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The Doctrine of Ideas

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By the beginning of Meditation III, Descartes has been able to retreat somewhat from the epistemological abyss that confronted him at the end of Meditation I. No longer facing a complete skepticism about all knowledge, he can now be sure of at least two things: that he exists (*ego sum, ego existo*) and that he is a thinking thing (*sum res cogitans*). Even if the meditator's being, and consequently his faculties, are the result of the designs of an evil genius who is bent on seeing him systematically deceived, these most simple and basic truths about himself remain indubitable.

However, Descartes' ambitions go beyond the limited security of solipsistic beliefs. He is not content simply to have in his possession certain knowledge about himself as a mind or spirit. His goal in the *Meditations* is to provide epistemological and metaphysical foundations for the sciences, especially the new mathematical science of nature for which he, along with Galileo, Mersenne, and others, is a leading early-modern proponent. He is seeking knowledge of independent and objective eternal verities and of the most universal principles of the world around him. Somehow, therefore, he is going to have to find a way to move beyond the certainty that he, at the beginning of Meditation III, has about his own being and nature toward certainty about the existence and nature of that world. He needs, in other words, a bridge from his own mind to external things.

This is where the doctrine of ideas comes in. Descartes will rely on these immediately accessible and absolutely certain contents of his own mind to demonstrate, first, the existence of an all-powerful, all-perfect, benevolent, non-deceiving God who created him. Having established this, he will be able to conclude that, as long as he uses his God-given, hence inherently reliable, rational faculties properly and only gives his assent to what he clearly and distinctly perceives, he can be confident in the truth of his certain beliefs about things in the world.

Descartes' doctrine of ideas thus plays a crucial role in the overall argument of the *Meditations*. It serves as the fulcrum that will allow him to move outside of himself and toward the metaphysical truths about God and, eventually, nature that

provide secure foundations for the sciences. It is also, however, one of the more difficult and, to our twenty-first-century minds, puzzling aspects of the argument of the work. In this chapter, I shall address some of the important elements of the doctrine and explain the role that they play in the meditator's project.

What are Ideas?

Descartes is well aware of the ambiguities of the word "idea." In fact, his own use of the word is equivocal and inconsistent. He usually uses it to refer to immaterial images in the mind, and this is the understanding of the word which dominates the *Meditations* and with which we will be concerned below. Sometimes, however, it is used also to refer to volitional acts by the mind; and at other times it is used to refer even to material images in the brain (see, for example, AT vii, 181 and AT xi, 174).

For the most part, we can distinguish two senses of "idea" for Descartes: a broad sense and a strict sense. In the broad meaning of "idea" – "idea" as genus – the word refers to any mental item, any state of the mind, whether it be an image, an affect, or a volitional act. Ideas in this general sense are states of consciousness, and these come in a great variety: perceptions, imaginings, thoughts, desires, feelings, willings, doubtings, and so on. In the narrow sense – "idea" as species – the word refers only to those mental items that are "as it were images of things [*tanquam rerum imagines*]" or representational states. These include sense perceptions of physical things, pure intellectual thoughts (e.g., of mathematical figures), imaginings (e.g., of unicorns), dreams, and sensations and feelings (pain, pleasure). Both the sensory appearance of the sun as a small, yellow, warm disc and the conceptual understanding of the sun as an enormous body of gas are equally ideas in the narrow sense.

Descartes vividly draws this distinction between the narrow and broad meanings of "idea" in this passage from Meditation III:

Some of my thoughts are as it were the images of things, and it is only in these cases that the term "idea" is strictly appropriate – for example, when I think of a man, or a chimera, or the sky, or an angel, or God. Other thoughts have various additional forms: thus, when I will, or am afraid, or affirm, or deny, there is always a particular thing which I take as the object of my thought, but my thought includes something more than the likeness of that thing. Some thoughts in this category are called volitions or emotions, while others are called judgements. (AT vii, 37)

At the core of every idea in the broad sense is an idea in the strict sense, giving it a specific content or referent. When I desire an ice cream cone, there is, in addition to the affirming state of mind that constitutes the desiring, an idea or image of an ice cream cone that makes it the particular desire that it is.

In sum, then, we can say that ideas generally speaking are the states of consciousness of which the mind is immediately aware. This, in fact, is precisely how Descartes defines “thought” in the *Principles of Philosophy*: “By the term ‘thought’, I understand everything which we are aware of as happening within us, in so far as we have awareness of it” (I, art. 9). An “idea,” correlatively, is what is apprehended by the mind when one is conscious of the thought: “Idea: I understand this term to mean the form of any given thought, immediate perception of which makes me aware of the thought” (*Second Replies*, AT vii, 160). Strictly speaking, however, ideas (in the narrow sense) are those states of consciousness that are image-like appearances. Ideas (in the narrow sense) are all those visions, thoughts, feelings and other *imagines* that stand before the mind’s eye in consciousness and that are the objects of the mind’s active attitudes (affirming, denying, willing, desiring, and so on). An idea is what is immediately “there” to the mind, regardless of what may or may not be the case outside of the mind.

