

DESCARTES ON REPRESENTATION, PRESENTATION, AND THE REAL  
NATURES

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Abstract

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This dissertation concerns two controversial aspects of Descartes' philosophy. The first is the meaning of the distinction between the material and objective senses of the word "idea." The second is an alleged tension between the *Fifth Meditation's* claim that the real natures are mind-independent and the claim of the *Principles* that universals are mind-dependent.

In the first chapter, I take up the material sense, and argue against those interpretations which see it as a category for the contentless ontology of ideas. I argue that the textual evidence points to the material sense being Descartes' category for phenomenological description of how things seem to be to a given mind when it has a given idea. In particular, I argue that he deploys the material sense in his discussions of abstractions and that this points to the material sense being a category for content that lacks existential implication for the extramental world.

In the second chapter, I take up the ontology of the real natures, and suggest that there is no tension between the *Fifth Meditation* and the *Principles* because Descartes accepts

two things under the term “nature,” namely, universals and individual essences. I suggest Descartes is committed to Platonism about individual essences in the *Fifth Meditation*, and that in the *Principles* he is concerned only with universals, about which he is a conceptualist. I further suggest that individual essences play key roles in both singular and universal thought.

In the third chapter, I take up the objective sense, and the widespread interpretation of this sense of ideas as concerning current presentational or phenomenological content. I suggest that this account struggles with cases where there is stability in the object of thought paired with changes in the associated phenomenology. I propose that we ought to reject a straightforward equation of the objective sense with current presentational content, and instead adopt a scheme according to which what has objective being in an idea is the sum total of thinkable, essential features of the object, and that when an idea is clear and distinct, what we perceive has objective being in the idea.

*For my parents, who were there through all of it.*

## CONTENTS

Acknowledgments .....	iv
Introduction .....	1
Chapter 1: Inner Awareness and the Material Sense of Ideas .....	6
1.1 Introduction .....	9
1.2 Senses and Views.....	13
1.3 Textual Evidence and Motivations .....	18
1.4 Defeating the <i>No Content</i> View .....	20
1.4.1 Against the Textual Basis .....	20
1.1.1 Problem Cases for the <i>No Content</i> View.....	24
1.5 Material Falsity in Brief .....	30
1.6 An Alternative: The Three Category Interpretation .....	34
1.7 Conclusion.....	36
Chapter 2: Real Natures, Universals, and Individual Essences .....	38
2.1 Introduction .....	38
2.2 The Natures Problem .....	40
2.2.1 The Textual Basis .....	40
2.2.2 Three Approaches to the Natures Problem .....	42
2.3 The Generic Natures Thesis and Some Ontological Assumptions .....	48
2.4 Individual Essences.....	50
2.5 Towards Phenomenal Conceptualism.....	62
2.6 Toward Individual Platonism .....	69
2.7 The Method and Substance Problems .....	75
2.8 Conclusion.....	80
Chapter 3: Genuine Representation, Containment, and the Objective Sense of Ideas .....	81
3.1 Introduction .....	81
3.2 Representation, Presentation, and the Objective Sense .....	86
3.2.1 Preliminaries .....	86
3.2.2 Presentationalism.....	88
3.2.3 The Textual Grounds of Presentationalism .....	91
3.2.4 The Argument from Awareness.....	93
3.2.5 Objective Being and Representational Content.....	94
3.3 The Successive Recognition Problem .....	97

3.3.1 The Problem.....	97
3.3.2 Option 1: Deny <i>Representational Stability</i> .....	101
3.3.3 Option 2: Deny <i>Presentational Instability</i> .....	105
3.3.4 Option 3: Deny <i>Representational Identity</i> .....	107
3.3.5 Option 4: Deny <i>Presentational Identity</i> .....	110
3.4 Towards Objective Maximalism .....	113
3.4.1 Against the Argument from Awareness.....	113
3.4.2 The Argument from Adequacy .....	116
3.4.3 The Argument from Essences.....	121
3.5 Genuine Representation and the Veil of Inner Awareness.....	123
3.6 Conclusion.....	127
Bibliography .....	130

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Thank you.



## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation concerns Descartes' account of mental representation, his ontology, and the connections between these areas of his philosophy. More specifically, it tackles two key aspects of his thought, namely, the distinction between two senses of the word "idea" from the *Preface to the Reader* of the *Meditations*, and his claim in the *Fifth Meditation* to have cognition of real natures which are independent of his mind. I approach these topics via two broad questions. First, what is the *Preface's* distinction a distinction about, and what does it tell us about Descartes' picture of the mind more broadly? And second, are the real natures of the *Fifth Meditation* truly mind-independent, and if so, how do they relate to the aforementioned distinction in the senses of the word "idea?"

There are a number of reasons to be interested in the answers to these questions. Beyond general reasons of charity, clarity, and curiosity, both of these questions have been subject to intense debate over the last century. With regards to the first question, a commonplace reading of the distinction takes it as holding between the ontology of ideas as contentless *modes* of mind, identified with the material sense, and the content that they bear, identified as the objective sense. While such a reading does have its merits, it faces significant textual and philosophical problems, or so I argue in what follows. Meanwhile, the *Fifth Meditation's* claims about the mind-independence of real natures faces a more direct challenge via Descartes' own account of universals in the *Principles*, which treats universals as mind-dependent concepts. If all real natures are universals, then Descartes has contradicted

himself, yielding what I call the *Natures Problem*. Ideally, an account of these areas of his thought ought to remedy these problems, and that is what this dissertation attempts to do.

In the first chapter, I take up the first sense of the word “idea,” namely, the material sense. Against the view that the material sense is a category for the contentless ontology of ideas, I suggest three key places where Descartes appears to invoke the material sense, but which appear to be explicitly concerned with different types of content, namely, in his accounts of the truth of ideas, ideas of universals and other abstractions, and sensory ideas. In order to account for these difficult cases, I propose a new interpretation of the material sense according to which it picks out a particular kind of content, namely, what I call the phenomenal content of ideas, or in more Cartesian terminology, states of inner awareness. States of inner awareness are ways things seem to be to minds in particular mental states; as such, they are the luminously clear and certain by default, but always understood as qualified by their status as mere appearances. I argue that for each of these cases, as well as for the familiar worries about the material falsity of sensory ideas, taking the material sense to concern such appearances seems to make extremely good sense of Descartes’ overall view.

In the second chapter, I turn to the *Fifth Meditation* and to how we might resolve the *Natures Problem*. Prior approaches to this problem have tended to favor the assumption that the real natures of the *Fifth Meditation* are close kin of the universals of the *Principles*, leading to a familiar dialectic according to which Descartes must either be a Platonist or Neoplatonist, thus favoring the *Fifth Meditation*, or some form of conceptualist, thus favoring the *Principles*. Against both of these approaches, I argue that Descartes does not intend that the real natures be taken to be universals at all. Instead, I suggest that he accepts what I call the *Generic Natures Thesis*, according to which there are at least two types of thing going under the name of nature, namely, individual essences and universals, and that while Descartes is a

conceptualist about universals, he at least affirms the independence of individual essences from finite minds, if not from minds more broadly speaking. Along the way, I develop an interpretation of Cartesian universals as modes of mind, that is, as ideas taken materially, and suggest some possible ways we can understand an ontology of individual essences relative to the more familiar ontology of substances and modes. Meanwhile, for individual essences, I suggest that these may have some important connections with the objective sense, but note that these connections are not entirely clear. In any case, I conclude that Cartesian Platonism or Neoplatonism may be significantly more plausible options than is commonly assumed, and that neither view is fatally compromised by the *Natures Problem*.

In the third chapter, I consider the interface between the theory of real natures just developed and the meaning of the objective sense. Recall that according to the standard reading of the *Reader's Preface Distinction*, the objective sense is Descartes' category for the content of ideas. One way to elaborate this is to say that what has objective being in our ideas is exactly what we experience when we have those ideas, that is, that objective being is a category for the explicit phenomenal content given in experience. I argue that this account faces a significant problem, what I call the *Successive Recognition Problem*, which emerges from trying to extend such an account over successive apprehensions of different features of the same object, a central feature of Descartes' account of real natures in the *Fifth Meditation*. Roughly, if all there is to objective being is what is given in phenomenal awareness, then changes in phenomenal awareness yield changes in objective being. But this runs into a problem: the objective sense is most typically characterized in terms of its relationship to representation, and, I argue, the best way to make sense of his remarks about the implicit contents contained in his ideas is to treat such contents as represented by the relevant ideas. In such a case, we have a problem, for when we combine these claims, we get the

contradictory outcome that in such cases, there is both change and stability in what has objective being in a given idea. Given this, I move to consider several ways of resolving this difficulty, including getting precise about the diachronic identity of ideas, denying that there are successive recognition cases as I've described, and denying that such ideas are representationally stable. I conclude that none of these options are viable. Accordingly, I argue, we ought to regard the relationship between presentational content and the objective sense as less than an identity. As an alternative, I propose a three-part analysis of this relationship. First, I suggest that we ought to take seriously Descartes' requirement that whatever has objective being in an idea must be *capable* of being thought of, however obscurely. Second, I argue that some of Descartes' remarks to Arnauld, as well as others in *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet* and the the *Fifth Replies* discussion of essences, point to a strong thesis, what I call *Objective Maximalism*, according to which to entirety of the thinkable, essential features of a given object have objective being in the idea of that object. This gives us several benefits, among them, letting us characterize the relationship of individual essences to the objective sense; what has objective being in ideas are individual essences, and these are complete in the sense specified by *Objective Maximalism*. Third, I suggest that we gain access to these objectively existent features via clear and distinct awareness: when an idea clearly and distinctly presents an object as some way, then that object and that feature have objective being in the idea. This final requirement proves useful for diffusing a problem which I call the *Veil of Inner Awareness*. This worry stems from holding that the material sense concerns only awareness of what seems to be the case: if this were the whole story about presentational content for Descartes, then we would have no access to what has objective being in our ideas. But, thanks to this analysis, we have a resolution of the issue, though of

course, it leaves the question of how clear and distinct perception accomplish such a remarkable feat. But that is a project for another day!

In the epilogue, I argue that the resulting picture thus shows Descartes' overall orientation to be somewhat different than what it is typically made out to be. I see the principle advantages as lying in two directions. First, with regards to issues within Descartes' own thinking, this approach usefully sets the stage for providing a richer theory of clarity and distinctness. It also hints at useful further elaborations for the theory of innate ideas. Moreover, with regards to Descartes' historical context, it suggests interesting new routes for understanding his relationship with his successors, specifically, to Leibniz's theory of complete individual concepts via my interpretation of the real natures in the second and third chapters.

## CHAPTER 1:

### INNER AWARENESS AND THE MATERIAL SENSE OF IDEAS

#### 1.1 Introduction

In the *Preface to the Reader* of the *Meditations*, Descartes draws a distinction.

'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; and this thing, even if it is not regarded as existing outside the intellect, can still, in virtue of its essence, be more perfect than myself.<sup>1</sup>

Call this distinction the *Preface to the Reader Distinction*, or PRD for short. Scholars have been divided over what Descartes intent with this distinction might be. One view, which I'll hazard is probably the most widely accepted, is that Descartes' intent is to distinguish between an idea's ontology and its status as a representation. Ideas taken materially are just modes, considered without regard to their content, and taken objectively, they count as representations. Since this view sees ideas taken materially as without content, call this view the *No Content View*.

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<sup>1</sup> (CSM II 7: AT VII 8). In this footnote and in what follows, I follow the normal convention of referring to the standard English translation of Descartes' major works in Rene Descartes, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*. Trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, Vol 1 and 2. (New York: Cambridge, 1985), with CSM followed by the roman numeral indicating volume, paired with page number of. Rene Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, Ed. Charles Adams and Paul Tannery (Paris: J. Vrin 1974), prefaced by AT and followed by volume number followed by page. Where the citation is drawn from the collection of Descartes' correspondence in Rene Descartes, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*. Trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, Anthony Kenny. Vol 3. (New York: Cambridge, 1991), I denote this as CSMK and follow the convention just described.

The *No Content View* is an understandable interpretation, since Descartes does need a distinction of this kind. The question is whether that is his intent in the *Preface to the Reader*. Over the last fifty years, some interpreters have suggested that the material sense is in fact a category for some form of mental content. Call such views *Content-Laden Views*. The aim of this chapter is to offer the first part of a defense of one such view, which I'll call the *Phenomenal-Representational View*. According to this view, Descartes' intent in the above passage is to distinguish between two forms of content that all ideas have. On this view, the material sense is Descartes' category for the phenomenological or presentational content of thought, while the objective sense concerns what I will call the genuine representational content of ideas.<sup>2</sup>

The present chapter begins this argument by considering the material sense. My core thesis will be that the ideas taken materially are ideas considered with regards to what Descartes calls *inner awareness*, that is, our experience of how things *seem* to us when we have a given idea. Why favor this view over the *No Content View*? My argument for this point is partly textual and partly philosophical. Textually speaking, I'll propose that if we consider the applications of this distinction, we find a consistent identification of the material sense with inner awareness. Philosophically, I'll argue that these texts show the plausibility of an

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<sup>2</sup> Although it is not the focus of this chapter, it is worth mentioning that my rendering of the distinction between the objective and material senses is very close to a distinction drawn by Margaret Wilson in her classic article "Descartes on the Representationality of Sensation," where she suggests that Descartes' approach to sensory ideas involves a distinction between what an idea *presents*, that is, the experienced feely content we are aware of when we have a given sensory idea, and its *reference*, which she suggests likely involves some sort of causal story connecting our experience to a given physical object. Wilson's distinction is intended to concern sensory ideas, and seems plainly modelled on familiar debates about reference from the late twentieth century. Without wading into that whole morass, I suspect it may be helpful to say that my account of the distinction between the objective and material senses sees the material sense as concerning presentational content, though as we'll see in Chapter 3, we ought not to straightforwardly equate reference with the objective sense. See Margaret Daulet Wilson, "Descartes on the Representationality of Sensation," in *Ideas and Mechanism: Essays on Early Modern Philosophy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 69-83.

argument I call the *Argument from Modification*, which suggests that the “operations of the intellect” that Descartes describes in his definition are modifications of the mind’s principal attribute, thought, and hence they should be seen as ways thought can be, namely, states of inner awareness. Furthermore, I’ll also advance a second argument, the *Argument from Motivation*, which suggests that understanding the material sense this way lines up well with many of Descartes’ philosophical motivations stemming from the method of doubt. In particular, I’ll suggest that the first-personal, luminously certain, and faculty-specific nature of states of inner awareness turns out to provide Descartes with exactly what he needs in several key areas of his philosophical project.<sup>3</sup>

Now, one may reasonably wonder what is new in this rendering of Descartes’ position, given that others have held something in this vein before. The novelty of my account stems from two sources. First, past accounts of the material sense as contentful have generally not stressed the epistemic considerations that stem from understanding the material sense in the way I’ll propose. Here such considerations will take center stage. Second, prior authors haven’t tried to use the material sense as a tool for understanding Descartes’ position on a range of other issues beyond the material falsity of sensory ideas. Here I’ll argue that the range of uses extends deep into his mental ontology, including his accounts of abstractions, his remarks about truth and ideas, and his positive advice about handling sensory ideas. Moreover, I’ll argue, each of these cases is extremely poorly handled

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<sup>3</sup> The terminology of luminosity is due to Williamson, who introduces it in the context of arguing against the existence of with this feature states. In his usage, a given mental state is luminous when, if a given subject is in such a state, they know that they are in such a state. See Timothy Williamson. “Anti-luminosity,” in *Knowledge and Its Limits*, (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 93 -113. Accordingly, when I claim that ideas taken materially are luminous, I mean that when one entertains an idea, it will seem to the mind that some state of affairs holds, and that mind will know or be certain that that state of affairs seems to be the case.



by the *No Content View*: In each case, such a view gets stuck saying that the objective sense is in play when the text explicitly mentions the definiens of the material sense. This turns out to be especially important because, in each of these cases, the motivations I suggest animate his use of the material sense turn out to be those relevant for these passages; so not only does the *Phenomenal-Representational View* get the terminology right, but it also gets the philosophy in good order, a happy outcome indeed!

We'll start, then, by considering some stock statements of both the *No Content View* and *Content-Laden View* from the literature, then consider the textual case for its view of the material sense, and build an account of inner awareness's characteristics and its motivations. Following that, we'll consider the negative case against the *No Content View*, and then wrap up by considering material falsity and setting up some objections to be tackled later on.

## **1.2 Senses and Views**

The *Reader's Preface* distinction has prompted a welter of interpretations, though primarily the focus of these conversations has been on the objective sense, and primarily in the context of debates about materially false ideas. Here I want to just focus on some major accounts of the material sense, and will save my (thankfully limited) discussion of material falsity till the end.

Our first view of the material sense holds that Descartes' aim with it is strictly ontological: an idea taken materially is just an idea as a *mode*, and consequently, ideas taken materially have no content. Of the options we'll discuss here, my suspicion is that this view is the most popular, though like many popular views it winds up having fewer explicit

defenders.<sup>4</sup> One nice statement of this view can be found in Steven Nadler's "The Doctrine of Ideas." In Nadler's rendering, to take an idea materially is to take it with regards to its formal reality, that is, its mere ontological characterization. In his words, "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."<sup>5</sup> Where ideas are concerned, this means they should be treated as modes of thinking, and consequently, "in terms of their formal reality, all ideas are identical. They are all equally items dependent on the minds to which they belong, and there is in this regard no difference between them."<sup>6</sup> This interpretation is also endorsed by Richard Field, who maintains that "taking the idea materially, as opposed to objectively, means considering it as simply a thought or mode of the mind, without regard to its status as an objective representation."<sup>7</sup> And again, in a footnote to his article "Descartes' Theory of Universals," Lawrence Nolan writes, "the term 'idea' can be taken - 'materially'"

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<sup>4</sup> Another option, which I am not engaging with here for reasons of length, can be found in Lionel Shapiro, "Objective Being and "Ofness" in Descartes," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 84, no. 2 (2012): 378–418. In Shapiro's rendering, the PRD holds between what an idea represents from the perspective of a complete, and clearly and distinctly understood, science, on the objective hand, and the way we sort our mental contents from a pretheoretical context, specifically, in ways of ordinary speech untouched by the method of doubt, on the material. Thus, the idea of a quality like red might be understood one way casually and another scientifically. In short, my objection to such a reading is that it does not go deep enough: it is not enough to point out the casual usage of language with regards to mental contents, but to explain why such casual usages are appropriate, and also, how we might be inclined to affirm or deny their status as representations of reality. My rendering of the material sense here is intended to fill in this gap: things seeming thus and so explains why we adopt the pretheoretical vocabulary we might with regards to our own mental contents, and also explain why we are inclined to judge of them, since seemings can count as evidence that might incline the will.

<sup>5</sup> Steven Nadler, "The Doctrine of Ideas," in *The Blackwell Guide to Descartes' Meditations*, ed. Stephen Gaukroger (Malden: Blackwell 2006), 89.

<sup>6</sup> Nadler, "The Doctrine of Ideas," 90.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Field, "Descartes on the Material Falsity of Ideas." *The Philosophical Review* 102, no. 3 (1993): 322.

(which is a synonym for "formally"), as an operation of an intellect, or "objectively", as the thing represented by that operation."<sup>8</sup>

A second take on the material sense is to align it, in some sense, with some form of content or with some form of contentful mental state. Maybe the most elaborate account of this type of reading is contained in Vere Chappell's essay, "The Theory of Ideas." There, Chappell treats ideas taken materially as states of consciousness that represent ideas in the objective sense, which in turn represent objects outside the mind. Chappell's account thus falls in line with the standard representationalist reading of Descartes.<sup>9</sup> Another example of the *Content-Laden View* is provided by Claudia Lorena Garcia, in her article "Transparency and Falsity in Descartes' Theory of Ideas." In her rendering, the PRD concerns a distinction between what she terms seeming and actual representation. Ideas taken materially, in her view do have content, but such content is not representational. In her own words:

...To consider an idea in this manner is to consider it in so far as it possesses an explicit or immediate content – a content which does not of itself have a representative function. To take an idea materially also is, according to this reading, to consider it in so far as it is *tanquam rerum*, as it were of something – i.e., as that which it appears to represent.<sup>10</sup>

Nonetheless, in spite of not being representational, such content is akin to representational content insofar as it is the content of our phenomenal states, which she identifies with this apparent representationality. Thus, she affirms that Descartes accepts the luminosity of the mental: there are elements of our mental reality that we know immediately,

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<sup>8</sup> Lawrence Nolan, "Descartes' Theory of Universals," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 89, no. 2/3 (1998): 179.

<sup>9</sup> Vere Chappell, "The Theory of Ideas," *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, ed. Amélie Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press 1986), 178.

<sup>10</sup> Claudia Lorena Garcia, "Transparency and Falsity in Descartes's Theory of Ideas," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*: IJPS 7, no. 3 (1999): 355.

but these are not representational. The job of providing the actual representational content of our thought, is fulfilled by the objective sense. The point at which we are able to reach beyond our merely apparent mental contents in the material sense to what actually has objective being in our ideas are when said ideas are clear and distinct.

The account I offer here will coincide in large part with both Chappell and Garcia's accounts.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, as I said in the introduction, there are some significant points of difference, both of emphasis, content, and I think that it is possible to flesh out an account similar to Chappell's into a more complete account of the epistemic characterization of the material sense.<sup>12</sup> Second, although my analysis lines up quite closely with Garcia's insofar as I identify the material sense with the phenomenal contents of thought, I deny that such contents are not well-and-truly representational. Rather, we should regard them as representational, since they can serve as the objects of false or unjustified judgments, but not trustworthy in the way the ideas of the intellect are, or so I will argue below.

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<sup>11</sup> There are two other names worth mentioning here, namely, Daniel Kaufman and Paul Hoffman. In Kaufman's 2000 article "Descartes on the Objective Reality of Materially False Ideas," he endorses Chappell's reading but renders the PRD as concerning acts of thought and objects of thought, and then appears to equate the objective sense with phenomenological or presentational content, thus making interpreting his overall position on the material sense somewhat difficult. See Dan Kaufman, "Descartes on the Objective Reality of Materially False Ideas," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 81, no. 4 (2000): 386, 403. Meanwhile, in a footnote to his "Descartes on Misrepresentation," Hoffman suggests that he follows Chappell in regarding ideas taken materially to be "as if" representations, but offers no elaboration. See Paul Hoffman, "Descartes on Misrepresentation," *Journal Of The History Of Philosophy* 34, no. 3 (1996): 372. To my eyes, it is highly unclear from his essay what such representation is supposed to come to, or even what Hoffman means by this claim. In light of this, I suppose the position I articulate here may be regarded as a sort of friendly elaboration and expansion of his views.

<sup>12</sup> The other important difference between my account and Chappell's arises from his claim that ideas taken materially and objectively are only conceptually distinct, and issue which comes to a head in the third chapter, and is specifically discussed in footnote 141.

### 1.3 Textual Evidence and Motivations

So, with all that out of the way, let's consider the PRD again, and look to its applications. Here my strategy will be one of connective sleuthing: We have a term, "material," as applied to ideas, and a definition, that which pertains to ideas insofar as they are "operations of the intellect" that are "less perfect" than the mind having them. We also have a contrast: the objective sense pertains to ideas insofar as we are talking about "the thing represented by that operation." In such a case, ideas may be "more perfect" than the mind having them. Given these basic assumptions, my question is, where do we find Descartes deploying the material sense, and what is its role?

We'll start with the definition. What does Descartes mean by the phrase "operations of the intellect?" Unfortunately, the definition as stated gives us few clues. At a minimum, it is clear that it is intended to elucidate the proof of God's existence that occupies most of the *Third Meditation*; this is why he invokes perfection in describing both senses, since the causal consequences of each might differ. If we turn to the *Third Meditation* proper, we find an elaboration of this underlying thought, but this time focusing strictly on the question of causal entailments. In the crucial passage, Descartes considers a new way of investigating the world beyond his own mind in the wake of his methodical doubts, and seems to invoke the distinction between ideas taken materially and objectively:

But it now occurs to me that there is another way of investigating whether some of the things of which I possess ideas exist outside me. 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. But in so far as different ideas <are considered as images which> represent different things, it is clear that they differ widely.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> (CSM II 27-28: AT VII 40)

Most scholars consider this text to be the core application of the PRD. If we consider ideas “as modes of thought,” Descartes tells us, then they all come “from within me in the same fashion,” and thus providing no route to proving the existence of anything outside of him. Accordingly, it seems we are justified in taking “modes of thought” to be synonymous with “operations of the intellect,” and thereby with the material sense.

