
THE ONTOLOGICAL STATUS OF CARTESIAN NATURES¹

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Abstract: In the Fifth Meditation, Descartes makes a remarkable claim about the ontological status of geometrical figures. He asserts that an object such as a triangle has a 'true and immutable nature' that does not depend on the mind, yet has being even if there are no triangles existing in the world. This statement has led many commentators to assume that Descartes is a Platonist regarding essences and in the philosophy of mathematics. One problem with this seemingly natural reading is that it contradicts the conceptualist account of universals that one finds in the *Principles of Philosophy* and elsewhere. In this paper, I offer a novel interpretation of the notion of a true and immutable nature which reconciles the Fifth Meditation with the conceptualism of Descartes' other work. Specifically, I argue that Descartes takes natures to be innate ideas considered in terms of their so-called 'objective being'.

1. Introduction

The ontological argument is traditionally understood as a proof of God's existence from the idea or concept of a supremely perfect being. Descartes' version of the argument, however, appears to trade on something else. He characterizes it as a proof from God's 'essence' or 'nature'.² In fact, he prefaces his statement of the argument in the Fifth Meditation with a peculiar theory of 'true and immutable natures'. In the course of meditating in the proper order he claims to discover

... innumerable ideas of certain things, which, even if perhaps they exist nowhere outside me, nevertheless cannot be said to be nothing; and although in a certain way they are

thought by me at will, nevertheless they are not invented [*inguntur*] by me, but have their own true and immutable natures [*veras & immutabiles naturas*]. So that when, for example, I imagine a triangle, even if perhaps such a figure exists nowhere in the world outside my thought, nor ever existed, there is still a certain determinate nature, or essence, or form of it, immutable and eternal, which was not invented [*non effecta*] by me, and does not depend on my mind [*nec a mente mea dependet*] . . . (AT VII, 64; my translation)

In stating that certain things like geometrical figures have essences or natures even on the supposition they do not exist in the world, Descartes is invoking the standard medieval distinction between essence and existence.³ According to scholastic tradition, we can determine *what* something is (i.e., its essence) prior to knowing whether it exists.

The distinction is useful here because it provides another method for demonstrating God's existence which is much simpler than the causal arguments of the Third Meditation. It is possible to establish that something has a given property simply by perceiving clearly and distinctly that it belongs to that thing's essence or nature.⁴ Familiar applications of this method of demonstration are to be found in geometry and pure mathematics. Whatever else the geometer might do to prove that the angles of a triangle, for example, are equal to two right angles, Descartes thinks that the certainty and evidential character of the demonstration derives from perceiving clearly and distinctly that such a property is contained in the essence of a triangle.⁵ The proof of God's existence is supposed to work by analogy with geometry: "existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than the fact that its three angles equal two right angles can be separated from the essence of a triangle . . ." (AT VII, 66; CSM II, 45–46).⁶

While the distinction between essence and existence clearly plays an important role in the Fifth Meditation statement of the ontological argument, it also raises an important question concerning Descartes' ontology: *what is the status of essences or natures so distinguished from existences?* Answering this question was a demand that scholastic philosophers imposed on their own accounts of the distinction. If we can determine a thing's essence prior to its existence, then we can ask what ontological status that essence has in itself.

Descartes' answer to this question has appeared quite transparent to many readers: in claiming that a triangle has an immutable and eternal nature, essence, or form that does not depend on human minds, yet "cannot be said to be nothing" even if there are no triangles existing in the world, Descartes seems committed to a species of Platonic Realism. Indeed, his contemporary Pierre Gassendi reads the Fifth Meditation in this way. In the Fifth Set of Objections Gassendi accuses Descartes of positing entities which are independent from God: "it seems very hard to propose that there is any 'immutable and eternal nature' apart from almighty God" (AT VII, 319; CSM II, 221).

Descartes replies by invoking his doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths, of which Gassendi was unaware (AT VII, 380; CSM II, 261). Descartes of course held an extreme form of voluntarism which makes absolutely everything dependent on God's will. He saw as a consequence of this doctrine that essences, and the eternal truths concerning them, are as much a part of divine creation as existing things.⁷ Hence, whatever their status, true and immutable natures cannot be *causally* independent from God.

