meditations, because they correspond to being outside the cave in the Platonic allegory, need to be taken as a unity. Perhaps most significantly, the role of the Fifth Meditation, and in particular of the ontological argument—often regarded as little more than a tiresome delay in getting to the point—comes into focus. Just as the cave-dweller has to learn that the Form of the Good is the ground of all being, so the meditator has to learn that this is also true of the God who has been discovered to exist. Descartes' own heading to that Meditation—‘another argument for God’s existence’—is so surprisingly low-key that it is itself partly to blame for readers missing the significance of the argument. But, as has been emphasized, it is an argument with a different conclusion from the cosmological argument of the Third Meditation: it concludes that God exists *necessarily*, and as such is the metaphysical anchor of all contingent being. The meditator then determines what is the clear and distinct idea that can be instantiated as existing things through this necessary being (what is the essence of material things)—a recognizably Christian Platonist way of proceeding. Finally, thus armed with the necessary insights, the meditator can then return to the cave of material existence to sort the different things into their kinds and roles, thereby at last to understand the world aright.

A further benefit which flows directly is that the *Meditations'* preoccupation with the nature and existence of God immediately becomes clear. This is because it brings out vividly that the foundation of Cartesian science is the knowledge of God as the omnipotent, but non-deceiving, necessarily-existing ground of all being—and not the *cogito*, as so often claimed. The role of the *cogito* is, as Descartes emphasizes, to stop the doubt and to lead to self-discovery. But science needs a stable foundation on which to build—from which to move on—rather than the endless reminding

<sup>106</sup> The author himself lamented the failure of his earliest readers to see that early-reached conclusions were merely preliminary; what his reaction would be to the modern first-year epistemology course, with its almost-exclusive focus on those two Meditations, one can only imagine! For our purposes, the relevant matter is the oft-repeated view that Descartes introduces a new conception of mind in which feeling and thinking are conflated—as illustrated above with the case of Richard Rorty (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 47–54).

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oneself of one's own existence.<sup>107</sup> And, obviously, the meditator delays returning to the cave until those foundations have finally been put in place by the Fifth Meditation. Recognizing this is a benefit not only for understanding the work, but also for all those teachers and students who together struggle through (at least parts of) the *Meditations* in introductory philosophy courses. As is known all too well, the undergraduate's initial excitement with a text which begins so dramatically—calling everything into question—soon turns to disappointment, even hostility, when the trail seems to lead only to dull, not to mention incomprehensible, religious topics. Every teacher knows just what hard work teaching the work can become; a task made all the harder because, typically, the sense of having entered a medieval bog is shared by teacher and student alike. Bringing the parallels between the *Meditations* and the cave to the fore cannot remove this problem entirely, but it does ease it, by making the nature of the project clear to all.

Finally, not the least of benefits is that to recognize Descartes' metaphysical project in the *Discourse* and *Meditations* as the manipulation of an ancient idea to express a new, if related, idea provides a striking illustration of one way in which philosophical use can be made of philosophy's history; and, more specifically, of how the scientific revolution's much-vaunted 'break with the past' was effected with the aid of materials borrowed from that past itself. Many claims have been made for the radical break which Descartes effected with his works, but these are nearly always overblown.<sup>108</sup> The originality of his philosophical works cannot be denied, but the nature of that originality has commonly been misconstrued; in particular, the more radical claims for the uniqueness of his conclusions have been undermined in the face of a solid understanding of his debts to Augustinian and other influences. The identification of direct Platonic influences in this study has further pressed that point. Attending briefly to the most popular aspects of the *Meditations* will sum up the point. The first stage of the method of radical doubt—the doubting of the senses in

<sup>107</sup> Again, see Williams, *The Sense of the Past*, 244–5.

<sup>108</sup> Even Stephen Gaukroger's twin claims that Descartes established the centrality of epistemology, and did so in order to make one responsible for one's intellectual life (*The Blackwell Guide to Descartes' Meditations*, 1), seems to me to go too far. Both these themes are visible in the Socrates of the early dialogues. The same is true of much of the long tradition of philosophy as a 'spiritual exercise': see Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold Davidson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