For this reason, ideas have a special epistemic status in Descartes’ system. Our apprehension of them is absolutely certain, even if everything else has been placed in doubt. There may not be an external world of bodies at all. For all I know – and this is the meditator’s situation as Meditation III begins – there is only myself as a thinking thing. Nonetheless, the contents that stand immediately before me as a thinking thing – my ideas, my thoughts – are indubitably there, and there can be no doubt whatsoever about this. I may be wrong in my judgment as to whether or not there is a table in front of me, but I cannot possibly be wrong in my judgment that I have an idea or thought (or the appearance) of a table in front of me.

I am a thing that thinks: that is, a thing that doubts, affirms, denies, understands a few things, is ignorant of many things, is willing, is unwilling, and also which imagines and has sensory perceptions; for as I have noted before, even though the objects of my sensory experience and imagination may have no existence outside me, nonetheless the modes of thinking which I refer to as cases of sensory perception and imagination, in so far as they are simply modes of thinking, do exist within me: of that I am certain. (*Meditations* III, AT vii, 34–5)

This is a point he will later make again in the *Principles of Philosophy*:

If I say “I am seeing, or I am walking, therefore I exist,” and take this as applying to vision or walking as bodily activities, then the conclusion is not absolutely certain. This is because, as often happens during sleep, it is possible for me to think I am seeing or walking, though my eyes are closed and I am not moving about; such thoughts might even be possible if I had no body at all. But if I take “seeing” or “walking” to apply to the actual sense or awareness of seeing or walking, then the conclusion is quite certain, since it relates to the mind, which alone has the sensation or thought that it is seeing or walking. (I, art. 9)

I may be able to doubt that x truly exists outside the mind, but I cannot possibly doubt whether or not I have an idea of x . Philosophers often put this point by

saying that my beliefs about my ideas are *incorrigible*: if I believe that I have an idea of or am thinking of x , then I do have an idea of or am thinking of x .

Formal vs Objective Reality

Most first-time readers of the *Meditations* are particularly confused by some technical vocabulary that Descartes uses in Meditation III to distinguish between two different aspects of ideas. The distinction is actually first introduced in the work's Preface. Descartes early on alerts the reader to yet another ambiguity in the word "idea," although in this case the ambiguity is restricted to ideas taken in the strict sense, as *imagines* appearing before the mind: "There is an ambiguity here in the word 'idea.' 'Idea' can be taken materially, as an operation of the intellect, in which case it cannot be said to be more perfect than me. Alternatively, it can be taken objectively, as the thing represented by that operation' (AT vii, 8). In Meditation III, this distinction between the material reality of an idea and its objective reality reappears as the distinction between the idea's formal reality and its objective reality.

Now what is usually confusing to the modern reader is that the word "objective" is ordinarily understood to refer to something that is out there in the real world, external to the mind and regardless of whether anyone is perceiving it. The contrast is with what is "subjective," which is what is in the mind. To refer to something's "objectivity" is taken to refer to its real, extra-mental being. In a sense, as we shall see, Descartes completely reverses this meaning and uses "objective being" to refer to something's being in the mind by way of being thought about. When he speaks of something existing "objectively," he will in a certain respect mean what we mean when we speak of something existing "subjectively."

Let us begin, however, with the "formal reality" or "material reality" of ideas. By these terms, Descartes is referring to the true ontological reality or being of a thing. In particular, to ask about the formal reality of something is to ask in the most general and metaphysical way what kind of thing it is and what its status is in reality. For Descartes, there are only two kinds of things – substances and modes (or modifications) of substances. Substances have the highest ontological status. They are true beings, and exist independently of other things. Strictly speaking, only God is a true substance, since God alone requires nothing else for its existence. Still, finite things, such as human souls, have a sufficient degree of ontological independence to qualify as substances in a secondary sense, since they depend on nothing other than God for their being. A mode or attribute or property, however, can exist only as the mode or attribute or property of something. Modes are not free agents, but necessarily belong to substances. Modes are simply the ways in which substances exist or manifest themselves.

The modes of material or extended substances are shape, size, divisibility, and mobility. The shape of the table is one of its modes. The modes of thinking

substances, on the other hand, are thoughts. The formal reality of ideas, then, which are nothing but a species of thought, is that they are modifications of thinking substance. Insofar as it is considered simply as a mental event, an idea is nothing but a property of the mind. In terms of their formal reality, all ideas are identical. They are all equally mental items dependent on the minds to which they belong, and there is in this regard no difference whatsoever between them. “In so far as the ideas are [considered] simply [as] modes of thought, there is no recognizable inequality among them: they all appear to come from within me in the same fashion” (Meditation III, AT vii, 40).

But what *kind* of mental property is an idea? There has been a great deal of debate, both among Descartes’ seventeenth-century followers (such as Antoine Arnauld and Nicolas Malebranche) and in recent scholarship, over whether ideas for Descartes are modes of the mind in the sense of mental things perceived by the mind or in the sense of the mind’s perceptions. Are Cartesian ideas, in other words, *mental objects* or *mental acts*? Descartes speaks in ways that seem to lend support to both readings. On the one hand, he speaks of ideas as what are immediately perceived by the mind. For example, in Meditation III he says that an idea is “what appears before my mind,” and appears to treat it as the object of the mind’s attention. On the other hand, in the Preface to the *Meditations*, an idea is defined not as some inert object perceived by the mind, but rather as an active “operation of the intellect [*operatio intellectus*].” This makes it seem as though an idea is not what is perceived but is the perceiving itself through which we apprehend external things.