Some recent commentators, similarly inclined to read the Fifth Meditation as Platonistic, have attempted to repair Gassendi's interpretation in a way which makes true and immutable natures causally dependent on God but preserves their abstract extra mental status. The leading proponent of this refurbished position has been Anthony Kenny. In light of the doctrine that essences are created, Kenny argues that for Descartes a mathematical object is "an eternal creature of God, with its own immutable nature and properties, a real thing lacking only the perfection of actual existence" (697).⁸ He describes Descartes' philosophy of mathematics as "thoroughly Platonic" and crowns Descartes as the "founder of modern Platonism" (692–93). With some reservations, other influential commentators have endorsed Kenny's reading. Margaret Wilson, for example, agrees that with respect to the ontology of true and immutable natures Descartes' position is "at least quasi-Platonic" (171).⁹

In spite of Kenny's refinements the Platonist interpretation is untenable. Besides undercutting Cartesian dualism by admitting created substances that are distinct from minds and bodies, it commits Descartes to an account of natures which violates the method of universal doubt. If in the Fifth Meditation Descartes were positing abstract Platonic entities, then he would be guilty of smuggling in things which are at least as susceptible to methodic doubt as corporeal objects, but which are not justified anywhere in the argument of the *Meditations*. Unless one is content to suppose that Descartes was extremely careless or openly deceitful, this consideration alone is fatal to the Platonist reading.¹⁰

A natural alternative to the Platonist interpretation, and a view with scholastic precedents, would be to locate essences within God. Such a position has been defended recently by Tad Schmaltz who argues that Descartes takes essences "to be identical to God himself, and in particular to his decrees" (129).¹¹ This general approach has the advantage of providing a straightforward account of the eternity and immutability of essences – which they derive from being in God – while escaping the objections just discussed. Unfortunately, it suffers from even more serious difficulties than Kenny's reading. Besides lacking direct textual support,¹² it saddles Descartes with what he would view as the worst kind of heresy, namely identifying God with his creatures. Again, Descartes insists that

the essences of finite things are produced by God's efficient causality in the same way as their existence. Locating diverse essences in God also violates the doctrine of divine simplicity which Descartes understood in the strictest of terms.¹³

A third interpretation, defended in this paper, is that Cartesian natures are nothing more than ideas in the minds of human beings.¹⁴ One attraction of this view is that it reconciles the Fifth Meditation treatment of natures with the conceptualist theory of universals that one finds in Descartes' other writings. In his early and late correspondence and in the *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), published three years after the *Meditations*, Descartes claims that eternal truths, essences, and/or universals are simply innate ideas or ways of thinking which have no being outside our thought.¹⁵ These texts provide a very strong *prima facie* case for reading the Fifth Meditation in the same way.¹⁶

Taking his cue from the other texts just mentioned, Martial Gueroult broadly gestures at an interpretation like this. According to Gueroult, Descartes holds that in addition to existing things outside my thought, "God has created in me the ideas of these things, and these ideas . . . I call essences". Such essences are distinct from existing things "as ideas are distinct from the things they represent" (vol. I, 270).¹⁷ But Gueroult does not develop this insight into a coherent interpretation. He also overrelies on the *Principles* without explaining how the conceptualism of that work squares with the apparent Platonism of the Fifth Meditation.¹⁸ Partially as a result of these shortcomings, the conceptualist interpretation of Cartesian essences has been largely overlooked.¹⁹

This paper attempts to develop the suggestion which identifies Cartesian essences with ideas by advancing a new interpretation of the Fifth Meditation that reconciles it with the conceptualism of Descartes' other writings.²⁰ Specifically, I argue that Descartes takes true and immutable natures to be innate ideas considered with respect to what he calls their 'objective being'.

