Descartes without Clear and Distinct Ideas – A Proposal

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The article advances a reading of Descartes's Meditations on First Philosophy *that dispenses with "clear and distinct ideas". Since Descartes's lifetime, these concepts have become a trademark of his philosophy and a target for his critics, on account of their vagueness and inconsistency. The article provides evidence that, by and large, "clear and distinct ideas" were intended by Descartes to convey in simpler, catchier terms a much more elaborate argument, ultimately grounded on the system of the mind's faculties. The article argues that, through this enquiry, Descartes meant to provide a space of reasons wherein to establish key contentions of his philosophy, to include those involving the existence of both mind and bodies. The article concludes by showing that the traditional portrayal of Descartes as an unmitigated intuitionist is, at best, one-sided.*

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Descartes has gone down in history as the philosopher of "clear and distinct ideas", an expression that soon became a shibboleth for his supporters and detractors alike. This lore is not without foundation. Descartes himself insisted a great deal on casting his arguments in these terms. Most importantly of all, Descartes stated his well-known "rule of truth" along these lines, arguing that "whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is true". Descartes set forth this principle at the onset of the *Third Meditation*, as a "general rule" inferred from the case of the *cogito* argument which, at that stage of his enquiry, had emerged as the one piece of knowledge able to withstand all sorts of doubts:

> I am certain that I am a thinking thing. Do I not therefore also know what is required for my being certain about anything? In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting, which of course would not be enough to make me certain of the truth of the matter if it could ever turn out that something which I perceived with such clarity and distinctness was false. So I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true.[1]

The validation of this rule took up a good share of the *Third* and *Fourth Meditations*, but failed to convince the vast majority of Descartes's contemporaries, and most of his present-day interpreters. The difficulties associated with his argument usually go under the name of the "Cartesian circle". Descartes intended to demonstrate that God exists by appealing to the clear and distinct idea thereof. At the same time, however, Descartes argued that we can trust clear and distinct ideas to be true only because God – *qua* the most perfect and, therefore, non-deceiving being – exists, and thereby guarantees that whatever we perceive in this distinct manner corresponds to actual states of affairs. Since Arnauld's *Fourth Objections*, there have been many others who have also criticized the argument, and Descartes's hesitant responses have given his interpreters cause to wonder whether there is any way out of the "circle".

Descartes's "rule of truth", moreover, seems bedevilled by a number of problems of its own, even prior to its validation. In particular, it is far from clear what these "clear and distinct ideas" are supposed to be in the first place, and how we are to distinguish them from their "obscure" and "confused" counterparts. The absence of rigorous criteria to tell apart the two classes of

[1] *Meditationes* III, AT VII 35, CSMK II 24. "AT" stands for C. Adam and P. Tannery, eds., *Œuvres de Descartes*, vols. I–XI, Paris, Vrin, 1964; "CSMK" for J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch and A. Kenny, eds. and trans., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols. I–III, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985–1991. The asterisk (*) after the CSMK page number indicated that I have modified the translation.

ideas has often been lamented. Most notably, Leibniz insisted on the need to define these concepts with exactness, and explicitly presented his own taxonomy of "clear", "distinct" and "adequate" ideas as a response to Descartes.

Complaints along these lines had already been voiced during Descartes's lifetime, and found their way into the *Meditations*. In particular, Gassendi mocked the hero of the *Discourse* for failing to figure out the method of his own thought.[2] Gassendi was being characteristically spiteful, but he had a point. In the *Discourse*, Descartes himself had remarked that "there is some difficulty in noting well what are the things that we conceive distinctly", right after his first ever presentation in print of his rule of truth.[3] The *Meditations* did not seem to fare much better in this regard: in this work too, Descartes urged readers to be very "prudent" in these matters, apparently appealing to an honourable virtue to remedy for the want of a proper criterion.[4]

Descartes was keenly aware of the difficulty, but he protested that he had supplied such a method, and claimed to have structured the *Meditations* so that readers could progress through it and carry it out themselves:

> What you add then, that one should not take pains over the truth of the rule but, rather, over the method determining whether we are wrong, or not, when we think we perceive something in a clear way, I do not deny it. But I protest that I carefully provided such a method in the appropriate places, where I first dispelled all preconceived opinions and, subsequently, enumerated all prime ideas, and distinguished clear ideas from the obscure or the confused ones.[5]

The concluding remark – in which "distinct" ideas are contrasted with both "obscure" and "confused" ideas, as if the latter two were equivalent – confirms Descartes's loose use of the terms, which is especially significant in a passage wherein he tries to defend against criticisms like those levelled by Gassendi. The passage, however, reveals something even more important. Descartes conceives the method for singling out "prime ideas" not as a catalogue of abstract rules but as the *Meditations* themselves: readers were expected to learn it by putting it into practice, by performing their arguments stage by stage, in the exact order of their appearance in the text.[6]

"Clear" and "obscure", "confused" and "distinct": these distinctions do play an important role in this process of argumentation, to be sure, and do flag all-important stages and crucial turning points of the argument. Yet, they are not quite the entire story, not even as far as the "rule of truth" is concerned. I think it can be proved that Descartes fundamentally intended to establish the existence of both mind and bodies by means of a thoroughgoing enquiry into the mind's faculties and their specific functions, their respective range of validity and their mutual relations; in one word, by an enquiry into their "system". In particular, Descartes argued that we are to trust and assent to the "natural light" and the "great propensity to believe" in the existence of bodies because "no other faculty" of ours can contest them. Two of Descartes's most important claims in metaphysics are thereby proven to be grounded in an investigation of the mind's faculties.