However, if we adopt this hypothesis of synonymy, the above passage turns out not to be the first place where Descartes invokes the material sense in the *Third Meditation*. For consider another passage which comes a few pages earlier. There, Descartes is considering which of his mental contents can lead him to make mistakes. Here is what he says:

Now 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... Thus the only remaining thoughts where I must be on my guard against making a mistake are judgements. 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. Of course, if I considered just the ideas themselves *simply as modes of my thought*, without referring them to anything else, they could scarcely give me any *material* for error.<sup>14</sup>

In this passage, Descartes lays out three important claims about the epistemology of ideas taken as modes of thought. First, the closing phrase “material for error,” in connection with “modes of thought” offers further confirmation that the material sense is in play here. Second, the sense in which ideas can be “material for error” appears to be linked to using them to provide *material* for the added *forms* of judgment: since judgments must be affirmations or denials of content, this suggests that such ideas taken in this way have

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<sup>14</sup> (CSM II 26; AT VII 37)

content of some type. Third, provided we abstain from adding in any judgments, Descartes claims that ideas taken “simply as modes of thought” are epistemically unsuspect, insofar as they “cannot be false.” Fourth, early in this passage, Descartes allies considerations about the kinds of material thus supplied for judgment to the faculties in question.<sup>15</sup>

This last item provides us with our next set of texts. If we expand our view a little wider and assume that where Descartes utilizes talk of ideas as modes, be they modes of thinking, mind, or whatever faculty, then we get our first real glimpse of Descartes’ intent. For consider Principles I.32, whose title is *we possess only two modes of thinking: the perception of the intellect and the operation of the will*:

All the *modes of thinking* that we *experience within ourselves* can be brought under two general headings: perception, or the *operation* of the intellect, and volition, or the *operation* of the will. Sensory perception, imagination and pure understanding are simply various *modes of perception*; desire, aversion, assertion, denial and doubt are various *modes of willing*.<sup>16</sup>

Here all the themes of the prior passages are echoed once again, this time explicitly invoking the terminology of operations explicitly side by side with the mode-talk we saw in

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<sup>15</sup> There are some subtleties here concerning the status of ideas taken materially relative to judgments which are worth mentioning, though they are not my focus here. Specifically, ought we to regard ideas taken materially as being entirely judgment free? After all Descartes does claim that provided we abstain from judgments, ideas thus understood cannot lead us into error. It seems right to me that the class of judgments he’s making this claim about are those of assent and denial; in the context of my account, these would be those judgments where, when it seems to us that p, we affirmatively judge that p, and that Descartes’ positive advice here is that we just refrain from making that leap. Nonetheless, does this mean that such ideas do not contain other judgments? One class of judgments which are important on this front are those which are described in Alison Simmons, “Descartes on the Cognitive Structure of Sensory Experience.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 67, no. 3 (2003): 554. Simmons argues convincingly that Descartes’ remarks about the role of judgments in perceptions of geometrical properties ought to be taken as a sort of conceptual enrichment of basic sensation with geometrical concepts. If she’s right about the existence of such enriching concepts, then we should expect our phenomenological space to include them, and thus that the material sense can include such judgments. But such judgments, if Descartes is committed to them, belong to different class than the straightforwardly assertional judgments more characteristic of his philosophy.

<sup>16</sup> (CSM I 204: AT VIIIA 17), my italics.

the *Third Meditation*. But, as the second italicized phrase should indicate, the phrase “experience within ourselves,” *in nobis experimur* in the Latin, hints at some form of content. But what kind of content could he have in mind? Whatever it is, it must be not only contentful in order to be apt for judgment, but also be epistemically innocent insofar as it can’t lead us astray when we consider it without judgment, and specific to the faculties utilized in its appreciation.

The answer to this question, I now want to suggest, is what Descartes sometimes terms inner awareness. Here Descartes is thankfully clear on a number of occasions, most notably in the definition of thought in *Principles* I.8, where he writes:

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. Hence, thinking is to be identified here not merely with understanding, willing, and imagining, but also with sensory awareness. For 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.*<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> (CSM I 190: AT VIIIA 7-8), my italics. This passages’ parallel in the *Second Replies* axiomatization is still more explicit, where defines thought, as “to include everything that is within us in such a way that we are immediately aware of it. Thus all the operations of the will, the intellect, the imagination and the senses are thoughts.” (CSM II 113: AT VII 160) This passage has been subject to many treatments over the years, as it raises issues which, though orthogonal to my aims in this chapter, nonetheless merit mention. Maybe the most important of these issues concerns what relationship Descartes sees between thinking and consciousness, usefully discussed in Alison Simmons, “Cartesian Consciousness Reconsidered.” *Philosophers Imprint* 12, no. 2 (2012): 1–21. As Simmons lays out, there are a couple of ways we might try to relate Descartes’ talk of consciousness to thinking. One option is to regard the attitude of thinking and the attitude of being conscious as being identical, which Simmons suggests amounts to trivializing the claim that all thinking is conscious. A second option is to regard conscious states as having thoughts (as defined in the above passage) as the objects of conscious attitudes, a route which does not trivialize the claim but which leaves difficult questions regarding why exactly thoughts must be have the property of being consciously apprehended, an option which is also explored and helpfully contextualized in David Clemenson’s *Descartes’ Theory of Ideas*, (London ; New York: Continuum, 2007), 77-82. I am sympathetic to both of these readings, but my suspicion is that the simplest approach is that which Simmons suggests amounts to a trivialization; we ought to regard the attitude of thinking as simply identical to the attitude of being conscious, and to regard having an idea as simply being in a



In this passage, Descartes defines thought as “everything which we are aware of as happening within us, insofar as we have awareness of it,” which he elsewhere terms inner awareness. What then is inner awareness? An answer is provided by the parallel passage in the *Second Meditation*. There, having established the cogito, he runs through the checklist of his mental faculties, and notes that the method of doubt appears to rule out all of them as sources of information about the extramental world.

The fact that it is I who am doubting and understanding and willing is so evident that I see no way of making it any clearer. But it is also the case that the 'I' who imagines is the same 'I'. For even if, as I have supposed, none of the objects of imagination are real, the power of imagination is something which really exists and is part of my thinking. Lastly, it is also the same 'I' who has sensory perceptions, or is aware of bodily things as it were through the senses. *For example, I am now seeing light, hearing a noise, feeling heat. But I am asleep, so all this is false. Yet I certainly seem to see, to hear, and to be warmed. This cannot be false;* what is called 'having a sensory perception' is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking.<sup>18</sup>

All of the same themes just enumerated occur here, but with the italicized passage, he has provided us with a final, and to my mind absolutely crucial, tidbit about ideas taken materially. What is given in inner awareness is what seems to be the case, and this is properly speaking what thinking is. Moreover, he stresses the importance of states of inner awareness as being said of himself: they are, put short, first-personal.

We are now ready to give a complete account of what inner awareness is, and to introduce some useful terminology. First, states of inner awareness are *apparent*: If I am in a state of inner awareness, then it will *seem* to me that some state of affairs is the case, like that I am walking or so on. Second, states of inner awareness are *first-personal*: If I am in such a

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conscious state paired with some objective existent presented in the aforementioned conscious state. However, a great many convolutions lie ahead in developing such an account, which is an area for further research.

<sup>18</sup> (CSM II 19; AT VII 29)

state, then it will seem *to me* that some state of affairs holds. Third, states of inner awareness are *luminously certain*: If I am in such a state, then I am certain that I am in such a state, and therefore certain that it seems to me that some state of affairs holds. Fourth, states of inner awareness are *faculty specific*: If I am in such a state, then that state can be attributed, at least in part, to one of my faculties, and will have the attendant phenomenological characteristics.

A few observations here. First, the apparent nature of states of inner awareness makes it clear that they must be contentful in some sense of that word. In the *Second Meditation* passage, Descartes explicitly links this fact to the hypothesis that he is dreaming, and thereby to the method of doubt. This means that whatever content ideas so taken have, it can be investigated independent of how the actual world, independent of one's own mind, really is. Moreover, if ideas taken materially are luminously certain, then there is no chance of error in our investigations. This allows them to serve two crucial roles. First, thanks to their being first-personal, they can provide the antecedent condition of the *cogito* under the method of doubt, as we saw Descartes highlighting in his claim in the *Second Meditation* that "the fact that it is I who am doubting and understanding and willing is so evident that I see no way of making it any clearer."<sup>19</sup> Second, they are able to provide a subject matter for investigation in the form familiar from the later part of the *Second Meditation*, where Descartes engages in a parallel investigation of the wax and his own mind via the ideas of the wax, noting at the conclusion of this process that he has noticed the differences between his faculties, and declaring that "...my awareness of my own self is not merely much truer and more certain than my awareness of the wax, but also much more distinct and evident."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> (CSM II 19: AT VII 29)

<sup>20</sup> (CSM II 22: AT VII 33)

So, if this rendering is right, the material sense is for states of inner awareness, and inner awareness allows Descartes to engage in the types of psychological investigations that are proper to the mind, including the cogito and the investigation of the faculties. This gives us a first argument that is not strictly textual: In order for Descartes to do the type of psychology he does in the *Meditations*, he needs a category with the features just listed. That category is inner awareness, and inner awareness appears to be closely linked to the material sense. So, for reasons of terminological parsimony, we should take the material sense to be for inner awareness. Call this the *Argument From Motivation*.

The above texts also give us a route to a further argument. Call this the *Argument from Modification*. Thought, we all agree, is the principal attribute of mind, and modes of thought are ways that principal attribute can be. But thought, by definition, is inner awareness. So, modes of thought are ways inner awareness might be. But modes of thought, at least those he's principally concerned with here are operations of the intellect, and operations of the intellect are ideas taken materially. So, ideas taken materially are ways inner awareness might be, and are therefore contentful in the way just laid out.

So, this gives us the positive case for the *Content-Laden View*. However, the defender of the *No Content View* still has a number of replies available. In the next section, I'll take up these topics and argue that none of the texts count decisively in favor of their view, and moreover, that there are a number of texts which their account struggles greatly to account for, and which my account does well with.

## 1.4 Defeating the *No Content View*

### 1.4.1 Against the Textual Basis

Defenders of the *No Content View* have a number of texts that they draw on to make their case. The first and most important comes from the *Third Meditation*, where Descartes claims that “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.”<sup>21</sup> A natural enough interpretation of this passage, which Nadler endorses, is that there is no difference whatsoever between ideas taken materially, and the reason for this is that they are all modes that are fundamentally undifferentiated from each other in that regard.<sup>22</sup>

One very important reason to adopt this reading has to do with causality: Descartes advances this claim as part of his set-up for his proof of God’s existence from God’s objective reality. A key premise in that argument is what commentators have come to call the Causal Principle, which has the consequence that the cause of the existence of a mode can be either a mode or a substance. Descartes’ claim that “they all appear to come from within me in the same fashion,” can be taken as a statement of the possibility that the mind, a substance, is the cause of its ideas, its modes. Given that this is what Descartes is trying to do, then the only feature of ideas that really matters is their being modes; hence, the only thing that matters for ideas taken materially is their being modes.

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<sup>21</sup> (CSM II 22: AT VII 33)

<sup>22</sup> Nadler, “The Theory of Ideas,” 89-90.

There are a few points to make against this line of argument. First, there is no in reason why Descartes can't be speaking of ideas as being modes *and also* of their being states of inner awareness, since as we learned from the *Argument from Modification*, this is just what it is to be a mode of mind. And, insofar as ideas taken materially are modes, they don't have consequences for the extramental world under the causal principle. But my opponent might parry and ask in what sense they have no "recognizable inequality" within them. My reply to this is that they have no recognizable inequality within them *insofar as they are modes*. Put another way, Descartes' question here is about causal requirements, and not about content: there is no recognizable inequality between them with regards to the features that matter for his argument.

This line of argument merges nicely with a second, what I'll call the *Argument from Redundancy*. If Descartes' intent with the material sense is to just to highlight the status of ideas as modes of mind, then it wouldn't make sense for him to introduce a new sense of ideas on top of the material sense. However, this is precisely what he does early in the *Third Meditation's* proof of God's existence by speaking of ideas in a third way, via their *formal reality*. While discussing the question of whether ideas can entail the existence of things outside of himself, Descartes claims that "the nature of an idea is such that of itself it requires no formal reality except what it derives from my thought, of which it is a mode."<sup>23</sup> In most versions of the *No Content View*, to speak of an idea in the material sense is just to speak of it with regard to its formal reality. But then it seems Descartes has introduced some redundancy into his account, since these are just the same. Charitability demands that we try

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<sup>23</sup> (CSM II 28; AT VII 41)

to read there as being a distinction here, since there is a difference in terminology, and the best answer is that they are distinct concepts.

A defender of the *No Content View* might further reply that the material sense of the PRD is a relatively late addition to the *Meditations*, and therefore stands suspected of the kind of terminological carelessness that marred Descartes' argument in the *Fourth Replies* and elsewhere. This is relevant in the current context because that undermines the charge of redundancy between the notions of formal reality and the material sense and replaces it with a charge of sloppiness. However, if the argument of the last section has succeeded, this also falls short, since at the time of the composition of the *Second Meditation*, he was already associating the term "material" with the avoidance of error via withholding judgment..

A second line of argument for the *No Content View* concerns the objective sense. If Descartes' intent with the material sense is as I've made it out to be, then it seems that he should not define it in such a way as to make the objective sense seem like a category for presentational or phenomenological content. But this is precisely what he does, again in the *Third Meditation*, where he introduces objective reality thusly: "...Insofar as different ideas <are considered as images which> represent different things, it is clear that they differ widely."<sup>24</sup> And later on in the *Third Meditation* he repeats this underlying thought while building towards the conclusion that God exists on the basis of the objective reality of the idea of God, claiming that "it is clear to me, by the natural light, that the ideas in me are like <pictures, or> images which can easily fall short of the perfection of the things from which

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<sup>24</sup> (CSM II 28; AT VII 40)

they are taken, but which cannot contain anything greater or more perfect.”<sup>25</sup> So, the argument goes, what is such picture talk supposed to come to if it isn’t for discussing the phenomenal content of ideas? And, if we’re going to talk about charitable and non-redundant reading, it seems that Descartes must be committing some sort of double counting or worse.

A full reply to this line of argument will have to wait until the third chapter, where I’ll offer a detailed account of the objective sense. Nonetheless, for now, it’s worth noting that talk of images is ambiguous. For consider Descartes’ remark that “...Insofar as different ideas <are considered as images which> represent different things, it is clear that they differ widely.”<sup>26</sup> One way to render this point is to say that ideas differ objectively insofar as they are *images* which represent different things. Reading images as phenomenal states, then the objective sense is for phenomenal states, thus suggesting that the *Content-Laden View* of the material sense renders Descartes’ point redundant. On the other hand, however, suppose that the emphasis falls elsewhere, and that Descartes’ point is that ideas taken objectively are considered as images which represent different *things*. In such a case, it seems as though Descartes’ point in introducing this category might not lie in phenomenology at all.

Making good on why this rendering is the right one will have to await the final chapter. For now, however, I want to turn our focus to three cases where the *Content-Laden View* has an edge over the *No Content View*. The argument will be straightforward: what

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<sup>25</sup> (CSM II 29: AT VII 42)

<sup>26</sup> (CSM II 28: AT VII 40)

Descartes says about the ideas and truth, sensory ideas, and abstractions all presuppose that ideas in the material sense have representational content.

#### 1.4.2 Problem Cases for the No Content View

Let's begin by returning the *Second Meditation*, and to what Descartes says about truth and ideas.

Now 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... Of course, if I considered just the ideas themselves simply *as modes of my thought* without referring them to anything else, they could scarcely give me material for error.<sup>27</sup>

Earlier, I claimed that this passage provides key evidence for sorting out the web of terminology surrounding the PRD, while setting aside the claim that they “cannot strictly speaking be false.”<sup>28</sup> We can now return to this issue. I see two ways that we might render this claim. The first way understands this remark to also extend to the idea being incapable of truth; insofar as ideas are kept independent of judgments, one might think, they don't have truth values at all. A second way of understanding his remark, however, would be to

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<sup>27</sup> (CSM II 25: AT VII 37), my italics.

<sup>28</sup> Consider, for example, Descartes' claim that he has a certain knowledge of his own mind from his judgments, and that “same applies in other cases <regarding all the things that come into our mind, namely that we who think of them exist, even if they are false and have no existence.>” (CSM I 196: AT VIIIA 9). One way of understanding this remark sees it as basically expressing the same idea as the passage above, where the “other cases” are ideas that are *not* affirmative or negative judgments, and that regardless of whether the objects depicted are real or not, it is nonetheless true that we have inner awareness and thus certain knowledge of our own mental states; combined with the passage I am considering in this section, the natural way to understand the sense in which Descartes invokes ideas is materially, that is, the ideas considered “simply as modes of thought.”



take it as being restricted to falsehood; in this case, the idea would be not just a truth-bearer, but the bearer of something akin to (gulp) a necessary truth!<sup>29</sup>

Any good interpretation should have a stance on which of these to favor, and why. The *Phenomenal-Representational View* favors the later option. Recall the luminosity of inner awareness: when our minds have a given mode, then we are *certain* that some state of affairs seems to be the case to us. If we take it that certainty entails truth, or at least the truth insofar as finite minds can grasp it, then when our minds are modified, it is *true* that some state of affairs seems to be the case to us. Thus, Descartes' claim that his ideas cannot be false, and therefore must be true, is conditional on the mind being modified by the relevant idea.

Meanwhile, on either of these readings, the *No Content View* faces challenges. If I am right that Descartes is discussing ideas in the material sense, and the material sense is not concerned with content, then why does Descartes appear to treat such ideas as being representations of (respectively) goats and chimeras? So far as I can tell, there is no straightforward answer. Given that, the extension of such considerations of representation to claims about truth goes wrong no matter which reading one favors. On the view that ideas express conditionally necessary contents, then, the *No Content View* is lost, since modes without regard to content shouldn't have any relationship to truth, while on the view that they lack truth-values entirely, they still face the problem of explaining why they can be differentiated by content.

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<sup>29</sup> I was first made aware of the issues surrounding this passage by D.T.J. Bailey, "Descartes on the Logical Properties of Ideas," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 14, no. 3 (2006): 401–11.

A second line of argument concerns Descartes' account of abstractions, such as universals, time, space, and number. In his account in the *Principles* of how these notions arise in us, he again makes considerable usage of the locution "modes of mind," and again, the *No Content View* does not fare well.

With regards to universals, he writes, "these universals arise solely from the fact that we make use of one and the same idea for thinking of all individual items which resemble each other: we apply one and the same term to all the things which are represented by the idea in question, and this is the universal term," and earlier adds that, "In the same way, number, when it is considered simply in the abstract or in general, and not in any created things, is merely *a mode of thinking*; and the same applies to all the other universals."<sup>30</sup> He makes a similar remark in his account of time:

In order to measure the duration of all things, we compare their duration with the duration of the greatest and most regular motions which give rise to years and days, and we call this duration 'time'. Yet nothing is thereby added to duration, taken in its general sense, except for a *mode of thought*.<sup>31</sup>

The thrust of these passages seems to be this. Abstractions are the products of our minds. By use of our faculties, we recognize resemblances between things and cluster them together into a single idea. Similarly, we utilize our faculties in making comparisons between different types of duration, and arrive at an idea of duration in general. However, Descartes insists, the resulting ideas should not be taken to represent real things, for example, the *ante rem* universals of Platonism; and his favored alternative for dealing with these odd ideas is to insist they are modes of thought.

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<sup>30</sup> (CSM II 212: AT VIIIA 27), my italics.

<sup>31</sup> (CSM II 212: AT VIIIA 27), my italics.

There are a couple of ways we might take this remark. One might take the locution “modes of thought” to be used contrastively to “modes of body,” and so not take it as an explicit invocation of the material sense. In favor of this option, Descartes insists in the paragraph prior to the above passage that “some attributes or modes are in the very things of which they are said to be attributes or modes, while others are only in our thought,” and the abstractions described above are all supposed to be in the latter category.<sup>32</sup> Such a reading would hew close to Descartes’ general position that abstractions are mental constructions, and, as commentary on this passage has demonstrated, this is not an indefensible position. One can, for example, attempt to wed together Descartes’ remarks about universals in the above passage with those he makes about real natures and essences, as in Lawrence Nolan’s “Descartes’ Theory of Universals.” Here is what Nolan says:

When we regard ideas in their presentational aspect, we are considering them objectively or, equivalently, with respect to their objective being. Now, Descartes does not explicitly invoke the notion of objective being in his discussion of universals in the Principles, but it would be a rather odd view to hold that universals are ideas considered with respect to their formal being (as would be implied by the strict sense of the term ‘mode of thinking’), since formally speaking ideas are indistinguishable acts of the intellect. Surely, he does not want to say that universals are acts of mind or that they are indistinguishable from one another.<sup>33</sup>

Nolan’s argument is by elimination. Take ideas in their formal sense. This is equivalent to taking them materially.<sup>34</sup> Taken as such they are indistinguishable, but ideas of universals are distinguishable. So, universals must be ideas in the objective sense, which is

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<sup>32</sup> (CSM II 212; AT VII 27)

<sup>33</sup> Nolan “Universals,” 172-173.

<sup>34</sup> Nolan “Universals,” 179.

allied with presentational content. Nolan dismisses out of hand the possibility that they might just be acts of mind.

Although I do not claim that such a strategy is doomed to failure, I think that the hurdles it poses should demonstrate the advantages of reading “modes of mind” in the manner I’ve argued for here. For consider how easily the passage under discussion reads given the *Phenomenal-Representational View*. Descartes has told us how we come to think about universals, namely, by constructing new ideas out of the ideas of particulars on the basis of their resemblances. The resulting idea, however, is at least confused, being the joining of several distinct ideas. How ought we to regard such ideas? One way is to judge that they are of real things, real universals, numbers etc. This snap judgment may seem plausible to the inattentive mind, but not to one that is attentive and notices that such ideas are abstractions wholly dependent on the mind. What then to do with this abstracted content? The *Phenomenal-Representational View* has an answer: we should regard it as a mere seeming, from which we cannot infer the reality of the seeming thing it depicts, namely, a universal.

In the following chapter, we’ll see how this basic insight can be fruitfully developed into a more elaborate theory of one of the principal things Descartes does with his theory of abstractions, namely, give a theory of conceptual distinctions. But for now I want to consider a third case, namely, what Descartes says about sensory ideas. In many places, Descartes tells us that our best strategy for considering such ideas is to regard them as cases of inner awareness. For example, consider what he says in *Principles* I 66.

There remains sensations, emotions, and appetites. These may be clearly perceived provided we take great care in our judgments concerning them to include no more than what is strictly contained in our perception – *no more than we have inner awareness*... In order to distinguish what is clear in this connection from what is obscure, we must be very careful to note that pain and color and so on are clearly and distinctly perceived when they are regarded merely as *sensations or thoughts*. But

when they are judged to be real things existing outside our mind, there is no way of understanding what sort of things they are.<sup>35</sup>

A nearly identical suggestion is then made in the subsequent article. In both passages, Descartes' positive advice to his newly cautious reader is to not go beyond the contents of inner awareness, that is, precisely I've held is the material sense. This has a handy consequence: If sensations are to just be regarded as ideas taken materially, then that means we don't have to worry about what their status is via the objective sense. This, perhaps, explains why Descartes never took a stance on the status of the objective being of phenomenal qualities, precisely because it was enough to evaluate them materially, and that this was as far as epistemic prudence would allow.<sup>36</sup>

How does the *No Content View* handle this passage? That will depend heavily on how we want to flesh out an accompanying view of the objective sense. One option, which we'll explore in the final chapter, is to regard objective being as Descartes' category for presentational content. Since sensory ideas are paradigmatically present to the mind, we would expect that they should, somehow wind up having objective being in our ideas. But

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<sup>35</sup> (CSM I 216; AT VIIIA 32)

<sup>36</sup> Just as an aside, it is worth noting that this way of looking at the texts opens up another way of understanding Descartes' position on the representationality of sensation. Although commentators have been widely divided over whether Descartes ought to be regarded as a representationalist about sensation, one of the more promising options is to regard sensory ideas as representative *not* of bodies as they really are, but rather, as their features are salient to the survival of the body and the mind-body union. Such is the account developed in Alison Simmons in "Are Cartesian Sensations Representational?" *Noûs* 33, No. 3 (1999), 347-369, as well as elsewhere. As Simmons stresses, such an account makes sensory representation out as genuine representation, rather than merely apparent, by virtue of the fact that such perceptions are veridical, albeit not in the way we might naively think, thus absolving God of the charge of implanting deceptive ideas in us. However, on the above account, we need not go so far: in this way of understanding Descartes' point, he has the alternative option of insisting, not that sensory ideas *represent* the salient features of bodies occasioning them, but rather, that regardless of what they represent, if we take them just as states of inner awareness, then they are sufficient for the purposes of guiding the body in biologically advantageous ways, and accordingly we needn't worry ourselves with all the awkward questions of integrating the alleged representationality of sensation with, for example, our account of the objective sense of ideas.

then we are stuck asking why, if that's his stance, why didn't he ever say so? Matters are made even worse in his exchange with Arnauld about material falsity, as we'll now see.

### 1.5 **Material Falsity in Brief**

I would not be surprised if the mere mention of this topic has prompted a groan on the part of my readers, since material falsity is, by now, among the most thoroughly explored topics in the literature. To those readers, who are maybe having thoughts about the beating of dead horses, I promise that our conversation will thankfully not be too deep and mostly focused on what Descartes says about objective being, because the reading set out here offers very straightforward ways to regard these woefully difficult passages.

So, let's start with a bit of scene-setting. In the *Third Meditation*, Descartes considers his ideas of heat and cold, he notes that they are obscure and confused and therefore materially false. He then makes the problematic claim that his sensory idea of cold "represents a non-thing as a thing," since cold is an absence and his sensory experience of cold is positive.<sup>37</sup> In the *Fourth Replies*, Arnauld points to a problem with this particular claim: supposing objective being to be Descartes' category for representational content, he points out that either a thing or a non-thing has objective being in his idea. Provided that cold is genuinely an absence, either the idea represents cold, and therefore has no positive objective being associated with it, or it represents a thing, in which case it is not the idea of cold!<sup>38</sup> Note that Arnauld's assumption effectively is just that of the *No Content View*, namely,

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<sup>37</sup> (CSM II 30; AT VII 43-44)

<sup>38</sup> (CSM II 145-146; AT VII 206-207)

that when we talk about the content of ideas, or about what they represent, we are talking about ideas in the objective sense.