To clarify this thesis, I begin in the next section by sketching the central features of the Cartesian theory of ideas, primarily as they are set forth in the Third Meditation. In Section 3, I situate the notion of a true and immutable nature, as it is introduced in the Fifth Meditation, within this prior theory of ideas. In Section 4, I answer potential objections to my main argument and explain how natures, even as ideas in our finite minds, can be immutable and eternal. I also discuss the proper relation of Descartes' views to Platonism.

2. *The Cartesian Theory of Ideas*

This section is not intended to provide an exhaustive treatment of Descartes' theory of ideas but an interpretation of those features which

are most relevant to the notion of a true and immutable nature. It is not clear that a full treatment of the theory of ideas is even possible, at least as that theory is set forth in the Third Meditation. In fact, we shall need to appeal to other texts on occasion to fill in some of its details. The reason for this is that Descartes unveils only as much of his theory as is needed to advance the meditator's epistemic status. The Third Meditation is not attempting to articulate a fully developed account of ideas but only to consider those things that one discovers naturally in the process of meditating in the proper order.

To understand why Descartes raises the subject of ideas in the Third Meditation, it helps to recall what things I, as the meditator, can claim as certain at this stage in the order. I just finished persuading myself in the Second Meditation that I exist as a thinking thing which possesses various thoughts, and that mind is better known than body. The hyperbolic doubts of the First Meditation, however, continue to leave me ignorant of whether anything exists outside me. If I am ever to progress beyond this solipsistic state and achieve certainty about things other than my mind, I must use my thoughts to do so because although I can doubt whether anything exists outside me – e.g., the earth, sky, and stars – I cannot deny that the thoughts of such things appear before my mind (Third Meditation; AT VII, 35; CSM II, 24).

Following the rule of the *Discourse* that we divide complex matters into simpler ones, Descartes says that the first task is to classify our thoughts into definite kinds. Some of our thoughts, we are asked to observe, are “as if images of things” (*tanquam rerum imagines*), e.g., the thought of man, a chimera, the sky, an angel, or God. Descartes enjoins us to reserve the term ‘idea’ for thoughts of this kind alone (AT VII, 36–37; CSM II, 25). He goes on to recognize other types of thoughts, most notably judgments, but for our purposes it will suffice to focus on the class of ideas. Within this class a further division can be drawn, or at least an apparent one. This is the famous threefold classification of ideas according to origin. Descartes says that some of his ideas appear to be innate, some adventitious, and others to have been invented by him. At this point in the order, however, the division is merely provisional. Our ideas *seem* (*videntur*) to divide naturally into three distinct categories, but that appearance might be deceptive. Indeed, it might turn out that our ideas are all adventitious, all innate, or all invented: “for as yet I have not clearly perceived [*clare perspexi*] their true origin [*veram illarum originem*]” (AT VII, 37–38; CSM II, 26). As we shall see in the next section, Descartes resurrects this division in the Fifth Meditation because at that point he thinks we have reached a place in the order where the true origin of our ideas can be clearly and distinctly perceived.

Of the three kinds of ideas just classified, Descartes thinks that adventitious ones – i.e., those which seem to be acquired through the senses –

deserve special attention because we are inclined to think that they derive from things existing outside us and that they resemble those things. If this inclination were based in truth, then the meditator would have a direct and simple way of achieving certainty about things other than his mind. In the course of investigating this inclination, however, Descartes discovers that it is based not in correct judgment but in some blind impulse (*caeco aliquo impulsu*). These ideas which, again, *appear* to be caused by things existing outside me, may in fact derive from some unknown faculty within me such as the one that produces ideas when I am dreaming (AT VII, 38–40; CSM II, 26–27). What had seemed like a promising lead turns out to be a false start, but from Descartes' perspective it is an important one to dismiss given the meditator's previous reliance on the senses as a source of certainty about things existing outside him.

With this route obstructed, Descartes says it occurs to him that "there is another way of investigating whether some of the things of which I possess ideas exist outside me" (AT VII, 40; CSM II, 27). At this point he introduces the centerpiece of the theory of ideas, namely the distinction between formal and objective being.²¹ It will be important to get a firm grasp of this distinction and, more particularly, the notion of 'objective being', as it plays a crucial role in the Fifth Meditation characterization of true and immutable natures.

