

# Reading Philosophy

(HPPH5038/HPPH6038)

Vuthy Hastings

# Critical review of Book VI – VII: On Innate Knowledge

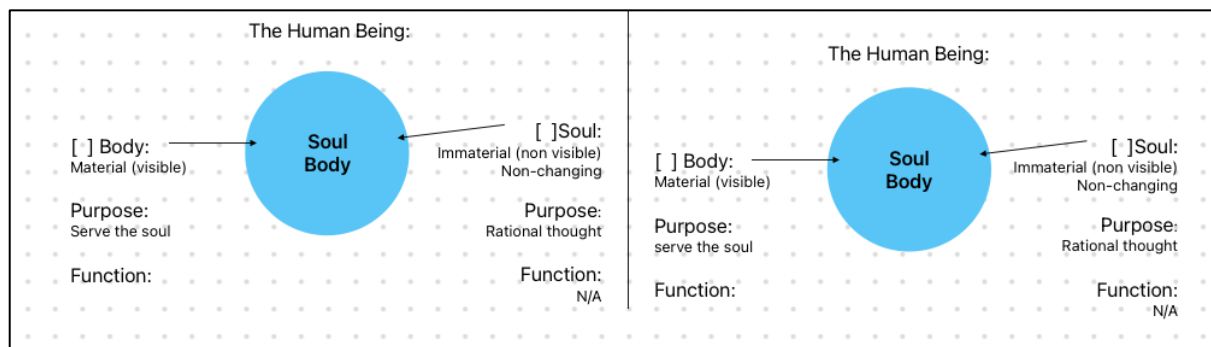
## Introduction:

This essay picks up where my recent presentation (Hastings, 2025) on mind-body dualism left off, using that session as a springboard to dig further into the theory of forms. That earlier discussion opened the door to thinking more seriously about what it means to be human, and more specifically, how the soul and body relate to one another in two of the most influential frameworks in Western philosophy, Plato's and Descartes's. To get things rolling, I'll return briefly to that original soul-body framework, adding a few refinements along the way to solidify it as a foundation for what follows. From there, I shift into the deeper layers of both thinkers' metaphysical ideas. The goal here isn't just to compare and contrast for the sake of it, but to build a shared structure, a sort of cross-philosophical scaffolding on which their ideas about reality and the human condition can be properly understood. Whether it's Plato's Form of the Good or Descartes's conception of God as the source of truth, both philosophers construct dualist systems that separate the intelligible from the physical, with the soul caught in the middle as the link between the two.

Once that base is in place, I move into their ideas about knowledge itself. Plato and Descartes both favour reason over the senses as a source for knowledge, but they get there in different ways, with different assumptions. I'll lay out their positions and use them to build a working epistemological map that reflects both their overlap and their divergence. The turning point in the essay comes with a look at innate knowledge. Here, I bring in *The Kybalion* (Initiates, 2021), a Hermetic text that reframes the debate on (innate ideas) entirely, not as a

matter of stored information or divine downloads, but as a matter of attunement. In this view, knowing isn't remembering or deducing; it's aligning with something deeper. I close the investigation by testing this unified model against John Locke's famous critique of innate ideas. Rather than dismantling the concept, I argue that Locke may have simply misunderstood what innate really means.

## Point 1: Soul and body framework



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At the heart of both Plato's and Descartes's philosophies lies a foundational distinction between soul and body. Each philosopher explores the makeup and purpose of these components, though their interpretations branch off in significant ways. During the original presentation, the term "function" came up, but a cohesive function wasn't found; instead, what emerged was a sense of purpose. For clarity, let's align Plato's view on purpose with a teleological framework and Descartes's term function, with a mechanistic one. This will allow for an integrated discussion so as not to leave one or the other out.

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<sup>1</sup> Screenshot From Vuthy's Macbook, Created via freeform, date: 4/5/25, time: 12:30

In their views, the body is made of material stuff, divisible, ever-changing, and finite. Its purpose? To serve the soul. The soul is something else entirely: indivisible, non-material, and unchanging. For both thinkers, the soul's ultimate purpose is rational thought. However, what they each mean by "rational" depends on their broader metaphysical and epistemological commitments, which shape how they define and prioritize the human experience. (ref)

As we delve deeper into the essay, our understanding of the human being will evolve according to each philosopher's metaphysical system. Even if the basic terminology overlaps between Plato and Descartes, how they position these ideas, and what they ultimately mean, will hinge on the philosophical lens they're using

## Point 2: Metaphysical framework

| <b>Plato:</b><br>Metaphysical Framework                                                                 | <b>Descartes:</b><br>Metaphysical Framework                                                               |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>The Form of Good:</b> (First principle)<br>- Source of being and intelligibility, the ultimate cause | <b>The Substance, God:</b> (First principle)<br>- Source of being and intelligibility, the ultimate cause |
| <b>The World of Being:</b> (intelligible realm)<br>- Invisible, immaterial, unchanging                  | <b>intelligible realm</b><br>- Invisible, immaterial, unchanging                                          |
| <b>The World of Becoming:</b> (Physical realm)<br>- Visible, material, changing                         | <b>Physical realm</b><br>- Visible, Material, Changing                                                    |