Descartes' reply to this worry has puzzled most commentators, especially those committed to the *No Content View*. First he says that Arnauld's response is good, so far as it goes, but that it was not what he meant, because materially falsity in the sense he intended "it means that the ideas are such as to provide subject-matter for error." He then goes on:

When M. Arnauld says 'if cold is merely an absence, there cannot be an idea of cold which represents it as a positive thing', it is clear that he is dealing solely with an idea taken in the formal sense. Since ideas are forms of a kind, and are not composed of any matter, when we think of them as representing something we are taking them not materially but formally. If, however, we were considering them not as representing this or that but simply as operations of the intellect, then it could be said that we were taking them materially, but in that case they would have no reference to the truth or falsity of their objects. So I think that the only sense in which an idea can be said to be 'materially false' is the one which I explained. Thus, whether cold is a positive thing or an absence does not affect the idea I have of it, which remains the same as it always was. It is this idea which, I claim, can provide subject-matter for error if it is in fact true that cold is an absence and does not have as much reality as heat; for if I consider the ideas of cold and heat just as I received them from my senses, I am unable to tell that one idea represents more reality to me than the other.<sup>39</sup>

As tempting as it might be to dig into questions about this new formal sense Descartes introduces, instead I want to focus our attention on the continuity between his usages of the material sense here with those we began with. As before, Descartes begins by insisting that ideas, taken as modes of mind, "have no reference to the truth or falsity" of their objects. We've already seen why this should be so via the fact that states of inner awareness are merely apparent. To this we can add a second item: Ideas taken materially can be materially false insofar as we take their apparent content and affirm it while it is yet obscure and confused. This explains why Descartes uses the term materially in this context,

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<sup>39</sup> (CSM II 162-163; AT VII 232)

precisely to highlight this connection, which I suppose would wind up being analogous to saying that I affirm p because it seems to be the case that p. This is followed by his insistence that the idea of cold remains the same as it always was, regardless of what object we take it to represent. In the following passage he elaborates on this: “It often happens in the case of obscure and confused ideas – and the ideas of heat and cold fall into this category – that an idea is referred to something other than that of which it is in fact the idea. Thus if cold is simply an absence, the idea of cold is not coldness itself as it exists objectively in the intellect, but something else, which I erroneously mistake for this absence, namely a sensation which in fact has no existence outside the intellect.”<sup>40</sup>

Now, readers committed to the *No Content View* should start feeling some major puzzlement at this moment. For if Descartes’ only category for representation is the objective sense, then his claim that the idea of cold is just a sensation offering us occasion for error is again a non-sequitur, since we would like to know what, exactly, it is that we perceive when we have the idea. Certainly it’s something! A natural guess would be that it is a positive objective being, maybe the sensation he closes the passage emphasizing. However, a few paragraphs later, he explicitly denies this possibility!

Hence, in asking what is the cause of the positive objective being which, in my view, is responsible for the idea being materially false, my critic has raised an improper question. For I do not claim that an idea’s material falsity results from some positive entity; it arises solely from the obscurity of the idea – although this does have something positive as its underlying subject, namely the actual sensation involved.<sup>41</sup>

Here the *No Content View* appears to come up radically short. Descartes insists there is a positive “underlying subject,” giving rise to the error, but that this subject is not an

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<sup>40</sup> (CSM II 163: AT VII 233)

<sup>41</sup> (CSM II 164: AT VII 233)



objective existent. But if it is not an objective existent, then it must be that the underlying sensation is to be understood materially, as Descartes established at the beginning of his reply! But if this material sense is the same as that of the *Preface to the Reader*, and ideas taken materially have no content, it isn't obvious how it could occasion bad judgments at all, for there is nothing to judge!

As the vast literature on this subject demonstrates, the defender of the *No Content View* has a number of interpretive options here, though many of them rather strain the textual basis.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, my reading doesn't need a great deal of squirming to make sense of this claim. The 'underlying entity' is the sensory idea taken materially. As such, it is the very obscure phenomenal presentation which gives rise to errors of the kind documented above. Under such circumstances, our best bet is to attend to such ideas as they come to us independent of judgments, and to understand them only as modes of mind.

One final benefit of this reading that I want to highlight is that, because it isolates questions of the phenomenology from questions of representation, it leaves the objective sense free to serve a different role than providing erroneous content. For it isn't enough to say just that materially false ideas offer occasion for false judgments: rather, we must also say *what* such judgments are false of. The objective sense can serve this purpose by supplying the object of that materially false ideas really represent, and thereby are false of. So, in the case of the idea of cold, what has objective being in that idea is the privation that Descartes premises his whole argument on, while the idea taken materially is the positive sensation that he says serves as an "underlying subject." This explains nicely what he means in saying that

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<sup>42</sup> A useful summary of this literature is provided in Raffaella De Rosa, *Descartes and the Puzzle of Sensory Representation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2010.

the idea of cold “represents a non-thing as a thing” and why this should go hand in hand with saying no positive objective being is responsible for its material falsity.

### 1.6 **An Alternative: The Three Category Interpretation**

There are a number of objections which might be raised against this view, or alternatives which I have not yet explored. I want to close by briefly considering one of the most pressing alternatives to both of the views advanced here. Call this view the Three Category Interpretation, or TCI.<sup>43</sup> TCI agrees with the *No Content View*’s rendition of the *Reader’s Preface* distinction as being one between content and ontology, but doesn’t regard objective being as the *sole* Cartesian category for handling representational content. Instead, TCI adds inner awareness as a category distinct from both the objective and material senses. The great advantage of this approach is that it preserves the standard reading of the *Third Meditation*’s use of the distinction, while allowing that the issues raised about inner awareness are real, just that they are not used in the manner I’ve suggested here relative to the material sense.

This view raises a very difficult, but important question, namely, what motivates the direct equation of the material sense with inner awareness. On the textual front, the evidence I’ve presented above is intended to show that Descartes’ writings demonstrate a consistent set of themes and terminology surrounding the material sense that show it lines up well tightly with his treatments of inner awareness. Philosophically, however, understanding the material sense as being involved with inner awareness suggests a useful reason for why this

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<sup>43</sup> An example of a view of this kind can be found in Jorge Secada, *Cartesian Metaphysics: the Late Scholastic Origins of Modern Philosophy*. (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 78.

distinction is said of the same underlying entity; ideas taken materially and objectively are distinguished by emphasis, between the *image-like representation* of a thing and *the thing represented* by an image-like content. There can be, on this rendering, no ideas which can only be spoken of in only *one* sense; the Janus-faced nature of Cartesian thought requires no less. However, if we adopt TCI, we are left with the rather vexing question of what it is that ties together inner awareness with the material and objective senses. If inner awareness is the defining feature of thought, must it have an object as a matter of necessity, no matter how confusedly grasped that object might be? The answer is probably, but note that while my view can tell us why it must from the reasons above, TCI must give some sort of distinct answer, which Descartes' texts unfortunately give us little guidance on which does not guide us directly to the view articulated here. Moreover, any such reading will have to address the evidence I've presented above for equating inner awareness with the material sense in the third section, which I think should be decisive.

However, there is a final argument against this rendering of the point, which has already been teased above, and with which I will close. Let us assume that a charitable reading of Descartes should have him assigning the terminology of distinctions in a way reflective of their philosophical use. If so, then the material sense should have a reason for being so-called. And, in the texts above, we saw him using this term to describe the status of ideas prior to judgment, suggesting they provide no *material* for error if properly handled, which we'll see him amending shortly with the doctrine of *material* falsity, meaning they offer opportunity for error. We also saw him suggesting that the contrast for this ought to be the *added forms* of judgment. On the story I've been telling, there's a straightforward reason for him to make this the contrast he's interested in. Insofar as sensations and universals are

taken materially, they are taken as states of inner awareness, and insofar as they are states of inner awareness, they accomplish both aims, by presenting a content which can lead us into error, but which does not do so necessarily, provided it is handled correctly. This explains why Descartes ought to call this sense *material*, insofar as inner awareness provides the material grist for judgment's mill. The three-category interpretation lacks this advantage, and to my mind, thus ought to be dismissed alongside other *No Content Views*.

### 1.7 **Conclusion**

Where does all of this leave us? If I am right, it appears that the familiar distinction between the phenomenology and representation plausibly lies at the heart of Descartes' motivation for introducing the PRD. So far as the material sense is concerned, the *Phenomenal-Representational View* has solid textual evidence, usefully unifying his sundry remarks about the material that ideas provide for judgment and the material falsity some ideas have via their propensity to occasion errors; since phenomenal states do this by providing us with experiences of how things seem while tempting us to judge that how things seem is how they are, they fulfill this role. Phenomenal states are also important insofar as they fulfill key roles in his overall project, providing him with the immediate, luminous, faculty-specific and first-personal content, themes which run directly through those passages where Descartes invokes the operations of the intellect mentioned in his definition of the material sense. Moreover, they are shed useful and interesting light on his views of sensory ideas, universals, and the relationship of ideas to truth, which I've hopefully shown can be developed fruitfully and integrated into his larger project. Meanwhile, we've

seen the *No Content View* fall short, both on the textual grounds which were supposed to serve as its most obvious basis, and in its philosophical applications.

Of course, this is only half of the picture, for we would like to know, not just the meaning of the material sense, but also of the objective sense, and in a sense our case against the *No Content View* will not be complete until we have a plausible reading of the objective sense in hand. After all, if Descartes' intent wasn't to use the objective sense for phenomenal content, what use might he have in mind? In order to answer that question, however, we will first need to consider a topic which (at first glance) may seem rather far afield, namely, the mysterious nature of the real natures of the *Fifth Meditation*.

## CHAPTER 2: REAL NATURES, UNIVERSALS, AND INDIVIDUAL ESSENCES

### 2.1 Introduction

Claims about natures lie at the very heart of Descartes' philosophy, but there are many challenges to understanding what these claims mean. One of the greatest such challenges emerges in the *Fifth Meditation*. There, Descartes claims that there are real natures which are independent of his mind. This is puzzling, however, because in the *Principles*, Descartes offers an analysis of universals, according to which universals are abstractions produced by our cognitive powers and so dependent on our minds. If all real natures are universals, then it appears Descartes has contradicted himself, and so we might wonder whether his claims about natures represent a coherent doctrine at all.

Call this the *Natures Problem*. Solutions (or evasions) of this problem fall into three camps. The first camp downplays or ignores the *Principles* in favor of a straightforward reading of the *Fifth Meditation* as an endorsement of a type of Platonism. According to this reading, Descartes thinks real natures are distinct from God and our minds, though dependent on God and thought of by us. The second camp adopts the opposite tact and reads Descartes as a conceptualist, with real natures being innate ideas that are dependent on finite minds and not extra-mental beings in their own right. A third camp, which we might

call Neoplatonist, sees Descartes as committed to the existence of real natures, but locates such natures in God's mind, either as God's ideas or as his decrees.<sup>44</sup>

My aim here is to suggest that much of this debate has been conducted under the false assumption that the real natures of the *Fifth Meditation* are universals. Instead, I'll propose that Descartes accepts that there are two types of thing that go under the generic term "real nature," namely, universals and individual essences. Call this claim the *Generic Natures* thesis. Here I'll argue for this claim on three fronts. First, I'll establish that Descartes has a pressing need for individual essences in order to account for the possibility of singular thoughts such as the *cogito*. Second, I'll suggest that nothing he says in the *Fifth Meditation* locks in that he is talking about universals, and third, that his formalization of the *Fifth Meditation's* argument in the *Second Replies* seems to point to him talking about individual essences when paired with other remarks he makes in a series of letters to Hobbes.

Where does this leave questions about the ontology of real natures? I'll suggest that all told, there is a good case for attributing to Descartes the view that individual essences are

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<sup>44</sup> The classic article defending the Platonist reading is Anthony Kenny, "The Cartesian Circle and the Eternal Truths," *The Journal of Philosophy* 67, no. 19 (1970): 685–700. The two most important recent renderings of the Neoplatonist interpretation are Tad Schmaltz, "Platonism and Descartes' View of Immutable Essences," *Archiv Für Geschichte Der Philosophie*, 73(2) (1991): 129–170, and Marleen Rozemond, "Descartes's Ontology of the Eternal Truths," In *Contemporary Perspectives on Early Modern Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Vere Chappell*, ed. Paul Hoffman, David Owen, and Gideon Yaffe (London: Broadview, 2008), 41–63. The most elaborate defense of a conceptualist interpretation can be found in a series of articles by Lawrence Nolan, beginning with "The Ontological Status of Cartesian Natures," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (1997): 169–94, continued in "Descartes' Theory of Universals," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 89, no. 2/3 (1998): 161–80, and recently revived in "Descartes on Universal Essences and Divine Knowledge," in *The Problem of Universals in Early Modern Philosophy*, edited by Stefano Di Bella, and Tad M. Schmaltz. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Oxford Scholarship Online, 2017.

independent of mortal and divine minds, a thesis which I'll call *Individual Platonism*.<sup>45</sup>

Meanwhile, I'll suggest that universals are mere concepts, but building on the argument of the last chapter, I'll argue that they are concepts of a particular kind, namely, concepts whose proper analysis lies only in the material sense. Call this claim *Phenomenal Conceptualism*. This claim, I'll argue here, has a number of useful upshots for Descartes, among them, blocking the existence of ante rem universals, and allowing for a theory of conceptual distinctions. Finally, I'll suggest that these views open interesting conceptual territory on whether individual essences are substances or not. I'll propose four options for how to consider this question, and suggest that *Individual Platonism* gives us more room to maneuver than we might initially think.

## 2.2 The Natures Problem

### 2.2.1 The Textual Basis

The first prong of the *Natures Problem* comes from Descartes' discussion of real natures in the *Fifth Meditation*. There, Descartes considers his ideas and remarks that:

...I find within me countless ideas of things which even though they may not exist anywhere outside me still cannot be called nothing; for although in a sense they can be thought of at will, they are not my invention but have their own true and immutable natures. When, for example, I imagine a triangle, even if perhaps no such figure exists, or has ever existed, anywhere outside my thought, there is still a

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<sup>45</sup> So far as I can tell, the rendering of Individual Platonism I am offering here is unique. However, I am not entirely alone in taking singular thought to be significant for Descartes, for example in David Clemenson's *Descartes' Theory of Ideas*, 42-43, where Clemenson argues that Descartes' comfortable use of singular thought serves as an indicator of the influence of Jesuit commentators on his thinking, given that they were generally more friendly to singular thought than the Thomistic Dominicans.



determinate nature, or essence, or form of the triangle which is immutable and eternal, and not invented by me or dependent on my mind.<sup>46</sup>

The general lesson from this text can be briskly summarized. (1) There are natures. (2) They are eternal and immutable, (3) they are independent of finite minds and are not its inventions, and (4) the fact that they can be thought of does not entail the existence of the objects whose natures they are.

Suppose that we are prepared to read the mind-independence claim in (3) above literally. If so, then the picture of the *Fifth Meditation* contrasts dramatically with that given in the *Principles*. For example, in *Principles* I.58, titled “number and all universals are simply modes of thinking,” he writes that “...number, when it is considered simply in the abstract or in general, and not in any created things, is merely a mode of thinking; and the same applies to all the other universals, as we call them.”<sup>47</sup> And in the subsequent section he goes on:

These universals arise solely from the fact that we make use of one and the same idea for thinking of all individual items which resemble each other: we apply one and the same term to all the things which are represented by the idea in question, and this is the universal term. When we see two stones, for example, and direct our attention not to their nature but merely to the fact that there are two of them, we form the idea of the number which we call 'two'; and when we later see two birds or two trees, and consider not their nature but merely the fact that there are two of them, we go back to the same idea as before. This, then, is the universal idea; and we always designate the number in question by the same universal term 'two'.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> (CSM II 45-45: AT VII 64)

<sup>47</sup> (CSM I 212: AT VIIIA 27)

<sup>48</sup> (CSM I 212: AT VIIIA 27-28)

Here rather the opposite picture emerges from the *Fifth Meditation*. Universal terms, Descartes tells us, are usable because we can use selective attention to ignore irrelevant features of individual things and focus on specific resemblances between them, thus forming what he calls universal ideas. These ideas, alongside other abstractions, are (1) modes of mind, and all of them are (2) products of our abstractive powers. He does not say that they are immutable, so the contrast is not complete, but generally speaking, while the most obvious reading of the *Meditations* is Platonically flavored, the most obvious reading of the *Principles* is that universals are concepts or concept-like, and second, that Descartes understands them to be mind-dependent, as indicated by his claim that they are modes of mind. Indeed, I consider the evidence of the above passage and its textual surroundings to be sufficient to show that Descartes must accept that universals are conceptual and mind-dependent.

Given that, we arrive at the *Natures Problem*, here stated as an inconsistent triad:

1. All real natures are independent of the mind.
2. All real natures are universals.
3. All universals are not independent of the mind.

If we wish to overcome this problem, we will have to abandon at least one of the above claims. The question is, which ought it to be?

### 2.2.2 Three Approaches to the Natures Problem

Over the years, scholars have offered many different interpretations of these texts. Here I will be concerned to highlight the advantages of my approach versus three major competitors. The first such competitor finds its classic articulation in Kenny's "The Cartesian Circle and the Eternal Truths," in which Kenny takes Descartes' remarks in the

*Fifth Meditation* at face value. In the resulting reading, Kenny describes Descartes as the “founder of modern Platonism” because of his claim that God creates the eternal truths and the essences those truths are (presumably) about.<sup>49</sup> Because God creates them, Kenny reasons, they must be distinct from him. Moreover, Kenny also takes the natures to be kin to Meinongian possibilia; they are the things which contain possible existence, antecedent to their actualization.<sup>50</sup> However, as Kenny argues, in holding these positions, Descartes does not wish to make the eternal truths or the essences of things independent from God, but rather, describes them as dependent on him as well.<sup>51</sup> Following Kenny, I’ll call this position *Modern Platonism*.

There are a number of problems with Kenny’s approach. Here I’ll be concerned with two. The first and most pressing complaint is that it is simply textually inadequate, because it has precious little to say about the conceptualism of the *Principles*, and thus fails to address the *Natures Problem* just discussed. The second complaint is that it effectively generates a third class of entities besides bodies and minds, namely, the natures themselves. One might then wonder: what is the status of these beings? Since they are distinct from and depend on God, it might seem natural to take them to be finite substances. If so, it seems strange that Descartes never does this, and instead says that the only finite substances are bodies and mind. Call this the *Substance Problem*.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Kenny, “The Cartesian Circle,” 697.

<sup>50</sup> Kenny, “The Cartesian Circle,” 692-694.

<sup>51</sup> Kenny, “The Cartesian Circle,” 695-696.

<sup>52</sup> Nolan, “Cartesian Natures,” 117

A second school of thought tries to circumvent these worries by shifting the entire edifice of real natures into God's mind. According to this Neoplatonic approach, the real natures are beings in God's mind, or the eternal truths are simply God's dictates. This later option has been powerfully developed by Tad Schmaltz in his 1991 article, "Platonism and Descartes' View of Immutable Essences." According to this view, the essences of things are identical with God's decrees.<sup>53</sup> The great advantage of this view, as Schmaltz sees it, is that it allows Descartes to hold that essences are immutable and eternal without thereby incurring the *Substance Problem*, for it winds up positing nothing beyond God that would raise worries of some third category of substance.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, Schmaltz thinks, it explains why Descartes claims in the *Fifth Meditation* that the natures are independent of his mind, namely, that they are dependent on God and identical with his decrees.<sup>55</sup> And, to my mind less conclusively, Schmaltz downplays the conceptualism of the *Principles*, seeing Descartes' principal aim as avoiding making universals out to be substances, but not as denying that there are such entities insofar as they are acts of God's will.<sup>56</sup>

An alternative to Schmaltz's approach is provided by Marleen Rozemond's 2008 article, "Descartes' Ontology of the Eternal Truths," which proposes that the real natures (and the eternal truths) ought to be identified with the contents of God's ideas, rather than

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<sup>53</sup> Schmaltz, "Platonism," 136-138.

<sup>54</sup> Schmaltz, "Platonism," 164-165.

<sup>55</sup> Schmaltz, "Platonism," 159.

<sup>56</sup> Schmaltz, "Platonism," 165. It is worth noting here that Schmaltz has recently rescinded this view, regarding Descartes' position as being open to interpretation, with the thought that this usefully directs us to ways that his immediate followers utilized these ambiguities to advance dueling interpretive frameworks. See Tad M. Schmaltz, "Platonism and Conceptualism Among the Cartesians," in *The Problem of Universals in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Stefano Di Bella, and Tad M. Schmaltz (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 117-141.

with the acts of divine will.<sup>57</sup> Rozemond traces the background of such an approach to Scotus, who proposed that the natures of things are God's ideas which have a sort of diminished being in God's mind. Accordingly, she takes Descartes' proposal to line up roughly with this tradition, with the real natures having objective being in the ideas of God, which perhaps explains his co-opting of the classical term for exemplars in God's mind, that is ideas, as the name for his cognitions.<sup>58</sup> Against a conceptualist proposal, Rozemond points to Descartes failure to endorse conceptualism in his exchange with Gassendi in the *Fifth Objections and Replies*, as well as Descartes' consistent description of God's *creation* of the eternal truths as being distinct from their being imprinted on our minds via concepts.<sup>59</sup>

Both of these approaches to this issue, however, suffers from a significant objection, nicely stated by Lawrence Nolan in his recent article, "Descartes on Universal Essences and Divine Knowledge." Call this worry the *Argument from Simplicity*. According to this objection, Neoplatonic approaches run afoul of one of the foundational assumptions of Descartes' theology, namely, that God is ontologically simple. As Descartes elaborates this thought, the appearance of complexity in our idea of God is strictly a consequence of our finite apprehension of him.<sup>60</sup> In Nolan's rendering of this position, Descartes thinks that every apparently distinct attribute, act, and faculty of God are in fact identical.<sup>61</sup> So, God's acts of

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<sup>57</sup> Rozemond, "Eternal Truths," 49-53.

<sup>58</sup> Rozemond, "Eternal Truths," 46.

<sup>59</sup> Rozemond, "Eternal Truths," 44-45.

<sup>60</sup> Nolan "Universal Essences," 89, 91-94. For direct textual evidence on Cartesian divine simplicity, see (CSM II 34: AT VII 50), (CSM I 201: AT VIIIA 14), as well as the texts concerning the creation of the eternal truths at (CSMK 24: AT I 149) and (CSMK 25-26: AT I 151-153).

<sup>61</sup> Nolan "Universal Essences," 94-98..

willing and understanding are one and the same; what God knows is what he wills is what is the case, and so on. Consequently, it seems God's thought cannot be the dwelling of the real natures, because each putatively distinct thing God thinks of must be identical with every other, and consequently they cannot serve as the grounds of our thoughts of the real natures. And so too with his decrees; there simply is not diversity enough in God to account for the diversity of things in the world.<sup>62</sup>

As an alternative, Nolan has proposed a third approach throughout a series of articles spanning the last few decades. According to this approach, we need not posit anything so arcane as Platonic entities or even a diversity of divine ideas. Instead, in his article "The Ontological Status of Cartesian Real Natures," Nolan defends a conceptualist position, according to which the real natures of the *Fifth Meditation* are just the innate ideas of finite minds, specifically, those ideas considered with regards to their objective being, and that universals are similarly only objective beings.<sup>63</sup> According to this interpretation, Descartes' claims about the mind-independence really are claims about the compositionality of mental content: the real natures are mind-independent insofar as they are not products of our compositional mental powers, that is, insofar as they are innate.<sup>64</sup> They are immutable insofar as we cannot change their contents.<sup>65</sup>

As Nolan acknowledges, this approach faces a different sort of problem than its competitors, namely, that since it identifies real natures with innate ideas, and innate ideas

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<sup>62</sup> Nolan "Universal Essences," 98.

<sup>63</sup> Nolan "Cartesian Natures," 179-180.

<sup>64</sup> Nolan "Cartesian Natures," 181-182.

<sup>65</sup> Nolan "Cartesian Natures," 183.

are not eternal, then it seems that the real natures must likewise not be eternal. Call this the *Argument from Eternality*.<sup>66</sup> Nolan's solution to this problem is to bite the bullet and treat this as an aspect of Descartes' overall view of divine ineffability.<sup>67</sup> That being said, his solution does nicely resolve several of the issues with Kenny's reading: with regards to the *Substance Problem*, for example, since the real natures are innate ideas taken objectively, they are dependent on the mind, and consequently they don't qualify as substances.

My aim in the following will be to try to show that the Modern Platonist has little to fear from the *Natures Problem*. In the event that the approach I propose works, the arguments just outlined would then count as significant evidence in its favor. Modern Platonism doesn't face the *Argument from Eternality*, since it doesn't regard the *Fifth Meditation's* real natures as bound to finite minds, nor does it face the *Argument from Simplicity*, since it doesn't regard the real natures as tethered to God's mind. This means that the most significant worry that it faces is the *Substance Problem*, which we'll return to at the conclusion.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Nolan "Cartesian Natures," 184. For a useful resituation of this argument relative to some of the other topics under discussion here, see Raffaella De Rosa, "Rethinking the Ontology of Cartesian Essences." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 19, no. 4 (2011): 605–22.