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[2] *Objectiones* V, AT VII 279 & 318, CSMK II 194–195 & 221.
[3] *Discours* IV, AT VI 33, CSMK I 127*.
[4] *Responsiones* VII, AT VII 462, CSMK II 310*: "only prudent people (*soli prudentes*) distinguish between what is perceived in a clear and distinct way and what only seems to be perceived in this way".
[5] *Responsiones* V, AT VII 361–362, CSMK II 250*.
[6] Descartes famously refused to spell out a "geometrical method" to tell apart the "prime ideas" from the others, and suggested his readers to rather pay attention to what he had been actually doing in the course of the work; cf. *Responsiones* II, AT VII 164: "hoc enim facilius exemplis quam regulis addiscitur, & puto me ibi omnia hujus rei exempla vel explicuisse, vel saltem utcumque attigisse".

At first, this might sound surprising, as it is often maintained that Descartes spoke only incidentally of "faculties". Yet, the *Meditations* abound with references to this notion: the word "facultas" alone occurs in no fewer than thirty places in the six *Meditations*, to which one should add the much longer seven sets of objections and replies, and all synonyms like "vis" and "potentia".[7] To be sure, Descartes had a quite peculiar understanding of these faculties, and frequently insisted (*contra* many Late Scholastics) that they were not to be understood as "parts" of the "soul". The "thinking thing" was for Descartes *one* thing, and remained so throughout, for "it is always the same mind that wills, and understands, and has sensory perception".[8] Rather than as "parts" of the mind, mental faculties were for Descartes to be understood as specific *functions* of the undivided "thinking thing" and, by the same token, as "modes" thereof.[9]

Descartes's claims on this question are many and extremely dense; they would require quite some considerable unpacking, more than it is possible to provide within the scope of this present article. Yet, the main questions one can raise about Descartes's theory of faculties do not in the least detract from their significance. The argument was extremely complex, almost thorny, and Descartes did not try to hide this from his readers. For this exact reason, though, he punctuated some of his most important reflections on faculties by references to "clear" and "distinct", which had already been occasionally employed by some of the Late Scholastic authors with whom he was so familiar. Arguably, Descartes expected his readers to be well acquainted with these notions as well, and expected them to be able to use "clear" and "distinct" as guiding lights through the twists and turns of the *Meditations*. The strategy backfired. "Clear" and "distinct" became a sort of signature for Cartesians, and ended up capturing most of his readers' attention, and progressively drove them away from the true core of Descartes's argument. As we are about to see, "clear and distinct ideas" were not a goal in their own right for Descartes. They were not even the means, actually, but often just a handy, catchy proxy – a very captivating and successful one, as it turns out, that has been haunting most of Descartes's readers ever since.

It is obviously impossible here to go through the entire *Meditations* to substantiate this reading case by case: what I can offer here is only a first survey – a proposal, at best. However, in order to make a case for this reading, it might be enough to prove that Descartes had "rules of truth" other than "clear and distinct ideas" and, even more to the point, that some of the "metaphysically certain" truths of the *Meditations* are neither clear nor distinct. Descartes's theory of a "natural light" and his argument for the existence of an external world reveal that the logic at work in the *Meditations* runs much deeper than the letter of "clear and distinct" ideas.

As I end this introduction, a final word of caution is in order. Among interpreters, it is common practice to take as a starting point the definitions of "clear" and "distinct" presented by Descartes in the *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), and then to give them a retroactive application in the *Meditations* and earlier works, in the hope to square – by virtue or by force –

[7] As for "facultas" in the six *Meditationes*, see AT VII 25, 31 (imaginandi facultas), 32 (judicandi facultas), 34 (imaginandi facultas), 38 (nulla alia facultas), 39 (facultas, nondum mihi satis cognita), 51 (per eandem facultatem, per quam ego ipse a me percipior), 53 (judicandi facultas), 54 (errandi facultas), 54–56 (six occurrences), 56 (cognoscendi facultatas), 57 (facultates intelligendi), 56 (facultas recordandi vel imaginandi), 60, 71 (imaginandi facultas), 72 (facultas cognoscitiva), 77, 78–80 (eight occurrences), 85.

[8] See especially *Meditationes* VI, AT VII 86, CSMK II 59: "neque etiam facultates volendi, sentiendi, intelligendi etc. ejus partes dici possunt, quia una et eadem mens est quae vult, quae sentit, quae intelligit". Likewise, the *facultas imaginandi* was for Descartes the mind itself *qua* imagining – i.e., qua directed to the body to which it happens to be joined; and likewise for all other mental powers; cf. *Meditationes* VI, AT VII 71–72.

