

Descartes' Rationalist Epistemology

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Lex Newman
University of Utah – Dept of Philosophy
lnewman@philosophy.utah.edu

Doubtless Descartes belongs in the rationalist tradition. Stating why is not so easy. He nowhere characterizes the view we call 'rationalism', nor does he describe himself *as* a rationalist. His express commitment to a doctrine of innateness is suggestive though not sufficient, for some philosophers (e.g., Kant) accept such a doctrine while rejecting rationalism. Further suggestive is that he links innateness with the achievement of knowledge:

[W]e come to know them [innate truths] by the power of our own native intelligence, without any sensory experience. All geometrical truths are of this sort – not just the most obvious ones, but all the others, however abstruse they may appear. Hence, according to Plato, Socrates asks a slave boy about the elements of geometry and thereby makes the boy able to dig out certain truths from his own mind which he had not previously recognized were there, thus attempting to establish the doctrine of reminiscence. Our knowledge of God is of this sort. (CSMK 222-23, AT 8b: 166-67)

Clarifying a precise account of rationalism is no aim of the present paper. I shall instead assume that we're on the rationalist track and attempt to develop central rationalist themes that figure prominently in Descartes' epistemology.

The themes I develop center on methodist concerns. Distinguish two sorts of epistemological questions for which one might identify characteristic responses, including rationalist responses:

What-questions – e.g., What particular propositions can be known?

How-questions – e.g., How are such propositions known?

Exemplary what-questions concern whether we can know, for example, the nature of being itself; or know necessary truths; or the nature of identity; causality; and so on. Exemplary how-questions concern the nature of knowledge itself, including how it differs from opinion; the origin of our ideas; the reliability of our ideas as a basis for judgment; and so on. Opinions vary about the proper direction of inquiry – about which sort of question should take precedence over the other in the process of discovery. Two broad camps have emerged. (Note that these camps do not map onto the rationalism-empiricism distinction.) According to the *particularist* camp, answers to what-questions take precedence. Proper inquiry begins by identifying exemplary cases of particular propositions that we know. What counts as exemplary? According to G. E. Moore, "Here is a hand" is exemplary (while holding up your hand and looking at it). These exemplary cases are then used to help sort out better and worse answers to how-questions – the better answers will have it that the exemplary cases count *as* knowledge. The *methodist* camp reverses

the order of inquiry. How-questions take precedence. Accordingly, we can only correctly identify a knowledge claim as exemplary if we have already sorted out answers to how-questions. A proper such sorting might indeed reveal that Moore's celebrated knowledge-claim is not well founded.

Descartes is a methodist par excellence. His methodist orientation is perhaps best explained in historical context. The early 17th century is entrenched in dogma. Centuries of Aristotelianism having prevailed, the philosophical world is captivated by ancient authorities and long standing traditions. If the new mechanist philosophy is to supplant Aristotelianism, a strategy is needed to effectively call into question venerated authorities and traditions, but – importantly – without directly impugning their credibility. In a stroke of genius, Descartes devises a broader methodist strategy to accomplish this. As part of the strategy, we're to carryout a once in a lifetime epistemological *audit* – a thorough examination of the books, as it were, scrutinizing our beliefs and their basis. The opening lines of the *Meditations* present a simple and compelling rationale for the audit:

Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences [*scientiis*] that was stable and likely to last. (CSM 2:12, AT 7:17)

The stated rationale in no way impugns venerated Aristotelian institutions. Moreover, the architectural allusions play well to Aristotelian readers, for they already accept a foundationist approach to rigorous knowledge (i.e., *scientia*). Accordingly, knowledge is modeled on an architectural analogy. A structurally sound edifice – one that's "stable and likely to last" – is founded on a solid base that firmly anchors all superstructure. By analogy, an *epistemic* edifice should be founded on a base of evident principles that provide for a deduction of all further knowledge claims. The audit strategy calls for a complete demolition and reconstruction of the edifice, from the very foundations. Because not even Aristotelians accept authority or tradition as *basic* epistemic sources, they would understand the implications of the audit: they should put to the side the very authority of Aristotle, identifying the basic principles to which he would appeal. Descartes' strategy turns out highly influential. His methodist approach (broadly speaking) signals a historical sea-change in the way philosophers approach philosophical inquiry – a change helping move the philosophical world towards modernism.

Because Descartes' approach is strongly methodist in orientation, so is the present paper. Our focus will be on Descartes' rationalism from the vantage point of how-questions. His answers to what-questions will be of only secondary interest. The remainder of this essay is organized as follows. Section 1 explains Descartes' account of innateness. Section 2 develops two rationalist doctrines in Descartes – methodist doctrines concerning the proper foundations of knowledge. Section 3 addresses how Descartes' famed method of doubt figures in his treatment of the two doctrines.

1. Descartes on innateness

The how-question most characteristic of the rationalism-empiricism debate concerns the origin of mental content. Rationalism standardly affirms a doctrine of innate mental content. Talk of innateness may be applied to a variety of items, including ideas (both sensations and concepts), truths, and knowledge. Ideas are at the center of much of the early modern debate.¹ A near litmus test of one's camp is a commitment to, or against, innate ideas – specifically, innate concepts. Our focus will be on *concepts*, by which I mean general ideas – those with general content. (Innate truths also come into play, where truths and concepts amount to distinct ways of regarding eternal essences – more on this in Section 2.) Section 1 develops three aspects of Descartes' account: Section 1.1, the criterion of innateness; 1.2, the innateness of sensations; 1.3, the dispositional element of innateness.

1.1. The criterion of innateness

What according to Descartes makes ideas *innate* rather than non-innate? Descartes introduces a threefold distinction of ideas by way of his *meditator* – the inquiring spokesperson of the *Meditations*:

Among my ideas, some appear to be innate, some to be adventitious, and others to have been invented by me. (CSM 2:26, AT 7:37-38).

This text offers a partial answer to our question, by contrasting innateness with two other sorts of ideas – *adventitious* and *invented*. Though the threefold distinction is supposed to be exhaustive (this is presupposed by various arguments that Descartes later puts forward, cf. AT 7:51), it is not exclusive. Whatever else is true of *invented* ideas, their content draws ultimately on preexisting innate or adventitious ideas – i.e., invention is not a basic ideational source. Presumably, invented ideas can draw on *both* native and sensory resources. I suggest therefore that the threefold taxonomy is consistent with an official doctrine of two ultimate (i.e., basic) ideational sources: the *intellect*, which exemplifies the category of innateness; the *senses*, which exemplify the category of adventitiousness.

¹ Descartes uses 'idea' with dual reference, sometimes referring to perceptual *acts* and other times to perceptual *objects*. I take the issues of debate in the present paper to center around ideas qua perceptual objects. To avoid confusion, therefore, I use 'idea' exclusively to refer to perceptual objects (unless otherwise noted). Some commentators hold, to the contrary, that Descartes' claims about innate ideas refer to ideas as perceptual *acts*, not perceptual *objects* – cf. Chappell (1986:178-79) and Jolley (1990:33). Among the considerations supporting my view is a remark coming in the same Third Meditation passage in which Descartes first introduces his threefold distinction of ideas (*innateness* being one of the categories): "In so far as the ideas are simply 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 represent different things, it is clear that they differ widely." (CSM 2:27-28, AT 7:40) The implication is that insofar as we regard ideas as perceptual acts, the threefold distinction does not apply.

Further help on the category Descartes calls 'innate' comes from an important passage in the *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*:

I did, however, observe that there were certain thoughts within me which neither came to me from external objects nor were determined by my will, but which *came solely from the power of thinking within me* [*sed à solâ cogitandi facultate*]; so I applied the term 'innate' [*innatas*] to the ideas or notions which are the forms of these thoughts in order to distinguish them from others, which I called 'adventitious' or 'made up'. (CSM 1:303, AT 8b:357-58; my italics)

I suggest we parse the text, distinguishing its implications for 'innateness'-*talk* and its implications for the very notion of *innateness*. Evidently, Descartes thinks it helps avoid confusion to reserve the term 'innate' for just those ideas that derive "solely" from the faculty of thinking. The notion of innateness is another matter. On one reading of the passage, innateness admits of degrees (even if the terminology does not): if some ideas exemplify innateness because of deriving *solely* from the mind, other ideas might qualify as partly innate because of deriving *partly* from the mind. I take the official doctrine to be that *ideas are innate insofar as their content derives from the nature of the mind alone*. Neither of the above passages expressly says this, though both are consistent with it. And this formulation allows us to explain a variety of other texts and doctrinal considerations, so I'll argue. Let's consider further Descartes' two basic categories of ideas – innate and adventitious – in relation to this official doctrine.