<sup>67</sup> Nolan "Cartesian Natures," 185.

<sup>68</sup> It is worth mentioning here that all of these positions share the common assumption that the existence of real natures, whatever they may be, must be existentially independent of the objects whose natures they are, an assumption which I share, since such existential independence (to my mind) it is presupposed by the method of doubt and is also required for there to be thoughts of non-existent objects more broadly. However, this is not shared universally, for example, via the account given in David Cunniff "True and Immutable Natures and Epistemic Progress in Descartes's Meditations." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 11, no. 2 (2003): 235–48. In Cunniff's account, a real nature is just the object that has the nature, which, in the case of body, is just an extended substance modified in whatever way we please. So far as I can tell, Cunniff's strategy in arguing for this point is to regard the *Fifth Meditation's* specific real natures as modes of extension, and then to take the existence of extension to be what is proven at the end of the *Meditations*, and therefore Descartes' final position has no need for the assumption of existential independence that I make central to my account. There is much to say about this position, and it has been subjected to substantive critiques in Willis Doney, "True and Immutable Natures," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 13, no. 1 (2005): 131–37, and in John Edward Abbruzzese, "A Reply to Cunniff on the Nature of True and Immutable Natures." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (2007): 155–67. Although Cunniff's approach is effectively orthogonal to my project here, I think it is worth it to say I think we disagree on two points: First, on whether Descartes is a monist about extended substance, and second, I am strongly inclined to read the real natures as being

### 2.3 The Generic Natures Thesis and Some Ontological Assumptions

My solution to the *Natures Problem* is to deny that Descartes holds that all real natures are universals; instead, I see him as holding the view that the term “real natures,” covers both universals and individual essences. But what do I mean by speaking of individual essences and universals? By universals, I mean those entities which are *multiply instantiable*, or in scholastic parlance, are said of many, and which are typically referred to by abstract nouns. Moreover, I also assume that for Descartes, universals are *not necessarily instantiated*; there can be the universal triangularity without there being any triangles, for example. Finally, I take it that universals stand in a particular structure of relations of definitional containment, what has historically been called the Porphyrian Tree after the highly influential treatment of Aristotle’s *Categories* and *Topics* to be found in Porphyry’s *Isogoge*. This final commitment is less familiar to us, but for thinkers living in the age of Baroque scholasticism, it was regarded as being one of the most important features universals have. As these relations, and the tree itself are likely familiar to the reader, I will forego discussing them here. To those who accepted this scheme in Descartes’ time, which is to say most scholastic readers, any good account of universals requires that this structure be defined. I take it that Descartes accepts

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existentially independent of their instances. If we deny they are so existentially independent, and hold that the real nature of the triangle is identical to an actually existent triangle, then every shape of which we have an idea has a corresponding actual object in the world. Perhaps the strangeness of Cunning’s position is somewhat mitigated if we view the triangle as only being a mode of extended substance, but in that case it appears that extension must actually have the mode of triangularity. So it appears that on Cunning’s reading, Descartes must be committed to what we might call cognitive plentitude: for every real nature of which we can conceive, there is either an actual individual substance answering to it, or an actual mode of an actually existent substance. This outcome seems to me to not be in the spirit of Descartes’ account, but I will not pursue this point further here. (See Abruzzese, “A Reply,” 162, for an longer discussion of this point.)



this burden, though as he repeatedly stresses, he regards it as somewhat beside the point where the actual task of *doing* first philosophy is concerned.<sup>69</sup>

As for individual essences, I want to be explicit that the terminology is not Descartes' but rather belongs to our own era, though there certainly were philosophers utilizing the notion in his era, most notably the Scotists, via their own terminology of individual difference and haecceity. As to what such individual essences are, I make three assumptions. First, on the assumption that every substance is a particular, every substance has a unique individual essence. Second, for all substances x and y, x and y are identical iff they share their individual essence. Third, the individual essence of any object should metaphysically necessitate all of its generic characterizations; for example, if something has the individual essence of Socrates, then every genus above that individual (say, humanity and animality) is had by that individual essentially.

All of that being given, the thoughtful reader may be quite reasonably wondering how all of this relates to the more familiar Cartesian ontology of principal attribute, mode, and substance. After all, in a certain sense the *Generic Natures* thesis is trivially true insofar as Descartes sometimes refers to the principal attributes of finite substances, thought and extension, as being the natures of those substances. I'm happy to grant that, and we'll return to the issue below when I discuss the *Substance Problem*. But, in order to avoid confusion later on, I think it's worth it to say that I take modes and principal attributes to be the trope-like ontological constituents of singular things, where every mode is a mode of a principle

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<sup>69</sup> Descartes' own discussion of the Porphyrian distinctions of genus, species, differentia, accident, and property can be found at (CSM I 212-213: AT VIIIA 27-28).

attribute upon which it depends. Consequently, modes and attributes are not universals, but are particulars.

Finally, a terminological point. Though Descartes uses the terminology of nature most frequently, he often also uses the term “essence.” In what follows, I will assume that both the term “nature” and the term “essence” can be used in different senses, but that those senses overlap, so that both terms might mean universals, principal attributes, or, I’ll argue, individual essences.

All of that being given, then, why does the distinction between individual essences and universals matter? The principle reason is that ontologically, universals and individual essences are subject to distinct worries. Both universals and individual essences face the concern that they may be said to exist if they are not actualized, for example. However, individual essences face no worries about their being multiply instantiable, since any putatively distinct things having the same individual are the same individual by fiat. Thus, should one hold that everything that really exists is particular, the classic commitment of nominalism, individual essences do not directly run afoul of this commitment. However, should one hold that everything that exists is actual, then individual essences may run into trouble, depending on how one fleshes out that commitment.

## 2.4 **Individual Essences**

Given the assumptions individual essences above, what reasons are there to think that Descartes accepts that there are such things? The textual evidence can be a bit confusing, so I think the best place to begin is by considering the philosophical considerations recommending such a reading.

Among such considerations, I think the most important by far has to do with the possibility of singular thought, via what I'll call the *Argument from Singular Thought*. I take it that Descartes seems to have no problem in claiming that he has thoughts of individuals. Among those individuals which he thinks of during the *Meditations* include God, himself, the sun, and the wax.<sup>70</sup> In the case of the wax, he even goes so far as to stress that he is thinking of a singular thing, writing at the conclusion of his argument, "I must therefore admit," he writes, "that the nature of this piece of wax is in no way revealed by my imagination, but is perceived by the mind alone. (I am speaking of this particular piece of wax; the point is even clearer with regard to wax in general.)"<sup>71</sup> In the *Principles*, this list expands to include stones and birds, and in a letter to an unknown correspondent in 1646, he claims that there is a thought by which "I think of Peter," which is distinct from the thought by which he thinks of Peter's general characteristics, so presumably he thinks that there are singular thoughts of people that don't boil down to ideas of universals.<sup>72</sup>

Supposing then, that there are thoughts of singulars, consider an exchange that Descartes has with Gassendi in the *Fifth Objections and Replies*. This exchange begins with Gassendi suggesting that Descartes' proof of God's existence in the *Third Meditation* is flawed, for the idea which Descartes has of God could fail to be innate. How? Gassendi suggests this idea might be put together from ideas of finite things we have encountered and

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<sup>70</sup> For discussions of the sun, see (CSM II 27: AT VII 39), and (CSM II 75: AT VII 103). For one example of the claim we have an idea of God (and God's nature!) see (CSM II 117: AT VII 167), as well as texts I discuss below.

<sup>71</sup> For the wax, see (CSM II 20: AT VII 30) Presumably, the "nature" he is talking about here is the principle attribute of the wax, namely, its extension. Nonetheless, I think the "this" here highlights the singularity of the thought of the wax.

<sup>72</sup> (CSMK 280: AT IV 350), (CSM I 212: AT VIIIA 27)

which we imagine to be greater than they are, given that, the idea of God wouldn't be innate but rather invented.<sup>73</sup> This would, of course, compromise many of Descartes' core theological claims, most importantly, that the idea of God is innate and evidence of God's existence. In his reply, Descartes explicitly denies that the idea of God could be put together in such a way.

When you attack my statement that nothing can be added to or taken away from the idea of God, it seems that you have paid no attention to the common philosophical maxim that the essences of things are indivisible. An idea represents the essence of a thing, and if anything is added to or taken away from the essence, then the idea automatically becomes the idea of something else.<sup>74</sup>

First, Descartes replies that Gassendi's objection ignores the maxim that the essences of things are indivisible. The reason this matters, he says, is because ideas represent the essences of things, and that should one add or take away some feature of that essence, then one automatically changes what they idea represents. I think it almost goes without saying that Descartes must be talking about intellectual ideas here, for the idea of God is given to the intellect and sensory ideas are not supposed to reveal the essences of things at all. With that in mind, there are a couple of ways to interpret these claims. With regards to the claim that "an idea represents the essence of a thing," two options present themselves. First, we could take it to express an identity: what ideas represent *just are* the essences of things. The claim that changes in the essence entails changes in representation follows directly from such a reading. An alternative is to take Descartes to be speaking loosely, and that what he means is that ideas represent things *because* of what essence has objective being in them, so that if an

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<sup>73</sup> (CSM II 211; AT VII 304-306)

<sup>74</sup> (CSM II 255-256; AT VII 371)

idea has a given essence with objective being in the idea, then the idea represents the thing whose essence it is. The primary reason to endorse such a reading is that it avoids worries about whether the intellect has contact with the extra-mental world, for perhaps things are not identical to their essences. If essences serve in the mediating role I've just described, then Descartes is committed to something like the representationalist scheme according to which the quiddity or essence is not the immediate object of thought, but rather serves as the intermediary. However, regardless of how one wants to read this passage, the point comes out that the essences involved or represented by ideas play some crucial role in allowing thought to represent what it does. (We'll consider this passage in greater depth in the next chapter.)

Now, consider the idea of a given individual, say Peter. Suppose that I want to know what it takes to change the idea of Peter into the idea of Paul. Or, put another way, what is it that differentiates these two thoughts? A natural answer here is that Paul and Peter have individual essences; the difference between the respective ideas of each individual emerges from difference between the individual essences that the ideas represent. So too with the idea of the singular thing, God: if my idea represents the individual essence of God, then any addition or subtraction to it (such as those which occur in invented ideas) will serve to shift what the idea represents. The utility of this way of distinguishing mental contents is significant enough, I think, that we ought to take Descartes to accept the existence of individual essences. And note, the price of failing to do this is steep: it locks Descartes into all thought of real natures being universal, and thus burdens the commentator to a heavy degree of paraphrasing of Descartes' claims about the ideas of Socrates, Peter, God, himself, and all the rest of singulars I just mentioned.

Can such a strategy of paraphrase succeed? I think it cannot, thanks to a second argument, what I'll call the *Argument from Universal Thought*. Consider again the *Principles* discussion of universals. As we saw above, Descartes describes the abstractive process that yields universal ideas as requiring that (a) we have ideas of individual things, (b) their resemblances, and (c) the ability to selectively ignore some resemblances while focusing on others. For example, Descartes claims this is how we get the idea of the universal *triangularity*. "...When we see a figure made up of three lines," he writes, "we form an idea of it which we call the idea of a triangle; and we later make use of it as a universal idea, so as to represent to our mind all the other figures made up of three lines."<sup>75</sup> So, we can only have ideas of universals if we have ideas of individuals.<sup>76</sup> And, by the *Argument from Singular Thought*, these will need to be ideas of individual essences.

That this is Descartes' account has two further ramifications. First, consider the paraphrase option mentioned above. On such an account, the essences that Descartes invokes to defend the innateness of the idea of God would be paraphrased into being universals. So, for example, one might try to say that the essence Descartes is talking about is some universal that nonetheless specifies God, for example, the universal of *being infinite*. And a similar story might go for other singular thoughts. However, in light of Descartes'

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<sup>75</sup> "In the same way, when we see a figure made up of three lines, we form an idea of it which we call the idea of a triangle; and we later make use of it as a universal idea, so as to represent to our mind all the other figures made up of three lines." (CSM II 212: AT VIIIA 28)

<sup>76</sup> One might reasonably wonder whether Descartes' allusion to "seeing" here might point in a different direction, namely, that individuals are not apprehended by the senses at all. If this were so, it would put Descartes dramatically closer to the scholastic views he is critiquing. However, I assume this must be a case of pure sloppiness on Descartes' part; were it the case that we can only form ideas of universals via sensory apprehension of individuals, then it seems no thought would be possible at all in the empty world Descartes envisions in the first few *Meditations*, in which there are no sensorily perceivable things to begin with, nor the sensory organs by which they may be sensed.

account of universal idea formation, such a strategy fails to explain how we might have arrived at thoughts of God's universal characteristics in the first place; it seems the only story we can tell is one whereby we consider the singular idea of God and recognize some universal aspect of it. And if we're prepared to accept that, then the paraphrase strategy has failed, for we must have singular thoughts in order to have universal thoughts.

This brings us to a third point, via what I'll call the *Argument from Existential Modality*. In Descartes' discussion of cognition, be it singular and universal, he consistently stresses that ideas representing things do not necessitate the actual existence of those things. Instead, throughout his works, he claims or implies that the natures of finite substances contain only possible existence. To give just a sampling, consider the classic statement from the *Second Replies* Axiomatization: "Above all [the reader] should reflect on the fact that the ideas of all other natures contain possible existence, whereas the idea of God contains not only possible but wholly necessary existence."<sup>77</sup> Shortly thereafter, he continues, "possible or contingent existence is contained in the concept of a limited thing, whereas necessary and perfect existence is contained in the concept of a supremely perfect being."<sup>78</sup> And this is only a small sample of the many places where Descartes advances such claims.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> (CSM II 116: AT VII 163)

<sup>78</sup> (CSM II 117: AT VII 166)

<sup>79</sup> Here is but an incomplete list: "As I have shown, we have a conception or idea of God which is such that if we attend to the idea closely and thoroughly examine the issue in the way I have explained, we shall recognize, simply from this scrutiny, that it is not possible that God does not exist, since existence is contained in the concept of God - and not just possible or contingent existence, as in the ideas of all other things, but absolutely necessary and actual existence." (CSM I 306: AT VIII B 362). Or again, in *Principles* I.14: "In this one idea the mind recognizes existence - not merely the possible and contingent existence which belongs to the ideas of all the other things which it distinctly perceives, but utterly necessary and eternal existence." (CSM I 197: AT VIII A 10) Or again, in his reply to Caterus: "But to remove the first part of the difficulty we must distinguish between possible and necessary existence. It must be noted that possible existence is contained in the concept or idea of everything that we clearly and distinctly understand; but in no case is necessary existence so contained, except in the case of the idea of God. Those who carefully attend to this difference between the idea of God and every other idea will undoubtedly perceive that even though our understanding of other things

Why does this matter for whether Descartes recognizes individual essences? Here I see two reasons. The first is negative. First, it is worth noting that Descartes' introduction of the real natures explicitly invokes this containment of possible existence to account for the fact that the things whose natures they are need not exist by virtue of my having the idea, writing "I find within me countless ideas of things which even though they may not exist anywhere outside me still cannot be called nothing; for although in a sense they can be thought of at will, they are not my invention but have their own true and immutable natures."<sup>80</sup> The reason this matters is that this way of talking about possible existence lines up quite nicely with a familiar commitment of the Scotist school, which framed much of the discussion of natures during the period leading up to Descartes. One of the questions which Scotus dealt with in the *Ordinatio* was whether or not individuation might occur through actual existence, that is, whether or not actualization might not be the individual difference. Scotus rejects this possibility for a number of reasons which need not allay us here. As an alternative, he argued that actuality "distinguishes ultimately," that is, constitutes a difference for individuals, but does so "by a distinction outside the whole *per se* categorical hierarchy," which is to say, at a minimum, outside the Porphyrian tree of essences. Accordingly, Scotus claims "this distinction is so to speak "accidental" in a certain sense," presumably because individual essences can gain or lose existence, while recognizing that it was not in any case an accident in the sense that being red might so be called. For this reason, one might plausibly

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always involves understanding them as if they were existing things, it does not follow that they do exist, but merely that they are capable of existing. For our understanding does not show us that it is necessary for actual existence to be conjoined with their other properties. But, from the fact that we understand that actual existence is necessarily and always conjoined with the other attributes of God, it certainly does follow that God exists." (CSM II 83: AT VII 116-117)

<sup>80</sup> (CSM II 44: AT VII 64)



take possible existence as a sort of reversal of actuality; actuality is a predicable which *can* (be need not necessarily) be said of the individual essence of a finite thing.<sup>81</sup>

If we accept the thought that such bearers of potential existence are individual essences, then we have ideas of individual essences. So, Descartes' position in the *Principles*, far from showing that he has conceptualized away all manner of real natures, actually entails that there are *some* real natures, namely, individual essences.<sup>82</sup>

These are the philosophical considerations that I think strongly support the thesis that Descartes accepts individual essences. There are also a handful of texts which support this interpretation, albeit more weakly. Here is the first of them: In a passage from the *Principles* that parallels the *Second Meditation's* consideration of the wax, Descartes considers the bodily nature of a stone, and remarks that notions of space are just abstractions from the extension of physical bodies, writing "it is easy for us to recognize that the extension constituting the nature of a body is exactly the same as that constituting the nature of a space. There is no more difference between them than there is between the nature of a genus or species and the nature of an individual."<sup>83</sup> Here it appears that Descartes wants to

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<sup>81</sup> See Paul Vincent Spade, *Five Texts on the Mediaeval Problem of Universals: Porphyry, Boethius, Abelard, Duns Scotus, Ockham*. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994) 73-74.

<sup>82</sup> Intriguingly, if this reading of Descartes' account is correct, then it bears an uncanny resemblance to remarks that Gassendi makes in reply to the *Fifth Meditation*. Compare the following passages, the first from Descartes in the *Principles*: "These universals arise solely from the fact that we make use of one and the same idea for thinking of all individual items which resemble each other: we apply one and the same term to all the things which are represented by the idea in question, and this is the universal term." (CSM I 212: AT VIIIa 27-28) And here is Gassendi in the *Fifth Replies*: "...if anything is a man, it must resemble other things to which we apply the same label, 'man', in virtue of their mutual similarity. This similarity, I maintain, belongs to the individual natures, and it is from this that the intellect takes its cue in forming the concept, or idea, or form of a common nature to which everything that will count as a man must conform." (CSM II 222-223: AT VII 320) Whether Descartes cribbed Gassendi's account, and what significance it might have, is not something I will explore here.

<sup>83</sup> (CSM I 227: AT VIIIa 46)

suggest that space is an abstraction, and the principle way that he makes out that space is an abstraction is by comparing it to the abstraction of a genus or species from the nature of an individual. Granted, this is supposed to be an analogy, but I take it Descartes would not deploy the analogy if he did not buy the plausibility of there being individual essences. Moreover, as in the wax passage, Descartes appears to see no problem in talking about genus and species as being natures as well, so “natures” here is functioning as a generic term.

Here is the second piece of evidence. In a series of letters passed through Mersenne, Hobbes objected to Descartes’ theory of motion, according to which motions themselves can have determinations. Following his typically aggressive nominalism, Hobbes suggests that there could be no difference between a motion and its determination: there is only a single motion. In the course of fleshing out this objection, Hobbes attempts to clarify his position vis-à-vis the scholastic theory of predicables, writing, “So just as Socrates and man are not two men, nor two things, but one man described by two names (since it is the same thing which is named 'Socrates' and named 'man'), in the same way 'motion' and 'determined motion' are one motion, and one thing under two names.”<sup>84</sup>

Descartes’ reply is typically dismissive: Hobbes has overstated his case. It’s not enough, Descartes suggests, to say that “man” and “Socrates” are the same thing under different names. Rather, they need to be understood to concern different *concepts*, writing, “Granted that man and Socrates are not two different substances, nevertheless the term 'Socrates' means something other than the term 'man', since it signifies individual or

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<sup>84</sup> See Thomas Hobbes, *The Correspondence. Volume I, 1622-1659*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 106.

particular differentiating characteristics.”<sup>85</sup> To anyone well versed in the philosophy of the era, such talk of individual differences would have to be understood as an endorsement of there being some trait in virtue of which an individual is an individual, and that this serves to differentiate the concept of the individual from more general concepts. Such was the usage of Scotus in arguing for the indispensability of individual differences, and a reader well versed in scholastic thought would thus be justified in taking it that Descartes accepted such individual essences. However, later in the same letter, Descartes complicates this picture:

...It follows that on his [Hobbes’s] view man and Socrates are merely a single thing under different names, and accordingly that no individual differentiating characteristic of Socrates could perish — for example his knowledge of philosophy — without his simultaneously ceasing to be a man<sup>86</sup>

The example here is a little strange, since generally we would not think of Socrates’ philosophical acumen as being essential to him. But I think Descartes’ point here is best understood as suppositional: supposing that Socrates’ knowledge of philosophy is essential to him, one of his differentiating characteristics, then Socrates would cease to be himself upon losing it. What’s curious about this claim is Descartes’ invoking a plurality of “differentiating characteristics,” since this makes him sound less like Scotus and more like Leibniz, insofar as he seems to be endorsing that individuals are differentiated by (perhaps many) qualitative features. However, regardless of how we read this, it sounds as if Descartes at least knew of the issues surrounding individual essences, and also that he accepted that individuals (like Socrates) have essences distinct from their species.

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<sup>85</sup> (CSMK 178: AT III 355)

<sup>86</sup> (CSMK 179: AT III 356)

With these philosophical considerations in hand, we're now prepared to circle back around to the *Fifth Meditation*. First, there are some pieces of textual evidence that might lead one to believe that Descartes is talking about universal concepts that we'll need to deal with. At the beginning of the *Fifth Meditation*, Descartes introduces the idea of a perfect triangle, and then immediately moves to deny that he got this idea from looking at particular triangles:

It would be beside the point for me to say that since I have from time to time seen bodies of triangular shape, the idea of the triangle may have come to me from external things by means of the sense organs. For I can think up countless other shapes which there can be no suspicion of my ever having encountered through the senses, and yet I can demonstrate various properties of these shapes, just as I can with the triangle.<sup>87</sup>

One way to take this claim is to think that it assumes that the real natures of the *Fifth Meditation* are universals, and that Descartes is denying that the natures in question are arrived at via abstractions from ideas of individuals. This would seem to indicate that he is talking about universals. If so, then Descartes has plainly contradicted himself, because that's precisely what he endorses in the *Principles*. Accordingly, if we take the charitable stance towards his later work, a better option is to place the emphasis on the sensory nature of the ideas of physical triangles: what he is denying is that the perfect triangle he is intellectually contemplating in the *Fifth Meditation* can be known via the senses at all, a position which he confirms in his conversation with Burman.<sup>88</sup>

Little else that Descartes says about the idea of the triangle in the *Fifth Meditation* seems to settle the question of what kind of nature he is thinking about. Later on he

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<sup>87</sup> (CSM II 45: AT VII 64-65)

<sup>88</sup> (CSMK III 344: AT V 162)

discusses the idea of God, which I think should count as evidence for his acceptance of individual essences via the arguments given above. Nonetheless, the lack of evidence here is telling, if we're willing to take seriously the consistency of his account here and in the *Principles*, for beyond the above passage, Descartes doesn't mention abstractive reasoning at all in the *Fifth Meditation*. That seems odd: if he is talking about universals, shouldn't he describe the abstractive processes involved? If he doesn't, that would seem to indicate he has something else in mind.

The good news, however, is that the *Second Replies* axiomatization provides some clues which turn out to point towards individual essences when combined with his exchange with Hobbes. The starting point for this reading comes in Definition IX, which Descartes deploys once to support the proof of God's existence from the *Fifth Meditation*: "When we say that something is *contained in the nature or concept of a thing*, this is the same as saying that it is true of that thing, or that it can be asserted of that thing."<sup>89</sup>

This definition, as stated, is an exceptionally strong claim, since Descartes seems to be equating truth and containment. We'll consider the full implications of this passage in the next chapter, but for now, note that first, that Descartes' description of real natures here sounds as if it is supposed to obtain over singular things, for it is the natures or concepts *of things* that he specifies. More importantly, however, if we accept the textual evidence I gave above for Descartes' recognition of individual essences, then it seems this definition *should* range over individual essences, precisely because the "individual differentiating characteristics" he described there are true of the objects which have them.

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<sup>89</sup> (CSM II 114; AT VII 162)

I suppose one might also wonder whether Descartes isn't talking about either universals or individual essences here. Might he just be thinking of some other item of his ontology? After all, sometimes he does call principal attributes natures, for example in the *Second Meditation*, where he declares that the essence of the particular wax he is contemplating to be its principal attribute. However, I don't think that's the case, since he is talking about a triangle, and a triangle presumably is not just the principal attribute, but that attribute joined to a mode. Might he be talking about just the mode? That would seem odd, because he claims that the natures he is contemplating contain possible existence, and modes isolated from principle attributes don't have this feature.

The last option then, would be that he would be talking about what later Cartesians were to call a modified substance, a conjunction of mode and principle attribute. Could this be what he means? If so, then it seems that the real natures involved above are just substances. But is that really Descartes meaning? The answer to this question is a complex one, but in order to appreciate its full significance, I want to set it aside and consider the other type of real nature: universals.