The debate has been fueled by a worry that if ideas are mental objects, then Descartes seems to have surrounded the mind with what has been derisively called “a veil of ideas.” Ideas, on this account, would be the direct and immediate objects of perception and stand between the perceiving mind and the external world, with the latter only indirectly perceived. A person would apprehend ideas as a kind of picture show, beyond which lies the reality which is the ultimate object of knowledge. But then how could we ever know anything for certain about that external world? The epistemological problem that Descartes has set himself in the *Meditations* would have to be framed in terms of how to determine whether things in the world outside the mind are at all like the mental images or pictures in the mind that we apprehend. But since all we ever directly and immediately perceive are ideas, there would be no direct evidence for how things “really” are – we certainly could not step outside the “veil of ideas” and compare those things with the ideas – and thus (especially given the problems that notoriously plague Descartes’ demonstrations of God’s existence and veracity) no satisfying resolution to the skeptical puzzles with which the work begins.

But it seems to me that the question of whether Descartes’ ideas are objects of the mind or acts of the mind is, epistemologically speaking, irrelevant. No matter what ideas are ontologically, Descartes must clearly confront the main skeptical question that he has set himself in the *Meditations*: how can he know to what

degree the way things in the world (or in mathematics, or in any scientific domain whatsoever) appear to him to be is in fact the way they really are? Ideas are appearances, the way we perceive or conceive things. It does not matter whether Descartes holds a representational theory of perception (whereby the immediate objects of perception are mental objects) or a direct realist theory of perception (where ideas are the perceptions themselves by which we apprehend external objects). The direct realist, as much as the representationalist, has to concede that at least some claims to perceive or conceive how things really are, are false; after all, we commonly make sensory errors and get taken in by our dreams, and our intellectual reasonings often go astray. The direct realist certainly must admit the distinction between the way an object appears and the way it actually is. The real question is not whether ideas are objects or acts, but rather how can one know on any particular occasion that the perceptual or conceptual experience (or at least aspects of it) is not illusory? More generally, how can one have any confidence that our mind's faculties, when properly used, tell us something about reality? This problem confronts Descartes no matter what ideas are ontologically. In fact, this is *the* epistemological problem of the *Meditations*, and can be answered for Descartes only through the proof of God's existence and goodness and thus by providing a certain class of ideas or appearances with a divine guarantee. It cannot be answered simply by showing that Descartes' ideas are acts rather than objects.

So much for the question of the formal reality of ideas. Ideas as modes of the mind bear no differences among them. But, Descartes continues, "in so far as different ideas [are considered as images which] represent different things, it is clear that they differ widely." While we cannot distinguish one idea from another in terms of its formal reality or ontological status as a mental event, we certainly can distinguish one idea from another in terms of its content – that is, in terms of *what* it is an idea of. Thus, the idea of the sun differs from the idea of a human being not as an idea *per se*, but insofar as the former is the idea "of the sun" and the latter is the idea "of a human being." Similarly, two oil paintings on canvas may not differ from each other in terms of their formal or material reality, since both are nothing but oil-based pigment on canvas, but they will differ inasmuch as one is a portrait of Descartes and another is a portrait of Socrates.

This content of an idea, which allows us to discriminate one idea from another by its object, is what Descartes is referring to when he speaks of an idea's "objective reality." It is what the idea represents (or, better, presents) to the mind. The objective reality of an idea is what makes the idea "like a picture or image" and allows it to make something (e.g., the sun, in the case of the idea of the sun) immediately present to the mind. An idea's objective reality gives the idea what philosophers have called "intentionality." It makes an idea the idea *of* something.

Objective reality of an idea. By this I mean the being of the thing which is represented by an idea, in so far as this exists in the idea. In the same way we can talk of

“objective perfection,” “objective intricacy,” and so on. For whatever we perceive as being in the objects of our ideas exists objectively in the ideas themselves. (*Second Replies*, AT vii, 161)

Descartes’ terminology comes from a medieval categorization of different ways of being. According to thirteenth- and fourteenth-century thinkers such as St Thomas Aquinas, William of Ockham and Johannes Duns Scotus, a thing can have being in two ways. It can possess *esse formale*, or actual concrete being as a real thing (as a physical object or a mental entity), and it can have *esse obiectivum*, objective or conceptual being. For something to have objective being does not imply that the thing actually exists in space and/or time. Rather, it means that the thing exists in some mind insofar as it is being thought about by that mind. It is a mode of being in the understanding, not as a real property of the understanding (such as its acts or operations) but as the intentional *object* that the understanding grasps. In a word, something is in the mind “objectively” when it is thought about, understood, or perceived. When I think about the sun, the sun thereby has objective existence in my mind, in addition to the formal existence it has in the sky.

Thus, when Johannes Caterus, one of the first critics of the *Meditations* and a man educated in the scholastic tradition, asks Descartes for clarification of some points relative to the nature of ideas, Descartes responds in language that should seem familiar to him:

“Objective being in the intellect” . . . will signify the object’s being in the intellect in the way in which its objects are normally there. By this I mean that the idea of the sun is the sun itself existing in the intellect – not of course formally existing, as it does in the heavens, but objectively existing, i.e., in the way in which objects are normally in the intellect. (*First Replies*, AT vii, 102)

We can say, in fact, that for Descartes objective reality is a defining feature of the mind’s ideas: “Some of my thoughts are as it were images of things, and it is only in these cases that the term ‘idea’ is strictly appropriate.” It is essential to an idea that it has a representational content that it displays to the mind. “The objective mode of being belongs to ideas by their very nature” (Meditation III, AT vi, 42). In this respect, Descartes anticipates later thinkers in the phenomenological tradition, such as Edmund Husserl, who make intentionality the hallmark of the mental.