Consider the so-called 'innate' category. Descartes' examples include various concepts in mathematics (e.g., number, line, triangle, etc.), logic (e.g., contradiction, necessity, etc.), and metaphysics (e.g., identity, substance, causality, etc.). To Mersenne, he notes that our innate concepts include "the idea of God, mind, body, triangle," and others (CSMK 183, AT 3:383). These ideas are supposed to be exemplary of innateness because of deriving solely from the nature of the mind. The senses play *no* role in their formation. Descartes refers to them as ideas of the pure intellect/understanding (*intellectus*), their *purity* consisting in an absence of any sensory component. The Sixth Meditation illustrates the difference between thinking of geometric figures using sensory images and using pure intellection:

... I will first examine the difference between imagination and pure understanding. When I imagine a triangle, for example, I do not merely understand that it is a figure bounded by three lines, but at the same time I also see the three lines with my mind's eye as if they were present before me; and this is what I call imagining. But if I want to think of a chiliagon, although I understand that it is a figure consisting of a thousand sides just as well as I understand the triangle to be a three-sided figure, I do not in the same way imagine the thousand sides or see them as if they were present before me. It is true that since I am in the habit of imagining something whenever I think of a corporeal thing, I may construct in my mind a confused representation of some figure; but it is clear that this is not a chiliagon. For it differs in no way from the representation I should form if I were thinking of a myriagon, or any figure with very many sides. Moreover, such a representation is useless for recognizing the properties which distinguish a chiliagon from other polygons. (CSM 2:50, AT 7:72)

Because there is no relevant difference between the confused sensory image of a chiliagon and that of a myriagon, Descartes concludes that the sensory images contribute nothing to the *distinct* conception of these geometric figures.²

Though Descartes denies that sensory images are *constitutive* of a purely intellectual idea, there are ways they may be involved. One way, as in the above passage, is that a sensory element might *accompany* the intellectual idea. This confused image, however, forms a separate idea. Another way is that sensory ideas might help activate a (preexisting) purely intellectual idea. Descartes describes such a case:

[W]hen in our childhood we first happened to see a triangular figure drawn on paper, it cannot have been this figure that showed us how we should conceive of the true triangle studied by geometers, since the true triangle is contained in the figure only in the way in which a statue of Mercury is contained in a rough block of wood. But since the idea of the true triangle was already in us, and could be conceived by our mind more easily than the more composite figure of the triangle drawn on paper, when we saw the composite figure we did not apprehend the figure we saw, but rather the true triangle. ... Thus we could not recognize the geometrical triangle from the diagram on the paper unless our mind already possessed the idea of it from some other source. (CSM 2:262, AT 7:382)

Of such cases, the *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet* adds:

[S]trictly speaking, sight in itself presents nothing but pictures, and hearing nothing but utterances and sounds. So everything over and above these utterances and pictures which we think of as being signified by them is represented to us by means of ideas which come to us from no other source than our own faculty of thinking. (CSM 1:305, AT 8b:360-61)

Descartes thinks that sensation functions as a "merely accidental cause, which gives the primary cause occasion to produce its effect at one moment rather than another" (ibid.). Purely intellectual concepts may therefore *depend* on the senses, but the conceptual dependence is one of activation, not formation. Something similar holds for any dependence on the will. Strictly, we play no willing role in forming purely intellectual ideas, but only in actualizing/realizing them. Their formation, as part of the mind, derives ultimately from the divine will.

Descartes' notion of intellect marks a clear contrast with empiricism. Philosophers from each camp allow that the mind is equipped with an intellect, or understanding. Only rationalists can consistently dissociate this faculty from the mind's sensory faculties. Devoid of any sensuous element, Descartes' purely intellectual ideas have literally abstract content that is in no way determined by particular imagery. The intellectual conception of a triangle equally well represents right triangles, equilateral triangles, or any other. Early modern empiricist accounts do also employ *abstraction*-talk, designating concepts 'abstract ideas'. On these accounts, however, the idea's abstract content *is*

² This is one of many passages in which Descartes puts forward some version of a poverty of stimulus argument – roughly: I have a concept that cannot derive from sensory resources; therefore, the concept derives from innate resources. Descartes invokes some version of this argument in many places, including the famed wax passage of the Second Meditation.

determined by particular imagery. Idea content is abstract in roughly the manner of so-called abstract art. The minimalism of a sensory image (or of what the mind selectively attends to) enables it to resemble a whole *sort* of particulars and thus to represent each of the particulars of the sort. Cases like the triangle pose notorious difficulties for such accounts. Because every triangular image is already minimal, it is unclear how abstraction is supposed to achieve general representation of what is "neither oblique, nor rectangle, neither equilateral, equicrural, nor scalenon; but all and none of these at once," writes Locke (*Essay* IV.vii.9).

Consider the so-called 'adventitious' category of ideas. Descartes cites, as examples, such sensory ideas as hearing a noise, seeing the sun, and feeling heat (AT 7:38). *Prima facie*, the ideas in this category derive entirely from the senses – *if* any ideas do. They appear to be utterly *non*-innate, seeming to derive entirely from outside the mind, not from within. The Aristotelian account of sensation accords well with this *prima facie* character. The account models their formation after the manner in which a seal is impressed in a wax tablet. The mind is utterly passive, contributing nothing to the content of the images, except insofar as it must have the capacity to receive such images via the senses. On such an account, the character of an idea is owed entirely to what impresses it on the mind – its form is quite literally transported into the mind from without.

Descartes' treatment of adventitious ideas may seem confusing, notably on two counts. First, in the unfolding of the *Meditations*, the meditator undergoes anti-sceptical progress. In the context in which the threefold distinction of ideas is first introduced (an early Third Meditation context), the meditator remains in doubt about whether there *is* an external world, and thus about whether any ideas are actually adventitious in the way they appear. Assuming solipsism is correct, such ideas would derive from an innate source – a scenario the meditator takes seriously.³ Importantly, therefore, the threefold distinction is introduced by the meditator in terms of how his ideas *appear* to arise – "among my ideas, some appear (*videntur*) to be innate, some to be adventitious, and others to have been invented by me." (Note that talk of sensory ideas need not presuppose physical sense organs as opposed merely to sensory faculties. Referring to cases in which we "*seem* to see, to hear, and to be warmed," Descartes writes that "what is called 'having a sensory perception' is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking" (CSM 2:19, AT 7:29).)

³ In the same passage introducing the threefold distinction, the meditator concedes of his apparently adventitious ideas: "there may be some other faculty [of my mind] not yet fully known to me, which produces these ideas without any assistance from external things" (CSM 2:27, AT 7:39). In interesting ways, the early Third Meditation meditator's external world doubts parallel Hume's considered views – while in his study, at any rate. In the *Treatise*, Hume maintains that we cannot rule out "with certainty" the hypothesis that sense impressions are produced by nothing external, but instead "by the creative power of the mind" (1.3.5). The doubt is preserved in the *Enquiry*, where he concedes that we cannot prove that impressions are "caused by external objects" instead of

Second, Descartes holds in the final analysis that sensations *are* in some manner adventitious, though not fully so. By the Sixth Meditation, the meditator purports to resolve his external world doubts, demonstrating that his sensations are caused by external things, indeed by "corporeal things" (CSM 2:55, AT 7:79-80).⁴ Contra the Aristotelian account, however, these sensory ideas are not literally transported into the mind, from without. Sensory stimulation serves merely to *occasion* the mind's sensory content. Taking this seriously implies that the occasioned sensory content is in some manner *innate* – a topic to which I want now to turn.

1.2. Sensations and innateness

Though I have been focusing on concepts, our attention turns to sensations – the images produced by individual sense impressions, not the general conception of them. Strictly, these "sensation ideas" (as I'll call them) include only the most immediate, conscious result of the stimulation of each sense. Thus "light and colour," writes Descartes, are "the only qualities belonging properly to the sense of sight" (CSM 1:167, AT 6:130). Many commentators find puzzling Descartes' claims that even sensation ideas are innate. Our account suggests not this puzzle, but instead a puzzle as to how Descartes can avoid putting sensation ideas on a par with intellectual ideas in terms of their innateness. Let's consider both of these puzzles.