## 2.5 Towards Phenomenal Conceptualism

Universals for Descartes are mind-dependent concepts. The interesting question, however, is what *kind* of concepts are they? In the last chapter, I laid out the first step towards answering this question: universals are abstractions that are strictly modes of mind, and modes of mind are just states of inner awareness. One useful consequence of this reading is that it ensures that Descartes' account of universals does not entail the existence of *ante rem* universals outside of the mind. This means that, while entertaining universal thoughts, it may well *seem* to us that there are such entities, but our awareness of this seeming

to be the case does not entail that this is the case. Here I want to add a second useful upshot, namely, that understanding universals as ideas taken materially makes good sense of one of the most difficult parts of Descartes' theory of distinctions, namely, the account of conceptual distinctions.

In the *Principles*, Descartes lays out a theory of the forms of distinction, naming them real, modal, and conceptual. Descartes' discussion of the last of these is notoriously opaque, and in recent years has been subject to debate among commentators. To start us off, here is Descartes' initial description of the conceptual distinction:

A conceptual distinction is a distinction between a substance and some attribute of that substance without which the substance is unintelligible; alternatively, it is a distinction between two such attributes of a single substance. Such a distinction is recognized by our inability to form a clear and distinct idea of the substance if we exclude from it the attribute in question, or, alternatively, by our inability to perceive clearly the idea of one of the two attributes if we separate it from the other.<sup>90</sup>

Descartes provides us with two examples of conceptual distinctions, and a means of recognizing them. The recognitional criteria, as I read it, is that if one has a clear and distinct idea of a conceptually distinct entity, then by default that idea is also of the thing it is conceptually distinguished from. Thus, for example, I try to think of a body independent of its extension, if my thought is clear and distinct, I will automatically recognize that I am thinking of both. Or, if I have a clear and distinct idea of two principal attributes of a substance, say, extension and duration, then by forming the idea of the one, I also form the idea of the other. Nonetheless, this is not to say that we can't distinguish between two conceptually distinct features,

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<sup>90</sup> (CSM I 214; AT VII 30)

but rather, that the price of thinking of them separately is that our thought becomes obscure and confused.

Now, all of this leaves open the question of what kinds of things are conceptually distinct. Scholars have been divided on this point. The strongest interpretation of conceptually distinct items comes from Nolan, according to which conceptually distinct entities are being identical in reality. Thus, a substance and its principal attributes, and distinct principal attributes like extension and duration, are in fact just one thing under different conceivable aspects, much on the model of distinct but corefering terms like “Tully” and “Cicero.” Call this the *identity reading*.<sup>91</sup>

A second school of thought, usefully articulated by Paul Hoffman’s “Descartes’ Theory of Distinction,” rejects this rendering, holding that the best way to understand Descartes’ commitments is that the theory of distinctions does not apply to any identical items: rather, the theory of distinctions (including conceptual distinctions) applies only to numerically diverse things. What role, then, does conceptual distinction play? According to Hoffman, conceptual distinctions obtain between things which are inseparable in reality, for example, the kind of inseparability that holds between modes and attributes, or between a substance and its attributes. Thus, all and only non-identical things are distinct, and conceptual distinctions obtain between mutually inseparable entities. Call this the *inseparability reading*.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Nolan, “The Ontological Status of Cartesian Natures,” 131-132.

<sup>92</sup> See Paul Hoffman, “Descartes’s Theory of Distinction.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 64, no. 1 (2002): 57–78.



It is not my aim here to resolve the question of which of these readings is right. Instead, I think that phenomenal conceptualism has something to offer to the proponents of any of these views, at least where universals are concerned. So, let's begin with the identity reading. According to the identity reading, where a conceptual distinction obtains, the putatively distinct relata of a conceptual distinction are identical. Here, as above, phenomenal conceptualism provides the essential link in explaining why Descartes aligns these concepts as he does. Ideas taken materially, on their own, do not directly entail any truth about the world beyond the mind. A useful consequence of this is that it allows for there to be two ideas whose apparent contents concern the same substance, but under different universal aspects. To take Descartes' example, suppose I inattentively consider a body B's substance via one idea (call it I1) and its duration via another idea (call it I2). In such a case, when we take the ideas materially, while having I1 it will seem to me that *B is a substance* and it will also seem to me that *B has duration* while having I2. Now, it may be the case that in reality *substance is duration*, as per the identity reading. As Descartes makes clear, however, the conditions under which we can have I1 and I2 without automatically having the other is when those ideas are obscure and confused. But now consider the advice that Descartes gives with regards to confused and obscure sensory ideas, that "these may be clearly perceived provided we take great care in our judgements concerning them to include no more than what is strictly contained in our perception - no more than that of which we have inner awareness."<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> (CSM I 216: AT VIIIA 32)

If Descartes' advice with regards to obscure and confused sensory ideas applies to obscure and confused ideas more generally, then where we have obscure ideas of conceptually distinct universal attributes, we ought to follow his advice; we ought to regard them merely as modes of mind, states of inner awareness which don't reveal truths about the external world. The immediate consequence of this is that things which are identical in reality can nonetheless be thought of, contentfully, but without immediate implications for how things are in reality.

Now consider the *inseparability reading*. According to this reading, conceptually distinct items are inseparable in reality. Now, taking the example from before, when I have I1, it seems to me that B is a substance and when I have I2, it seems to me that B has duration. The truth of the matter is that being a substance and having duration are metaphysically inseparable. But, when my thoughts are obscure and confused, this fact need not be obvious to me; and, following the advice regarding sensory ideas, all I have access to are how things seem to me. Thus I can (confusedly) go on perceiving them independently without thereby knowing about their inseparability; all I have are my different inner awarenesses of the substance and the attribute.

So, this is the first advantage of my rendering of Descartes' universal conceptualism on this front: regardless of whether conceptual distinctions obtain between identical things or inseparable things, phenomenal conceptualism tells us *what* their content is (namely, that they seem to be distinct things), while preventing this from entailing any facts about whether or not this is the case in reality, or whether they are separable.

Here is a second advantage: in a letter to an unknown correspondent in 1646, Descartes considers conceptual distinctions, and makes clear that the possibility of such

distinctions presupposes the modal distinction between ideas *qua* modes of mind. Invoking the *Principles* discussion of universals, he writes:

But existence, duration, size, number and all universals are not, it seems to me, modes in the strict sense, nor in this sense are justice, mercy, and so on modes in God. They are referred to by a broader term and called attributes, *or modes of thinking*, because we do indeed understand the essence of a thing in one way when we consider it in abstraction from whether it exists or not, and in a different way when we consider it as existing; but the thing itself cannot be outside our thought without its existence, or without its duration or size, and so on.<sup>94</sup>

So, it seems that universals and their abstractive ilk ought to be regarded as modes of thinking. According to the version of conceptualism developed here, this move makes complete sense, and thus that Descartes is talking about ways we can think of things, and that this is to be contrasted to how things are outside of us. Moreover, it then follows that ideas of different attributes (which I am here construing as universal ideas), are different from each other as modes of a substance and so Descartes calls them modally distinct. Nonetheless, note that his identification appears to be wedded to content of a particular kind, namely, the content considered in particular types of abstraction.

So far so good for the form of conceptualism I've advocated for here; it appears that his account of universals here soundly lines up with this reading. However, Descartes complicates matters almost immediately. Shortly after this initial passage, Descartes does invoke the objective sense in discussing the ideas of a triangles' essence and existence, writing "when I think of the essence of a triangle, and of the existence of the same triangle, these two thoughts, as thoughts, even taken objectively, differ modally in the strict sense of the term 'mode.'"<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> (CSMK 280: AT IV 349)

<sup>95</sup> (CSMK 280: AT IV 350)

What are we to make of this claim? Here is how I would read it: the ideas of the triangle's essence and its existence differ modally, because the phenomenologies of those ideas differ, and they do this "as thoughts," that is, as states of inner awareness. Nonetheless, they are only conceptually distinct, either because they are identical in reality or because they are inseparable in reality. Given that, what then does the clause "even taken objectively" mean? In the original Latin, this phrase is *etiam objective sumptae*, and *etiam* is of course ambiguous between the conjunctively-flavored "moreover" and the concessive-flavored "even." Following CSMK's translation, I think that the concessive rendering is the right one. In that case, Descartes is raising the possibility of considering the essence and existence of a triangle, and suggesting that if we take these ideas objectively, then since they are both of a single triangle, they *don't* differ objectively. But the thoughts by which we think of one and the same triangle do differ by their phenomenological content. Hence, there is a modal distinction between them, even if that distinction doesn't obtain by virtue of objective being alone.

I take it that this more or less undermines the readings of those, such as Nolan, who want to read this passage as being about objective sense. The version of conceptualism advanced here can explain the reason for the concession to the objective sense; he intends the contrast between the ideas taken objectively (in which case they are not distinct), and between the ideas taken materially (in which case they are distinct.) If this is the right reading, then objective conceptualism can't be the right reading, for why would Descartes contrast the objective sense, named as such, with itself, named as "modes of mind."

So, where does all this leave us? I take it that the ease with which phenomenal conceptualism handles *ante rem* universals and conceptual distinctions provides us with ample reason to accept its analysis. So far as the Natures Problem is concerned, then, we can affirm

that universals are mind-dependent, but deny that entails that all real natures are mind dependent, since the *Generic Natures* thesis undermines that assumption. This then leaves us with the question of what Descartes thinks the ontology of individual essences is. As I'll now argue, there are good reasons to think Descartes imagines these in a Platonic key.

## 2.6 Towards Individual Platonism

Let us assume, as per my above arguments, that Descartes' claims about real natures in the *Fifth Meditation* concern individual essences. As we have seen already, in that text Descartes claims that in the case of his idea of a triangle that "there is still a determinate nature, or essence, or form of the triangle which is immutable and eternal, and not invented by me or dependent on my mind."<sup>6</sup> According to Modern Platonist and Neoplatonist readings, Descartes means to claim that such real natures are independent of finite minds. However, this reading can be resisted from a conceptualist angle: one can interpret the claim that real natures are independent of the mind as meaning that ideas of real natures are not inventions of the mind (that is, factitious ideas) but rather are innate. Such is the line advanced by conceptualist readers like Nolan.

I think this second option is plausible at first glance, but it falls prey to the *Eternality Problem* mentioned before. The heart of the issue is that Descartes claims that the real natures are eternal. Because innate ideas are not eternal, it follows that real natures cannot be innate ideas. In the present context, that means that it won't do to say that the real natures are not

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<sup>6</sup> (CSM II 45; AT VII 64)

invented by the mind, since being innate doesn't entail eternity and so fails to tie together Descartes' claim here.

The defender of a Conceptualist reading has some responses here, the first of which is textual. In the *Principles*, Descartes appears to be fine with saying that the eternal truths are mind-dependent. For example, in Principles I.48, he considers the objects of thought and remarks that the eternal truths have “no existence outside of our thought.”<sup>97</sup> In the following section he considers examples of the truths and claims that such cases are “regarded not as a really existing thing, or even as a mode of a thing, but as an eternal truth which resides within our mind.”<sup>98</sup> Since in both of these places Descartes doesn't see a problem with identifying eternal truths as mind-dependent, when it comes to the real natures which those truths are about, we should see Descartes as likewise not flinching at making their eternity go hand-in-hand with their mind-dependence.

I take it as given that the philosophical merits of such a reply are limited, for it does nothing to resolve the underlying question of *why* eternity can cohabitate with mind-dependence. Fortunately, however, I think there is a way to use the tools of my reading to deal with this worry. Specifically, when we consider the list of eternal truths in the *Principles*, which Descartes claims are not outside of his mind, they are uniformly stated in universal terms. Among them are such examples as “It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be at the same time; What is done cannot be undone; He who thinks cannot but exist while he thinks; and countless others.”<sup>99</sup> The reason that their generality matters is that it

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<sup>97</sup> (CSM I 208: AT VIII A 22)

<sup>98</sup> (CSM II 209: AT VIII A)

<sup>99</sup> (CSM I 209: AT VIII A 24)

intersects nicely with the analysis of universals given above, according to which they are mind-dependent abstractions. In that case, it should be totally unsurprising that truths expressed with universal terms they should be mind-dependent. Note, however, that this does not exclude the possibility that the things that the truths are *about* are mind-independent and eternal, namely, the essences of individuals. Such a reading has two useful upshots: first, it shows yet another level on which the pairing of *Individual Platonism* with *Phenomenal Conceptualism* can show how Descartes has a single consistent account between the *Fifth Meditation* and the *Principles*, because then the claims about eternal truths turn out to be about different aspects of the same underlying set of issues. And second, it shows that the eternity Descartes attributes to the real natures in the *Meditations* can still be taken literally. But, if that is the case, then it can't be that the real natures are just innate ideas. Rather, some of them (the individual essences) cannot be identified with innate ideas.

However, there's a second way of attempting to deal with the *Eternality Problem*, and that is to claim that Descartes accepts that it is a problem but chalks it up to divine incomprehensibility. Such is the line taken by Nolan. Consider, then, those passages which he points to. Here is one example:

It will be said that if God had established these [mathematical] truths he could change them as a king changes his laws. To this the answer is: Yes he can, if his will can change. 'But I understand them to be eternal and unchangeable.' – I make the same judgment about God. 'But his will is free.' – Yes, but his power is beyond our grasp. In general we can assert that God can do everything that is within our grasp but not that he cannot do what is beyond our grasp. It would be rash to think that our imagination reaches as far as his power.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> (CSMK 23: AT I 145–46)

Roughly speaking, Nolan takes this and other passages to illustrate that the creation of the eternal truths is regarded by Descartes as one of the genuine mysteries of creation, beyond the ken of finite minds due to God's incomprehensibility. In Nolan's rendering, Descartes' final position "is that the eternality of essences (or eternal truths) is beyond human comprehension. We know that essences are created and we know that they are eternal, but we cannot reconcile these two pieces of knowledge."<sup>101</sup>

In replying to this answer, I want to avoid wading too deeply into the quagmire surrounding the creation of the eternal truths, so I wish to stress early that I am advancing no new interpretation of this dogma.<sup>102</sup> That being said, I think that there is an important test for whether Nolan's reading holds up. If Descartes' dodgy explanation of the creation of the eternal truths makes appeal to divine incomprehensibility, and the eternal truths (and the real natures they are about) are innate ideas, then Descartes is effectively appealing to divine incomprehensibility to explain why the ideas that we have innately are eternal. But this seems to me to be absent in the above passage, as well as in most of the passages that Nolan gestures at as supporting his position. There is nothing about innate ideas being eternal in the above passage: it seems apparent to me that Descartes' primary claim about ideas is that what we know to be possible is possible for God, which is orthogonal to those ideas being

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<sup>101</sup> Nolan "Cartesian Natures," 185.

<sup>102</sup> The debates over the exact meaning of this particular Cartesian dogma have been going on for a long time. In general, I think the best reading is one which seeks to keep Descartes' divine voluntarism at as great a distance from his other claims about modality as possible. For an example of how such a reading works, see Dan Kaufman, "God's Immutability and the Necessity of Descartes's Eternal Truths," *The Journal of the History of Philosophy* 43, no. 1 (2005): 1–19, who suggests that Descartes effectively accepts a segregated view of modality, where what is possible for God is prior to, and logically distinct from, what is possible from the viewpoint of mortal minds.



eternal. The closest Descartes comes to relating these themes is in the letter to Mesland of 1644, where he writes:

I turn to the difficulty of conceiving how God would have been acting freely and indifferently if he had made it false that the three angles of a triangle were equal to two right angles, or in general that contradictories could not be true together. It is easy to dispel this difficulty by considering that the power of God cannot have any limits, and that our mind is finite and so created as to be able to conceive as possible the things which God has wished to be in fact possible, but not be able to conceive as possible things which God could have made possible, but which he has nevertheless wished to make impossible.<sup>103</sup>

Descartes then continues to say that when we consider the difficult claim that God could have made a contradiction true, “we should not try to comprehend [God’s making a contradiction true], since our nature is incapable of doing so.”<sup>104</sup>

Now, while Descartes definitely does make mention of ideas here, that is via our ability to “conceive as possible” what God ordains as possible, he is notably not saying that our ideas and what God ordains are the same: instead, it appears that Descartes is saying that God wishes things to be possible, and creates us as capable of understanding them as such, and describes these acts as if they were distinct. If Descartes’ intent was to identify possible things or states of affairs with the innate ideas of those things or states of affairs, we should expect him to be saying, in one way or another, that the creation of the eternal truths is just the creation of our capacity to understand them as such. It does not appear he does this. More importantly for our purposes here, Descartes does not invoke divine incomprehensibility to explain the eternality of innate ideas: the topic under discussion is just God’s ordaining what is possible, full stop. And, under the present interpretation, that would

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<sup>103</sup> (CSMK 235: AT IV 118)

<sup>104</sup> (CSMK 235: AT IV 118)

just be God's creation of the individual essences, either via his decreeing them, understanding them, or by creating them as distinct things.

A somewhat more difficult point for this interpretation concerns a letter from July 1648 to Arnauld, where Descartes writes, "For since every basis of truth and goodness depends on his omnipotence, I would not dare to say that God cannot make a mountain without a valley, or bring it about that 1 and 2 are not 3. I merely say that he has given me such a mind that I cannot conceive a mountain without a valley, or a sum of 1 and 2 which is not 3; such things involve a contradiction in my conception."<sup>105</sup> To my eyes this appears to be the closest text to endorsing Nolan's approach, insofar as it ties together the nature of our mind (which presumably includes innate ideas) with God's creation of the eternal truths, which I'll happily concede. Note, however, that this passage does not concern the *eternality* of those truths and the innate ideas, but rather with God's capacity to make such truths otherwise. So, as Nolan cites this passage as evidence for his interpretation that the eternality of innate ideas is incomprehensible, it is difficult to see how this passage counts as evidence. As I read it, Descartes is claiming that God's omnipotence with regards to these truths is incomprehensible, which has no bearing on the *Eternality Problem*.

So, supposing that neither of the objections just discussed really defuse the issue, and that the textual evidence for Nolan's response to the eternality problem doesn't do what it is supposed to do, where does this leave us? I think the answer is quite simple: we should default to some form of Platonism. Either the individual essences are God's ideas or his decrees, or they are genuinely distinct from him, and, if one finds the *Simplicity Problem*

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<sup>105</sup> (CSMK 359: AT V 224)

irresistibly compelling, one should default to Modern Platonism about the individual essences. Now, I don't claim that this is a particularly fancy argument, or particularly new: nonetheless, when we pair it with the removal of the *Natures Problem*, it appears to me to offer decisive reason to affirm a non-conceptualist answer to the question of what the ontology of the real natures ought to be.

## 2.7 The Method and Substance Problems

This completes my main arguments about the *Natures Problem*. I want to close, then, by returning briefly to two other issues Nolan raises against Platonist and Neoplatonist options. The first of these is the *Method Problem* described above. Put short, this worry holds that Descartes' method of doubt begins on the assumption that nothing exists. If nothing exists, goes the worry, then if real natures are something (as the Platonist holds) then the method of doubt ought to hold that they are not existing either. Given that the method of doubt is resolved only in the *Sixth Meditation*, the *Fifth Meditation's* introduction of real natures shouldn't commit us to anything mind-independent. Accordingly, the real natures must be mind-dependent.

In reply, I think that this objection gets the order of Descartes' reasoning wrong. I take it that the method of doubt is subject to a gradual loosening throughout the *Meditations*, with one of the decisive steps falling in the *Third Meditation* via Descartes' introduction of the Truth Rule, that everything he clearly and distinctly perceives is true.<sup>106</sup> The immediate consequence of this rule is that it allows Descartes to examine what is clearly and distinctly

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<sup>106</sup> (CSM II 24: AT VII 35)

given to the intellect, which is revealed to be the real natures in the *Fifth Meditation*. It is important, I think, that accepting the deliverances of the intellect does not tell us what is the case, save in the case of God's necessary existence. Such knowledge only becomes available (in a highly constrained form) in the *Sixth Meditation*, when Descartes grants the limited validity of the senses and imagination. So, according to this story, it would be perfectly normal for Descartes to introduce real natures in the course of his method, and in an unrestrictedly Platonic sense in the form I've suggested here.

This leaves a final challenge for the Platonist, namely, the *Substance Problem*. Recall that this issue emerges from Descartes' claims substances and real natures, which can be perspicuously rendered as two inferences contradictory inferences. The first inference concerns Descartes' dualism about finite substances, according to which all such substances are either bodies or minds.<sup>107</sup> But real natures, at least at first glance, are neither bodies nor minds. (This is particularly important if we think some or all real natures are universals!) Accordingly, real natures are not finite substances. The second inference concerns Descartes' definition of finite substances in Principles I.51, where he defines finite substance as beings which depends only on God.<sup>108</sup> However, if Descartes is a Modern Platonist, then it seems real natures satisfy this definition, and consequently are substances. This leaves us with a contradiction. Accordingly, to render Descartes consistent, we must jettison one of the following four claims:

- (1) All substances are either bodies or minds.
- (2) Real natures are neither bodies nor minds.
- (3) Substances are defined as distinct from God and dependent on him.

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<sup>107</sup> (CSM II 210: AT VIIIa 24-25)

<sup>108</sup> (CSM II 210: AT VIIIa 24-25)

(4) Real natures are distinct from God and substances dependent on him.

So far as I can tell, Nolan's approach is built around the denial of (4).<sup>109</sup> Since real natures are only objective beings, they are dependent on finite minds, which suffices to make them not substances. Now, although there are advantages to this answer, I think it's important to appreciate the range of options available to Platonist and Neoplatonist approaches, particularly once the merits of *Individual Platonism* are fully appreciated. Accordingly, my primary purpose in what follows will not be to resolve the *Substance Problem*, but to show that a great many options are available to us once we regard the issue as restricted to individual essences.

So, what are the options given the *Generic Natures* thesis? First, where we are considering universals, I wholeheartedly agree with Nolan's solution to the issue, for Descartes clearly intends for universals to be mind-dependent. But how do individual essences fare? Here there are several alternatives which become more plausible when we aren't concerned with the issues surrounding multiple instantiability. Here I'll lay out four possible responses, which each have advantages. Although I don't decide between them, my primary point will be that there are ample resources for resolving the substance problem which are not Nolan's.

The first option is familiar from above, namely, to deny (4) on Neoplatonist grounds. That is, instead of holding that individual essences are distinct from God, one can hold that they are God's decrees or ideas, and thus only conceptually distinct from God. As I mentioned earlier, such a reading raises worries about divine simplicity if conceptual distinctness implies identity. Now, while I concede gladly that such a reading has solid

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<sup>109</sup> Nolan "Cartesian Natures," 180

textual grounds, its worth noting that it doesn't follow on the inseparability reading of conceptual distinctness, so for those who wish to defend this reading, defending the inseparability reading as well turns out to be crucial.

In the event one does find the issues facing Neoplatonism to be significant, a second option is to deny (2), and hold that individual essences are in fact identical to individual bodies and minds. Such a reading may seem overly strong but consider again the *Argument from Modality*. Descartes' position, we already saw, is that ideas of finite substances contain possible existence. Accordingly, one might just adopt a picture according to which the individual essences exist (perhaps in some Meinongian sense) and are either contracted with actuality as an accident, or they are not, and remain only possible existents.<sup>110</sup>

One advantage of this reading is that it gives us an extremely simple answer to the question of what an individual essence is supposed to be exactly. Individual essences, in this story, are just substances with exactly the modes they have, except with no assumption of being actual existents. However, one might resist such a reading based on Descartes' insistence in the letter of 1646 that in "the triangle existing outside thought... essence and existence are in no way distinct."<sup>111</sup> That means that, at a minimum, the essence of a finite substance, which presumably includes its individual essence, and its existence are inseparable, at a minimum. With that in mind, one can consider again Descartes' initial definition of a substance as "nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its existence," which appears to include existence as part of the

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<sup>110</sup> In addition to the above texts, we might see this as a plausible option given Descartes' remarks about existence being a predicate. For if existence is a predicate like any other, then we might think that the bearer of that predicate should be a substance, in which case the bearer of possible existence should be a substance.

<sup>111</sup> (CSMK 280: AT IV 350)

definition of a substance. In such a case, one might say that the last option has it wrong, because mere potential existence doesn't suffice for substantiality.

If one finds this line of argument plausible, it provides yet another answer to the substance problem distinct from Nolan's. For, supposing that a substance must have (a) an individual essence and (b) actual existence, and that these are (at a minimum) inseparable, one can plausibly deny (3), holding that Descartes definition of substance requires actualization in addition to other requirements. In such a case, we avoid the conclusion that individual essences are substances, at what seems to me to be a highly reasonable and unsuspecting price. And this would be just to accept a form of Platonism according to which individual essences some form of existence (in some sense, perhaps as God's ideas) but are not substances.

Now, I hope from this brief discussion at least it is clear that (a) the substance problem does not automatically lock in a conceptualist solution, at least where individual essences are concerned. Moreover, (b) I hope it has shown that there is exceptionally fertile ground for discussions about the ontology of individual essences, more, I'd hazard, than remains in the well-trodden territory surrounding the *Natures Problem*. But note that fully understanding this rich diversity of interpretative options requires accepting some form of real nature not subject to worries about multiple instantiability, such as I have described in this paper's arguments about individual essences. So, while not strictly a reason to accept the view I've provided here, the potential interest that the substance problem holds for further research is at least an important reason to consider it thoroughly: should any of these three options just discussed turn out to have considerable explanatory power, that is a benefit that is certainly worth exploring, and thus it behooves us to consider the benefits of the position presented here.