For Descartes, every idea has two distinct kinds of being or reality – 'formal' and 'objective' – and, consequently, can be regarded in two ways.²² When we think of ideas as modes or operations of the mind, we are regarding them in terms of their formal or actual being.²³ This is the kind of reality that ideas share with all actually existing things, whether material or spiritual. As modes, ideas also have the same *degree* of formal being as all other modes and as each other. Descartes wants us to see that when regarded in terms of their formal reality alone, ideas are indistinguishable from one another: "In so far as the ideas are considered simply as modes of thought, there is no recognizable inequality among them: they all appear to come from within me in the same fashion" (AT VII, 40; CSM II, 27–28).

However, ideas can be distinguished from other existing things and, more importantly, from each other, by considering them with respect to their so-called 'objective' being. Unique to ideas, objective being is the kind of reality that an idea possesses in virtue of its intrinsic representational character. Earlier Descartes had compared ideas with images. We are now apprised of the significance of that analogy: when considered as images which 'represent' (*repraesentant*) or 'exhibit' (*exhibent*) different things to the mind, ideas are being regarded objectively or, equivalently, with respect to their objective being (AT VII, 40; CSM II, 28).²⁴

When considered objectively, ideas can be distinguished in two ways. First, we can distinguish them in terms of the *degree* of objective reality

that they possess. Being – whether formal or objective – admits of three discrete grades. The grade of formal being that any particular thing possesses is measured by its level of ontological dependence. Modes or accidents have the lowest grade of formal reality since they depend for their being on created substances.²⁵ Finite substances, in turn, have the next highest grade of formal being or reality since they depend solely on God for their existence. As an infinite substance, God has the highest level of formal being because he depends on nothing else for his existence and, in fact, is the source of all being (Second Replies, Axiom VI; AT VII, 165; CSM II, 117). This hierarchy of being is reduplicated for objective reality. Descartes says that ideas that represent finite substances have a greater degree of objective being than those that represent modes, while the idea of God has the greatest degree of objective being (Third Meditation; AT VII, 40; CSM II, 28).

For the purposes of the first causal argument for God's existence, Descartes focuses in the Third Meditation on this first way of distinguishing ideas. His aim is to show that the idea of a supremely perfect being is unique in having infinite objective reality and hence in requiring a cause with infinite *formal* reality, *viz.* God himself.

However, there is a second way of distinguishing ideas considered objectively that will prove to be more relevant to the concerns of this paper. This is a distinction between the objects or contents of ideas. Ideas which have the same degree of objective reality may be differentiated on the basis of their objects. For example, although the idea of the sun and the idea of the moon have the same grade of objective being insofar as they both represent substances, they nevertheless represent distinct substances with different properties and can be distinguished on this basis.²⁶

In speaking of the 'objects' (*objecta*) of Cartesian ideas one must be extremely careful to distinguish two kinds of objects – those within the mind and those outside it. Descartes often uses the term 'object' or 'thing' (*res*) in this context to refer to the former. Since ideas are intrinsically representational for Descartes, every idea exhibits some internal object to the intellect whether or not the object exhibited has a counterpart outside the intellect.^{27, 28} For example, I have ideas which represent other men, animals, and angels "even if there are no men besides me, no animals, and no angels in the world" (Third Meditation; AT VII, 43). While lacking actual or formal existence, these things at least have objective being in the mind.

In a move which will have important consequences for the ontology of mathematical objects, Descartes identifies this internal object of thought with the idea itself considered objectively. In the Third Meditation, he says that objective being is the mode of being "by which a thing exists . . . in the intellect by way of an idea" (AT VII, 41; CSM II, 29). This

does not yet state the identification between an idea and its internal object, but is suggestive of it. Descartes is more explicit about the identification in the First Replies. In the First Set of Objections, Caterus had stated that an idea is “the thing that is thought of, insofar as it has objective being in the intellect” (AT VII, 92; CSM II, 66). Although Descartes had never defined an idea in just this way, he adopts Caterus’ formulation in his reply and claims to have used it before, presumably in the Third Meditation: “Now I wrote that an idea is the thing which is thought of [*res cogitata*] insofar as it has objective being in the intellect” (AT VII, 102; CSM II, 74). But, as Chappell has noted, Descartes thinks the term *res cogitata* is ambiguous.²⁹ Whereas Caterus uses it to refer to something outside the intellect, Descartes says he intended it to stand for the idea itself “which is never outside the intellect”. The idea of the sun, for example, “is the thing which is thought of [*res cogitata*], in so far as it has objective being in the intellect” (AT VII, 102; CSM II, 74–75). Here the identification between an idea and its internal object is made explicit.