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<sup>2</sup> Screenshot From Vuthy's Macbook, Created via freeform, date: 4/5/25, time: 13:33

Plato's metaphysics begins with the Form of the Good, which he sees as the highest source of all existence and intelligibility. It's not just another form, it's the reason anything can be understood at all. This is most famous in *The Republic*, where the Form of the Good functions like the sun in the Allegory of the Cave, shedding light on truth and enabling comprehension. Plato even says, 'The good is not being, but superior to it in rank and power' (Plato, p. 509b)

From that ultimate principle, Plato divides reality into two major realms:

- **The World of Being:** This is the immaterial, invisible world that never changes. It's what the soul connects to when it seeks true knowledge. As Plato puts it, the journey of the soul is 'If you identify the upward journey and the sight of things above with the ascent of the soul to the intelligible realm, you will not mistake my intention' (Plato, p. 517B)
- **The World of Becoming:** This is the physical realm we see and touch, always moving, never still. Plato calls it the land of 'we see images and shadows of things rather than the things themselves, and it is subject to constant flux and change' (Plato, 1997, p. 515c)

Descartes mirrors this dualism but rephrases it through his own rationalist lens. His starting point isn't a Form, but rather God, the single substance responsible for both reality and understanding. In *Meditations*, Descartes argues that God's existence is as undeniable as anything clearly and distinctly perceived: 'what is more clear than this, that the supreme being exists or that God—to whose essence alone existence belongs exists?' (Descartes, p. 136)

His framework also splits into two:

- **Intelligible Realm:** Like Plato's world of being, this realm is abstract, unchanging, and invisible. Descartes writes;

"When an idea contains one particular intentional reality rather than another, it must surely get this from some cause in which there is at least as much formal reality as is contained intentionally in the idea" (Descartes, 1998, p. 107)

- **Physical Realm:** This is the material world, visible and subject to change. Though we can conceive of many ideas, some might exist only in the mind: 'even if they do not exist anywhere outside me, still they cannot be said to be nothing' (Descartes, p. 131)

### Point 3: Epistemological frame work

| <b>Plato:</b><br>Epistemological Framework                                 | <b>Descartes:</b><br>Epistemological Framework                    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>True Knowledge: (Episteme)</b><br>- Eternal, Unchanging, and infallible | <b>True Knowledge:</b><br>- Eternal, unchanging and infallible    |
| <b>Opinion: (Doxa)</b><br>- Variable, uncertain, based on sense perception | <b>False knowledge:</b><br>- Uncertain, based on sense perception |

3

Plato draws a strict line between true knowledge (episteme) and mere opinion (doxa). For him, knowledge is stable, eternal, and accessed through reason, not through the senses. He writes, 'Knowledge is set over what is, while ignorance is necessarily set over what is not; and opinion is intermediate between these two extremes'. (Plato, 1997, p. 447a) Our senses, he warns, are stuck in the realm of change and illusion.

Descartes shares this mistrust of sensory information. His true knowledge is also certain, permanent, and rooted in clear, rational thought. 'I could establish as a general rule that everything that I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true' (Descartes, p. 101). In contrast, belief based on the senses is shaky at best: 'Despite the fact that the senses occasionally deceive us about things that are very small or very far away' (Descartes, p. 83). For both philosophers, knowledge is something we reach through reason, not observation.

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<sup>3</sup> Screenshot From Vuthy's Macbook, Created via freeform, date: 4/5/25, time: 15:40

Having now laid out their views on metaphysics, epistemology, and the human being, we can start to find a deeper coherence that might unify their approaches to human nature and knowledge.

#### **Point 4:** Innate Knowledge unification

To understand how Plato and Descartes treat innate knowledge, we can reinterpret their theories through the Hermetic teachings of *The Kybalion* (Initiates, 2021)

In dialogues like *Phaedo* and *The Republic*, Plato presents knowledge as recollection. The soul has seen truth before birth and learning is just remembering. In *Phaedo*, he writes: ‘We must have learned it at some earlier time’. (Plato, 1997, pp. 75c-d) This means the soul is inherently attuned to a higher reality, the realm of the Forms.

Descartes is more systematic but still believes some ideas, like God, mathematical principles and infinity are not learned but inborn. He writes:

“There cannot be in us even an idea or image of something of which there is not some archetype, either in ourselves or outside us, that really contains all its perfections” (Descartes, 1998, p. 226)

these innate ideas, when seen clearly, align with truth.

The Hermetic texts introduces a mentalist metaphysics, ‘THE ALL is MIND; The Universe is Mental’ (Initiates, p. 131) If the universe is fundamentally mental, then truth isn’t just remembered or implanted, it’s resonated with. Both Plato’s

Forms and Descartes's clear ideas become vibrations of a universal mind that human consciousness can align with.