## 2.8 Conclusion

Summing up: I've argued in this chapter that Descartes thinks that real natures come in two varieties, individual essences and universals, and that while he is robustly conceptualist about universals, he is probably either a Neoplatonist or a Modern Platonist about individual essences. I've suggested that this reading allows us to resolve the *Natures Problem* by denying that all real natures are universals, for individual essences are not universals. Without the *Natures Problem*, we lose one of the principal reasons reject Descartes' *prima facie* Platonism. Moreover, by adopting the analysis presented here, we gain a surprisingly rich and interesting picture of how Descartes handles universal concepts that prevents *ante rem* universals from becoming genuine beings, while also allowing for an interesting account of how to handle conceptual distinctions. Moreover, we saw that one of the ways a conceptualist might attempt to overcome the *Eternality Problem* fails to do so: although Descartes has plenty to say about divine ineffability with regards to the creation of the eternal truths, it doesn't appear any of these texts directly feed into explaining the eternity of innate ideas. Finally, we saw that two of the other major issues facing Platonic or Neoplatonic readings turn out to either fail, as I argued with regards to the *Method Problem*, or to be subject to a diversity of solutions, as I argued with regards to the *Substance Problem*. Thus Descartes is a Platonist, though which sort of Platonist is, I leave to the reader's better judgment.



## CHAPTER 3:

### GENUINE REPRESENTATION, CONTAINMENT, AND THE OBJECTIVE SENSE OF IDEAS

#### 3.1 **Introduction**

This chapter concerns Descartes' theory of mental representation, a rarified topic demanding a rarified setting. So: Consider the Matterhorn. It is a famously large thing. If you approach it from a distance, you'll likely start off experiencing a small and indistinct blur on the horizon, which grows progressively larger and more detailed in the visual field as you get closer. Provided that you are equipped with sound eyes and basic knowledge of the Alps, this process will likely terminate with an experience, not just of a blur, or even of a mountain, but rather, of jutting peak with one unusually sheer cliff-face. At such time, you may justly form the judgment that it has been the Matterhorn you've been looking at all along, though maybe you didn't know it right away.

Experiences of this kind are routine, and our way of describing them is curious. Oftentimes when we are looking at the something, be it large or not, we undergo a series of phenomenological changes with regard to which aspects of the object we are currently focused on, and which are emphasized in the visual field. Nonetheless, regardless of whether I am attending to the left or right half of my visual field, to the gray gravel hillsides or the sparkling snow-capped peak, we describe ourselves as looking at a single object; I was

looking at the Matterhorn before, and I am looking at the Matterhorn now. Or, to put more generally, in the process of perceptual inspection, there can be changes in our phenomenology paired with stability in the object of perception. Call such cases *successive recognition cases*.

Successive recognition cases are not unique to the senses: Descartes thought it was an utterly foundational feature of the use of the intellect as well. Indeed, he highlights such successive apprehensions of the aspects of real natures as crucial evidence that the ideas of such things were innate, as with the *Fifth Meditation's* triangle, and again in the *Second Meditation's* wax example, where he claims such experiences provide him with ever deeper understanding not just of the nature of the body, but also with the nature of his own mind.<sup>112</sup>

Although such cases are commonplace in Descartes' philosophy, they raise some tricky issues for the commentator, particularly if they are wondering about the objective sense of ideas. It is my gut instinct, and hopefully yours, that the *objective* sense should have something to do with the stable *object* of perception. But this raises a gnarly question, which will be my focus here: What is the relationship of the objective sense to all those fleeting experiences? Or, borrowing terminology from Margaret Wilson, what is the relationship between objective being and presentational content? Many commentators have wanted to draw a connection between these notions, albeit in tenuous or not entirely fleshed-out ways. There is good reason for this: a central tenet of Cartesianism is that to be in the mind is to (somehow) have a relation to thinking, and to think is to be aware. Were objective beings to

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<sup>112</sup> (CSM II 21: AT VII 31), (CSM II 45: AT VII 61)

not have some relation to presentational content, then it seems they would have no place in the Cartesian mind at all. But of course they do! Call this the *Argument from Awareness*.

This argument plays a crucial role relative to the *No Content View* of the first chapter, according to which the material sense covers the pure ontology of ideas and the objective sense covers their representational content. In such a scheme, If we take presentational content as a kind of representational content, then it looks like presentational content ought to fall under the objective sense. One way we can make sense of this is to say that ideas taken objectively *just are* ideas taken with regards to their presentational content. Call this claim the *Presentational View* of the objective sense of ideas, and its supporters, presentationalists.<sup>113</sup> I am not certain that there are any presentationalists thus defined, but many have said things that come close, and so its worth exploring. This is especially true because they have a strong case, since they attribute nothing to the Cartesian mind save the content of present awareness, thus doing well by the *Argument from Awareness*, and they can point to a number of texts which seem to relate objective being to phenomenological or picture-like contents.

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<sup>113</sup> Presentationalism is a view which, at least to gauge from sundry conversations and stray remarks in the literature, has a fair degree of support throughout the current scholarship. Here I've chosen some of the most explicit articulators of this approach as my interlocutors, principally among them Steven Nadler, *Arnauld and the Cartesian philosophy of ideas*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 156-165, Lawrence Nolan's "Descartes' Theory of Universals," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 89, no. 2/3 (1998): 161-80 and Dan Kaufman, "Descartes on the Objective Reality of Materially False Ideas," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 81, no. 4 (2000): 385-408. Meanwhile, according to Lionel Shapiro, "Objective Being and "Ofness" in Descartes," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 84, no. 2 (2012): 401, the objective sense ought to be interpreted presentationally, but only under conditions of clear and distinct perception, an option I briefly explore in footnote 4 above. The general spirit of this critique also extends to a number of interpreters who do not endorse presentationalism, most notably Vere Chappell, "The Theory of Ideas," *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, ed. Amélie Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press 1986), 177-198, in footnote 141.

My core argument in this chapter is that this view must fail due to what I'll call the *Successive Recognition Problem*. Here is the strongest version of the problem. Suppose we identify the objective sense with presentational content. Now, consider a given successive recognition case. In such a case, what has objective being in our idea must change with the posited phenomenological changes. Nonetheless, Descartes also uses objective being to specify the stable objects thought of throughout such perceptual shifts, in which case what has objective being in our idea does not change. This is a contradiction. Here, I'll suggest that the best response to this problem is to deny that presentational content exhausts what has objective being in our ideas, and affirm instead that presentational states (some of them at least) are only partial apprehensions of the total content that ideas contain objectively. Call this claim *Partial Presentation*.

If *Partial Presentation* is right, then we're left with a big question, namely, what exactly is it that has objective being in our ideas? And moreover, what role is the objective sense supposed to play in Descartes' cognitive scheme? Here I'll advance a bold claim, which I'll call *Objective Maximalism*. According to this thesis, if an idea represents an object, then all of the thinkable essential features of that object have objective being in the idea. Why accept this account? Here I'll propose three arguments for this view, drawing from Descartes' view of essences and containment, his remarks about ideas as capacities, and some claims he makes about the possibility of adequate knowledge. If I'm right, then we'll be in a position to make good on my proposal in the first chapter that the objective sense of ideas should be understood as a category for genuine representation. *Objective Maximalism* makes this explicit

via its connection with truth; ideas taken objectively, on this picture, are as complete a representation of what is essentially true of an object as we can hope to have.<sup>114</sup>

However, as I'll discuss in the conclusion, this leaves two major issues unanswered. First, the clarity and distinctness of particular acts of cognition must be assumed in order to make much of my argument plausible, and for ruling out alternatives to the view I propose. Given that we don't yet have an analysis of these terms, this lacuna poses a serious issue for my account.<sup>115</sup> Second, and most pressingly, I'll suggest that this analysis faces a serious internal problem, what I'll call the *Veil of Inner Awareness*. Put short, if we accept that inner awareness is Descartes' sole category for phenomenology, and that states of inner awareness are only of how things seem to us during particular experiences, then how would they allow us to know objective beings at all? I'll suggest in the concluding section that both of these worries can be remedied via the introduction of a third principle, which I'll call *Distinctness*, which says that when an idea presents a given aspect of an object, and we distinctly perceive this aspect, then that aspect has objective being in the idea. A nice consequence of my arguments for Objective Maximalism is that this principle has a simple three step proof, and I'll suggest, it allows us to resolve each of these issues.

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<sup>114</sup> I am not the first to advance this claim. In Alice Sowaal, "Descartes's Reply to Gassendi: How We Can Know All of God, All at Once, but Still Have More to Learn About Him." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 19, no. 3 (201) endorses something akin to this thesis as well. Her argument for this principle, while bearing some similarities to my own, nonetheless is subject to critique, as I lay out in footnotes 151, 167 and 168.

<sup>115</sup> Two recent discussions of clarity and distinctness can helpfully shed light on this difficult concept, in particular Elliot Samuel Paul, "Cartesian Clarity," *Philosophers' Imprint* 20, no. 19 (2020): 1–28, and Sarah Patterson, "Clear and Distinct Perception." in *A Companion to Descartes*, ed. Janet Broughton, John Carriero (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007), 216–34.

## 3.2 Representation, Presentation, and the Objective Sense of Ideas

### 3.2.1 Preliminaries

Back during our philosophical reverie in the Alps, I mentioned a term of art borrowed from Margaret Wilson, namely, *presentation*. Wilson originally introduced this term in order to offer her characteristic solution to the problems surrounding the materially false idea of the senses.<sup>116</sup> In the case of our idea of cold, for example, Wilson suggests that such ideas are materially false because they *present* one thing, namely, a phenomenal experience of cold, while *referring* to another thing, the absence of corpuscular motion, where such reference is likely picked out via some sort of causal story. Presumably, Wilson's intent with this terminology was to conjure up then current debates between descriptivism and the causal theory of names and suggest something of an analogy between these debates and the issues surrounding material falsity. Now, while this account has been thoroughly discussed and rejected by many scholars, nonetheless, the language of presentation, if not reference, has become standard through large swaths of the literature.<sup>117</sup>

However, despite its prevalence, I don't want to adopt talk of presentation carelessly, particularly where Descartes is concerned, and especially where we are at risk of conflating

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<sup>116</sup> Margaret Dauler Wilson, "Representationality of Sensation," 69-83.

<sup>117</sup> This shift has coincided with the widespread adoption of a reading (contra Wilson) according to which Descartes is a sort of Fregean or descriptivist in which the descriptive content or mode of presentation associated with a given idea plays some role in determining what it ultimately represents. One notable development of this picture can be found in Raffaella De Rosa, *Descartes and the Puzzle of Sensory Representation*, which offers a defense of a descriptivist account of Cartesian mental representation. I'm generally very sympathetic to such readings, and I think that the general thrust of this chapter, in particular *Objective Maximalism*, can easily be taken in a Fregean spirit; the idea of thing objectively contains all that is thinkably essentially true of an object, and thus can be seen as coming close to uniquely determining what we might call a referent. However, many complications attend such a conception, and raise issues that lie beyond the scope of what I think Descartes had in mind.

his position with that of anyone else. So: What then do we mean when we speak of the presentational content of an idea? By presentational content, I will mean the content we are aware of when we are in a given mental state. As I'll construe it, presentational content is kin to descriptive content, since having awareness of some presentational content puts us in a position to describe what we are experiencing, and moreover, can arguably be said to be a type of descriptive content for Descartes insofar as it can be said to be true or false of the objects of perception.<sup>118</sup> And of course, as I argued extensively in the first chapter, we ought to regard Descartes' primary category for dealing with such contents as the material sense, identified as the inner awareness of what seems to be the case.

What about reference? Here I think matters are muddled by adopting too much terminology that Descartes already uses for his own purposes, as he does with reference.<sup>119</sup> Moreover, when Descartes describes objective being, it's almost always in terms of representation. So, with this in mind, I'll adopt the terms representation and representational content as my contrastive to presentation and presentational content, and fix as its core sense whatever Descartes meant by describing objective being as concerning "representation," and secondarily those other places where he is discussing close cognates like some idea being "the idea of" something else.

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<sup>118</sup> I say arguably because some scholarship, most notably John Carriero, *Between Two Worlds: a Reading of Descartes's Meditations*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009), has stressed the idea that Cartesian truth really only applies to judgments and that ideas all on their own aren't truth-apt. I disagree with this position, though I won't explore it here.

<sup>119</sup> Descartes' use of this terminology is almost always used in contexts where he is discussing a particular class of judgment, namely, those which erroneously relate some sensory idea to a hypothesized object bearing a resembling counterpart to that sensation. An alternative rendering of the meaning of Cartesian reference, see Deborah J. Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.)

This is an important restriction for three reasons. First, I don't want to make any assumptions about the relationship of such content to presentational content, since that's what's under investigation here. Second, since our aim here is to investigate objective being, we'll generally keep the usage of "representational content" restricted to those places where Descartes is not obviously discussing the material sense, since those passages are covered in the first chapter, and focus on those places where he explicitly discusses objective being. Moreover, for now, we'll just assume that representational content of an idea can be specified by a normal name or a name associated with some description. And, for the sake of simplicity, we'll assume there are no particular issues surrounding reference when the named objects don't exist.

### 3.2.2 Presentationism

So, now that we have the requisite vocabulary, let's consider the case for the Presentational View. Earlier I said that I am not certain that this view is held by anyone, but there are a number of people who have endorsed something close to it. Maybe the prime example of this can be found in Steven Nadler's *Arnauld and the Cartesian Philosophy of Ideas*. There, in the course of a discussion of how Descartes set the stage for later thinkers, he identifies objective reality with representational content and representational content with presentational content, writing, "by representational content I mean that in virtue of which ideas are, as Descartes says, *tanquam rerum imagines*; that is, idea *qua* images exhibit or present an object to the mind... the objective reality of an idea is its representational content," (159) and goes on to claim that "Most Cartesian scholars agree that for Descartes an idea's objective reality is identical with its representational content." He then considers Gueroult's claim that "what constitutes an idea... is the character it possess that an internal observation



reveals...” and claims that “[Guerolt] rightly recognizes such a content, hence an idea’s objective reality, is something that can be read off the idea, i.e. is accessible to a purely immanent and phenomenological examination.”<sup>120</sup> However, in the course of the subsequent discussion, Nadler qualifies this initial endorsement, and holds that this identity holds only where ideas are clear and distinct, a point which we’ll consider at greater length below.<sup>121</sup>

A second example of this kind of position can be found in Lawrence Nolan’s *Descartes’ Theory of Universals*, where, distinguishing between ideas taken formally and objectively, he writes:

...Ideas also exhibit or present various things to the mind, regardless of whether the objects exhibited actually exist outside thought. So, Descartes says, I have ideas which present other men, animals, and angels "even if there are no men besides me, no animals, and no angels in the world" (AT VII, 43). *When we regard ideas in their presentational aspect, we are considering them objectively or, equivalently, with respect to their objective being.*<sup>122</sup>

Such off-hand identifications of the objective sense with presentational content are extremely common.<sup>123</sup> Nonetheless, it seems to me that these statements

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<sup>120</sup> Nadler “Arnauld,” 159-163. The quotation in this quotation comes from Martial Guérout, *Descartes’ Philosophy Interpreted According to the Order of Reasons*. Vol. 1, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 151. The full quote: “In fact, what constitutes idea (sic) is not the objective validity that it can really possess – its effective correspondence with what is ideated – it is the character it possesses that an internal observation reveals, to be manifest to our consciousness as a picture of something external, even if, in fact, nothing of this kind corresponds to it. All thought that is discovered, during an inspection of the mind, as possessing this character must therefore be considered an idea.” Given the scale and complexity of Guerout’s own account, I will focus only on Nadler here.

<sup>121</sup> Nadler is far from alone in adopting this restriction. For example, Calvin Normore claims that “When an idea is clear and distinct, we can see how it represents – whether it represents by presenting us with an object objectively, or simply by itself being an object of a certain kind,” in Calvin Normore “Meaning and Objective Being: Descartes and His Sources,” in *Essays on Descartes’ Meditations*, ed. Amélie Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press 1986), 230. Similarly, Raffaella De Rosa attributes the doctrine to him in *Descartes and the Puzzle of Sensory Representation*, at least so far as intellectual ideas are concerned, writing “In the case of intellectual ideas, the object of thought is presented in a clear and distinct way, that is as having (all and only) the properties it actually has,” 32.

<sup>122</sup> Nolan “Universals,” 172-173, my italics.

<sup>123</sup> For example, Dan Kaufman in *Descartes on the Objective Reality of Materially False Ideas*, writes, “For example, when I think of the sun, I have both an idea in the material sense (the

conceal two important ambiguities. The first ambiguity is temporal. Cartesian meditation occurs in time, and the changes produced by such meditations are changes in presentational content. Given that, how ought we to describe the temporal dimensions of the relationship between the objective sense and presentational content?

This ambiguity becomes especially pertinent relative to a second ambiguity concerning conditional strength: Usually, we think of identity statements as entailing equivalences. So, if the presentational content of an idea is what has objective being in our ideas, then objects and properties are given presentationally if and only if they have objective being in our idea, and likewise with representational content. But is this really the right way to render this relationship, particularly given the temporal ambiguity just described?

To see why these ambiguities might be important, let's spell out this identification in a way that takes an explicit stand on these issues. Perhaps this is what our commentators intend:

*Presentational Identity:* An object O is presented by a given idea I as being F at some time T if and only if O and F have objective being in I at T.

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modification that my mind undergoes) and an idea in the objective sense (the sun as the object of my thought). *The idea in the objective sense is what is presented to the mind when one has an idea in the material sense,*" 386. Although less explicit, Tad Schmaltz, "Descartes on innate ideas, sensation, and scholasticism: The response to Regius," in M. A. Stewart (ed.), *Studies in Seventeenth-Century European Philosophy*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 33-73, also appears to endorse this option, writing "the objective reality of ideas involves the presentation to mind of a subject of thought," on 38. A comparable claim is advanced by Gary Hatfield, who claims Descartes "treated sensations as a species of perception, and attributed them "objective" (or "representative") "reality", which renders them as (ostensible) presentations of objects," on 364 in Gary Hatfield, "Transparency of Mind: The Contributions of Descartes, Leibniz, and Berkeley to the Genesis of the Modern Subject," in *Departure for Modern Europe: A Handbook of Early Modern Philosophy (1400-1700)*, ed. Hubertus Busche, (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2011), 361–375.

*Presentation Identity* renders the claim as a biconditional with identical temporal indices. If you want to know what has objective being in a given idea at a given time, just examine the presentational content and now you have it. Or, if you follow Nadler's approach, you might add a restriction to clear and distinct ideas, yielding:

*Presentation Identity*<sup>P</sup>: Given that idea I is clear and distinct, an object O is presented by I as being F at some time T if and only if O and F have objective being in I at T.

### 3.2.3 Textual Grounds of Presentationalism

We'll suppose for the time being that these are correct statements of our interlocutor's intent, and set aside alternative renderings for later. Given that, what textual and philosophical reasons are there to adopt these claims? Here I see three major reasons. The first is a consequence of the *No Content* view of the first chapter. If the material sense isn't a category for representation of any kind, then it seems plausible presentational content ought to fall under the objective sense. If the arguments of the first chapter have succeeded, then this should not be a compelling position.

A second reason is Descartes' consistent association of the objective sense with talk of pictures and picture-like content. Nadler places great emphasis on those texts concerning objective being compare objective being to pictures, for example, the *Third Meditation's* discussion of objective reality, where Descartes writes that:

...In so far as different ideas <are considered as images which> represent different things, it is clear that they differ widely. Undoubtedly, the ideas which represent substances to me amount to something more and, so to

... speak, contain within themselves more objective' reality than the ideas which merely represent modes or accidents.<sup>124</sup>

This analogy is echoed elsewhere.<sup>125</sup> As Nadler's discussion demonstrates, such passages have struck many as pointing to a phenomenological purpose for the objective sense, especially when pair with his remark in the *Third Meditation* with regards to objective being that "some of my thoughts are as it were the images of things."<sup>126</sup> And again, in a letter to Regius, Descartes invokes the metaphor of a painting in describing the objective sense, writing,

Suppose someone said that anyone can paint pictures as well as Apelles, because they consist only of patterns of paint and anyone can make all kinds of patterns with paint. To such a suggestion we should have to reply that when we are talking about Apelles' pictures we are not considering just a pattern of colors, but a pattern skillfully made to produce a representation resembling reality, such as can be produced only by those very practiced in this art.<sup>127</sup>

How are we to understand the use of the picture metaphor here? I suppose a natural thought is that ideas are like pictures insofar as they depict, and that the most natural mental contents for such depicting would be presentational states. It would follow that objective being is a category for presentational content, though perhaps not as strongly as *Presentational Identity* and its ilk might suggest.

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<sup>124</sup> (CSM II 28: AT VII 40)

<sup>125</sup> For example, consider Descartes' description of a hypothetical idea of an extremely intricate machine and remarks that what "is contained in the idea merely objectively - as in a picture - must be contained in its cause, whatever kind of cause it turns out to be..." (CSM 198-199: AT VIIIA 11)

<sup>126</sup> (CSM II 25: AT VII 37) p, suggests that these passages are in part responsible for the persistent popularity of representationalist readings of Descartes' overall account, which he suggests cannot be correct once Descartes' scholastic context is better appreciated.

<sup>127</sup> (CSMK 214: AT III 566-567)

### 3.2.4 The Argument from Awareness

There is, however, a third reason and more specific reason to adopt some version of *Presentational Identity*, stemming from the *Argument from Awareness* I mentioned in the introduction. This argument begins with an account of what it is to be “in the intellect,” as Descartes insists to Caterus is the meaning he accords to objective being.<sup>128</sup> One longstanding take on what it means to be “in the intellect” is that objects in the intellect are the subjects of active, conscious awareness, a position Descartes seems to endorse in the *Fourth Replies*. There, under questioning from Arnauld, Descartes advances a very bold claim:

As to the fact that there can be nothing in the mind, in so far as it is a thinking thing, of which it is not aware,' this seems to me to be self-evident. For there is nothing that we can understand to be in the mind, regarded in this way, that is not a thought or dependent on a thought. If it were not a thought or dependent on a thought it would not belong to the mind qua thinking thing; and we cannot have any thought of which we are not aware at the very moment when it is in us.<sup>129</sup>

This point gets echoed in a 1640 letter to Mersenne:

What I say later, 'nothing can be in me, that is to say, in my mind, of which I am not aware', is something which I proved in my *Meditations*, and it follows from the fact that the soul is distinct from the body and that its essence is to think.<sup>130</sup>

In the event that we require that being in the mind requires some degree of conscious experience of it, then then *Presentational Identity* had better be right! Otherwise there would be objective existents which are not in the mind at all.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> (CSM II 74: AT VII 102)

<sup>129</sup> (CSM II 171: AT VII 246)

<sup>130</sup> (CSMK 165-166: AT III 273)

<sup>131</sup> The argument from awareness is typically understood to commit Descartes to a robust form of the transparency of the mental, a topic which has received multiple recent treatments, including Lilli Alanen. "Self-Awareness and Cognitive Agency in Descartes's *Meditations*," *Philosophical Topics* 44, no. 1 (2016): 3-26, as well as Elliot Samuel Paul, "Descartes's Anti-Transparency and the Need for Radical Doubt," *Ergo* 5, no. 20200916 (2019), and Hatfield (2011). The general thrust of all of these arguments is that one ought not too carelessly attribute to Descartes

### 3.2.5 Objective Being and Representational Content

From the texts just considered, it might seem like presentation or presentation-like content is the central theme of Descartes' account of the objective sense. Nonetheless, there are also many texts where Descartes describes the objective sense in terms of representation, objects, essences of objects, and the features of objects. The paradigm of this type of description is the by-now familiar *Reader's Preface* to the *Meditations*. There, Descartes describes the objective sense as "the thing represented by that operation; and this thing, even if it is not regarded as existing outside the intellect, can still, in virtue of its essence, be more perfect than myself."<sup>132</sup>

At first glance, it appears that Descartes has simply identified the objective sense of "idea" with the actually existing object of thought itself, which is problematic if we also affirm the possibility of a world in which no such object exists. Fortunately, Descartes clarifies this point in a well-known exchange with Caterus in the *First Objections* and *Replies*. In the *First Replies*, Caterus observes that according to standard usage, objective being in the intellect "is simply the determination of an act of the intellect by means of an object." Put more carefully, objective being is just a way of describing a cognitive act which entails nothing about the existence of anything outside of us, nor does it introduce any new effects requiring causes to explain them beyond the mind. Descartes' reply begins with an example and a concession. "For example, if anyone asks what happens to the sun through its being

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the view he is committed to transparency, with Hatfield stressing the importance of inattentive states as counter examples to this argument, and Paul arguing that Descartes is not even committed to transparency via introspective methods, favoring instead the claim that Cartesian introspection requires the clarity and distinctness granted only by wedding introspection to the method of doubt. Paul's case is for this is very strong, and exactly how to stack up his account of transparency against my own is a topic for further research.