[9] *Meditationes* VI, AT VII 78.

all of Descartes's statements on the subject.[10] The pitfalls of this method are glaring.[11] In order to determine whether the *Meditations* agree on this point with the *Principles*, it is clearly necessary to first puzzle out the *Meditations* in their own right. Besides the general defect of anachronism, moreover, a reading the *Meditations* through the lens of the *Principles* runs against Descartes's express instructions. It would be a gross error to assume that the *Principles* always present Descartes's most considered views, simply on account of their later publication. As it happens, Descartes himself presented the first book of the *Principles* as nothing but a "summary" of the *Meditations*, and it was to the *Meditations* which he continually referred throughout his life as the finest and most rigorous formulation of his metaphysics.[12] It remains a matter of debate whether this is truly the case, in general, and also for the specific case of the 1644 definitions of "clear" and "distinct perception". But whatever its influence over the longer term and however many modifications may have been introduced in Descartes's subsequent works, the theory of the *Meditations* deserves and demands a study of its own, in particular as it comes to the arguments for the existence of mind and bodies.

1. The Mind and the Natural Light

Between the spring of 1638 and the autumn of 1639, while drafting his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), Descartes read Herbert of Cherbury's *On Truth* at least twice: first, in the second, Latin edition of 1633 and then again in Mersenne's translation of 1639. It was a decisive reading. Suffice it to mention that it was precisely from this work that Descartes derived the concept of "adventitious ideas" and the basic criteria to distinguish between factitious, innate, and adventitious ideas, upon which he was to ground so many of the key claims made in the *Meditations*.[13]

In his letter to Mersenne on Herbert's treatise, however, Descartes rather insisted on the shortcomings of Herbert's treatise, and on one in particular, which is of special interest for our present purposes:

> The author takes universal consent as the rule of his truths; as for me, the only rule of mine is the natural light.[14]

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[10] *Principia* I 45; AT VIII–1 22: "Claram voco illam [perceptionem], quae menti attendenti praesens et aperta est: sicut ea clare a nobis videri dicimus, quae, oculo intuenti praesentia, satis fortiter et aperte illum movent. Distinctam autem illam [perceptionem], quæ, cum clara sit, ab omnibus aliis ita sejuncta est & præcisa, ut nihil planè aliud, quam quod clarum est, in se contineat". Arguably, these definitions are not without difficulties, and do not perfectly dovetail with Descartes's statements in the *Meditationes*. I analyse these tensions in M. Mantovani, *The Eyes and the Ideas. Descartes on the Nature of Bodies*, Ph.D. dissertation, Humboldt–Universität zu Berlin, 2018, pp. 150–174. The present article elaborates on claims first advanced in that work, especially at pp. 134–149.

[11] The first major, and very influential specimen of this interpretative strategy is provided by A. Gewirth, "Clearness and Distinctness in Descartes", *Philosophy* 18 (1943), 17–36; reprinted in John Cottingham ed., *Descartes*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1998, 79–100. Gewirth's brilliant *tour de force* treatment of Descartes's theory of ideas contains plenty of insightful remarks, but ends up defending an extremely speculative reading of Descartes's theory of "clear and distinct" perception, by means of an artful distinction between a psychological, a perceptual, and a logical understanding of these notions. In order to come up with as neat an account as possible, moreover, Gewirth fails to pay attention to Descartes's changes of terminology – and of mind – throughout the years, thereby dispelling all doubts on the need to study each of Descartes's works in its own right, before any attempt at an *Entwicklungsgeschichte*.

[12] Descartes to Chanut, 26 February 1649, AT V 291: "sa première partie ne soit qu'un abrégé de ce que j'ai écrit en mes *Méditations*".

[13] I provide evidence for this claim in M. Mantovani, *Herbert of Cherbury, Descartes and Locke on Innate Ideas and Universal Consent*, "Journal of Early Modern Studies" 8 (2019), 83–115. On the relation between Descartes and Herbert of Cherbury, see also, very recently, L. Rouquayrol, *L'idée d'un sens commun à tous. Descartes et Herbert de Cherbury*, "Revue de métaphysique et de morale" 113 (2022), 21–38.

[14] Descartes to Mersenne, 16 October 1639, AT II 599, CSMK III K 140*.

This statement is not confined to the letter of 1639, but features prominently – albeit not always so visibly – also in the *Meditations* (not to speak of Descartes's other works).[15] According to Descartes, it is precisely by virtue of this "light" that we come to know all metaphysical tenets, such as that "nothing comes from nothing", or that "the distinction between preservation and creation is merely conceptual".[16] For Descartes, moreover, it is always thanks to this "light" that we apprehend how the mind's faculties relate to one another. More specifically, he argues that it is immediately "manifest by natural light… that the perception of the intellect should always precede the determination of the will".[17] The continuation of the argument is even more remarkable: Descartes maintains that we assent to claims like this one on account of their being "clear" by virtue of the light cast upon them by the mind. And, Descartes concludes, "from a great illumination of the intellect", there can only follow "a great inclination of the will" and, thereby, our assent.[18]

The passage proves that Descartes conceived of the "natural light" of the mind and of its "clear and distinct ideas" as intertwined notions. All these concepts openly spring from the same metaphorical domain, all being imported into philosophy from the theory of light and vision. One can therefore easily understand why Descartes provided these two parallel formulations of his "rule of truth": the two statements were for him largely equivalent. Accordingly, Descartes could sometimes state that the "clear and distinct" philosophical tenets are self-evident while, on other occasions, he inverted the terms, to claim that it is the natural light that makes them so.[19]

But what exactly is this "natural light" for Descartes, and how does it relate to the other faculties of the mind? The questions become especially challenging when one considers that Descartes never listed the "natural light" alongside the intellect, imagination and sensibility. Moreover, this "natural light" is to be distinguished from the will, and precedes it, so that it cannot be explained by means of this faculty either.