In a famous remark, Descartes claims that sensation ideas are innate. I earlier proposed that, on his official doctrine, *ideas are innate insofar as their content derives from the nature of the mind alone*, where "insofar" talk allows for degrees of innateness. Far from puzzling, the claim that sensation ideas are innate is explained by Descartes' understanding of mechanism. Accordingly, the real properties of bodies include size, shape, and motion (what would later come to be called 'primary qualities'), but nothing resembling ideas of pain, colors, sounds, tastes, or the like (the qualities producing these ideas would come to be called 'secondary'). Sensation ideas arise not from exactly resembling qualities in sensibly large external objects, but from the size, shape, and motion of the insensibly small corporeal bodies reaching the sense organs. For the case of secondary quality sensation ideas, therefore, it is especially clear that their content must derive, in part, from innate resources. If nothing in the corporeal world resembles the sensation idea of *red*, then, contra the Aristotelian theory, the content of that idea is

arising "from the energy of the mind itself" (Sect. 12). I take it that these considerations help motivate him to allow that sense impressions might properly be called innate (see the footnote at the end of *Enquiry 2*).

⁴ See my 1994 for a detailed discussion of how Descartes' develops the problem of the external world in terms of hidden faculties of the mind (cf. note 3), and how he purports to refute it.

not transported into the mind from without.⁵ This is what Descartes' famous remark comes to – a remark made in the *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*:

[I]f we bear well in mind the scope of our senses and what it is exactly that reaches our faculty of thinking by way of them, we must admit that in no case are the ideas of things presented to us by the senses just as we form them in our thinking. So much so that there is nothing in our ideas which is not innate to the mind or the faculty of thinking, with the sole exception of those circumstances which relate to experience, such as the fact that we judge that this or that idea which we now have immediately before our mind refers to a certain thing situated outside us. We make such a judgement not because these things transmit the ideas to our mind through the sense organs, but because they transmit something which, at exactly that moment, gives the mind occasion to form these ideas by means of the faculty innate to it. Nothing reaches our mind from external objects through the sense organs except certain corporeal motions ... Hence it follows that the very ideas of the motions themselves and of the figures are innate in us. The ideas of pain, colours, sounds and the like must be all the more [evidently]⁶ innate if, on the occasion of certain corporeal motions, our mind is to be capable of representing them to itself, for there is no similarity between these ideas and the corporeal motions. (CSM 1:304, AT 8b:358-59)

Sensation ideas, therefore, are at least partly innate. Their ideational content derives from the mind's own faculties, not from qualities in external corporeal things – a point that, as Descartes notes, is all the more evident for the case of secondary quality sensation ideas.

The harder puzzle concerns why Descartes does not treat the innateness of sensation ideas on a par with purely intellectual concepts – why he does not regard both kinds of ideas as fully innate. In both cases, Descartes denies that their content is transported in from external things; and he allows that they may be activated by stimulation of the physical sense organs. It might therefore seem that *both* kinds of ideas are equally innate – viz., fully innate – and thus deserving of the official designation 'innate'.

The resolution of this puzzle lies in Descartes' unique views of the ontology of sensations.⁷ Strictly, sensation ideas do not arise from the nature of the mind *alone*, but from the nature of the mind-body *union* – "the close and intimate union of our mind with the body" (CSM 1:209, AT 8a:23). Though "the faculties of sensation and imagination belong to the soul," writes Descartes, they belong to it "only in so far as it is joined to the body" (CSMK 203, AT 3:479). This understanding of sensation is anticipated in the chiliagon/myriagon passage discussed above. While working out differences in imagination and pure intellection, the meditator observes:

[T]his power of imagining which is in me, differing as it does from the power of understanding, is not a necessary constituent of my own essence, that is, of the essence of my mind. For if I lacked it, I should

⁵ Adams correctly notes: "If an adventitious idea is an idea that comes into the mind from outside in sensation, Descartes does not believe that we have any adventitious ideas. But he calls some ideas adventitious, meaning that their occurrence in our minds is occasioned (or that we judge it to be occasioned) by the action, on our sense organs, of bodies that we perceive." (1975:77)

⁶ The CSM rendering of '*ac tantò magis innatæ esse debent ideæ*' as "the ideas ... must be all the more innate" suggests that secondary quality sensation ideas are *more innate* than primary quality sensation ideas. But Descartes does not hold this. I take the Latin to convey instead an epistemic claim: that what is all the more the case is not their *innateness* per se, but that they *must be* innate. It is all the more evident.

⁷ See Rozemond for a careful treatment of the relevant doctrinal issues in Descartes (1998, ch. 6).

undoubtedly remain the same individual as I now am; from which it seems to follow that it depends on something distinct from myself. (CSM 2:51, AT 7:73)

The mental aspect of sensation *is* entirely mental. In a curious way, however, its very *being* depends on more than just the mental. Unlike the content of the purely intellectual idea of a triangle – idea content which *can* be activated by sensation – the content of sensation ideas can *only* be activated in sensation. Sensation ideas, therefore, are not fully innate in the manner of intellectual concepts.

Descartes' view of sensation ideas as partly innate accords well with his mechanist commitments. Can a consistent empiricist hold such an account of sensation ideas (\neq concepts)? Arguably, Locke consistently holds as much, though this is not the place to make the argument. With the onset of the new mechanical physics, rationalists and empiricists alike would abandon the Aristotelian view of sensation, holding instead that the content of sensation ideas derives from the mind's abilities. The debate between rationalism and empiricism would center around the origin not of sensation ideas, but of concepts.

1.3. The dispositional element of the account

Not only are fully innate concepts not formed with the help of the senses, Descartes denies that they are formed at all – not formed by *our* wills, at any rate. Their formation predates our abilities at concept formation. They're in our minds from birth, whether we notice them or not. An important role of philosophical reflection is to help us to *discover* these ideas, not to form them.

This suggests an objection. By definition, ideas are items of conscious awareness,⁸ namely the immediate objects of perception or thinking (cf. AT 7:160f).⁹ But no ideas are items of uninterrupted awareness. It seems to follow that no ideas are always *in* the mind, much less in it from birth. As Hobbes objects: "It follows that no idea is innate; for what is innate is always present" (CSM 2:132, AT 7:188-89).

Descartes claims to avoid the objection with a dispositional account. Though only occurrent thoughts count as *ideas* strictly speaking, we can regard ideas either in their occurrent state as items of actual awareness, or their state as potential items of awareness. Even in the potential state, ideas are *in* the mind in that the mind is wired with the ability to perceive them – "they always exist within us potentially" (CSM 1:305, AT 8b:361). The key to avoiding the Hobbes style of objection is that, in their dispositional state, ideas may be in the mind without our being aware of them – the things "said to be naturally implanted in us are not for that reason expressly known by us" (CSMK 222, AT 8b: 166). It is

⁸ There are exceptions in Descartes' early writings in which he refers to corporeal images as "ideas" (cf. *The Rules* AT 10:419).

⁹ Descartes uses "perceive"/"perception" (*percipio/perceptio*) with much wider scope than is the current practice in philosophy: for Descartes, to perceive *x* is, roughly, to think of, or to be aware of *x*.

in this dispositional sense that Descartes refers to ideas in terms of capacities or faculties (cf. AT 7:246f, 8b:357ff), including in his reply to Hobbes:

[W]hen we say that an idea is innate in us, we do not mean that it is always there before us. This would mean that no idea was innate. We simply mean that we have within ourselves the faculty of summoning up the idea. (CSM 2:132, AT 7:189)

In the case of the idea of God, adds Descartes, "some people will perhaps not notice it even after reading my *Meditations* a thousand times" (CSMK 194, AT 3:430; cf. AT 4:187). Descartes indeed maintains, that "there are many things which can be known ... which *no one* has yet reflected on" (CSMK 139, AT 2:598; my italics). If and when we notice our innate ideas, thinks Descartes, it is apt to occur to us that these ideas have always been with us, a position aligning him with Plato's metaphor of recollection:

[O]n first discovering [innate ideas] it seems that I am not so much learning something new as remembering what I knew before; or it seems like noticing for the first time things which were long present within me although I had never turned my mental gaze on them before. (CSM 2:44, AT 7:64)

Bear in mind that Descartes' appeal to dispositions does not purport to provide an analysis of innateness. It purports only to explain how innateness is compatible with non-awareness. As I have been arguing, Descartes' official analysis of innateness has it that *ideas are innate insofar as their content derives from the nature of the mind alone* – an analysis that does not, per se, rule out that innate ideas are (contrary to fact) items of uninterrupted awareness.