The Kybalion's 'As above, so below; as below, so above' (Initiates, p. 118), parallels Plato's division of worlds but suggests a less rigid, interconnected model. Rather than a strict separation, the realms mirror one another.

Descartes's rational clarity could then be seen not as a divine gift, but a result of tuning into the frequency of truth.

Both philosophers use the metaphor of the search for truth, Plato's soul digs through distractions to find it; Descartes strips away doubt to see it. But *The Kybalion* offers a different take: the soul harmonizes with truth, like a tuning fork. 'To change your mood or mental state, change your vibration'. (Initiates, p. 126)

Also key, is *The Kybalion's* Principle of Polarity: 'Everything is dual; everything has poles; everything has its pair of opposites; like and unlike are the same; opposites are identical in nature, but different in degree'. (Initiates, 2021, p. 11) Mind and matter, then, aren't opposites but two sides of the same coin. This better sides with Plato's view than Descartes's rigid split, suggesting a more integrated understanding of reality and consciousness.

By drawing from Hermetic thought, we can create a hybrid view that unifies Plato's intuitive recollection with Descartes's rational accuracy:

- **Metaphysically**, the soul isn't remembering a past life or receiving divine downloads. It's a fragment of the Universal Mind, capable of aligning with truth through conscious resonance.

- **Epistemologically**, truth isn't simply recalled nor logically deduced. It's accessed through tuning, via philosophical dialogue or introspection.

In this unification, the soul holds dormant knowledge. Reason or reflection awakens it, not because it's been forgotten or handed down, but because it vibrates with the nature of reality itself.

### Point 5: Responding to John Locke

John Locke's idea of innate knowledge comes from *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. In Book I, he argues that no principle is universally acknowledged, not even the most basic logical truths are accepted by all people, including children or those with cognitive impairments. From this, he concludes that innate ideas cannot exist. 'If there be any innate truths, they must be universally received' (1925, p. 48). Locke insists that the mind begins as a *tabula rasa*, 'let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters.' (1925, p. 104)

However, when viewed through the lens of the Hermetic unification of Plato and Descartes, Locke's critique seems to miss the subtle conception of innateness. The unification does not argue that people are born with explicit, verbalized truths implanted in their minds. Instead, it proposes that knowledge exists in potential form, like seeds waiting to be awakened under the right conditions. These truths are not universally *assented to* because they are not consciously known by all at all times; they are resonances within the soul that require intellectual, spiritual, or emotional alignment to be perceived.

In this framework, innate knowledge is not about immediate access to concepts, but about the capacity to harmonize with higher truths embedded in the very fabric of reality. The Kybalion suggests that wisdom sprouts in proportion to one's receptivity: 'The lips of Wisdom are closed, except to the ears of Understanding.' (Initiates, p. 13) This implies that universal knowledge isn't absent, it's simply inaccessible to those not yet attuned. So, rather than disproving innateness, the lack of universal agreement may highlight the variability of human development, spiritual maturity, and mental 'vibration.'

Moreover, Locke's empiricism falls short when addressing abstract or metaphysical truths, such as the concepts of justice, beauty, or the infinite. His sensory-based model doesn't account for how we come to understand such universal and non-empirical ideas. The Hermetic-Platonic-Descartes unification fills this gap by suggesting these truths are *discovered* through tuning, not built from scratch. In this sense, Locke critiques a straw man mistaking potential resonance for fully formed knowledge and in doing so, underestimates the depth of the soul's inner landscape.

## Conclusion:

As this essay comes to a close, it's clear that what started with a simple look at the soul and the body ended up becoming a much broader inquiry into how we understand knowledge, truth, and reality itself. The original dualist structure that body is temporal and sensory-bound, soul as rational and lasting, proved to be more than just a philosophical footnote. It turned out to be the thread that runs through Plato's theory of Forms, Descartes's rationalism, and even the Hermetic ideas found in *The Kybalion*. By stepping into the metaphysical

framework each thinker offers, we see how both Plato and Descartes create a two-tiered universe, separating the visible and the invisible, the mutable and the eternal. While their language and assumptions differ, their models both leave space for a soul that reaches beyond the material world. That shared outlook set the stage for looking at how each of them thinks we come to know anything at all.

Their paths to truth, Plato through recollection, Descartes through doubt and clarity seem at first like parallel lines. But *The Kybalion* offered up a surprise: what if truth isn't "stored" in us or handed down, but something we can tune into? That idea, that truth is vibrational, not informational, lets us stitch together a third way. One where reason and intuition aren't opposites, but different methods of resonance. Then came Locke. His rejection of innate knowledge is profound and influential, but when seen from this new angle, it feels like he might have aimed at the wrong target. His critique works if you imagine innate knowledge as fully formed facts sitting in our heads from birth. But if you think of it instead as a capacity or potential something that needs the right moment or state of mind to activate, his objections don't land as strongly. In the end, this wasn't about picking who was right or wrong; it was about seeing what new insights might come out of an exchange between Descartes, Plato, Locke, and the initiates.

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