<sup>132</sup> (CSM II 7: AT VII 8)

objectively in my intellect, the best answer is that nothing happens to it beyond the application of an extraneous label which does indeed 'determine an act of the intellect by means of an object'." But then he continues:

But if the question is about what the idea of the sun is, and we answer that it is the thing which is thought of, in so far as it has objective being in the intellect, no one will take this to be the sun itself with this extraneous label applied to it. 'Objective being in the intellect' will not here mean 'the determination of an act of the intellect by means of an object', but 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 normally are in the intellect. Now this mode of being is of course much less perfect than that possessed by things which exist outside the intellect; but, as I did explain, it is not therefore simply nothing.<sup>133</sup>

This passage is a bit arcane, but I think there are three general claims we can extract from it. First, when an idea represents something, there is a special mode of intramental being that object has, its objective existence. Second, at least where finite substances are concerned, the object of thought has this mode of existence independently of its formal or actual existence outside of the mind. Third, and most ambiguously, it appears that Descartes accepts some form of identity between objectively and formally existing objects; it is "the sun itself" that has both formal existence in the world, and objective existence in the mind.

These last two claims have spawned a massive literature on whether Descartes is better understood as a representationalist or a direct realist, with direct realists favoring an identity of objective existents with (something akin to) their objects, and representationalists stressing the existential independence of both. In the interest of brevity, I'd like to sidestep these to focus our attention on what exactly Descartes is claiming about the relationship

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<sup>133</sup> (CSM II 74-75; AT VII 102-103)

between intramental existence and representation. This is a somewhat simpler task: Plausibly, Descartes means that if an idea represents something, if its representational content is that object, then that thing has objective being in the idea and therefore in the mind, as we've seen him saying all along. If this statement sounds too close to direct realism for any reader's comfort, I invite them to restate subsequent principles on more explicitly representationalist terms, as the *Successive Recognition Problem* holds regardless of how we parse the details of this syntax.<sup>134</sup>

Given this, we should add that it is not strictly objects which have objective being in ideas, but also their attributes. As Descartes defines objective reality in the *Second Replies*, this term refers to “the being of the thing which is represented by an idea, in so far as this exists in the idea,” and suggests that this also extends to the features of objects, writing “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.”<sup>135</sup>

As before, the same conditional and temporal ambiguities present themselves here. When Descartes says “whatever we perceive as being in the objects of our ideas,” does he mean a particular time? And likewise, does he intend a biconditional or a weaker conditional? I think it's plausible to read him as favoring a biconditional: The passage is intended as something of a definition, after all. And for now, we'll assume that this relation can fairly be taken to obtain at a time.

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<sup>134</sup> A useful summary of these issues can be found in Michael Ayers, “Ideas and Objective Being,” in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, edited by Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1062–1107.

<sup>135</sup> (CSM II 113-114; AT VII 161)



*Representational Identity*: An object O is represented by a given idea I as being F at some time T only if O and F have objective being in I at T.

Thus, under *Representational Identity*, if I have the idea that represents God as perfect, then God has objective being in the idea, and so does his perfection.

### 3.3 The Successive Recognition Problem

#### 3.3.1 The Problem

These claims do not, at first glance, appear to be in tension. However, they combine poorly with successive recognition cases. Throughout the *Meditations*, Descartes spends a great deal of time describing cognitive episodes in which he recognizes seemingly new contents lurking within his ideas. Maybe the most memorable of these is the *Second Meditation's* wax passage, in which Descartes contemplates the nature of the wax, noticing which of its features are cognized by what faculty, and concluding the exercise by remarking that "...the perception I have of [the wax] is a case not of vision or touch or imagination – nor has it ever been, despite previous appearances – but of purely mental scrutiny; and this can be imperfect and confused, as it was before, or clear and distinct as it is now, depending on how carefully I concentrate on what the wax consists in."<sup>136</sup> Nonetheless, in spite of the differences of appearances he runs through in the course of the examination of the wax, he

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<sup>136</sup> (CSM II 21: AT VII 32)

does stress that it is always the wax he is thinking of, stressing at the conclusion that “I am speaking of this particular piece of wax,” and the ideas he has of it.<sup>137</sup>

A second example of this kind of thought can be found in the *Fifth Meditation*, where it plays an important role in ruling out the possibility that geometrical ideas are invented. Considering his ideas concerning quantity, and describes his consideration of these ideas as akin to recognition, writing “...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>138</sup> He then considers the idea of the triangle and all those features which he can recognize within this idea, and remarks “since these properties are ones which I now clearly recognize whether I want to or not, even if I never thought of them at all when I previously imagined the triangle, it follows that they cannot have been invented by me.”<sup>139</sup>

So, Descartes is plainly fond of successive recognition cases. What are the characteristics of such cases? First, they are *temporally extended*, occurring over at least two different times. Second, they are what we might call *presentationally unstable*; at one time, a mind in such a case recognizes some aspect of what it represents, and at another, recognizes a different aspect of that object. Third, these cases of recognition are stable insofar as they are fundamentally perceptions of a single object with at least one fixed feature, that which Descartes describes as being “long present within me.” Assume, for the sake of argument, that the presence of such stable features ought to be cashed out as being represented by the idea in question, and hence that they can be called *representationally stable*. (We’ll consider

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<sup>137</sup> (CSM II 21: AT VII 32)

<sup>138</sup> (CSM II 44-45: AT VII 64)

<sup>139</sup> (CSM II 45: AT VII 64)

whether this is right in a moment.) With that given, we can state the *Successive Recognition Problem* as an inconsistent triad:

The Successive Recognition Problem:

- Presentation Identity:* Idea I presents object O as F at time T iff O and F have objective being in I at T.
- Representational Identity:* Idea I represents object O as F at time T if and only if O and F have objective being in I at T.
- Successive Recognition:* There exist cases such that (a) at times T1 and T2, idea I represents O as F, and (b) at time T1, idea I doesn't present O as F, and at time T2, idea I does present O as F.

For example, suppose I am contemplating a triangle, and move from thinking only of its being extended to recognizing that it is equiangular. There is a shift in my presentational content as I notice this unrecognized feature that my idea already represented. By *Presentation Identity*, there must be shift in what has objective being in the idea. But by *Representational Identity*, there is not.

This way of putting the issue raises a few worries which we can dismiss at the outset. The first stems from the suspicion that I've just played a trick with the diachronic identity of ideas to generate a problem where there is none. Alas, even adopting a very strict view of the temporal identity of ideas leaves the Successive Recognition Problem intact. Suppose I hold that the identity of ideas is instantaneous, and that for all times, if an idea I and an idea I\* exist at different times, then they are non-identical. In such a case, we can modify premise three to the following statement:

- Successive Recognition\*:* There exist cases such that (a) at times T1, idea I represents O as F, and at T2, idea I\* represents O as F, and (b) at time T1, idea I doesn't present O as F, and at time T2, idea I\* does not present O as F.

This way of stating the issue does resolve the contradiction if we state it in terms of change. But this is not enough to resolve the problem, since we are still stuck with the awkward state of affairs at T1, which generates our contradiction. And moreover, it seems to me that adopting such a strict criteria for the identity of ideas over time is contrary to Descartes' consistent habit of describing his investigations of his ideas as being investigations of different aspects of stable objects, for example, at the conclusion of the wax passage. So, in order to truly tackle the issue, one must challenge one of the premises directly; fiddling with identity conditions alone won't resolve anything.

Another strategy which will not resolve the issue is to try to restrict *Presentational Identity* with clarity and distinctness, as Nadler and others argue we ought. Adding the assumption that the ideas in question are clear and distinct does not change the existence of successive recognition cases; it is completely consistent with everything Descartes says about clarity and distinctness to assume that a clear and distinct idea might at one time present O as F and at another time O as G. Moreover, our ability to recognizing the kind of distinction that obtains between differing modes of a substance arguably requires *exactly* this.<sup>140</sup>

So, it appears that the problem can't be solved by either of these strategies. We must solve it by denying one of the premises just listed.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> After specifying that he is assuming we are talking about clear and distinct perception, Descartes writes that "the second kind of modal distinction is recognized from the fact that we are able to arrive at knowledge of one mode apart from another, and vice versa, whereas we cannot know either mode apart from the substance in which they both inhere. For example, if a stone is in motion and is square-shaped, I can understand the square shape without the motion and, conversely, the motion without the square shape; but I can understand neither the motion nor the shape apart from the substance of the stone." (CSM I 214: AT VIIIA 29) As I read this passage, Descartes is suggesting that this flavor of modal distinction is recognized when an idea presents one thing and then presents another while yet being an idea of the same object, and thus is a form of successive recognition case entirely restricted to clear and distinct perception.

<sup>141</sup> It is worth mentioning here that an alternative version of this problem emerges for Chappell's rendering of the PRD. In his rendering, there is a perfect bijection between ideas taken materially and ideas taken objectively, as he claims in "Theory of Ideas," 178, and therefore that they are only conceptually distinct.

### 3.3.2 Option 1: Deny Representational Stability

One might try denying that successive recognition cases work as I've described. Specifically, one might deny the (a) clause of *Successive Recognition*, that there are cases where an idea represents O as F at T1 and T2, regardless of what happens with presentation. I suppose one way to do this is to just flat out deny that this is how we ought to understand successive recognition; one strategy that seems especially appropriate on this front is to deny that it is *representation* that is stable. Some other category might do the job of accounting for those contents "long present within me," as Descartes says of the aspects of the triangle. A natural thought here is while Descartes might hold that an idea might implicitly *contain* some feature unnoticed, that does not mean that it thereby represents it.

My reply to this objection is to offer a positive argument for why we ought to regard implicitly contained contents as being represented by our ideas, and therefore for having objective being in them. Call this *Argument from Recognition*. Here is the short version of this argument:

- (1) Successive recognition cases are cases where we recognize implicitly contained contents of our ideas.
- (2) The implicitly contained contents of our ideas of objects are the essential features of the objects contained in the natures of those objects.
- (3) The essential features contained in the natures of the objects of thought are identical with what those objects represent.
- (4) By (1), (2), and (3), successive recognition cases are cases where we recognize the essential features represented by our ideas of objects.

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Recalling that Chappell sees the distinction between ideas taken materially and objectively as holding between some form of conscious state and a representation of the object. The problem is that if this holds, then all of the premises for the successive recognition problem also hold; changes in conscious content must be changes in objective content, and thus the problem reasserts itself. Although it's not my focus here, the ending position of this paper may be interpreted as an argument that ideas taken materially and objectively are modally distinct, not conceptually.

I take it that the first premise, that to be well-supported textually by the sources given at the beginning of this section. The second premise is testified to by Descartes' account of essences. The types of content that Descartes recognizes in the idea of the triangle are those pertaining to its essence, and one of the principle functions that essences play in Descartes' philosophy is containing the essential features of objects, as he says directly in the *Second Replies* axiomatization, where he defines such containment as "When we say that something is *contained in the nature* or *concept of a thing*, this is the same as saying that it is true of that thing, or that it can be asserted of that thing."<sup>142</sup> We'll consider the details of what Descartes is saying in this definition in a moment, but for now it's enough to say that containment is something akin to necessary or essential entailment, and that it is the principle use he makes of the notion of essence.

This much should be uncontroversial. The same cannot be said of Premise (3), that the essential features contained in the essences of objects are identical with those features which our ideas of those objects represent. This is a crucial premise, so crucial that everything I say in this chapter turns on it, so a bit of belaboring is in order. Why accept this claim? I think the strongest textual reason for this comes from an exchange that Descartes has with Gassendi in the course of the *Fifth Replies*. There, Gassendi challenges Descartes on whether the idea of God is innate. Gassendi's worry was that the idea of God might be factitious, by virtue of being put together from ideas of successively greater beings. Descartes' reply is that none of those ideas of successively greater beings would reach all the

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<sup>142</sup> (CSM II 114; AT VII 162)

way to the idea of an infinite being, and that Gassendi has neglected “the common philosophical maxim that the essences of things are indivisible.” He continues:

An idea represents the essence of a thing, and if anything is added to or taken away from the essence, then the idea automatically becomes the idea of something else...once the idea of the true God has been conceived, although we may detect additional perfections in him which we had not yet noticed, this does not mean that we have augmented the idea of God; we have simply made it more distinct and explicit, since, so long as we suppose that our original idea was a true one, it must have contained all these perfections.<sup>143</sup>

Here Descartes begins with the claim that the contents contained in the essences of the objects of thought supervene on the representational content of ideas. Why should this be so? I think the simplest explanation, consonant with his discussion of the the idea of God, is just this: The *supervenience* of contained essential features on representational content holds because contained contents are *identical* with the representational contents. This underpins Descartes’ concluding claim that the idea of God must have contained all the detected perfections; no construction is required on our part because all there is to understand is what it is that our idea represents in the first place.

Another argument for this premise can be had via *Representational Identity*. Call this argument the *Argument from Containment*. Holding *Representational Identity* in mind, consider what it is that Descartes says has objective being in his ideas. And here we find a fairly consistent answer: those contents which are contained in the essences of things. To cite but a few examples: From the *Reader’s Preface* definition of the objective sense, the idea of God “in virtue of its essence,” is “more perfect than myself.” In the *Principles* discussion of objective reality’s causal consequences, he is yet more specific: “The greater the amount of

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<sup>143</sup> (CSM II 255-256: AT VII 371)

objective perfection they *contain* within themselves, the more perfect their cause must be.”<sup>144</sup> Another text which confirms this can be found in the *Comments on A Certain Broadsheet*, where Descartes discusses Regius’s contention that “the idea we have of God no more transcends our characteristic powers of thinking than the concept of any other thing whatever,” and suggests that this is ambiguous. If Regius meant to claim that “In the concept of God no more *objective* perfections are implied than in all other concepts taken together, then he is clearly mistaken,” as Descartes’ intent was that “this superabundance of perfections, in which our concept of God surpasses all others, that I have used as the basis of my argument.”<sup>145</sup> What these texts, alongside others, suggest is that one of the principle applications Descartes sees for the category of objective being is for talking about *contained* contents which have objective being in those ideas. And via *Representational Identity*, this means that our ideas must represent such contained contents.

So, where does all of this leave us? If the foregoing arguments are right, we should affirm that successive recognition cases feature representationally stable ideas being successively apprehended via presentational changes. And if that holds, then we are stuck with the *Successive Recognition Problem*, and must look elsewhere for a solution.

### 3.3.3 Option 2: Deny Presentational Instability

Perhaps, then, the problem lies with the claim that such ideas are genuinely presentationally unstable, and that it is false there are cases where at T1, an idea doesn’t present O as F and at T2, the idea does present O as F. On the face of it, this might seem

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<sup>144</sup> (CSM I 198: AT VIIIA 11), my italics.

<sup>145</sup> (CSM II 306: AT VIIIB 362-363), my italics.



ridiculous to deny, but it is actually a surprisingly good solution. The reason has to do with attention. It might be that Descartes thinks we are genuinely aware of all of the contained contents of our ideas, but that the thing that shifts in a successive recognition cases is not presented content per se but instead our *focus of attention*. We've already seen Descartes insist that the clarification of his idea of the wax is a matter of how "carefully I concentrate on what the wax consists in," and likewise with similar cases throughout.<sup>146</sup> Put a bit more formally:

(*Attention*)      All putative cases of changes in presentational content are just changes in which parts of the presentational content of an idea are being attended to.

There are some reasons to favor this reading. It preserves the basic idea of the *Argument from Awareness*, since it commits us to nothing being in the mind that is not present in conscious experience. And such a position has fairly good rationalist *bona fides*, as such presentationally overloaded but massively underattended contents play a central role in Leibniz's account of monadic perception. Moreover, something akin to this view has been explicitly endorsed by McRae, who writes, "We have implicit knowledge of everything present to consciousness, and any part of this implicit knowledge can be rendered explicit by the direction of attention upon it... Explicit knowledge, that which we get from attending to

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<sup>146</sup> (CSM II 21: AT VII 31)

what we are conscious of as being ourselves is, then, the clear and distinct perception of what we are pre-reflectively conscious of.”<sup>147</sup>

Now, while I do think that attention is a central part of Descartes’ scheme, I have the strong suspicion that we can plausibly deny *Successive Recognition* this way. The reason stems from the kinds of things that Descartes holds up in successive recognition cases. For consider how Descartes describes his successive recognition of the triangle’s nature:

...Various properties can be demonstrated of the triangle, for example that its three angles equal two right angles, that its greatest side subtends its greatest angle, and the like; and since these properties are ones which I now clearly recognize whether I want to or not, even if I *never thought of them at all* when I previously imagined the triangle, it follows that they cannot have been invented by me.<sup>148</sup>

The crucial quote here is italicized: Descartes emphasizes that these features he now recognizes were never thought before this moment. I think its quite plausible to read him here as saying that they were simply presentationally absent, in which case it looks like *Attention* has it wrong.

A worry here is that Descartes is actually making a more limited point about the powers of the imagination, and not about thinking in general. According to such a story, he *does* think that all of those features which he recognized were presented intellectually, but not in the finite and limited perceptual field of the imagination. Against this, the claim he advances is that he never thought of them at all; and since intellection is a mode of thinking, it seems to me he must be denying that they he had presentational awareness of them, regardless of which faculty it was apprehended by.

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<sup>147</sup> McRae, Robert, “Innate Ideas”, in Butler, R. B., ed., *Cartesian Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972), 67-68.

<sup>148</sup> (CSM II 45: AT VII 64)

Even if this defense seems inadequate, however, it seems to me there is a deep problem with holding *Attention*. For consider how many demonstrable properties of a triangle there are: the number defies comprehension. Do we really want to saddle Descartes with *all* of these being presented but unattended, as the defender of this option must hold? This seems to my mind entirely contrary to the spirit of Descartes' philosophy; the Cartesian mind has stupendous intellectual powers, of course; Descartes is a rationalist. However, that doesn't entail a stupendous, indeed infinite, power of current conscious experience.

### 3.3.4 Option 3: Deny Representational Identity

Another option is to deny *Representation Identity*. What might replace it? A good compromise in such a case is an alternative which I'll call *Representational Potential*.

*Representational Potential:*      An idea I represents an object O as having feature F at time T if and only if O and F *can* have objective being in I at T.

*Representative Potential* resolves the our problem by weakening *Representational Identity*. According to its rendering, successive recognition cases do feature a shift of what has objective being in our ideas, but at the price of effectively severing a direct identity between representation and objective being. In the case of successive recognition of the idea of God, for example, we would say that when I am contemplating his beneficence, his beneficence would have objective being in my idea, and while I am contemplating his omnipotence, his omnipotence would have objective being in my idea. Nonetheless, what it represents (namely, God) would be stable throughout these changes, because representation establishes what *can* have objective being, not what *does*.

I think *Representative Potential* is the most plausible option thus considered, at least on logical grounds, but I think it faces serious textual problems. For consider the many texts above where Descartes defines the objective sense. *None* of them feature anything close to the modal qualification that this reading requires. So far as I can tell, the only one which points in this direction is the *Second Replies* axiomatization, where Descartes defines objective reality “as the being of the thing which is represented by an idea, in so far as this exists in the idea,” and adds that “for whatever we perceive as being in the objects of our ideas exists objectively in the ideas themselves.”<sup>149</sup> I suppose one might take this second clause as suggesting that whatever do in fact perceive has objective being in our ideas, but not if we’re not currently perceiving it. Under such circumstances it can be said to be represented or contained, but not to be present in the intellect in the way objects usually are.

Yet if Descartes’ aim is to express such a subtle distinction, it is striking how little care he takes to ensure his reader knows it is operative. Perhaps the most striking piece of evidence against this hypothesis comes from the French translation of the *Meditations*, which Descartes approved. Here, the translation routinely trades off between the objective sense and representation so casually that it seems Descartes couldn’t have intended anything more elaborate than a simple identity between them; describing the causal requirements on objective being, he is translated as “yet the mode of being by which a thing exists objectively <or representatively> in the intellect by way of an idea, imperfect though it may be, is certainly not nothing, and so it cannot come from nothing,” and again concluding that whatever causes of an idea must be, we must come to a primitive idea such that “the cause

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<sup>149</sup> (CSM II 114: AT VII 161)

of [that idea] will be like an archetype which contains formally <and in fact> all the reality <or perfection> which is present only objectively <or representatively> in the idea.”<sup>150</sup> Put short, I do not see a subtle modal qualification in these casual disjunctions; I see instead an unremarkable identity, the same which we saw running through the other definitions listed above. This evidence favors *Representational Identity*’s rendering of this identity.

*Representational Potential* it also suffers from some serious philosophical inelegance. Specifically, *it* winds up treating representation, but not objective being, as primitive. As this proposal is intended to save the Presentationalist reading, one motivation of which is the *Argument from Awareness*. But therein lies the problem, for then one might just run the worry for representational alone, rather than just for ideas taken objectively. What status do these stable representational objects have if they can escape being the content of present awareness? If such a case can hold, then it seems exactly the same worries apply; how can we be said to have such representational ideas in the first place when they are not in the mind? Now, in the final analysis, we’ll see that the *Argument from Awareness* can be at least somewhat mitigated; but I think that for any presentationalist inclined to take it seriously, *Representational Potential* can’t be seen as a serious option.

#### 3.3.5 Option 4: Deny *Presentational Identity*

This leaves only the possibility of denying *Presentational Identity*. One option which might seem initially plausible is to weaken the claim to a simple one way conditional:

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<sup>150</sup> (CSM II 29: AT VII 41-42)

*Partial Presentation:* If an idea I presents object O as F at T, then O and F have objective being in I at T

By dropping the biconditional, this blocks the inference from the absence of presentation at time 1 to the denial of objective being to F at time 2, thereby avoiding both the contradiction at time 2 and the secondary contradiction with regards to the change in objective beings. However, this solution won't quite do, for reasons stemming from obscure and confused ideas. Consider my idea of heat. This idea is materially false. If it presents heat as a positive thing, and occasions erroneous judgments of that content, then by *Partial Presentation*, phenomenal heat must have objective being in that idea. But Descartes soundly rejects this possibility, writing in his reply to Arnauld that "I do not claim that an idea's material falsity results from some positive entity," which in this context would be objectively existing heat.<sup>151</sup> So it cannot be that Descartes accepts a straightforward identification here.

A better option is to adopt a variant of Nadler's strategy of qualifying these relationships, and to affirm:

*Distinct Presentation:* If an idea I clearly and distinctly presents object O as F at T, then O and F have objective being in I at T.

I think this solution has it right. Like *Partial Presentation*, it blocks the problem by dropping the biconditional, and does *Partial Presentation* one better by adding a restriction to

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<sup>151</sup> (CSM II 164: AT VII 235)

keep out those pesky materially false ideas, thereby banishing sensations from direct participation in the realm of objective beings.<sup>152</sup>

Though I know of no text where Descartes directly endorses this option, I think a good case can be built for it from the claims he makes in the *Second Replies* axiomatization. With *Distinct Presentation* in mind, consider the sequence of axioms in which he characterizes objective being:

III. 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.<sup>153</sup>

As we just saw, one might render the claim that “whatever we perceive as being in the objects of our ideas exists objectively in the ideas themselves,” by modifying the claim to read that whatever our ideas represent *can* have objective being in our ideas. But another way we might read it, one which I suspect is more plausible, is to take it to say whatever an idea *presents* as being in the object of our idea has objective being in our ideas, as *Partial Presentation* has it. But then consider what he says an axiom later:

V. Substance. This term applies to every thing in which whatever we perceive immediately resides, as in a subject, or to every thing by means of which

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<sup>152</sup> I think something akin to this principle must be afoot in Sowaal’s account for how we can know all of God at once but still have more to learn about him. In Sowaal’s rendering, which endorses *Objective Maximalism*, the possibility of incomplete apprehensions of God’s essence are allowed for via what she terms *cognitive routes*, which allow for this possibility, via what she calls the *Attribution Thesis*. Underpinning this notion of cognitive routes is a distinction she makes between Attributes and attributes, where Attributes are the really identical features of God and attributes are “generated when the meditator uses different names to refer to her modally (but not objectively) clear and distinct perceptions of God.” Different cognitive routes by which one thinks of God may involve the mind invoking different attributes as means of thinking about a single Attribute. However, I think the emphasis on language gets matters wrong here; Descartes is all about thoughts, with language playing a secondary role. Thus, on my preferred rendering, the lower-case attributes in question are those features which we *experience* as different when our minds are modified in a certain way. The possibility of these turning out to be identical is then accounted for via the framework developed in the last chapter on conceptual distinctions.

<sup>153</sup> (CSM II 114: AT VII 161)

whatever we perceive exists. By 'whatever we perceive' is meant any property, quality or attribute of which we have a real idea.<sup>154</sup>

Here he qualifies the claim: By speaking of “whatever we perceive,” he assumes that this means perceptions of properties of which we have a “real idea.” What does this mean? I find it plausible that he means the idea in question be clear and distinct. If that is in fact what he means, and we can fairly interpret Axiom III in light of his qualification, then we get *Distinct Presentation*.

So, if my arguments have succeeded, we should be prepared to reject Presentationalism on philosophical and textual grounds. But we have not yet dealt with the *Argument from Awareness*, and in lieu of *Presentational Identity*, we still have a somewhat incomplete picture of what the objective sense directly involves; we know that clearly and distinctly presented contents must have objective being in our ideas, but this leaves the overall picture of objective being frustratingly underdetermined. It is to these issues that we now turn.