The "natural light", for Descartes, is no faculty among the others, but the "cognitive power" itself, insofar as it is capable of apprehending the first metaphysical truths.[20] It can thus be explained why Descartes sometimes referred to this "light" as "the intellectual perspicacity bestowed on us by nature", which would be "obscured" by the mind's embodiment.[21] Descartes understood the "intellect" as the cognitive power in its purity – i.e., as apart from the body – so that it made perfect sense for him to attribute the capacity to apprehend the highest truths to the intellect in the strict sense of the term. The "natural light", in sum, counts for Descartes as the

[15] For instance, the concept of a "natural light" already featured in the *Regulae ad directionem ingenii* (e.g., AT X 360: "naturale rationis lumen") and right from the title of *La recherche de la vérité selon la lumière naturelle*. The dating of Descartes's *Recherche* is still a matter of contention among scholars, and the finding of a new, earlier manuscript version of the *Regulae* – still in preparation for publication – demands that we reconsider the dating of Descartes's early writings. While waiting for this further evidence, in the interest of time and in light of the methodological principles defended above, I limit myself here to the *Meditationes* alone. On the concept of "natural light" and "intuition" in the *Regulae*, see M. Spallanzani, *Descartes. La règle de la raison*, Paris, Vrin, 2015.

[16] *Meditationes* III, AT VII 40 & 49, CSMK II 27–28 & 33.

[17] *Meditationes* IV, AT VII 60, CSMK II 41.

[18] *Responsiones* II, AT VII 147–148, CSMK II 105. Cf. *Meditationes* IV, AT VII 59, CSMK II 41.

[19] See also *Principia* I 30, AT VIII–1 16, 18–22. The link between these two statements of Descartes's philosophy – namely, his theory of clear and distinct perception, and the concept of a natural light – has already been pointed out by scholars: see for example A. Kenny, *Descartes. A Study of his Philosophy*, New York, Random House, 1968, 177–178.

[20] On Descartes's concept of "natural light" see D. Boyle, *Descartes on Innate Ideas*, London – New York, Continuum, 2009, pp. 81–118, which aptly adjusts a few infelicitous statements of the classical J. Morris, *Descartes' Natural Light*, "Journal of the History of Philosophy" 11 (1973), 169–187.

[21] *Responsiones* II, AT VII 162–163, CSMK II 115*: "perspicuitatem intellectus… a natura inditam".

intellect at its best.

Along these lines, Descartes could thus sometimes style the "natural light" as a "faculty". Not just any faculty, though, but the mind's supreme one:

> When I say "Nature taught me to think this", all I mean is that a certain spontaneous impulse leads me to believe it, not that its truth has been revealed to me by some natural light. There is a big difference here: whatever is revealed to me by the natural light – for example, that from the fact that I am doubting it follows that I exist, and so on – cannot in fact in any way be open to doubt. This is because there cannot be another faculty I can equally trust as this natural light (*quia nulla alia facultas esse potest, cui aeque fidam ac lumini isti*), and which could teach me that what is revealed to me by this natural light is not true.[22]

It is on account of its status as the highest power of our mind that Descartes concluded that we are to trust the insights of this "natural light", lest God be a deceiver. Indeed, since we lack cognitive resources to double-check and adjust its reports, if the "natural light" were to be proved wrong in any event, it would follow that that our entire mental equipment is irreparably unreliable, if not downright faulty.[23] It is crucial to realize that Descartes's argument does not rely on the nature of this "light" as such, but depends on its being the best among the faculties currently under examination. In principle, therefore, the same line of reasoning could be applied to other domains, and to other faculties; and this is exactly what happens with Descartes' argument for the existence of bodies.

Descartes's rule(s) of truth is thereby revealed to be much more elaborate than first appearances suggest: "clear and distinct ideas" – just like the "natural light" – cannot be taken on trust, at face value, but need to be *proved* to be the standards for truth. This indeed is what a fair share of the *Meditations* was all about, as Descartes objected to Gassendi. This does not solve all difficulties, of course: the validation conundrum is unresolved, and a way out of "Cartesian circle" is yet to be identified. But these involve a different set of questions.

One of the more important findings of our enquiry up to this point is that, contrary to Hamelin's portrayal – and those of many others in his wake – Descartes was not searching for some exquisite "atomes d'évidence" with which to force his readers' assent.[24] Even the "natural light" did not amount to much for Descartes, unless it could be proved to be trustworthy. And this is truer still for the "clear and distinct ideas". Descartes could therefore argue against Paris scientists that the most "clear and distinct" understanding of a mathematical proposition does not qualify, as such, as "science", before first ruling out the possibility "to have been constituted by nature in such a way as to err even in matters which seemed to me most true".[25] Truth, for

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[22] *Meditationes* III, AT VII 38–39, CSMK II 26–27*. See also *Principia* I 30, AT VIII–1 16: "lumen naturæ, sive cognoscendi facultatem a Deo nobis datam". Descartes's caution in relation to the proper nature and scope of this "natural" light, and, more generally, to the concept of "nature", was intended to make sure that his position would not have been confused with what would have later been called the philosophy of "common sense" (see further below, in relation to the claim that bodies are as we perceive them to be).