It is a particularly vexed question as to just *how* ideas are supposed to perform their representational function, especially in the light of Descartes’ commitment to a radical dualism between mind and body. What does it mean, for example, to say that an unextended mental idea represents an extended material body? On occasion, Descartes speaks as though ideas represent external things by resembling them, just as a painted portrait represents its sitter by a certain degree of resemblance. The idea of body or matter, he says, “comes to us from things located

outside ourselves, which it wholly resembles [*omnino similis est*]” (*Principles* II, art. 1). However, it cannot truly be the case that ideas represent by way of resembling their objects. The idea of a table is not itself table-like in *any* respect. The Cartesian dualist must say that the idea of the table and the physical table cannot have any properties whatsoever in common. An idea, unlike a table, cannot be square, since shape is something that belongs only to bodies. In fact, I do not think that Descartes ultimately believes that resemblance or similarity is necessary for a relationship of representation between image (material or mental) and object. In his work on optics, Descartes notes that, while a painted picture that resembles its subject will serve well to represent that subject, nonetheless signs and words can also represent things without in any way resembling the things they represent (*Dioptrics* IV, AT vi, 112–14). Unlike signs and words, however, ideas do not become representations through use or stipulation. Descartes, I believe, regarded the representational feature of ideas as a *sui generis* capacity that they have by nature to make things present to the mind. It is something that cannot be defined or explained (except metaphorically) in terms of any other relationship. Not that the matter ended there. This issue generated a good deal of heated discussion in the seventeenth century among his followers and critics.

The objective reality of ideas will play a crucial role in Descartes’ proof for God’s existence in Meditation III. He knows that it is perfectly possible that he is the cause of all of his ideas insofar as it is their formal reality that is in question; all of his ideas, as modes of the mind, need only the mind for their “material” being. But he will now have to determine whether there are any ideas whose representational content exceeds his own causal powers. His answer will be that there is at least one such idea, namely, the idea of an infinite being, God.

Innate, Adventitious, and Fictitious Ideas

In pursuit of his ultimate goal in the *Meditations*, and particularly when, having remarked upon the certainty of his ideas and their nature both as mental states and as representational, he starts to make his move towards establishing the existence of something outside himself, Descartes must take up an important question: where do these ideas come from? Given the epistemic limitations he has set himself in the first two Meditations, this seems to be the only question he *can* ask that will lead him anywhere beyond the world of his ideas. And in investigating the sources or causal origins of his ideas, Descartes draws a threefold distinction.

Among my ideas, some appear to be innate, some to be adventitious [foreign to me and coming from outside], and others to have been invented by me. My understanding of what a thing is, what truth is, and what thought is, seems to derive simply from my own nature. But my hearing a noise, as I do now, or seeing the sun, or feeling the fire, comes from things which are located outside me, or so I have hitherto

judged. Lastly, sirens, hippocraffs and the like are my own invention. But perhaps all my ideas may be thought of as adventitious, or they may all be innate, or all made up; for as yet I have not clearly perceived their true origin. (Meditation III, AT vii, 37–8)

In the most basic reading of the distinction, innate ideas are derived from the mind's own resources; adventitious ideas (from the Latin *advenire*: to come to) come to the mind from external sources; and fictitious ideas are made up by the imagination.

But the way Descartes has framed the distinction in Meditation III is a little misleading. For there is a sense in which *all* ideas for Descartes are innate. As modes of the mind or mental events – that is, in terms of their formal reality – ideas just are ways in which the mind is; the formal reality of every idea has its origin in the mind itself, in its active power to produce its own states. But even the representational content of any idea, which is itself nothing but a feature of a mental event (a mode of a mode, so to speak), is, strictly, also the work of the mind. Nothing ever literally comes into the mind from outside it. Descartes himself explicitly says as much in a later work:

If we bear in mind the scope of our senses and what it is exactly that reaches our faculty of thinking by way of them, we must admit that in no case are the ideas of things presented to us by the senses just as we form them in our thinking. So much so that there is nothing in our ideas which is not innate to the mind or the faculty of thinking, with the sole exception of those circumstances which relate to experience. (*Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*, AT viiiB, 358)

Outside the mind there is nothing but extended bodies and their motions. And certainly neither material particles nor motion can be communicated into the mind; since the mind is immaterial, it cannot receive any of the properties that belong to bodies. Nor do material bodies have anything immaterial or spiritual that they can send into the mind. The mind–body metaphysical gap, while not necessarily causally closed, does not allow anything to cross back and forth. Thus, none of the ancient and medieval theories of perception according to which external things literally transmit tiny material or immaterial images (or “species”) into the mind are, in Descartes’ metaphysical schema, possible. No so-called “influx” model of causation can explain how ideas arise in the Cartesian mind. What, in fact, happens in ordinary sense experience is that external objects communicate motions through the sense organs to the brain. When the motions reach the brain and create a material image therein – and the brain image is nothing but a structuring of the pore openings in the brain’s internal surface caused by the flowing of spirits through the nerves – this bodily process stimulates the mind to form a particular idea. Descartes insists that we judge that our ideas are caused by external objects “not because these things transmit the ideas to our mind through the sense organs, but because they transmit something [motions] which, at exactly that

moment, gives the mind occasion to form these ideas by means of the faculty innate to it" (*Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*, AT viiiB, 359). Thus, he concludes, our sensory ideas of bodies, their motions and figures, "the ideas of pain, colors, sounds and the like," must all be innate if "on the occasion of certain corporeal motions, our mind is to be capable of representing them to itself."