Descartes' appeal to dispositions invites an objection that would be raised by Locke. The appeal to dispositions appears to trivialize the very notion of an innate idea. For suppose the mind were a quite literal *tabula rasa*. It would nonetheless be *disposed* to have various sense impressions – even an entirely smooth tablet has the capacity to take on whatever form imprints it. Thus, there would seem to be something wrong in Descartes' account, if it implies that even *tabula rasa* impressions come out innate. As Locke complains, the account implies that our ideas "must all be innate, or all adventitious: In vain shall a Man go about to distinguish them" (*Essay* I.ii.5).¹⁰

Though the problem looks devastating, Leibniz would later clarify a distinction that solves it – a distinction that might plausibly be read into Descartes. In his *New Essays*, Leibniz distinguishes two sorts of dispositions via an analogy to a sculptor's block of marble:

I have also used the analogy of a veined block of marble, as opposed to an entirely homogeneous block of marble, or to a blank tablet – what the philosophers call a *tabula rasa*. For if the soul were like such a blank tablet then truths would be in us as the shape of Hercules is in a piece of marble when the marble is entirely neutral as to whether it assumes this shape or some other. However, if there were veins in the block which marked out the shape of Hercules rather than other shapes, then that block would be more determined to that shape and Hercules would be innate in it, in a way, even though labour would be required to expose the veins and to polish them into clarity, removing everything that prevents their being seen. This is how ideas and truths are innate in us – as inclinations, dispositions, tendencies, or natural potentialities ... (NE 51-52)

¹⁰ Kenny (1968:102f) and Jolley (1990:39f) provide useful discussions of this problem.

The appeal to dispositions would be insignificant, were the view simply that the mind has "the mere capacity to receive those items of knowledge – a passive power to do so, as indeterminate as the power of wax to receive shapes or of a blank page to receive words" (NE 79). But this is not Leibniz's view:

[I]t is not a bare faculty, consisting in a mere possibility of understanding those truths: it is rather a disposition, an aptitude, a preformation, which determines our soul and brings it about that they are derivable from it. (NE 80)

Both blocks of marble have the a bare capacity to be sculpted into the bust of Hercules. Only the veined block is *performed* to take on this shape. I will mark this difference using the terms 'disposition' and 'predisposition' (my terminology, not Leibniz's). The form of Hercules is innate to the veined block in the sense of being *predisposed* to take on that form. The smooth block – like the empiricist's *tabula rasa* mind – is no more predisposed towards any one form than another.

Borrowing Leibniz's sculptor analogy helps make sense of Descartes' view. The nativist mind is *predisposed* to having some ideas – *hardwired* with intellectual concepts – while merely disposed to having others. I have proposed that, on Descartes' official doctrine, *ideas are innate insofar as their content derives from the nature of the mind alone*. Descartes can maintain that the only ideas for which the mind is predisposed are those that derive *solely* from the mind alone – unlike those requiring union with a body, or deriving from the mind's inventive abilities.

Will the texts sustain this reading – are Descartes' statements best read in terms of Leibniz's *predispositions*, or the *mere* dispositions criticized by Locke? The mere disposition reading is suggested by Descartes' repeated use of the language of *faculties* – he even clarifies that "the term 'faculty' denotes *nothing but a potentiality*" (CSM 1:305, AT 8b:361; my italics). This language suggests the mistake of which Locke accuses him. On the other hand, there are texts strongly suggesting the predisposition reading – including texts using "faculty" talk. For example, Descartes makes an analogy to the sense in which diseases are said to be innate:

This is the same sense as that in which we say that generosity is 'innate' in certain families, or that certain diseases such as gout or stones are innate in others: it is not so much that the babies of such families suffer from these diseases in their mother's womb, but simply that they are born with a certain 'faculty' or tendency to contract them. (CSM 1:303-04, AT 8b:358)

Here, the suggestion is of an inherited disease – one for which there is a predisposition – in contrast with those diseases to which everyone is equally disposed. Note too that the predisposition reading helps make sense of numerous texts entailing that the initial cognition of innate concepts involves the discovery of preexisting (performed), determinate content – even immutably determinate content (a point I return to in Section 2). The mere disposition account is inadequate to explain these texts, because it implies that the mind innately disposed only for *determinable* content.

Even granting the predisposition reading, problems remain – or at least wrinkles to be ironed out. As some commentators have worried, the suggestion of innate dispositions of which we're unaware is

incompatible with Descartes' doctrine of the transparency of mind.¹¹ There is not sufficient space to develop these issues carefully. I'll note briefly, however, that in important texts Descartes makes clear that the transparency doctrine extends only to the operation or activity of the mind's faculties – that is, to occurrent thoughts – not to unactualized, or inoperative faculties:¹²

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, ... we cannot have any thought of which we are not aware at the very moment when it is in us. ... 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. (CSM 2:171-72, AT 7:246)

Difficulties remain, though perhaps this qualification provides Descartes some room to work.

2. Two rationalist doctrines

Plato's allegory of the cave illustrates well the rationalist themes of the cognitive inferiority of the senses in contrast with the superiority of the intellect. Plato likens what the senses reveal to shadows on the wall of a poorly lit cave – to wit, shadows of mere figurine beings; he likens what the intellect reveals to fully real beings illuminated by bright sunshine. Descartes revives the underlying themes, synthesizing them with a longstanding tradition that characterizes our most evident perceptual states in terms of *clarity* and *distinctness*. Where others had associated these phenomenal markers with sensory apprehension, Descartes identifies them principally with the intellect's luminance. On his account, the senses provide *obscure* (i.e., non-clear) and *confused* (i.e., non-distinct) perception of the world. The sensory view is indeed supposed to be cave-like in ways brought out by Plato's allegory: not only are the senses ill-equipped to illuminate the nature of reality, they have mere images as their perceptual objects, not real beings. In contrast, Descartes' references to the intellect are suggestive of the vision enjoyed by supra-cave sunbathers. Making an analogy to physiological vision, he likens the mind's *clear* perception to what "is present to the [physical] eye's gaze" (CSM 1:207, AT 8a:22). He characterizes exemplary cases of clear and distinct perception in terms of what we "see" (*intueri*) with the "mind's eye" (*mentis oculis*) (CSM 2:25, AT 7:36), and what is "revealed to [us] by the natural light" (CSM 2:27, AT 7:38).¹³

We may press the analogy to Plato even further, thereby elucidating a central feature of Descartes' normative epistemology. In contexts of practical importance, the prudent person will prefer to make judgments about visually sensible objects in the bright light of the sun, not a dim cave. In this vein, Descartes develops his doctrine about the proper use of our judgment faculties. In contexts of strict

¹¹ Wilson concludes "that Descartes does not provide a coherent account of how we are both 'conscious of all that is in us' and possibly ignorant of mathematics and metaphysics" (1978:164). Bennett makes the point that in Leibniz the predispositional account of innateness is parasitic on his doctrine of subconscious perception (2001:40f) – a doctrine anathema to Descartes given his own doctrine of the transparency of the mental.

¹² I discuss related issues in my 1994.

knowledge (*scientia*), the inquirer should make judgments only in the brightness of the "natural light" – the cognitive luminance shed by clear and distinct perception: if I "refrain from making a judgement in cases where I do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness, then it is clear that I am behaving correctly and avoiding error" – otherwise, "I am not using my free will correctly" (CSM 2:41, AT 7:59).

Section 2 develops Descartes' doctrinal commitments to the two underlying rationalist themes: 2.1, the doctrine related to the inferiority of the senses; 2.2, the doctrine related to the superiority of the intellect.

2.1. The senses are ill-suited to illuminate the nature of reality

The specific thesis about the senses that I attribute to Descartes is this:

Sensation Unreliability Thesis: The senses are an unreliable basis for judgments about the nature of reality.

The thesis is not that the senses always result in false judgments about the nature of reality, but that they are an unreliable basis. They never illuminate the mind with clear and distinct perception of the nature of reality. Where such judgments *are* true, writes Descartes, "it is by pure chance that I arrive at the truth" (CSM 2:41, AT 7:59-60). The texts suggest that unreliability issues are greater for the *external* senses – sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch – but Descartes is clear that they extend "not just to the external senses but to the internal senses as well" (CSM 2:53, AT 7:76). A significant aim of the *Meditations* is to teach us how to withdraw from the senses as a step in becoming knowers. In the dedicatory letter to the *Meditations*, Descartes writes that to comprehend his arguments one must have a mind "which can easily detach itself from involvement with the senses" (CSM 2:5, AT 7:5). In the Preface, he urges his readers "to withdraw their minds from the senses" (CSM 2:8, AT 7:9). Elsewhere he adds that if the mind "were released from the prison of the body, it would find them [innate truths] within itself" (CSMK 190, AT 3:425).