[23] This reading does not depend on a specific understanding on the "Cartesian circle", and is consistent with the main interpretations – "subjective" and "objective" – advanced by the literature.

[24] O. Hamelin, *Le Système de Descartes,* Paris, Alcan & Guillaumin, 1911, p. 85; quoted with approval by (among others) R. Ariew and M. Grene, *Ideas, In and Before Descartes*, "Journal of the History of Ideas" 56 (1995), p. 104. See also L. Nolan and J. Whipple, *Self–Knowledge in Descartes and Malebranche*, "Journal of the History of Philosophy" 43 (2005), 55–82, in particular 61–63. In my view, appeals to such a quest for "atoms of evidence" is a more appropriate way to characterize Descartes's strategy in the *Regulæ*; cf. J.–L. Marion, *Sur l'ontologie grise de Descartes*, Paris, Vrin, 1993[2], pp. 134–136. Indeed, in the *Regulæ* the problem of a "validation" via God of the cognitive faculty has not yet emerged and, accordingly, it is quite likely that at that stage Descartes would have sided with his fellow Paris scientist (rather than with the theory he was to defend some twelve years later) as far as the issue of a "science of the atheist" is concerned; see footnote below.

[25] *Meditationes* VI, AT VII 77, CSMK II 53*. Cf. *Responsiones* II, AT VII 141, CSMK II 10. *Responsiones* V, AT

Descartes, is not the affair of a few free-floating, all-evident intuitions. For Descartes, indeed, some fundamental "truths" of the *Meditations* were neither clear nor distinct.

2. The Body of the Argument

Not all philosophical truths fall under the purview of the "natural light": in fact, the vast majority of them do not. The existence of an external world – a world of "extended things" outside the "thinking thing" – was, for Descartes, an especially notable and challenging specimen of this latter class.

Faithful to himself, Descartes first tried to establish whether bodies exist by looking at the intellect. In this case, however, this opening gambit proved unsuccessful: according to Descartes, the innate ideas of geometry only show that the existence of bodies *qua* extended things is *possible*. He therefore turned to the second faculty in the row, which proved already better, but still inconclusive. Indeed, the phenomenology of the imagination suggests that the existence of bodies is highly *probable*, but does not permit the matter to be settled with certainty.[26] Down this path, Descartes turned thus to the senses and, more specifically, to their "adventitious ideas". According to his argument, each of us is faced with a class of ideas that "come to me (*mihi advenire*) without my consent" – hence their name – and whose representative content and order of occurrence it is not in my power to modify at will.[27] The singing of birds and the colours of flowers and trees that come to me at this moment fall among this class of ideas: the leaves of a poplar are brighter than a laurel – I cannot change that – and cuckoos sing deeper than sparrows and bee-eaters, and their singing has sequences of its own.

But where do these ideas come from? They certainly are not of the perceiver's own making; else, the perceiver could exert her control upon them, and bring them about at a whim. (In Descartes's jargon, adventitious ideas are not factitious ideas in disguise). On Descartes's account, the adventitious ideas of the senses do prove that there *certainly* exists something other than the mind, but still provide no final answer as to its nature. In particular, it remains to be established whether these adventitious ideas come from external bodies – as we ordinarily take them to be – or are brought about by something else completely, as, for example, by some "creature nobler than body". In order words: whether the birds are really out there on the trees, or the world is just a divine *mise-en-scène* or a devilish trickery.

Considered from the outside, in purely abstract terms, there is for Descartes no reason to favour one claim over the other. But it becomes quite a different matter whenever we are faced with the choice between the two. Descartes claimed that each of us experiences in fact, within herself , a "great propensity to believe" that the former is the case.[28]

Unfortunately, Descartes does not say much about the status of this *magna propensio ad credendum*, but he is at least crystal clear that it is no instance of the "natural light". The "great propensity to believe" in the existence of external objects does not originate from "a great illumination of the intellect"; the intellect is instead very much in the dark on this matter. Moreover, while this propensity is deep-rooted and pressing, it appears also to be far from irresistible as testified by its still being under scrutiny at such a late stage of the enquiry.
In the end, we seem to be left thus with nothing but a dubious urge to believe that there exists a world. Thinkers as diverse as Regius and Malebranche concluded that Descartes and

VII 428 (which responds to *Objectiones* V, AT VII 414–415). Descartes to Regius, 24 May 1640, AT III 65. The importance of these passages for Descartes's theory of clear and distinct perceptions had already been emphasized by P. Markie, *Clear and Distinct Perception and Metaphysical Certainty*, "Mind" 88 (1979), 97–104.

[26] *Meditatitones* VI, AT VII 73: "sed probabiliter tantum". For this reading of Descartes's argument, see M. Gueroult, *Descartes selon l'ordre des raisons*, Paris, Aubier – Montaigne, 1968, II 7.

[27] *Meditationes* VI, AT VII 75, CSMK II 52.