If all ideas are innate, then what does Descartes mean by differentiating between innate, adventitious, and fictitious ideas? This is one of the more difficult issues in understanding Descartes' doctrine of ideas. Part of the difficulty stems from Descartes' failure consistently to distinguish causal questions about ideas from epistemic questions, and dispositions to have certain thoughts from the occurrent thoughts themselves. Here, nonetheless, is a plausible interpretation, one which I do not pretend resolves every problem raised by Descartes' account of innateness.

The distinction between innate, adventitious, and fictitious ideas should be seen as based not on the proximate and general cause of ideas – which is always the mind – but rather on the distal or remote cause that may be required to occasion or stimulate the mind to think of something or to have a particular conscious appearance. If the mind's occurrent perception or thought of some concrete and particular thing comes about only because the mind's faculty of thought is triggered by a material image caused in the brain by an external object, then the resulting idea is adventitious (and there should be some kind of correspondence between the content of the idea, the brain image, and features of the object itself). Thus, the sensory process that begins in the motions of the particles of the sun and terminates in a specific image in the brain corresponding to those motions will occasion the mind to produce a round, yellow, warm idea: an adventitious idea of the sun. In other words, with an adventitious idea, the mind's faculty of thought must be stimulated by physical sense experience. If I never look at the sun or at least at some material representation of the sun, then I can never have the (adventitious) sensory idea of the sun.

On the other hand, innate ideas in the strict sense of the term are not sensory appearances of particular things, but rather the general and objective intellectual concepts that are in the mind by its very (God-given) nature. These include mathematical ideas (e.g., the concept of the circle), metaphysical ideas (the concept of being) and, most importantly for Descartes' purposes, the idea of God. Innate ideas comprise what Descartes calls "simple natures," as well as the eternal truths, which he says "are all inborn in our minds just as a king would imprint his laws on the hearts of all his subjects if he had enough power to do so" (To Mersenne, April 15, 1630, AT i, 145). They also include notions that the mind can come to have simply by reflecting on itself and on its own mental operations (such as the ideas of thought, of substance, and of duration).

Moreover, as Descartes intends to show by his progress within the *Meditations* itself, the mind's summoning of these ideas from its inner resources does not require any external sensory stimulation; in fact, unlike adventitious ideas, their

appearance in the mind is, at least in principle, completely independent of the body. Nor are innate ideas, like fictitious ideas, willfully constructed by abstraction and composition from the contents of other ideas (such as my idea of a gryphon, which combines elements from the ideas of different animals). The contents of innate ideas and their presence in the mind are independent of sense experience and of the will. Of course, one may be stimulated to think of a geometric triangle by seeing a triangular physical object, and one may come to think of God after looking at a painted representation of God (say, in Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling). But what distinguishes innate ideas is that sense experience is not a necessary condition for the having of an idea. What the summoning of innate ideas from the faculty of thinking really requires is deep reflective thought, something with which sensory ideas often interfere.

At one point in Meditation III, Descartes says that while "it is not necessary that I ever light upon any thought of God," nonetheless he can "bring forth the idea of God from the treasure house of my mind, as it were . . ." (AT vii, 67). And in a letter from the same year as the publication of the *Meditations*, Descartes says that an infant "has in itself the ideas of God, itself, and all such truths as are called self-evident, in the same way as adult humans have them when they are not attending to them; it does not acquire these ideas later on, as it grows older" (To Hyperaspistes, August 1641, AT iii, 424). From other contexts, however, it seems clear that Descartes does not think that innate ideas are actual concrete and occurrent thoughts stored up in the mind like the contents of a warehouse. Rather, certain ideas are innate in the mind insofar as the mind is so structured that it is predisposed to have certain occurrent thoughts, even if it never actually has them.

I have never written or taken the view that the mind requires innate ideas which are something distinct from its own faculty of thinking. I did, however, observe that there were certain thoughts within me which neither came to me from external objects nor were determined by my will, but which came solely from the power of thinking within me; so I applied the term "innate" to the ideas or notions which are the forms of these thoughts in order to distinguish them from others, which I called "adventitious" or "made up." This is the same sense as that in which we say that generosity is "innate" in certain families, or that certain diseases such as gout or stones are innate in others: it is not so much that the babies of such families suffer from these diseases in their mother's womb, but simply that they are born with a certain "faculty" or tendency to contract them. (*Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*, AT viiiB, 357–8)

Innate ideas, Descartes says, "always exist within us potentially . . . in some faculty." It is only when I actually think of God that this potentiality becomes actualized in the form of an occurrent idea.