A casual reading of the exhortations to *withdraw from the senses* might suggest shutting-off entirely the mind's sensory awareness. But this is not Descartes' intent, nor does he think it cognitively possible. In properly functioning minds sensory awareness is passively received, an evitable result of being united with a body. Officially, we're to withdraw not from the senses, but from sense based *judgments* – the senses don't err, strictly speaking:

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. . . . [the] 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

¹³ For a helpful analysis of Descartes on clarity and distinctness see Nelson (1997).

found here consists in my judging that the ideas which are in me resemble, or conform to, things located outside me. (CSM 2:26, AT 7:37)

The doctrine is reinforced in Descartes' distinction of "three grades of sensory response":

The first [grade] is limited to the immediate stimulation of the bodily organs by external objects ... The second grade comprises all the immediate effects produced in the mind as a result of its being united with a bodily organ which is affected in this way. Such effects include the perceptions of pain, pleasure, thirst, hunger, colours, sound, taste, smell, heat, cold and the like ... The third grade includes all the judgements about things outside us which we have been accustomed to make from our earliest years ... (CSM 2:294-95, AT 7:436-37)

Referring to the first two grades, Descartes clarifies that "nothing more than this should be referred to the sensory faculty, if we wish to distinguish it carefully from the intellect" (CSM 2:295, AT 7:437). In the case of a miscalculation about sensible objects, we're apt to blame the senses; yet, thinks Descartes, "it is clear" that the error "depends solely on the intellect" (CSM 2:295, AT 7:437-38). Descartes is sometimes careful in his statements to refer the error to the judgment. More often he uses elliptical references that misleadingly incriminate the senses. In any case, his considered view is that we cannot shut-off the senses, nor are they strictly responsible for error. Interestingly, the Third Meditation opens with the meditator expressly misstating the withdrawal doctrine, followed by an immediate correction:

I will now shut my eyes, stop my ears, and withdraw all my senses. I will eliminate from my thoughts all images of bodily things, or rather, *since this is hardly possible*, I will regard all such images as vacuous, false and worthless. (CSM 2:24, AT 7:34, my italics)

Though the claimed unreliability lies with sense based judgments, not all manner of sense based judgments are unreliable. The Sensation Unreliability Thesis concerns judgments *about the nature of reality* – judgments about "things located outside me," about "things outside us," as noted in the above cited texts. For ease of reference, I'll hereafter refer to these as *metaphysical* judgments. Though the senses are ill-suited for metaphysical judgments, they may contribute well to judgments about the present contents of consciousness. As already noted, the problems associated with the senses can be avoided, if we consider the ideas "without referring them to anything else." Indeed, Descartes allows that sensory ideas may be clearly and distinctly 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" (CSM 1:216, AT 8a:32; cf. 8a:33).

A related interpretive mistake has Descartes holding that *all* judgments about the present contents of consciousness are well founded. Some such doctrine is commonly attributed to him – whether in terms of the *infallibility* of the mental, or merely its *indubitability*. The attribution is a mistake. For Descartes, the sole marker of infallibility, or even indubitability, is the conjunction of clarity and distinctness. Introspective judgments may fall short of this marker – even those involving sincere efforts to represent the present contents of consciousness. Suppose that, upon introspecting my idea of a speckled hen, I judge that it has at least 20 speckles. If what the idea presents is a *confused* array of speckles, then my

judgment will be founded on a guess – albeit perhaps a good guess – rather than on what I clearly and distinctly perceive. Though the judgment *is* about the present contents of consciousness, it rests not on a reliable basis but on guesswork.

Interestingly, Descartes concludes not merely that the senses provide unreliable information about the nature of reality, but that they do not even *purport* to do so. The Sixth Meditation meditator observes:

I misuse them [the senses] by treating them as reliable touchstones for immediate judgements about the essential nature of the bodies located outside us; yet this is an area where they provide only very obscure information. (CSM 2:57-58, AT 7:83)

Obscurity is the contrast of *clarity*. According to Descartes, every perception that lacks clarity also lacks distinctness (cf. *Prin.* 1:45-46).

What then are the senses *for*, if not to inform us about the world? Descartes holds that the senses do inform us about the world, but their information is intended for *practical* purposes, not metaphysical inquiry.¹⁴ God designed our senses to convey information about the objects "in the vicinity" – e.g., that "some of these are to be sought out and others avoided" (CSM 2:56, AT 7:81):

For the proper purpose of the sensory perceptions given me by nature is simply to inform the mind of what is beneficial or harmful for the composite of which the mind is a part; and to this extent they are sufficiently clear and distinct. (CSM 2:57, AT 7:83)

To achieve clarity and distinctness about metaphysics, God intends that we use our intellect: we're not "to draw any conclusions from these sensory perceptions about things located outside us without waiting until the intellect has examined the matter" (CSM 2:57, AT 7:82).

From a post-Descartes vantage point, it might appear puzzling that I have treated the Sensation Unreliability Thesis as a *rationalist* doctrine. For empiricists as varied as Locke and Hume do also affirm some such thesis. In significant ways, however, early modern empiricism marks a revolutionary departure from pre-Modern empiricism – a departure owed in large measure to the philosophical revolution Descartes helps bring about. From the vantage point of his pre-revolution audience, the Sensation Unreliability Thesis marks a direct challenge to their empiricism.

2.2. The intellect is well-suited to illuminate the nature of reality

The specific thesis about the intellect that I attribute to Descartes is this:

Intellection Reliability Thesis: The intellect is a reliable basis for judgments about the nature of reality.

For Descartes, the reliability of intellect based judgments is owed to the divine design of our cognitive faculties. Upon properly accessing our innate, intellectual concepts, our minds are designed to represent perfectly the nature of being. In the *Discourse* Descartes writes:

I have noticed certain laws which God has so established in nature, and of which he has implanted such notions in our minds, that after adequate reflection we cannot doubt that they are exactly observed in everything which exists or occurs in the world. (CSM 1:131, AT 6:41)

By means of the eternal truths, "God himself has taught us" how he "has arranged all things":

The knowledge of these truths is so natural to our souls that we cannot but judge them infallible when we conceive them distinctly, nor doubt that if God had created many worlds, they would be as true in each of them as in this one. (CSM 1:97, AT 11:47)

In the final analysis, the mind's treasure house of innate ideas provide the metaphysician's holy grail (as it were) – cognitive access to ultimate truths about the nature of reality.

Descartes variously refers to the innate, intellectual items in terms of *ideas* or *truths*. In letters to Mersenne, he writes that the eternal truths are "inborn in our minds" (CSMK 23, AT 1:145); that the "essence of created things ... is nothing other than the eternal truths" (CSMK 25, AT 1:152); and that innate ideas "represent true, immutable and eternal essences" (CSMK 183, AT 3:383). The Fifth Meditation meditator's thoughts about triangles and God are variously expressed in terms of his ideas of them, or truths about them. Either way, our clear and distinct thoughts apprehend the very nature of being.

In connection with the intellectual apprehension of eternal essences, Descartes emphasizes a *cognitive immutability* (my term) arising in our clear and distinct thoughts of them. Says the Fifth Meditation meditator:

But I think the most important consideration at this point is that I find within me countless ideas of things which ... 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 determinate nature, or essence, or form of the triangle which is immutable and eternal, and not invented by me or dependent on my mind. This is clear from the fact that 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. (CSM 2:44-45, AT 7:64)

Descartes develops the cognitive immutability theme in dual ways – one that we might call *epistemic*, and the other *psychological*. On the epistemic side, the immutability is manifested in a form of rational insight that is supposed to illuminate truths that are *conceptually unalterable*. When thinking clearly and distinctly with the intellect, the mind apprehends what must be the case, on pain of conceptual repugnance:

[Regarding] those matters which I think I see utterly clearly with my mind's eye ... when I turn to the things themselves which I think I perceive very clearly, I am so convinced by them that I spontaneously declare: let whoever can do so deceive me, he will never bring it about that I am nothing, so long as I continue to think I am something; or make it true at some future time that I have never existed, since it is now true that I exist; or bring it about that two and three added together are more or less than five, or anything of this kind in which I see a manifest contradiction (*repugnantiam*). (CSM 2:25, AT 7:36)

¹⁴ Simmons (1999) offers a compelling interpretation of Descartes' account here.