### 3.4 **Towards Objective Maximalism**

#### 3.4.1 Against the *Argument from Awareness*

*Distinct Presentation* is formulated to leave the door open to contents which are unrepresented and yet represented, and thus runs afoul of the *Argument from Awareness*. Recall that this argument turns on what it means to be in the mind or the intellect, and Descartes' insistence to Arnauld that “nothing can be in me, that is to say, in my mind, of which I am

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<sup>154</sup> (CSM II 114: AT VII 161)



not aware,” a position which seems to indicate that unrepresented contents cannot be in the mind at all, including the objectively existing features which I claim are recognized in successive recognition cases.<sup>155</sup>

I think that the best reply to this worry is to consider what Descartes says immediately following the above remark to Arnauld:

But it must be noted that, although we are always actually aware of the acts or operations of our minds, we are not always aware of the mind's faculties or powers, except potentially. By this I mean that when we concentrate on employing one of our faculties, then immediately, *if the faculty in question resides in our mind, we become actually aware of it, and hence we may deny that it is in the mind if we are not capable of becoming aware of it.*<sup>156</sup>

Here Descartes qualifies the initial claim that to be in the mind requires being the object of present awareness. Something may also be said to be in the mind insofar as it entails a potentiality of the mind; such is the mode of being of our faculties. A further elaboration of this underlying line of argument comes in the *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*. There, Descartes responds to Regius's claim that the intellect has *no* innate ideas, requiring only the power of thinking in order to achieve knowledge. Descartes' reply is to deny holding any such position, and instead maintain that he did “observe that there were certain thoughts within me 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...”<sup>157</sup> Later on he further elaborates, writing “these ideas, along with that faculty, are innate in us, i.e. they

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<sup>155</sup> (CSMK 175: AT III 273)

<sup>156</sup> (CSM II 172: AT VII 246), my italics

<sup>157</sup> (CSM I 303: AT VIII B 358)

always exist within us potentially, for to exist in some faculty is not to exist actually, but merely potentially, since the term 'faculty' denotes nothing but a potentiality.”<sup>158</sup>

So, in Descartes’ own words, the ideas which he called innate were so called because they are “the forms of these thoughts,” and that they “exist within us potentially, for to exist in some faculty is to exist potentially.”<sup>159</sup> If we take this claim seriously, then it seems that objective being turns out to be a potentiality, presumably, a potential for thought about the object which the idea in question represents. Then, via the First Chapter, we can hazard a first interpretation of these passage: an objective being *is* a potentiality for states of inner awareness of the object of thought.

This is not an entirely unlovely interpretation, and I think it is certainly well supported by the text of the comments. However, there are some complications here, because Descartes is maddeningly inconsistent on the topic of potentialities. For example, a key premise in Descartes' proof of God's existence in the Third Meditation is that "the mode of being by which a thing exists objectively <or representatively> in the intellect by way of an idea, imperfect though it may be, is certainly not nothing, and so it cannot come from nothing."<sup>160</sup> Yet on the topic of potentialities, Descartes holds the contrary view, writing a mere paragraph later that "I perceive that the objective being of an idea cannot be produced merely by potential being, which strictly speaking is nothing, but only by actual or formal being."<sup>161</sup> Extrapolating then, a potential being is strictly nothing, in contrast to objective

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<sup>158</sup> (CSM I 305: AT VIII B 361)

<sup>159</sup> (CSM I 305: AT VIII B 361)

<sup>160</sup> (CSM II 29: AT VII 42)

<sup>161</sup> (CSM II 32: AT VII 47)

beings. But if objective beings are potentialities, they are nothing, and we have a contradiction.

There are a few strategies we might use to mitigate these difficulties. To my mind, the simplest is to modify our initial proposal, and interpret an objective being as a potentiality for thought which has causal requirements only when actualized in a clear and distinct thought; thus, in the case of the idea of God, his reality has objective being in the idea, whether it is thought of or not. But, when we think of it, the potentiality is actualized; and it is this actualized objectively existent feature which entails God's existence via the Causal Principle.<sup>162</sup>

An alternative approach would be to regard objective beings as actualities in the mind which ground or explain the potentialities of the mind, and thus to downplay his commitments in the *Comments*. An analogy is helpful here: consider a bouquet being present in a vase. The bouquet's presence explains the potentialities of the vase to house different arrangements of flowers; likewise, for the mind, the actual existence of objective beings explains the mind's potential to think of them in different ways, that is, to have different states of awareness regarding those objects.

Either of these options seem to me to be viable routes for making sense of Descartes' remarks about potentialities of thought, and I don't want to hang my case on either of them; my focus here is primarily deliniating the best solutions to the *Successive*

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<sup>162</sup> A reasonable question here is whether these texts might be seen as offering support for the idea that representation is primitive and that it entails the possibility of objective being, what I called *Representational Potential* above. I suppose we might choose to read Descartes this way, but against this: Descartes' description of being in the intellect (as a potentiality) closely parallels his discussion with Caterus where the topic is objective being, where he says that objective being is "being in the intellect in the way objects usually are." (CSM II 74: AT VII 72).

*Recognition Problem*. But the important point here is that on either reading, the *Argument from Awareness* fails. Either objective beings can be in the mind as pure potentialities for thought, or as actualities which ground potentialities for thought. Neither option requires that they be present in awareness properly speaking.

### 3.4.2 The Argument from Adequacy

If this is so, we are granted a powerful tool for establishing what *doesn't* have objective being in our intellect. Of any faculty, Descartes claims that “we may deny that it is in the mind if we are not capable of becoming aware of it,” which means that where the intellect is concerned, where we are incapable of becoming aware of some act of the intellect, we ought not to attribute it to the power of intellection.<sup>163</sup> And likewise, with regards to the intellect's proper objects, where we are incapable of becoming aware of some feature of an objective being, we ought not to hold that such a feature has objective being in our idea of it. Contrapositively:

*Potential Presentation:* If O and F have objective being in idea I at time T, then it is possible that I presents O as F at some time, T.

Two crucial points are worth mentioning here. *Potential Presentation* makes *no* requirement as to the clarity and distinctness of I; this requirement is therefore quite weak, since many features of objects may be thought obscurely, as Descartes often stresses.

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<sup>163</sup> (CSM II 172: AT VII 247)

Moreover, the possibility here is also crucial: we make no assumption that such features *must* be thought, only that they can.

However, as stated, this claim is underdetermined. For exactly how far does our ability to think (however obscurely) of the features of an object extend? Some things Descartes says seem to suggest not very widely at all. Consider, for example, what he says in the *Third Meditation*. There, in the process of ruling out candidate causes for the idea of God, he writes that he cannot be the source of this idea, in spite of his increase in knowledge and the potentiality for knowing that he plainly possesses. Instead, he writes that “even if my knowledge always increases more and more, I recognize that it will never actually be infinite, since it will never reach the point where it is not capable of a further increase.”<sup>164</sup> The thought here is that Descartes takes his own knowledge to never form a completed infinity: It can never be that he knows everything. In the context of our discussion, this claim would seem to have big consequences: If in speaking of knowledge, Descartes is assuming that knowledge presupposes awareness, then he is denying he can ever have complete awareness

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<sup>164</sup> (CSM II 37: AT VII 42). There is a wrinkle here which I suspect will raise issues relative to my endorsement of *Objective Maximalism*. The Cartesian intellect is finite, both as a finite substance and insofar as it is finitely powerful. However, it is tempting to interpret Descartes as holding that the intellect has a finite representation capacity as well, both in order to secure his claim that the scope of the will is greater than that of the intellect, and to ensure that he cannot be the source of his idea of God. However, neither of these aims requires assuming that the intellect has finite capacities for representation. As Descartes makes clear in the *Fifth Replies*, the doctrine of the will’s greater scope does not entail that the intellect only represents a finite number of things, but rather, that the will is able to affirm or deny falsehoods, while the intellect, rightly used, deals only in truths. (CIT AT VII: 336-337) Moreover, if we consider Descartes’ specific claims about his intellects’ finitude relative to the idea of God, we see that the emphasis is not on having a finite capacity for representation, but rather, his knowledge never forming a completed infinity. As I would interpret this claim, Descartes intends to hold that he can never have an adequate phenomenal awareness of the objective beings; in the case of an objectively existent circle, the indefinitely large number of ways it might be transected by a line, while contained in the idea objectively, can never be comprehended in inner awareness all at once. Such an interpretation gains further credence from the passage about adequate knowledge considered below, and crucially, it means that the finitude of the Cartesian intellect poses no problem to *Objective Maximalism*.

of an infinite number of features putatively contained in an objective being. Then, by *Potential Presentation*, they cannot have objective being in an idea.

Themes of this flavor run through much of Descartes' treatment of these topics in the *Meditations* and elsewhere, and raise many interesting issues for his account of the finitude of the intellect. However, I want to highlight an important, and to my mind unappreciated, text where Descartes adopts something of a different tact on the full extent of our capacity for knowledge, namely, a remark he makes to Arnauld in the *Fourth Replies*. In the *Fourth Objections*, Arnauld charges that the real distinction argument does not just require distinct knowledge, but rather adequate knowledge, that is, knowledge of every feature of an object, knowledge of the kind that only God has.<sup>165</sup> In his reply, Descartes denies that this is required to know the real distinction between body and mind, but in the process makes a startling claim about the nature of finite cognition:

...Only God can know that he has adequate knowledge of all things. A created intellect, by contrast, *though perhaps it may in fact possess adequate knowledge of many things*, can never know it has such knowledge unless God grants it a special revelation of the fact. *In order to have adequate knowledge of a thing all that is required is that the power of knowing possessed by the intellect is adequate for the thing in question, and this can easily occur.* But in order for the intellect to know it has such knowledge, or that God put nothing in the thing beyond what it is aware of, its power of knowing would have to equal the infinite power of God, and this plainly could not happen on pain of contradiction."<sup>166</sup>

Descartes begins his reply by claiming that finite minds *can* have adequate knowledge, and may in fact have such knowledge, but do not know that we know.<sup>167</sup> At first

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<sup>165</sup> (CSM II 140: AT VII 201)

<sup>166</sup> (CSM II 155: AT VII 220), my italics.

<sup>167</sup> Lest one suspect this is an unimportant claim on Descartes' behalf, recall that a longstanding item of Catholic faith required the possibility of God granting the beatific vision to souls. Descartes' remark here is

glance, this claim seems to be about knowledge of states of knowing, thus invoking the dreaded KK principle that has provoked so much recent epistemology.<sup>168</sup> However, I suspect that Descartes' intent with the above passage is rather different, reinforced by the fact that the Descartes' talk of knowledge can sometimes be ambiguous between cognition and knowledge properly speaking. In that case, when Descartes says we can have adequate first order "knowledge," he's actually talking about adequate mental representations without thereby requiring presentations of those contents be within our own powers. This reading gains further traction from his invocation of the *power* of knowing in the second italicized passage. Given the arguments from above, this power is grounded in the objective beings of the intellect. So, it seems Descartes wants to leave the door open for some vast storehouse of "knowledge," in my rendering, represented, objectively existing features, while yet insisting that the real problem is that the mind could never "know that it knew," not as in second-order knowledge, but rather, as in good old present-tensed first-order clear and distinct perception.

Viewed from this angle, it seems that Descartes' endorsement of *Potential Presentation* must be interpreted as having a very special type of modality. If O and F have objective being in I, then it is possible that we be aware of its contents, where the possibility includes, not just our normal intellectual efforts, but rather God's "special revelation," presumably, the sort of thing he might do for the especially blessed. But that means the range of

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likely motivated, at least in part, by trying to ensure that such a possibility remains open. See also his letter to Silhon, where accounting for this possibility is discussed. (CSMK 330: AT V 135-139)

<sup>168</sup> Against interpreting this passage as concerning second-order knowledge construed in the contemporary manner, Descartes is usually understood as holding reductive or outright negative views about second-order mental states, writing in the *Sixth Replies* that the cogito does not "require knowledge of reflective knowledge, i.e. knowing that we know, and knowing that we know that we know, and so on ad infinitum. This kind of knowledge cannot possibly be obtained about anything." (CSM II 285: AT VII 422)

potentially presented contents must be, not just moderately vast, but vast enough to meet the requirements for adequacy.

In that case, it appears that Descartes must ultimately hold a strong thesis, what I will call *Objective Maximalism*.

*Objective Maximalism:* O has objective being in I if and only if for every F such that O is essentially, presentably F, F has objective being in I.

The restriction to essential, thinkable predication is due the intellect's objects are the real natures, and real natures contain their essential properties. The accidents of finite substances ought therefore to be excluded. Meanwhile, the restriction to thinkability is just another way of stating *Potential Presentation*, and ought to be understood as including both our normal acts of intellectual awareness and the extraordinary gifts that he describes God as granting in the above passage.<sup>169</sup>

### 3.4.3 The Argument from Essences

But perhaps this argument is not entirely convincing. If so, I invite the reader to consider a second argument, which is an elaboration of the *Argument from Recognition* from above. Recall that the crucial premise in that argument was that the features contained in the real natures of the objects of cognition must be represented by the natures of those objects,

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<sup>169</sup> One minor issue here: As is well known, Descartes' commitments on the topic of modality are extremely vexed thanks to his characteristic views on the divine creation of eternal truths. Though it is an interesting question how the above passage might be read in light of this doctrine, I assume that the sense of "can" in "this can easily occur" above is to be understood as concerning what is naturally possible, not requiring any exceptional power on God's behalf inconsistent with the eternal truths.



a premise which we supported via its power to explain the supervenience of essential containment on what ideas represent. The question we can now ask is: What is the extent of such containment? And in the *Second Replies*, Descartes offers an explicit answer: “When we say that something is *contained in the nature or concept of a thing*,” he writes, “this is the same as saying that it is true of that thing, or that it can be asserted of that thing.”<sup>170</sup> I suspect that this statement must not be intended quite as strongly as it might sound, since if we include contingent properties in “what is true of that thing,” then all properties are essential and Descartes comes out as a superessentialist.<sup>171</sup> Thus, let’s try to charitably interpret this claim as concerning only what is essential to the objects of thought. In that case, our ideas represent everything which is essentially true of their objects. And then by *Representational Identity*, these features have objective being in our ideas, and by *Potential Presentation*, it must be possible for us to be aware of them. Thus: What has objective being in our ideas is the sum total of the features which those objects have essentially, constrained by an assumption that they are thinkable in the broadest sense.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> (CSM II 114; AT VII 162)

<sup>171</sup> An example which Tad Schmaltz pointed out to me is useful in seeing why superessentialist Descartes might be problematic: It is true of me that I am thinking now, and thus I can infer that I exist now. But certainly we don’t want to say that it is *essential* to me that I am thinking now, much less that I exist! It’s also worth mentioning here that the other proponent of objective maximalism, Alice Sowaal, appears to have fallen into interpreting Descartes in this way, though her discussion makes it difficult to interpret if this is her intent. Specifically, she endorses the inference from the indivisibility of essences to the indivisibility of substances, writing “all Cartesian substances are indivisible in the sense that they cannot be divided from their attributes; that is, they are not composed of their attributes.” (422) Her rendering of this claim is obscure on two points. The first concerns the suppressed premise underpinning the inference: it appears Sowaal must hold substances are identical to their essences, an option whose consequences I explored in Chapter 2. Second, and more importantly, there is an ambiguity in the term attributes; does she mean the principle attribute, or all attributes tout court? The above quotation strongly gives the impression that it is the second option. But in that case, it appears that Descartes must deny the possibility of accidents being metaphysically real; consequently, something akin to superessentialism holds, and Cartesian substances have no accidents. This appears to me to be in error for the reasons just given.

<sup>172</sup> This argument bears some resemblance to that offered by Sowaal. In Sowaal’s rendering, the argument begins from the assumption that “an idea of an essence represents the essence in its entirety,” and then passes immediately to her claim that “to say that an idea has an objective reality is just to say that it

#### 3.4.4 Pictures *Redux*

With this framework in hand, let us reconsider the texts which the Presentationalist points to as evidence for their view. First, consider again Descartes' contention in the *Third Meditation* that "in so far as different ideas <are considered as images which> represent different things, it is clear that they differ widely."<sup>173</sup> To the Presentationalist, this passage indicates that ideas taken objectively are to be considered as presentations. But, repeating a line familiar from the first chapter, I read this passage differently. Rather than interpreting this passage as emphasizing that ideas taken objectively are like *images* of an object, as the Presentationalist does, I read it as indicating insofar as ideas are images *of an object*, they vary widely. With the framework developed here, we can see why this emphasis makes a serious difference; a single object can be rendered in an image in a diversity of ways, and in a successive recognition case a given object is presented in two ways. Thus, all factors considered, this crucial passage does not provide the evidence it seemed to.

#### 3.5 Genuine Representation and *The Veil of Inner Awareness*

At this point, I want to set aside the terminological conventions for talk of representation and presentation that I introduced earlier, and focus again on the broader thesis of this dissertation. Back in the first chapter, I suggested that we ought to see the contrast between the objective sense and the material sense as a contrast between apparent

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represents the totality of that of which is it an idea," (424-425). However, Sowaal's discussion, to my mind, does not do enough to justify the adoption of that first crucial premise, and thus my approach above can be seen as a friendly elaboration of this basic idea.

<sup>173</sup> (CSM II 28: AT VII 40)

representation and genuine representation, what I termed the *Phenomenal-Representational View* of the PRD. We are now in a position to explain the motivation for saying the objective sense concerns representation. The reason to say the objective sense is a category for genuine representation is via its relationship to truth. Given *Objective Maximalism*, we can see why this should be so: what has objective being in our ideas is the totality of cognizable essential features true of that object. The fact that we have ideas in this sense does not guarantee that we know these truths, but it does mean we are *able* to know them.

But there remains a lingering question here, one which other critics of the *No Content View* have pointed to as a significant challenge for our approach. Call this problem the *Veil of Inner Awareness*. The challenge here is that since inner awareness only gives us some notion of how things seem, it looks like a new version of Yolton's Veil of Ideas has emerged, only this time monstrously internalized. For why would states of inner awareness give us access to objectively existent essences? All we would be justified in saying is that it seems to us that, for example, this equilateral triangle can be inscribed in this circle, but this would exhaust what our cognition comes to.

In a sense, I've already given an answer to this problem via *Distinct Presentation*. We know what has objective being in our ideas when our ideas are clear and distinct, a point which I share with my fellow critics. But I want to close by offering one final argument for that principle, and for why it should be seen as Descartes' solution to the problem just described.

So, begin with *Objective Maximalism*. O has objective being in I if and only if for every F such that O is essentially, presentably F, F has objective being in I as well. Given this, consider the famous Truth Rule of the *Third Meditation*, typically understood as follows:

(*Truth Rule*)                      If it is clearly and distinctly perceived that p, then p is true.

We can precisify this initial statement by shifting from a propositional variables to object and predicate variables, by pinning the description to a given idea, making it explicit that presentation is in play, and restricting I to cover intellectual ideas and their characteristic objects, the real natures:

(*Truth Rule\**)    If I clearly and distinctly presents O as F, then it is true that O is essentially F.

If this way of rendering the truth rule is right, we have yet another argument for *Distinct Presentation*, and a solution to the *Veil of Inner Awareness*. For suppose we clearly and distinctly perceive that O is essentially F. By Objective Maximalism, F must have objective being in the idea in question, and this suffices to avoid the problem.

What I think is significant about this argument, and why it deserves mention here, is that I think it provides an important desiderata for a theory of clarity and distinctness, a topic which has become somewhat more popular in recent years. If clarity and distinctness provides link between the objective and material senses as I've proposed, then that gives us a much richer problem space in which to operate than the more familiar ways of approaching these tricky concepts, namely, via the Cartesian Circle or the various uses Descartes puts it to. But regardless, I take it that this suffices to resolve any worries surrounding this issue.

### 3.6 Conclusion

This has been a long journey, so I would like to stop here and take stock of where we have come and how the picture developed in this chapter connects with the other chapters. We began with what seemed a plausible account of the objective sense, namely, that it is identical to the presentational content of ideas. We then tried to spell out some ways that this initial proposal might go, once we fully accounted for ambiguities of both tense and implication. Either we might take them to be identical full stop, as *Presentational Identity* held, or they might be identical given an assumption that the ideas were clear and distinct, as *Distinct Identity* held. As we saw, this ran into serious problems when combined with the existence of successive recognition problems and *Representational Identity*, which sees talk of representation as identical to talk of objective being. We then considered some different ways of resolving the issue, and I contended that the only really plausible option was to deny *Presentational Identity* outright.

So, where does this leave us? I think a plausible successor to *Presentational Identity* can be had from our three core principles. First, given *Potential Presentation*, we learn a constraint on what can have objective being in the intellect, namely, that the object must be presentable to the mind as having some feature F, crucially, without a constraint to clear and distinct perception. Second, *Objective Maximalism* elaborates that everything essentially, presentably true of the object of thought has objective being in the idea of that object. And finally, via *Distinct Presentation*, we learn that if an idea clearly and distinctly presents the object of thought as having a feature, then that feature has objective being in the idea along with the object.

Taken together, these three principles seem to get much right about Descartes' overall scheme. *Potential Presentation*, to my eyes, gets the basic spirit of the *Argument from*

*Awareness* right, particularly when its textual basis is considered in full. To be in the intellect is to be *capable* of being the content of present awareness, however obscurely, but it doesn't require being the *actual* content of present awareness. *Objective Maximalism*, meanwhile, appears to me to be a useful way of thinking of Descartes' rationalism: the powers of the purified mind are vast indeed, though imperfectly realized most of the time. And finally, *Distinct Presentation* gives us an answer to the Veil of Inner Awareness, to the question of how we might know what is contained in the vast storehouse of the Cartesian intellect; clear and distinct perception is what parts the veil. Of course, this still leaves the question of how exactly clear and distinct perceptions do this, but that is a matter for further exploration. Fortunately, should we attempt to tackle that issue, the account offered here *Distinct Presentation* and its textual supports can provide some guidance on what exactly is to be desired from such an account by showing the connections between the material and objective senses and these otherwise baffling notions.

## CONCLUSION

At the outset of this dissertation, I posed two questions. First, what is Descartes' intent with the distinction between the material and objective senses of ideas? And second, what is his preferred ontology of the real natures? If my argument has succeeded, we have interconnected answers to these questions. The objective sense is Descartes' category for genuine representation, insofar as all that is thinkably, essentially true of an object is what has objective being in our ideas. The material sense is Descartes category for phenomenology, for the assessment of what seems to be the case when we are thinking. Meanwhile, the principle objects of intellectual perception, the natures of things, come in two varieties: universals, which are mind-dependent modes of thought whereby the similarities of particulars are thought independent of their particularity, and individual essences, which are not multiply instantiable and are properly mind-independent. These positions resolve the problems afflicting other approaches: it does better by the textual evidence surrounding the material sense, resolves the *Natures Problem* by establishing that universals and individual essences are distinct categories, and allows for us to make sense of successive recognition cases, thus resolving the *Successive Recognition Problem*.

Where might these conclusions lead us? The primary application I see for this approach is in giving an account of clarity and distinctness. This should be particularly obvious given my focus in the final chapter on successive recognition cases. Of course, the stock examples of these cases are all places where Descartes seeks to clarify his understanding; and with the principle that distinctly presented contents have objective being in ideas, *Distinct Presentation*, I think the path to elaborating such a theory is entirely open.

What might such a theory look like? In the third chapter, my discussion of objective being was centrally concerned with articulating a view of what counts as *contained* in objective existents, and with the relationship of objective being with capacities for thought. However, Descartes' ontology is richer than just this, for his ontology is structured by relations of dependence via his ontology of mode, principal attribute, and substance, a structure which is made manifest in his theory of distinctions. As is well understood, this theory of distinctions is entirely articulated via claims about what can and cannot be clearly and distinctly perceived. Utilizing the tools developed here, a story about clarity and distinctness that incorporates the objective sense and focuses on this question of how capacities for thought and judgment might be structured would allow us to offer an interesting and comprehensive account of these notions.

Another issue which I think this project points to concerns innateness. As Descartes is standardly understood, the claim that ideas are innate typically is taken to stem from one of two sources: either, as per the argument of the *Third Meditation*, the innateness of ideas is proven via the possibility of an empty world, or, via the *Fifth Meditation*, where Descartes favors the existence of some innate ideas because he could never have got via sensory experiences, such as the idea of a perfect triangle. With *Objective Maximalism* in hand, I think it's quite plausible to recognize a third argument for innateness in the *Third Meditation*, specifically, via his point that the recognition of unnoticed features of the objects of thought provides evidence that such ideas cannot be adventitious. The force of this objection becomes clearer when we consider his scholastic antecedents, many of whom maintained that knowledge of essences might be arrived at via abstraction from sensory ideas. Viewed in this light, Descartes' argument about unnoticed contents gains a new force: If knowledge of essences is indeed gained via such a process, how is it possible that they contain such a



massive plethora of implicit detail? Properly developed, such an account would shed some significant light on the connections between the objective sense and innate ideas, and provide a powerful unifying account across different domains of Descartes' philosophy. A position which seems plausible on this front is to hold that the innate ideas are all and only the objectively existing individual essences of things. But of course, that would require more argument than I've offered here.

Another direction which is interesting to think about from this perspective turns in a more historical direction. My rendering of the objective sense of ideas is robustly concerned with individuals, and via objective maximalism, with the sum total of their features. While I have been careful to avoid rendering Descartes as a super-essentialist, it is very striking how his position comes out relative to Leibniz. An interesting thing to consider here is to what degree Leibniz may have been guided by Descartes on the adoption of his signature superessentialist position on complete individual concepts; this is a particularly curious option given that Leibniz was prone to claiming that the true source of this doctrine was scholastic and not Cartesian.

In any case, all of these are questions for another day. It is my hope that this dissertation has deepened the reader's understanding of its topics, and perspicuously rendered his commitments in terms intelligible to the philosophical tastes of today and perhaps tomorrow. Thank you for reading!

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