Descartes insists that, while the proximate cause of any idea is the mind, and the remote cause of an adventitious idea is the material image in the brain and the

external object that has generated this image, the ultimate cause of all of our ideas is God. It is God who has placed innate ideas in the “treasure house of the mind” (that is, who has given the mind such a nature that certain distinctive dispositions or potentialities are within it); and it is God who has so created the mind and established its correspondence with the body that, on the occasion of certain motions in the brain, the mind has certain sensory ideas.

I maintain that when God unites a rational soul to this machine [the human body] . . . he will place its principal seat in the brain, and will make its nature such that the soul will have different sensations corresponding to the different ways in which the entrances to the pores in the internal surface of the brain are opened by means of the nerves. (*Treatise on Man*, AT xi, 143)

Clarity and Distinctness

As if there were not enough distinctions already in the realm of Cartesian ideas, there is yet another to be made, one that is crucial for his project of providing a divine guarantee for human knowledge.

Through the process in Meditations I–III of trying to find some indubitable truths, some beliefs that are immune to skeptical doubt, Descartes comes upon his alleged criterion of truth. That is, he discovers just what it is that makes a particular class of ideas so subjectively certain that, as long as he is attending to them, he cannot conceive of them being false. The *cogito* itself provides him with the paradigm case for this criterion, although he soon realizes that other ideas – for example, those expressing mathematical propositions – manifest the requisite character to a very high degree as well. As he proclaims at the opening of Meditation III:

I am certain that I am a thinking thing. Do I not therefore also know what is required for my being certain about anything? In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting; this would not be enough to make me certain of the truth of the matter if it could ever turn out that something which I perceived with such clarity and distinctness was false. So I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true. (AT vii, 35)

Of course, Descartes is not quite out of the woods yet. The criterion itself – the principle that what one clearly and distinctly perceives to be true *is* in fact true, that what is subjectively certain is also objectively true – needs to be validated, something that will be accomplished only by the proof that an all-powerful and benevolent God is the source of my faculty for perceiving things clearly and distinctly. But Descartes has now identified an important feature of some of his ideas,

a feature that will allow him to distinguish those perceptions or conceptions that are candidates for being veridical and reliable guides to truth from those perceptions or conceptions that are most likely illusory and misleading.

What, then, does the clarity and distinctness of ideas consist in? What makes one idea clear and distinct and another idea obscure and confused? One thing is certain, namely, that the clarity and distinctness of a clear and distinct idea are features of its representational content. However, they are not determined by the *object* represented in the idea; after all, one can have a clear and distinct idea and an obscure and confused idea of one and the same object. Rather, clarity and distinctness are found in the character or quality of the representation. Here is what Descartes says when he offers formal definitions of clarity and distinctness:

I call a perception “clear” when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind – just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye’s gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility. I call a perception “distinct” if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear. (*Principles* I, art. 45)

The clarity of an idea is a matter of its vivacity. A clear idea strikes the mind with a force that compels attention. It is strong and impressive. The distinctness of an idea, on the other hand, looks, from the definition above, to be more of a relational feature of an idea – that is, a matter of whether the idea can be distinguished from other ideas. But this ability of the mind to “sharply separate” an idea from others is also a function of the idea’s own intrinsic content. An idea’s limits or boundaries are discerned because its content is well defined and delineated. A distinct idea is a semantically discrete idea. It provides evident information on the properties of its object and leaves no room for doubting what does and does not belong to it. There is no mistaking the idea for any other.

It is important to keep in mind that a distinct idea does not provide one with just *some* evident information about its object. Arnauld, for one, in his *Fourth Set of Objections*, is concerned that when Descartes says that he has a clear and distinct perception of himself as a thinking thing independent of his body, he is merely performing an act of abstraction or inattention and simply considering his thinking without also taking into account what else may belong to his being. Why should the fact that I can think of myself without a body imply that I as a thinking thing alone am something real and complete? “So far as I can see, the only result that follows from this is that I can obtain some knowledge of myself without knowledge of the body. But it is not yet transparently clear to me that this knowledge is complete and adequate, so as to enable me to be certain that I am not mistaken in excluding body from my essence” (AT vii, 201). Perhaps I have only abstracted my thinking from other, equally necessary aspects of my being, just as (to use the example Arnauld provides) one can think of a right-angled triangle and ignore or

suspend judgment about whether the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides.

But Descartes essentially denies that Arnauld's triangle example is truly a case of perceiving something clearly and distinctly. He replies that, with the clear and distinct idea of a thing, one is able to determine with absolute certainty what does and does not belong to the thing. Thus, in the distinct idea of a right-angled triangle one can know exactly and clearly what is included in its content (e.g., having three sides, having the sum of the figure's interior angles equal to one hundred and eighty degrees, having the square of the hypotenuse equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides) and what is not (e.g., having four angles, having its area equal to the square of its side). In other words, in a clear and distinct idea, the mind can see with a certain irresistible strength what the content of the idea necessarily contains and, just as importantly, what it excludes. "We cannot have a clear understanding of a triangle having the square on its hypotenuse equal to the squares on the other sides without at the same time being aware that it is right-angled . . . It is true that the triangle is intelligible even though we do not think of the ratio which obtains between the square on the hypotenuse and the squares on the other sides, but it is not intelligible that this ratio should be denied of the triangle" (*Fourth Replies*, AT vii, 224, 227).