According to Descartes, this conceptual immutability of the intellect marks a contrast with the senses. Consider any complex empirical idea – your idea of a cherry, a cow, a tree, or the like. Descartes maintains that the various parts of the complex are conceptually separable. You can conceive a cherry without the sweet taste; a cow without a mooing sound; a tree without green color; and so on. None of this is conceptually repugnant. In each case, the complex parts are conceptually mutable. Of "ideas which do not contain true and immutable natures," writes Descartes, they "can always be split up" (CSM 2:83, AT 7:117). Contrast this with the concept of a triangle. It too has complexity, in that multiple truths express its essence, but its complex nature is conceptually *immutable*:

For even if I can understand what a triangle is if I abstract the fact that its three angles are equal to two right angles, I cannot deny that this property applies to the triangle by a clear and distinct intellectual operation – that is, while at the same time understanding what I mean by my denial. (CSM 2:84, AT 7:117-18)

On the psychological side, the cognitive immutability of innate truths is manifested in their *indubitability*. When thinking clearly and distinctly, our minds are incapable of doubting the truths we perceive:

[T]he nature of my mind is such that I cannot but assent to these things, at least so long as I clearly perceive them. (CSM 2:45, AT 7:65)¹⁵

Again, the claimed immutability is supposed to mark a contrast with the senses. As Section 3 will discuss in detail, Descartes employs methodical doubt as a tool for revealing indubitable essences.

The upshot is a twofold cognitive immutability: we *cannot understand* how these truths could be otherwise, and we *cannot doubt* them. The meditator observes: "I could not but judge that something which I understood so clearly was true"; adding, that "a great light in the intellect was followed by a great inclination in the will" (CSM 2:41, AT 7:58-9). That the claimed cognitive immutability is manifest only *during* moments of clear and distinct perception is significant. Moments of cognitive distraction or confusion explain how we're able to ignore or to misconceive what is innate.

Is it a sufficient condition of *knowledge* that one's judgment is based in innate, clearly and distinctly perceived, intellectual ideas? The answer seems to depend on context.¹⁶ In the *Meditations*, Descartes' goal is the achievement of fully indefeasible knowledge. (Typically, he reserves the term '*scientia*' for this brand of knowledge.) He also recognizes knowledge of a weaker sort – one appropriate to contexts for which defeasibility issues do not normally arise. (In such contexts, he regularly uses

¹⁵ Later in the Fifth Meditation, Descartes adds: "Admittedly my nature is such that so long as I perceive something very clearly and distinctly I cannot but believe it to be true" (CSM 2:48, AT 7:69). In a letter to Regius, he writes: "In your second objection you say: 'the truth of axioms which are clearly and distinctly understood is self-evident'. This too, I agree, is true, during the time they are clearly and distinctly understood; for our mind is of such a nature that it cannot help assenting to what it clearly understands." (CSMK 147, AT 3:64)

¹⁶ I develop the case for this contextualist reading of Descartes more fully in my 2004.

'*cognitio*' and its cognates – terminology that translators routinely render into the English 'knowledge' and its cognates.) Assume the context involves *scientia* – the goal of the *Meditations*. In that case, it is not a sufficient condition of knowledge that one's judgment is based in innate, clearly and distinctly perceived, intellectual ideas. For this condition might arise in a mind that has been hardwired for error: perhaps an evil genius has so constituted the mind that it clearly and distinctly perceives innate propositions that are in fact false.¹⁷

Achieving *scientia*, therefore, requires two very different kinds of epistemological moves, both of which Descartes makes in his *Meditations*. Call the one kind of move, *intellect identifying moves*. A necessary condition for *scientia* of metaphysical truths is learning how to identify intellectual ideas so as to form judgments on their basis. A further necessary condition is to establish that the intellect is perfectly reliable, thereby ruling out that the mind is hardwired for error. Call this second kind of move, *intellect validating moves*. Descartes' intellect validating moves incorporate his well-known effort to demonstrate that clear and distinct perception is a divinely guaranteed, infallible criterion of truth.

3. The methodical case for the two rationalist doctrines

In Section 2, I attempted to clarify how the two rationalist doctrines fit with Descartes' broader philosophical commitments. Section 3 will focus narrowly on how, in the context of the *Meditations*, Descartes makes a case for the two doctrines. I shall argue that Descartes' primary methodical tool in making his case is the so-called *method of doubt* (hereafter, 'MOD').

MOD incorporates various sceptical hypotheses in the service of various ends. Our interest is in how sceptical doubts help distinguish the senses and the intellect. Descartes writes to Hobbes (in a context in which "corporeal things" are regarded as *sensible* objects):

I wanted to prepare my readers' minds for the study of the things which are related to the intellect, and help them to distinguish these things from corporeal things; and such [doubting] arguments seem to be wholly necessary for this purpose. (CSM 2:121, AT 7:171)

Descartes' two most famous doubting arguments will serve our purposes – the Dream Doubt and the Evil Genius Doubt. The Dream Doubt hypothesizes that your present sensory ideas are produced by a vivid dream, not waking sensation. The Evil Genius Doubt hypothesizes that an ingenious deceiver hardwired your mind for error – you go wrong even when your perception is clear and distinct. As we'll see, the senses are undermined by each of these doubts; the intellect is undermined only the Evil Genius Doubt.

¹⁷ Roughly this same point is developed by Cowie (1999:7ff), namely, that mere innateness is not sufficient for epistemic justification. Surprisingly she thinks Descartes didn't fully appreciate this point (11f), even claiming that he "waffles shamelessly" on the issues (11).

This contrast turns out significant to how the meditator is supposed to discover what is innate. Let's consider how Descartes employs MOD in making his case for each doctrine.

3.1. The case that the senses are ill-suited to illuminate the nature of reality

The case to be made is for the Sensation Unreliability Thesis – the claim that *the senses are an unreliable basis for judgments about the nature of reality*. MOD is supposed to show that all metaphysical judgments based in the senses are straightforwardly dubitable. Of course, it does not follow from "*p* is dubitable" that "*p* is false." Nor does it follow from "*p* is dubitable" that "*p* does not draw on innate concepts." It does follow, thinks Descartes, that we can make no positive case for the ability of the senses to illuminate the nature of reality – unlike the intellect. The case to be made, therefore, is negative and epistemological. The conclusions expressly drawn in the *Meditations* do ultimately entail that whole classes of sensory judgments are false, including judgments affirming a resemblance between secondary quality ideas and external things. Yet nowhere in the *Meditations* does Descartes expressly argue for this result. The strongest conclusions expressly drawn are that such judgments are not well founded, and that "it is therefore quite possible that these are false" (CSM 2:56, AT 7:82).

How exactly is MOD employed in support of the Sensation Unreliability Thesis? Our focus is on the Dream Doubt. Suppose you are now dreaming. In that case, any sense based judgments about reality that you are now making are unfounded. It might appear that there's a table to your right. But if you're dreaming, then even if there *is* a table to your right (say, a bedside table), the dream image is not a reliable basis for the judgment. Let's now alter the initial supposition. Suppose not that you *are* dreaming, but simply that you are *uncertain of being awake*. In that case too, the sensory image of a table to your right is not a reliable basis of judgment – it *might* be mere dream imagery, for all you know. Some will object to both initial suppositions, contending that they *are* certain of being awake, an objection the meditator considers:

Yet at the moment my eyes are certainly wide awake when I look at this piece of paper; I shake my head and it is not asleep; as I stretch out and feel my hand I do so deliberately, and I know what I am doing. All this would not happen with such distinctness to someone asleep. (CSM 2:13, AT 7:19)

Descartes thinks the objection shows a lack of reflection. For a vivid, realistic dream would induce the same feeling of confidence. The meditator continues:

As if I did not remember other occasions when I have been tricked by exactly similar thoughts while asleep! As I think about this more carefully, I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep. (Ibid.)

Because "there are never any sure signs" – no *indubitably* sure signs – sense based judgments about reality are not well founded.

Not everyone is convinced. Many philosophers insist that there are indeed *sure signs* of being awake. We'll not settle this debate here, though we can at least clarify it. Descartes' claim is not about whether it is *true* that you are now dreaming, nor about whether you *believe* it, but instead about your *justification*. His contention is that you cannot with certainty rule out that you are dreaming.

Recognizing this uncertainty is supposed to help readers appreciate that the senses are an unreliable basis for metaphysical judgments. Recognizing his own uncertainty, the meditator comes to appreciate that his sensory ideas lack the clarity and distinctness he had formerly supposed:

Yet I previously accepted as wholly certain and evident many things which I afterwards realized were doubtful. What were these? The earth, sky, stars, and everything else that I apprehended with the senses. But what was it about them that I perceived clearly? Just that the ideas, or thoughts, of such things appeared before my mind. Yet even now I am not denying that these ideas occur within me. But there was something else which I used to assert, and which through habitual belief I thought I perceived clearly, although I did not in fact do so. This was that there were things outside me which were the sources of my ideas and which resembled them in all respects. Here was my mistake; or at any rate, if my judgement was true, it was not thanks to the strength of my perception. (CSM 2:24-25, AT 7:35)

By repeated practice with doubt, we are supposed to learn that insofar as our sensory ideas are referred to real things they are never clear and distinct.