[28] *Meditationes* VI, AT VII 79, CSMK II 55*.

philosophy had here reached their limit, and called upon faith and the *Bible*.[29] For his part, Descartes remained convinced to possess a most sound argument for establishing this contention: the very same argument that he had employed to validate the "natural light.

This striking parallelism is easy to escape, at first glance, owing to the difference in subject matter and the complexity of the proof. Yet, the distinctive ring of Descartes's argumentation strategy is recognizable – almost word-by-word – also in this case:

> So, the only alternative is that [the active faculty that produces adventitious ideas] is in another substance distinct from me – a substance which contains either formally or eminently all the reality which exists objectively in the ideas produced by this faculty... This substance is either a body (i.e., a corporeal nature), in which is formally contained everything that is objectively in the ideas; or else it is God (or some other creature nobler than body), which contains it eminently. But since God is not a deceiver, it is altogether evident that he sends these ideas to me neither directly by himself nor indirectly, via some creature which contains the objective reality of the ideas not formally but only eminently. For God has given me no faculty at all for recognizing any such source for these ideas (*nullam plane facultatem mihi dederit ad hoc agnoscendum*); on the contrary, he has given me a great propensity to believe that they are issued by corporeal things. So, I do not see how God could be understood to be anything but a deceiver if the ideas were issued from any source other than corporeal things. It follows, therefore, that corporeal things exist.[30]

As for the natural light, in this case too, Descartes's argument is based on the lack of a mental power – *nulla alia facultas, nulla plane facultas* – that could provide any better insights into the matter. The argument clearly presupposes that *all* of mind's faculties have been taken into account and, indeed, Descartes was so watchful on this point as to question at length whether there can be in me "some other faculty not yet fully known to me".[31] However, once this possibility has been ruled out, there remain no principled reasons for us to oppose the "great inclination of the will" that naturally ensues from any "great illumination of the intellect" (as was the case also for "clear and distinct" ideas), and no reasons for resistance to our "great propensity to believe" that bodies exist. Therefore, we might and, indeed, must commit ourselves to all these claims.

To be sure, such a "propensity" cannot quite be compared to the pure intellect. And, indeed, Descartes first tried to establish whether bodies exist by considering the innate ideas of the intellect, and turning to the lower faculties and further below only out of necessity. At the outset of this enquiry, the "great propensity to believe" that external bodies exist, however, stood out alone, unchallenged, thereby proving itself in its own way to be as binding as the "natural light" with respect to metaphysical truths. Our unreflecting urge turns thereby itself into a reason. *Ac proinde res corporeæ existunt*.

The argument is extremely subtle, almost fragile. The suspicion with which it was met from the time of its first appearance was due also to a few major misunderstandings. A few remarks are therefore in order. First, it must be pointed out that Descartes did not conclude that the external world exists on account of there being more arguments in its favour than against: as

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[29] Henricus Regius claimed that Revelation alone ensures that the world exists in *Philosophia naturalis*, Amsterdam, Elsevier, 1654[1], p. 351; *Philosophia* naturalis Amsterdam, Elsevier, 1661[2], p. 416. Cf. Delphine Bellis, "Empiricism Without Metaphysics: Regius' Cartesian Natural Philosophy" in Mihnea Dobre and Tammy Nyden eds., *Cartesian Empiricism*, Dordrecht, Springer, 2013, p. 160. For Malebranche, see *Recherche de la vérité*, *Éclaircissement* VI in Geneviève Rodis–Lewis ed., *Œuvres*, Paris, Gallimard, 1979, I 838–841.

[30] *Meditationes* VI, AT VII 79–80, CSMK II 55*.

[31] *Meditationes* III, AT VII 39, CSMK II 39: "ita forte etiam aliqua alia est in me facultas, nondum mihi satis cognita". For an especially insightful analysis of Descartes's argument, see L. Newman, *Descartes on Unknown Faculties and Our Knowledge of the External World*, "The Philosophical Review" 103 (1994), 489–531.

for this latter option, there is just none. Descartes, however, did not thereby mean to shift the burden of the proof on to the sceptic. According to Descartes, the existence of bodies is not just a reasonable claim, to be taken for true for the time being (as quite a few early modern philosophers maintained), but a fundamental metaphysical truth, which he thought to be have established with uttermost certainty, just as for the existence of the mind, or of God. It is precisely for this reason that Descartes declined a number of merely "probable" arguments in favour of bodies' existence, and singled out for consideration, one after the other, all of the mind's faculties that could be expected to provide a conclusive argument for this claim.

Contrary to what is often assumed, Descartes intended in fact that all the conclusions of his *Meditations on First Philosophy* would share one and the same kind of certainty: the "metaphysical" one, of course, which, in contrast to "moral certainty" (that obtains in degrees) is an all-or-nothing affair. Descartes's *Meditations* work, under this regard, just as Euclid's *Elements*, the theorems whereof, from the simplest to the most complex, are all intended to be equally conclusive. For Descartes, of course, the *cogito* argument must have already been established in order to prove that material objects exist, thereby securing its foundational priority. Likewise, one must already have demonstrated that the sum of alternate angles is equal to two right angles if one is to prove that there are only five regular polyhedra and, accordingly, the two demonstrations feature at very different stages of the work. But once the initial demonstrations are in place, the latter claim is intended to be as unquestionable as the former, and this is as much the case for the *Meditations* as it is for the *Elements*.