As this passage indicates, not every clear and distinct idea is a *complete* idea of its object. Thus, one can have a clear and distinct idea of a thing but still not actually be aware of every single property that belongs to it. For example, I may know clearly and distinctly what a right-angled triangle is but not know that it satisfies the Pythagorean proportion. However, for every property one does in fact consider carefully, one will be able to determine through reasoning whether or not it belongs to the object. If one truly has a clear and distinct idea of a right-angled triangle and an understanding of what the Pythagorean proportion is, one would see right away that such a property could not, without contradiction, be denied of it.

An idea can be clear but not distinct. The sensation of pain or the perception of a bright color may have the requisite "strength and accessibility," but its identity and individuation may be uncertain.

When someone feels an intense pain, the perception he has of it is indeed very clear, but is not always distinct. For people commonly confuse this perception with an obscure judgment they make concerning the nature of something which they think exists in the painful spot and which they suppose to resemble the sensation of pain.
(*Principles* I, art. 46)

On the other hand, an idea cannot be distinct without being clear. That is because unless its content has the strength and accessibility demanded for clarity, it cannot be "sharply separated" from other perceptions. As Descartes says in the formal definition above, a distinct idea "contains within itself only what is clear."

Clarity and distinctness are closely bound up with another alleged feature of some ideas that has caused a great deal of confusion among Descartes scholars: material falsity. Descartes says that, strictly speaking, ideas have no truth value: they are neither true nor false. To have an idea (again, in the narrow sense of the word) is simply to entertain a thought or have an appearance before the mind. One either perceives or thinks of something or one does not. Truth and falsity belong to judgments, not ideas or perceptions. It is my assertion that my idea of the triangle accurately represents what a triangle is, or my judgment that my perception of the table as square is veridical and not illusory, that can be true or false. (This notion that ideas and judgments are distinct from each other, and that an idea can be found without any assertion or denial, was strongly criticized by Spinoza and others.) In Meditation III, Descartes notes that:

as far as ideas are concerned, provided they are considered solely in themselves and I do not refer them to anything else, they cannot strictly speaking be false; for whether it is a goat or a chimera that I am imagining, it is just as true that I imagine the former as the latter. As for the will and the emotions, here too one need not worry about falsity; for even if the things which I may desire are wicked or even non-existent, that does not make it any less true that I desire them. Thus the only remaining thoughts where I must be on my guard against making a mistake are judgments. And the chief and most common mistake which is to be found here consists in my judging that the ideas which are in me resemble, or conform to, things located outside me. (AT vii, 37)

And yet, Descartes concedes, ideas can indeed have a kind of falsity. Just what this species of falsity is, however, is hard to determine. When he first introduces the notion of material falsity, in the *Meditations*, it seems as though it consists in an idea *misrepresenting* its object.

Although, as I have noted before, falsity in the strict sense, or formal falsity, can occur only in judgments, there is another kind of falsity, material falsity, which occurs in ideas, when they represent non-things as things. For example, the ideas which I have of heat and cold contain so little clarity and distinctness that they do not enable me to tell whether cold is merely the absence of heat or vice versa, or whether both of them are real qualities, or neither is. And since there can be no ideas which are not as it were images of things, if it is true that cold is nothing but the absence of heat, the idea which represents it to me as something real and positive deserves to be called false; and the same goes for other ideas of this kind. (AT vii, 43–4)

It appears, on first glance, that an idea is materially false if it presents something in a way that it is not. Thus, on this understanding of the notion, an idea of x that represents x as F when x is in fact G (for example, that represents cold as something real and positive when it is, in fact, an absence of heat) would be materially false. But if this is what Descartes means by material falsity, then it is

hard to see how it differs from what he calls “formal” falsity, that is, the lack of correspondence between a judgment or assertion and reality. Moreover, as Arnauld makes clear in the *Fourth Objections*, treating ideas as false in this way does not make any sense. If an idea presents x as F , then it is simply and truly the idea of Fx ; it is not the false idea of Gx . What is false is my judgment that x actually is F rather than G (that is, my judgment that my idea of Fx accurately represents what x is). My idea that cold is a real thing is a positive idea that truly represents something (although what it represents may not be coldness); it is not the false idea of something else. All ideas that present something to the mind, Arnauld concludes, are true in the material sense – they all have a positive content.

Although it can be imagined that cold, which I suppose to be represented by a positive idea, is not something positive, it cannot be imagined that the positive idea does not represent anything real and positive to me. For an idea is called “positive” not in virtue of the existence it has as a mode of thinking (for in that sense all ideas would be positive), but in virtue of the objective existence which it contains and which it represents to our mind. Hence the idea in question [that represents cold as a positive thing and not merely as an absence of heat] may perhaps not be the idea of cold, but it cannot be a false idea. (AT vii, 207)

If the idea of cold represents cold as an absence of heat, then of course it is true in a number of senses. But if the idea represents its subject as a positive thing in its own right (and not merely as an absence of heat), then it is still a “materially true” idea, but just not the idea of cold (which is nothing but an absence of heat).