As we have seen, formal reality characterizes things that actually exist. Objective reality, by contrast, is the kind of reality that things in the intellect possess, as the internal objects of thought. To use scholastic terminology it is the being of being known. As such, objective being is less perfect than its formal counterpart. So the sun existing in my mind, by way of an idea, exists less perfectly than the sun existing outside my mind in the heavens (First Replies; AT VII, 102–103; CSM II, 74–75). Despite thinking that objective reality is an attenuated mode of being in comparison with formal existence, Descartes takes great pains to distinguish it from non being or nothingness. In the Third Meditation for example he writes:

... the mode of being by which a thing exists objectively or representatively in the intellect by way of an idea, imperfect though it may be, is certainly not nothing, and so it cannot come from nothing. (CSM II, 29; AT VII, 41)³⁰

The purpose of this elaborate qualification is that in order to prove that God exists, Descartes needs to establish that the objective reality of his idea of a supremely perfect being requires a sufficient cause. If objective being were nothing then this idea would need no cause and an essential premiss of the argument would be absent. As we shall discover in the next section, this characterization also plays a significant role in the Fifth Meditation where Descartes uses similar language and goes to equal lengths to qualify the kind of being possessed by things having true and immutable natures.

One final feature of the theory of ideas, which has not received the attention that it deserves, concerns the issue of whether some ideas are formed by combining other ideas. As with the other aspects of the theory

of ideas already discussed, this feature is raised in service of the causal argument for God's existence. In order to show that God's existence follows from our idea of an infinite being, Descartes needs to establish that the idea of God could not have been formed via a process of composition, i.e., by putting other ideas (or elements of other ideas) together. If it were to have originated in this way then we would not be justified in positing a being with infinite formal reality (*viz.* God) as its cause.

The Third Meditation proof of God's existence depends on an important causal principle, namely that every one of my ideas must have a cause with at least as much formal reality as the idea contains objectively. Descartes maintains that ideas must derive any objective reality they possess from things with formal being: "For just as the objective mode of being belongs to ideas by their very nature, so the formal mode of being belongs to the causes of ideas – or at least the first and most important ones – by *their* very nature" (AT VII, 42; CSM II, 29). He also thinks that the degree of formal being of these causes must be greater than or equal to the degree of objective being that they produce in the mind. This is just to say that they must be sufficient causes.

Descartes wants us to recognize that with respect to the ideas of finite things other than oneself, this principle can be satisfied without appealing to entities independent from the mind. As a thinking thing I have the level of formal reality that attaches to finite substances, and hence I can be the sufficient cause of ideas which represent other finite substances. The theory of composition is invoked at this point to provide a plausible account of how this might be possible. I could have produced ideas of various finite things by combining other ideas that I already possess. For example, the ideas of other men, animals, or angels, could have been "put together [*componi*] from the ideas I have of myself, of corporeal things and of God even if the world contained no men besides me, no animals and no angels" (AT VII, 43; CSM II, 29). Descartes goes on to argue that the ideas of corporeal things, in turn, may have originated in me by joining elements from the idea of myself (AT VII, 44; CSM II, 30). In the end, we are supposed to recognize that the idea of God is unique among all our ideas in containing an infinite degree of objective reality. It could not have been produced by combining ideas of finite things nor out of elements from the idea of myself. Its cause can only have been a being with infinite formal reality; hence such a being exists (AT VII, 45; CSM, 31).