According to Descartes, there remain fundamental differences between the proofs that the thinking I exists and the argument for the existence of outer bodies. "Ego cogito, ergo sum, sive existo" is said to be directly "revealed to me by the natural light" as the first of all truths, or – following Descartes' alternative phrasing – as being directly established by the "clear and distinct" perception that this is the case.[32]

By contrast, the existence of material substances was established by Descartes only after a long, inconclusive quest for better arguments, and from the absence of reasons to contest one's "propensity" to believe that this is the case. Yet, the texts show that the logic and almost the very phrasing of the two arguments is ultimately the same: a thorough enquiry into the mind's faculties in search for reasons to give, withhold or deny one's assent to the existence of her own mind and of the world.

As a consequence, if it was the case that bodies did not exist, it would not just be one "propensity" among many to prove misguided, but an argument by the "metaphysical certainty" of which Descartes was so convinced that he built around it the entire conclusion the *Meditations*. Such an error, therefore, could not be dismissed as an episodic lapse on our part, but would cast doubts on our rational capacities as a whole. According to Descartes, both the thinking I and material objects must therefore exist for real, with uttermost certainty, since otherwise there would be no way to escape the conclusion that our mental equipment is intrinsically flawed, *contra* God's benevolence and trustworthiness in "constituting" the human mind.

The deep logic of Descartes's argument emerges even more clearly if one considers yet another "propensity" discussed in the *Sixth Meditation*: the already-mentioned "spontaneous impulse" to ascribe to bodies properties other than the geometrical properties. "Nature taught me to think this", each of us would protest if pressed with the question: laurel leaves are ovate and oblong, sure enough; but are they not also dark green and possessed of a bright, spicy scent?[33] I do see it. I do smell it. And in this case too, Descartes once again argues that only a

[32] The two phrasings are advanced, a few pages apart, in the *Third Meditation*; *Meditationes* III, AT VII 38–39 & 35, CSMK II 24 & 26–27. The canonical formulation "ego cogito, ergo sum, sive existo" is to be read in *Responsiones* II, AT VII 140.

[33] See the already-quoted *Meditationes* III, AT VII 38–39, CSMK II 26–27*.

thorough investigation into the mind's faculties can establish whether one should commit oneself to the claim that birds and trees not only exist, but also have the very same colours and scents that we perceive them to possess:

> Despite the high degree of doubt and uncertainty involved here, the very fact that God is not a deceiver, and the consequent impossibility of there being any falsity in my opinions which cannot be corrected by some other faculty supplied by God (*nisi aliqua etiam sit in me facultas a Deo tributa ad illam emendandam*), offers me a sure hope that I can attain the truth even in these matters.[34]

In the end, this alleged "teaching of nature" will turn out to be a prejudice, born from a "perversion of the natural order" and a gross misunderstanding of the *practical* (as opposed to *theoretical*) function of sense-perception.[35] Descartes argues that we have a faculty – none other than the intellect – which urges us to resist the conclusion that "the heat in a body is something exactly resembling the idea of heat which is in me, or that, when a body is white or green, the self-same whiteness or greenness that I perceive through my senses is present in the body".[36]

Descartes's arguments about whether we are to trust (or not) our cognitive apparatus prove thereby especially subtle, and open to a variety of uses, but all display the same fundamental argumentation structure, which has been proven to ground some of Descartes's most disputed contentions. If we take one step back from these specific cases and try to reconsider the logic of all the *Meditations* in light of these findings, we may come to view Descartes as a thinker not quite the same as the one as which he is usually portrayed in the literature.

3. Descartes's Space of Reasons

Descartes's nonchalance in presenting as "the only rule of his truths" both "clear and distinct ideas" and "the natural light" proves that the motto "whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is true" is not quite the only guiding principle of Descartes's search after truth. The discovery that not all the pieces of doctrine defended in the *Meditations* share this alleged self-evidence reveals that the logic of Descartes's argument runs much deeper than the letter of this memorable statement would suggest.

According to Descartes, as we have seen, the doctrinal body of philosophy was not so much to be constructed on "clear and distinct" ideas as by means of a systematic enquiry into the mind's faculties.[37] It is thanks to such an enquiry that Descartes claimed to have provided proofs of the existence of both the "thinking" and the "extended substance", despite all the remarkable differences between the two arguments.[38]

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[34] *Meditationes* VI, AT VII 80, CSMK II 55–56. For an insightful reading of this passage – to which I am indebted – see M. Friedman, *Descartes on the Real Existence of Matter*, "Topoi" 16 (1997), pp. 156–158.

[35] For more on Descartes's understanding of the function of the senses, see M. Mantovani, *The Institution of Nature. Descartes on Human Perception*, "Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy" 11 (2022), 1–25.

[36] *Meditationes* VI, AT VII 82, CSMK II 56*.

[37] Accordingly, despite criticizing the concept of a faculty defended in his *De veritate*, Descartes remarks that Herbert of Cherbury was perfectly right in insisting that, in order to establish the truth of a claim, one should "always consider what faculty he is using"; Descartes to Mersenne, 16 October 1639, AT II 598, CSMK III 140*.