Arnauld’s objection gave Descartes the opportunity to clarify what he means by material falsity. What makes an idea materially false, he replies, is not that it is actually false (as a judgment is, through a lack of correspondence with the way things really are) but that it provides material for and makes possible – and even encourages – false judgments. Materially false ideas are not ideas that *misrepresent* their objects. Rather, they are ideas that are so defective in their representational content that it is not at all clear *what* they are presenting and so they can easily mislead us in our judgments. In reply to Arnauld, Descartes says that

my only reason for calling the idea [of cold] materially false is that, owing to the fact that it is obscure and confused, I am unable to judge whether or not what it displays to me is something positive which exists outside my sensation. And hence I may be led to judge that it is something positive though in fact it may merely be an absence. (*Fourth Replies*, AT vii, 234)

It is not the case that all ideas are “as it were images of things” in the same manner and to the same degree. That is, not all ideas present something to the mind in a clear and distinct manner such that there can be no mistake in the judgments that result from them. Materially false ideas are false in the sense that, unlike clear and

distinct ideas, they do not successfully present something to the mind as a real and positive thing with a clearly identifiable character. Their representational content is so confused and obscure that one cannot tell whether what they are representing is something positive and real or not. This is, I believe, what Descartes originally had in mind in the *Meditations* themselves. As he says in the passage from Meditation III quoted above: “For example, the ideas which I have of heat and cold contain so little clarity and distinctness that they do not enable me to tell whether cold is merely the absence of heat or vice versa, or whether both of them are real qualities, or neither is.” From my idea of cold alone, I cannot determine whether cold is an absence of heat or a real and positive thing in its own right. From an idea of pain, I cannot tell distinctly what condition of my body is being represented. In contrast with a clear and distinct idea, the evidence here is just not good enough for making an informed judgment. The representational content of the idea is, in a sense, hazy and murky, and for that reason indeterminate. Clear and distinct ideas, by contrast, display their content with such a high quality that, as Descartes says, they “give the judgment little or no scope for error,” that is, for mistakes in determining what the idea is properly representing.

Sensations – colors, pains, and other *qualia* – are all materially false ideas. The senses generally provide the mind only with obscure and confused data.

But as for . . . light and colors, sounds, smells, tastes, heat and cold and the other tactile qualities, I think of these only in a very confused and obscure way, to the extent that I do not even know whether they are true or false, that is, whether the ideas I have of them are ideas of real things or of non-things. (*Meditations* III, AT vii, 43)

The intellect, on the other hand, is the source of clear and distinct ideas: mathematical concepts, moral truths, metaphysical ideas, and the idea of God.

There remains the question of whether clarity and distinctness are characteristics *only* of items of the understanding. Do the senses provide us with any clear and distinct ideas? My ideas or perceptions of an object’s color, taste, warmth, and so on are obscure and confused. But what about my sensory perception of its particular quantitative properties: its shape, size, and motion? That we do have clear and distinct ideas of these features of things through the senses is suggested by the following passage from Meditation III:

If I scrutinize [my ideas of corporeal things] thoroughly and examine them one by one, in the way in which I examined the idea of the wax yesterday, I notice that the things which I perceive clearly and distinctly in them are very few in number. The list comprises size, or extension in length, breadth and depth; shape, which is a function of the boundaries of this extension; position, which is a relation between various items possessing shape; and motion, or change of position; to these may be added substance, duration and number. But as for all the rest, including light and colors,

sounds, smells, tastes, heat and cold and the other tactile qualities, I think of these only in a very confused and obscure way. (AT vii, 43)

The way the paragraph moves from the clear and distinct ideas of quantitative or geometric features of objects to the obscure and confused ideas of their qualitative features suggests that the former, like the latter, have their origin in sense perception. Elsewhere, Descartes insists that there is something objective about our sensory ideas of the geometric features of bodies but not our sensory ideas of their color, warmth, and so on:

When we suppose that we perceive colors in objects . . . we do not really know what it is that we are calling a color; and we cannot find any intelligible resemblance between the color which we suppose to be in objects and that which we experience in our sensation. But this is something we do not take account of; and, what is more, there are many other features, such as size, shape and number which we clearly perceive to be actually or at least possibly present in objects in a way exactly corresponding to our sensory perception or understanding. (*Principles* I, art. 70)

But does Descartes mean that we clearly and distinctly perceive through the senses the particular extension of this or that body? He does say that “we have sensory awareness of, or rather as a result of sensory stimulation we have a clear and distinct perception of, some kind of matter, which is extended in length, breadth and depth, and has various differently shaped and variously moving parts which give rise to our various sensations of color, smells, pain and so on” (*Principles* II, art. 1). Or is it his view that, when I sense perceive a body, there is also involved in the conscious experience a conceptual element of the intellect that is a clear and distinct idea and that informs the perceptual acquaintance with the particular body? Descartes’ distinction between clear and distinct ideas and obscure and confused ideas is often said to be a precursor to Locke’s distinction between the sensory ideas of primary qualities (which are supposed to “resemble” the features in bodies that cause them) and the sensory ideas of secondary qualities (which are only qualitative effects in the mind and bear no resemblance to their material causes). But this cannot be truly determined until we know whether or not for Descartes *any* sense perceptions qualify as clear and distinct. The failure successfully to resolve this latter problem must, despite the many other distinctions that we can draw with or on behalf of Descartes, leave a rather significant gap in our understanding of his doctrine of ideas.

Further Reading

Alanen (1994); Beyssade (1992); Chappell (1986); Cook (1975; 1987); Costa (1983); Cronin (1966); Danto (1978); Gewirth (1967); Jolley (1990); Kenny (1967); McRae (1965); Normore (1986); Wilson (1993); Yolton (1975).