Like the other features of the theory of ideas already discussed, the view that some ideas are formed by composing other ideas gets replayed in the Fifth Meditation. There Descartes implicitly appeals to composition as the mark of invented ideas and as a way of distinguishing such ideas from innate or, what I suggest we call, 'true and immutable ideas'. We are now prepared to turn to that discussion.

3. *The Fifth Meditation*

As was noted in the introduction to this paper, one of the things driving the standard Platonic reading of Cartesian essences is the term Descartes uses to refer to them. When he says in the Fifth Meditation that certain things like triangles have “true and immutable natures, essences, or forms” even if they do not exist, it is very tempting to suppose that he is positing a third realm of non-existent objects. This Platonic language seems much less seductive, however, once one examines the way that Descartes characterizes natures and the objects which are said to possess them. Much of what he says about the status of geometrical objects – the paradigms of things with true and immutable natures – can be traced to statements in the Third Meditation regarding ideas considered in terms of their objective being. Descartes seems consciously to be locating the notion of a true and immutable nature within the theory of ideas – a theory that he can expect is now quite familiar to the meditator. In this section I shall argue that despite the misleading term, Cartesian natures are innate intellectual ideas regarded objectively.³¹

Let us return to the passage from the Fifth Meditation with which we began this paper, this time with the aim of analyzing it and the surrounding paragraphs more carefully. In the full passage (which I refer to below as [A]) Descartes writes:

And what I think must be considered here most of all is that I find within me innumerable ideas of certain things, which, even if perhaps they exist nowhere outside me, nevertheless cannot be said to be nothing; and although in a certain way they are thought by me at will, nevertheless they are not invented [*inguntur*] by me, but have their own true and immutable natures [*veras & immutabiles naturas*]. So that when, for example, I imagine a triangle, even if perhaps such a figure exists nowhere in the world outside my thought, nor ever existed, there is still a certain determinate nature, or essence, or form of it, immutable and eternal, which was not invented [*non efficta*] by me, and does not depend on my mind [*nec a mente mea dependet*]; as is clear from the fact that various properties can be demonstrated of this triangle, namely that its three angles are equal to two right angles, that the greatest side is subtended by its greatest angle, and similar things, which now I clearly recognize whether I want to or not [*velim nolim*], even if I in no way thought of them before, when I imagined a triangle, and therefore were not invented [*effictae*] by me. (AT VII, 64; my translation)

This is a complex and difficult text to comprehend but fortunately Descartes provides clues to its proper interpretation in the first few lines. When he says that there are “certain things, which, even if perhaps they exist nowhere outside me, nevertheless cannot be said to be nothing”, he is drawing a distinction that harks back to the Third Meditation. Recall that in that earlier text Descartes had contrasted being or existence within thought with existence outside it, and claimed that with respect to finite

things other than oneself, the former is not dependent on the latter. A finite thing can have objective being within my mind without having formal being outside it. To use Descartes' illustrative examples, other men, animals, and angels have objective being as ideas, "even if the world contained no men besides me, no animals and no angels" (AT VII, 43; CSM II, 29). He seems to be relying on a similar distinction here in the Fifth Meditation in trying to account for the being of geometrical figures: such objects at least have objective being within the mind "even if perhaps they exist nowhere outside me."³² Although he does not use the term 'objective being' in this passage, as one might like, he employs almost the very same language to describe the kind of being that attaches to things having true and immutable natures as he had in the Third Meditation when characterizing the objective reality of ideas. Recall that for the purposes of the causal argument for God's existence, Descartes went to great pains to qualify the sense in which objective reality is a real form of being. He insisted that imperfect as it may be by comparison with formal or actual existence, objective being "is certainly not nothing, and so it cannot come from nothing" (*non tamen profecto plane nihil est, nec proinde a nihilo esse potest*) (AT VII, 41; CSM II, 29). Likewise, he affirms here that even if geometrical objects lack formal being, "nevertheless [they] cannot be said to be nothing" (*non tamen dici possunt nihil esse*).