In the closing lines of the Sixth Meditation, Descartes purports to lay the groundwork for overcoming the Dream Doubt, detailing how it is possible, in principle, for theistic meditators to know they are awake.¹⁸ It nonetheless remains the case that the senses are ill-equipped to illuminate the nature of reality – whether or not one achieves knowledge of being awake.

3.2. The case that the intellect is well-suited to illuminate the nature of reality

The case to be made is for the Intellection Reliability Thesis – the claim that *the intellect is a reliable basis for judgments about the nature of reality*. Unlike for the Sensation Unreliability Thesis, the case to be made is for a constructive result. Recall that we distinguished (in the closing paragraph of Section 2) two broad kinds of moves that Descartes makes: *intellect identifying moves* and *intellect validating moves*. Both are integral to achieving the intended constructive result. Without a procedure for reliably distinguishing ideas of the senses and ideas of the intellect, the fact of our being hardwired with innate concepts is of little consequence. But even if we can reliably identify what is native to the intellect, we will lack indefeasible knowledge unless we overcome the Evil Genius Doubt. Thus, Descartes makes his notorious intellect validating moves – his efforts to prove that the nature of his mind derives not from an evil genius, but from a benevolent, omnipotent deity who would never deceive. Though I'll not argue the point here, the intellect validating moves do also employ MOD, and do also

¹⁸ In my 1999a, I reconstruct how Descartes' strategy for overcoming the Dream Doubt is supposed to derive from God's benevolence in conjunction with principles argued in the Fourth Meditation.

depend on innate concepts. For our purposes, the intellect identifying moves are of more central interest. They are more specifically *rationalist*. They will be the focus of our discussion.¹⁹

I shall develop the issues along three main fronts: First, I address how doubt – an intrinsically destructive tool – is supposed to achieve a constructive result. Second, I discuss how the interpretation helps explain two features of the Evil Genius Doubt that commentators have found puzzling – its *indirect* and *hyperbolic* character. Third, I offer a case study that illustrates the broader account for the concept of mind.

A. How MOD purports to achieve a constructive result. Descartes' intellect identifying moves must establish a constructive result. They must somehow shed light, not darkness. How *could* doubt – an intrinsically destructive tool – achieve a constructive result?

Descartes' own foundationist metaphors illustrate the intended answer. The setup of the analogy is familiar: making judgments on a sensory basis is supposed to be the analogue of constructing a building on a loose foundation of sand; an intellectual basis, the analogue of an unshakeable foundation of bedrock; sceptical doubts are supposed to be the analogues of ground clearing bulldozers. If the aim is to found an unshakable edifice, ground clearing bulldozers can be used for both destructive and constructive purposes. On the destructive side, a bulldozer can effectively strip away loose sand, or even moderately firm ground. On the constructive side, a bulldozer can identify bedrock, by confronting ground that it cannot dislodge. Descartes uses sceptical doubts as epistemic bulldozers, for both destructive and constructive purposes:

Throughout my writings I have made it clear that my method imitates that of the architect. When an architect wants to build a house which is stable on ground where there is a sandy topsoil over underlying rock, or clay, or some other firm base, he begins by digging out a set of trenches from which he removes the sand, and anything resting on or mixed in with the sand, so that he can lay his foundations on firm soil. In the same way, I began by taking everything that was doubtful and throwing it out, like sand; and then, when I noticed that it is impossible to doubt that a doubting or thinking substance exists, I took this as the bedrock on which I could lay the foundations of my philosophy. (CSM 2:366, AT 7:536-57)

Doubt is used to identify unshakable epistemic ground, precisely by its inability to undermine that ground.

The epistemic analogue of the unshakability of bedrock is *indubitability* – a form of what I have been calling cognitive immutability. The psychological immutability of innate, intellectual propositions is manifest in our inability to doubt them. Our minds are hardwired such that we *cannot but assent* to the propositions we clearly and distinctly perceive (cf. Section 2.2 and note 15). For the tabula rasa mind

¹⁹ For a comprehensive interpretation of Descartes' intellect validating moves that is continuous with the interpretation of the present paper, see my 1999a and 1999b.

(think of Leibniz's veinless block of marble), there is no such hardwiring for epistemic bulldozers to expose. For the nativist mind (think of the veined block of marble), there is.

Of the numerous propositions that Descartes thinks exhibit this sort of cognitive immutability, his most famous example arises from the *cogito*. Leading up to the *cogito*, the meditator articulates MOD's constructive strategy:

Anything which admits of the slightest doubt I will set aside just as if I had found it to be wholly false; and I will proceed in this way until I recognize something certain, or, if nothing else, until I at least recognize for certain that there is no certainty. Archimedes used to demand just one firm and immovable point in order to shift the entire earth; so I too can hope for great things if I manage to find just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakeable. (CSM 2:16, AT 7:24)

The *cogito* passage immediately follows. Using his most powerful bulldozer, the Evil Genius Doubt, the meditator attempts to undermine the proposition, *I exist*, thereby discovering its impressive doubt resistance: "let him [the evil genius] deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something" (CSM 2:17, AT 7:25). Descartes goes on to treat the *cogito's* doubt resistance as the prototype of "being certain about anything," serving also to epitomize clarity and distinctness (CSM 2:24, AT 7:35). Elsewhere, Descartes lists "*He who thinks cannot but exist while he thinks*" as an "eternal truth which resides within our mind" (CSM 1:209, AT 8a:23-24).

There is much of philosophical and interpretive interest in the *cogito*, much more than can be explored here. Of present interest is that it is supposed to draw on innate cognitive resources, and that its status as epistemic bedrock is supposed to be revealed by subjecting it to doubt.

B. The *hyperbolic* and *indirect* character of the Evil Genius Doubt. The interpretation we have been developing helps explain two aspects of MOD that many commentators find puzzling. The one puzzling feature concerns the *hyperbolic* character of the Evil Genius Doubt. *Prima facie*, the doubt is gratuitously excessive – sheer hyperbole. Why then does Descartes employ such doubt? Gassendi is perhaps the first to articulate the complaint:

There is just one point I am not clear about, namely why you did not make a simple and brief statement to the effect that you were regarding your previous knowledge as uncertain so that you could later single out what you found to be true. ... This strategy made it necessary for you to convince yourself by imagining a deceiving God or some evil demon who tricks us, whereas it would surely have been sufficient to cite the darkness of the human mind or the weakness of our nature. (CSM 2:180, AT 7:257-58)

In view of MOD's nativist aims (among others), Gassendi's criticism misses the point. The point is not to arrive at *difficult* to doubt propositions. The point is to reveal propositions that are cognitively immutable – propositions that the constitution of our minds renders psychologically *impossible* to doubt. Consider again the architectural analogy. Suppose you are an architect laying the foundation for an edifice that will stand the test of time. Your aim is to find unshakable ground. Your tool is a bulldozer. Your problem: how will your bulldozer distinguish (a) unshakable ground, and (b) unshaken ground that

would be shaken by a bigger bulldozer? Clearly the bigger the bulldozer, the better. A medium-duty bulldozer may be unable to undermine ground that a heavier-duty bulldozer would easily dislodge. The implication is clear. *The bigger the bulldozer, the better* translates into *the more hyperbolic the doubt, the better*. Arguably, the architectural analogy breaks down in a manner that serves Descartes well. For, presumably, there is no *most-power-bulldozer*. In that case, no literal bulldozer could reveal ground that is truly *unshakable*. Perhaps epistemic bulldozing is not subject to this limitation. Perhaps there is a *most-powerful-doubt* – a doubt than which none more hyperbolic can be conceived. Descartes seems to think the Evil Genius Doubt fits the bill. Only a doubt this powerful *could* distinguish (a) unshakable epistemic ground, and (b) ground that is simply not yet shaken. It is therefore essential to Descartes' rationalist aims that MOD employs doubt that is hyperbolic.

The other puzzling feature of Descartes' doubts concerns the *indirect* character of the Evil Genius Doubt in contrast with the *direct* character of the Dream Doubt. Distinguish two kinds of ways in which a doubt might operate. In a direct doubt, the sceptical hypothesis induces occurrent doubt while the mind *directly attends* to the undermined proposition. In an indirect doubt, the sceptical hypothesis can induce occurrent doubt only when the mind is *not* directly attending to the undermined proposition. The distinction turns out important.