[38] Descartes's demand for a system of knowledge – as opposed to a mere collection of intuitions – dates back to his juvenile writings: see, for example, *Cogitationes Privatæ* (1619–1621), AT X 215: "Larvatæ nunc scientiæ sunt: quæ, larvis sublatis, pulcherrimæ apparerent. Catenam scientiarum pervidenti, non difficilius videbitur, eas animo retinere, quam seriem numerorum". The importance this demand of systematicity in Descartes' theory of knowledge has been duly emphasized by E. Cassirer, *Descartes et l'idée de l'unité de la science*, "Revue de Synthèse" XIV (1937), 7–28 and also pointed out by (among others) J. Cottingham ed., *Conversation with Burman*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1976, xxxi–xxxii and N. Jolley, *Scientia and Self–Knowledge in Descartes*, in in T. Sorell, G.A.J. Rogers, J. Kraye, eds., *Scientia in Early Modern Philosophy. Seventeenth–Century Thinkers on*

Descartes could not stay content with a few "atomes d'évidence": his search was for the *reasons* for us to trust the faculties we have. Intuition left to itself is worth nothing: only reason makes it valuable. The reason why Descartes, in the end, accepted as valid and trustworthy the "natural light" that makes ideas to shine – that makes them "clear and distinct" – is because he believed himself to have demonstrated that "there cannot be another faculty I can equally trust". Reason, in this case, has proved intuition to be the best reason we might have and, accordingly, urges us to follow it. Descartes's intellectualism is a feat of argumentation, not an assemblage of piecemeal intuitions. Even the most apparently "natural" claims were not therefore be taken on trust, but demanded that all arguments be investigated – in favour and against, one by one. The doubts raised at the onset of the enquiry and the painstaking responses that occupy the rest of the work are exemplary of this strategy, which shapes all of the *Meditations.* It is a strategy that is pursued in the seven sets of *Objections* and *Replies* that followed, by including yet more voices, and queries, and rejoinders. One comes thus to realize that no idea and no contention is true for Descartes owing to how it "manifests itself" to the mind, but by virtue of the position it occupies in the total space of reasons. The term "space of reasons" is not to be taken in Sellars's and Brandom's strict sense: their theories of propositions and inferences and their refusal of atomistic semantics are almost completely alien to Descartes. But the *Verfremdungseffekt* of the anachronism might help to reconsider the inveterate image of Descartes as an unmitigated intuitionist.[39]

Descartes did not intend by means of his strategy to endorse a coherence theory of truth, as if truth could be reduced to the inner consistency of a certain set of beliefs. *Pace* Frankfurt, Descartes expressly defined truth in terms of correspondence, as "the conformity of thought with its object".[40] At the same time, however, Descartes insisted that it cannot be established whether ideas are true simply based on whether they are apprehended in a clear and distinct manner, as opposed to an obscure and confused apprehension.

In all matters not illuminated by the "natural light", the role and demands of reason become even more evident. The claim that external bodies exist – and the claim that external bodies are coloured – seem to present themselves with the same "urgency". And yet, Descartes argues, there are reasons to question the latter and no reasons not to accept the former. In this case too, *a fortiori*, truth cannot be established by considering a few scattered claims in isolation, but requires an enquiry into the relations between claims and between individual claims and our body of knowledge as a whole.

In the end, the shortcomings duly pointed out by Gassendi and Leibniz remain in place, but they prove less disruptive than they might have appeared at first. Descartes employed these terms liberally, and not always consistently, but in general his discussion of "clear and distinct ideas" was meant to couch in simpler terms a line of reasoning grounded on the system of the mind's faculties, which is what the *Meditations* themselves ultimately amount to. It is based on

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Demonstrative Knowledge from First Principles, Dordrecht, Springer, 2010, 83–97, especially 86–89.

[39] "Intuitionism" is here intended to encompass any theories affording a paramount role to non-inferential knowledge. It should be noted, however, that a few commentators went on to portray Descartes as an "intuitionist" in the strict sense of the twentieth-century philosophy of logic, on account (amongst other things) of his alleged rejection of the principle of the excluded middle; see for instance J. Vuillemin, *Trois Philosophes Intuitionistes: Epicure, Descartes et Kant*, "Dialectica" 35 (1981), 21–41. For a more balanced assessment of the matter – with reference to *La logique de Port–Royal* – see P. Mancosu, *On the Status of Proofs by Contradiction in the Seventeenth Century*, "Synthese" 88 (1991), 15–41.

[40] Descartes to Mersenne, 16 October 1639, AT II 597, CSMK III 139: "*truth*… denotes the conformity of thought with its object". Cf. H. G. Frankfurt, *Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen*. *The Defense of Reason in Descartes's Meditations*, Indianapolis – New York, Bobbs–Merrill, 1970. Frankfurt himself later realized that his reading is untenable and tried to rescue at least part of it in his *Descartes on the Consistency of Reason* in M. Hooker ed., *Descartes. Critical and Interpretative Essays*, Baltimore – London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, 26–39. Yet, this improved version too is still far from convincing, as pointed out among the others by S. Landucci, *La mente in Cartesio*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2002, pp. 30–37.

this enquiry that Descartes meant to provide a space of reasons wherein to articulate truth. It is one of the many ironies of history that a thinker who made so passionate a plea for reasons, and structured his masterwork with such a rigour, has made a name for himself as the philosopher of clear and distinct ideas.[*]

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