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general in the dreaming argument—is recognizably a redeployment of Platonic argument and allegory; the *second* stage of the doubt—the doubting of the intellect in general in the arguments from divine omnipotence and chance (rather than in the sceptics' appeal to variability of judgements<sup>109</sup>)—has a much more solid claim on originality, but it relies, in part, on premises concerning the divine nature derived from Augustinian theology;<sup>110</sup> the *cogito* argument which stops the doubt is anticipated in Aristotle and Augustine, but most probably derives from Jean Silhon's *The Immortality of the Soul*; and the ultimate conclusion of the soul's immateriality being guaranteed by its intellectual nature is, whatever its other debts, recognizably a development of Plato's argument for the soul's immortality in the *Phaedo*.<sup>111</sup> Descartes' best-known arguments and conclusions are thus, in the main, adaptations or developments of arguments and conclusions traceable, directly or indirectly, to Platonic sources. The *Meditations* as a whole has been shown to be the rewriting of the cave allegory for the purposes of modern science and modern metaphysics, thereby to bring out the Platonic thread that connects its (Augustinian) theological and (mathematical) scientific concerns.

So, whether we focus on individual arguments or on the overall project, the work's originality is discovered to lie in its manner of harnessing ancient resources for modern ends, rather than in instituting a radical break with all that went before. Whatever the details of such conclusions, however, the main moral here is that to recognize the *Meditations'* Platonic debts is not merely a matter for lovers of arcane details, but a key to better understanding—and

<sup>109</sup> See, for example, Michel de Montaigne, *An Apology for Raymond Sebond*, in *Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991), 634–5.

<sup>110</sup> It also seems to have been so poorly understood in modern times that its relevance for current views seems to have been wholly missed. To take the obvious example: Descartes identifies, *mutatis mutandis*, the problem implicit in Darwinian naturalism, for which mental capacities must be explained in terms of survival value, rather than in terms of truth-orientation. (There may of course be links between the two. See, for example, Peter Godfrey-Smith, *Complexity and the Function of Mind in Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).)

<sup>111</sup> *Phaedo* 78b-80e, 100a-107a.

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better communication—both of the work’s central message, and also of its place in the philosophical tradition.<sup>112</sup>

### **Conclusion**

A marked tendency of modern scholarship has been to detect, in both the *Discourse* and the *Meditations*, evidence of considerable literary artifice. This study has offered further evidence in the same vein. It has argued that, in the *Meditations*, Descartes presents an intellectual journey which follows the same broad path as Plato’s allegory of the cave, a parallel which he has hinted at by including many Platonic echoes along the way; and that recognizing these aspects of the work provide an improved sense of its philosophical shape. The message of the *Meditations* is that the demands of Christian theology and of the new physics can be united in a consistently Platonic vision, by wedding Augustinian theology with a mathematical conception of the nature of the material world. This study has further argued that, in the *Discourse*, the author presents himself in terms which echo Plato’s depiction of the Socratic enquirer in the *Apology* and *Phaedo*. In so doing, the author reminds us that the *Discourse*, written in order to defend a life of enquiry, and its (only selectively published) fruits, is nothing

<sup>112</sup> A careful comparison of Descartes’ physics with the physics of the *Timaeus* would underline these linkages. In that work we see Plato argue that reality is composed out of different types of geometrical figure, such that material objects and their properties are explained by reference to mathematically-defined units of pure extension. Moreover, things exist in a ‘receptacle’ which, although identified by Plato as space, nevertheless possesses motion: he thus connects materiality and extension. Plato goes on to explain differences of properties between different things by the different shapes and sizes and motions of the particles of which different things are composed, all of which processes occur in a plenum. He also explains sensible qualities as effects of bodily disturbances on the soul, and so affirms the close connection of mind and body on which Descartes insists at the end of the *Meditations*. Finally, he holds that perfect knowledge of the changeable, imperfect world is impossible, and so accepts that his physical explanations are not knowledge, but a ‘likely story’; if a little grudgingly, Descartes also claims only ‘moral certainty’ for his physical principles. See *Timaeus* 52a-68d on basic constituents of reality, qualities of objects, body and soul; *Timaeus* 27e-29d and 72d-e on the world of change not being knowable with certainty; Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy* IV, 205–6 (CSM I, 289–90 (AT VIIIA, 327–9)) on moral certainty.

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less than Descartes' own *Apology*. Of course, it is no news to recognize Descartes' philosophy to be indebted to elements in the broad Platonic philosophical tradition; but it is something else again to recognize his major philosophical works to involve the self-conscious reworking of Plato's own writings. Descartes embedded this message in his presentation of the works: the *Discourse* and *Meditations* are, indeed, works of considerable literary as well as philosophical artifice.<sup>113</sup>

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