Descartes holds that sense based judgments about the world are subject to a direct doubt. The Dream Doubt does indeed operate as a direct doubt. Attend carefully and *directly* to your favorite empirical proposition about external things, say, Moore's "Here is a hand." Descartes contends that the hypothesis that you are now having a vivid dream allows you to make rational sense of how the proposition might be false. The First Meditation meditator doubts such propositions while thinking directly about them:

Suppose then that I am dreaming, and that these particulars – that my eyes are open, that I am moving my head and stretching out my hands – are not true. Perhaps, indeed, I do not even have such hands or such a body at all. (CSM 2:13, AT 7:19)

The constitution of our minds does not require us to assent to such propositions. While thinking directly about them we can make rational sense of denying them, even if we believe them to be true.

Intellect based judgments are supposed be subject only to an indirect doubt. Think carefully and *directly* about the proposition " $1+1=2$ " and attempt to doubt it. I confess that I cannot directly doubt this proposition. *While* attending to it, I cannot make rational sense of how it could be false. Descartes' explanation of this psychological indubitability is that the proposition is hardwired in my mind. Notwithstanding this hardwiring, he maintains that such propositions are subject to an indirect doubt. Descartes uses the Evil Genius Doubt as an indirect doubt. On occasions when I am not directly attending to the proposition, I can consider the possibility that my mind has been hardwired for error – that my mind is so constituted that it is incapable of doubting some propositions (even false propositions)

while attending to them clearly and distinctly. In the two clearest passages of the *Meditations* concerning the operation of the Evil Genius Doubt, its indirect character is unmistakable. These texts clarify that the inability to directly doubt such propositions is owed to our cognitive nature, and that our ability at indirect doubt arises only while redirecting attention towards the possibility that our cognitive nature is deceptive:

But what about when I was considering something very simple and straightforward in arithmetic or geometry, for example that two and three added together make five, and so on? Did I not see at least these things clearly enough to affirm their truth? Indeed, the only reason for my later judgement that they were open to doubt was that it occurred to me that perhaps some God could have given me a nature such that I was deceived even in matters which seemed most evident. (Third Meditation, 2:25, AT 7:35-36)

Admittedly my nature is such that so long as I perceive something very clearly and distinctly I cannot but believe it to be true. But my nature is also such that I cannot fix my mental vision continually on the same thing, so as to keep perceiving it clearly; and often the memory of a previously made judgement may come back, when I am no longer attending to the arguments which led me to make it. ... so long as I attend to the proof, I cannot but believe this to be true. But as soon as I turn my mind's eye away from the proof, then in spite of still remembering that I perceived it very clearly, I can easily fall into doubt about its truth, if I am unaware of God. For I can convince myself that I have a natural disposition to go wrong from time to time in matters which I think I perceive as evidently as can be. (Fifth Meditation, 2:48, AT 7:69-70)

The indirect doubt is, in some sense, a *faculty* doubt: I attend not to the particular proposition (e.g., "1+1=2") but to my cognitive faculties, casting doubt on *them*; this indirectly undermines *en masse* all such propositions as my faculties are used to apprehend – namely, the "matters which I think I perceive as evidently as can be."

That intellect based judgments are vulnerable only to a hyperbolic and indirect doubt emerges as an essential aspect of Descartes' intellect identifying moves. He needs a way to distinguish what derives from the senses and what is native to the intellect. The cognitive immutability of the intellect provides the way. Doubt must be hyperbolic and indirect if it is to succeed in revealing the claimed cognitive immutability.

One might object that the hyperbolic and indirect character of the Evil Genius Doubt shows that it is not a doubt in any *real* sense. By way of reply, note that if a "real" doubt is one that dislodges *belief*, then Descartes would agree. Neither the Dream Doubt nor the Evil Genius Doubt is intended to defeat knowledge by undermining belief; they are intended to undermine the *basis* of belief. Even Descartes characterizes the Evil Genius Doubt as a "very slight and, so to speak, metaphysical" doubt (CSM 2:25, AT 7:36). While characterizing his reasons for employing such doubts, Descartes writes: "I wanted to show the firmness of the truths which I propound later on, in the light of the fact that they cannot be shaken by these metaphysical doubts" (CSM 2:121, AT 7:171). The highly contrived character of his metaphysical doubts is very much to the point. That a class of propositions can be undermined only in such a contrived manner is supposed to help us to identify them as innate – as deriving from the nature of our minds.

C. A case study. Immediately on the heels of the *cogito*, the meditator employs MOD to help discover the essence of mind – more specifically the *self*, the thinking subject of the *cogito*. An examination of the case will help to clarify the interpretation I have been defending.

Descartes contends that the whole essence of mind is *thought* and that this essence is innate to our intellects. How is MOD supposed to reveal this? The meditator's procedure involves considering his pre-reflective conception of himself and then subjecting it to doubting arguments: "I will then subtract anything capable of being weakened, even minimally, by the arguments now introduced, so that what is left at the end may be exactly and only what is certain and unshakeable" (CSM 2:17, AT 7:25). The point of the procedure is twofold: introducing the doubts is supposed to achieve the *destructive* result of stripping away the sensory features of his conception; introducing hyperbolic doubt is supposed to achieve a *constructive* result by revealing what resists any direct doubt.

Implementing the procedure, the meditator recounts his own previous conception – one centering on sensible features:

Well, the first thought to come to mind was that I had a face, hands, arms and the whole mechanical structure of limbs which can be seen in a corpse, and which I called the body. (CSM 2:17, AT 7:25)

MOD helps to call all such features into doubt:

But what shall I now say that I am, when I am supposing that there is some supremely powerful and, if it is permissible to say so, malicious deceiver, who is deliberately trying to trick me in every way he can? Can I now assert that I possess even the most insignificant of all the attributes which I have just said belong to the nature of a body? (CSM 2:18, AT 7:26)

All the while, however, the meditator cannot doubt the existence of himself, nor that the self has a thinking nature. For *thought* is the one feature of his conception that resists direct doubt:

At last I have discovered it – thought; this alone is inseparable from me. I am, I exist – that is certain. But for how long? For as long as I am thinking. For it could be that were I totally to cease from thinking, I should totally cease to exist. ... I am a thing which is real and which truly exists. But what kind of a thing? As I have just said – a thinking thing. (CSM 2:18, AT 7:27)

Of course, the meditator's work is not complete. At best, the procedure thus far implemented will have activated the innate concept of mind. Since the innate concept of body has yet to be activated, or even considered, the meditator is in no position to draw conclusions about the mind-body relation. Thus the meditator remarks, in the very next paragraph:

And yet may it not perhaps be the case that these very things which I am supposing to be nothing, because they are unknown to me, are in reality identical with the 'I' of which I am aware? I do not know, and for the moment I shall not argue the point ... (CSM 2:18, AT 7:27)

Moreover, the procedure under consideration involves *intellect identifying moves*. At this early stage of the *Meditations* the aim is to discover innate essences, but not yet to establish them as perfect representations of the nature of reality. For the latter, the meditator will need to engage *intellect*

validating moves – moves intended to overcome the indirect doubt posed by the Evil Genius Doubt. Thus Descartes writes, of his Second Meditation results:

[H]ad I not been looking for greater than ordinary certainty, I should have been content to have shown in the Second Meditation that the mind can be understood as a subsisting thing despite the fact that nothing belonging to the body is attributed to it ... since we commonly judge that the order in which things are mutually related in our perception of them corresponds to the order in which they are related in actual reality. But one of the exaggerated doubts which I put forward in the First Meditation went so far as to make it impossible for me to be certain of this very point (namely whether things do in reality correspond to our perception of them), so long as I was supposing myself to be ignorant of the author of my being. And this is why everything I wrote on the subject of God and truth in the Third, Fourth and Fifth Meditations contributes to the conclusion ... (CSM 2:159, AT 7:226)

Descartes goes on to characterize the foregoing procedure as the "correct" indeed "unique" method by which "to understand metaphysical matters" (CSM 2:94, AT 7:130-31). In the *Meditations*, every claimed discovery of an innate, intellectual truth purports to be clearly and distinctly perceived. And in all such cases, Descartes claims that we "cannot but assent to these things." Being hardwired in our minds, we're supposed to be able to identify them by their cognitive immutability – with MOD providing the tool of choice. Having identified such truths, thinks Descartes, it remains only to be shown that our intellectual nature ultimately derives from an all-perfect deity who would never deceive us.²⁰

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