In the remainder of the passage and beyond, Descartes provides further indications that he conceives geometrical objects as objective beings. He says that what shows that a triangle has a true and immutable nature and "cannot be said to be nothing" is that various properties can be demonstrated of it, for example, "that its three angles equal two right angles, that its greatest side subtends its greatest angle, and the like . . ." These and other properties that can be demonstrated of various geometrical figures, Descartes adds,

. . . are certainly true, since I am clearly aware of them, and therefore they are something, and not merely nothing; for it is obvious that whatever is true is something; and I have already amply demonstrated that everything of which I am clearly aware is true. (AT VII, 65; CSM II, 45)

According to the rule for truth established in the previous meditation, whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive is true. Thus, the various properties that I clearly and distinctly perceive of geometrical figures are true. Descartes analyzes truth here in terms of being: "whatever is true is something, and not merely nothing." But in the Fifth Meditation we are still doubting whether anything answering to our idea of triangle exists or has being outside the mind. So geometrical objects and their properties cannot possess what Descartes called in the Third Meditation 'formal being' and attributed to actually existing things. Rather they must possess

the type of reality that objects in the intellect are said to have, namely objective being – the only other form of being that Descartes allows. Geometrical figures then are what Descartes sometimes calls ‘true and real entities’ even on the supposition that there are no physical objects because they have properties which we clearly and distinctly perceive, and whatever we clearly and distinctly perceive has objective being within our mind.³³ Again, Descartes does not explicitly use the term ‘objective being’ in this passage, but the language he uses to describe geometrical objects is characteristic of his account of objective being in the Third Meditation. Although geometrical objects and their properties may lack formal existence, nevertheless they are “something, and not merely nothing” (*aliquid sunt, non merum nihil*).

Without mentioning the all-important notion of objective being, Kenny considers a reading like the one I have just presented. He says that Descartes’ position might be that a triangle exists in thought and has a true and immutable nature whether or not any triangles exist outside thought. But he rejects this interpretation on the ground that it is clear from the context of passage [A] (if not the grammar³⁴) that things (*res*), not ideas (*ideae*), have true and immutable natures.³⁵ This rejection, however, is based on the faulty assumption that there is an important distinction to be drawn between ideas and ‘things’ like geometrical objects, and that the latter must be extra mental entities. Kenny fails to recognize that geometrical objects are characterized as objective beings which, as we saw in the previous section, Descartes wants to identify with the ideas themselves. For Descartes the internal objects of thought just are ideas. Given this identification, ideas are the possessors of true and immutable natures after all.

So far, our interpretive efforts have concentrated on showing that geometrical figures are ideas considered objectively, but Descartes also indicates what sort of ideas he conceives them to be. Particularly telling is the fact that in the paragraph immediately preceding passage [A], he invokes the Platonic theory of recollection. He speaks there of various truths concerning shape, number, motion and the like which are so “consentaneous to my nature” (*naturae meae consentanea*) that when he first discovers them he seems not so much to learn (*addiscere*) something new as to recollect (*reminisci*) things that he already knew before (AT VII, 63–64; CSM II, 44). The location of this allusion to Platonic reminiscence, just prior to the paragraph in which true and immutable natures are introduced, strongly suggests that Descartes holds that our ideas of geometrical figures and the like are innate. This should not surprise us. There are many other contexts where Descartes asserts that our ideas of mathematical objects, and indeed all things having true and immutable natures – *viz.* God, mind, body – are innate.³⁶ What is remarkable about the Fifth Meditation is not the claim that these ideas are innate, but that

Descartes should use the term 'true and immutable natures' to designate this. I take it that what Descartes means by saying that something has a true and immutable nature is that it has objective being as an innate idea in our mind.³⁷ Although he never explicitly equates true and immutable natures with innate ideas he makes clear that this is his position by contrasting them with invented and adventitious ideas. For example, in passage [A] he states that geometrical objects and the like "are not my invention but have their own true and immutable natures" (*non tamen a me finguntur, sed suas habent veras et immutabiles naturas*). Again, in the next sentence, he emphasizes that the nature of a triangle is "not invented by me" (*a me non efficta est*). In the subsequent paragraph, he completes the classificatory scheme introduced in the Third Meditation by denying that geometrical ideas are adventitious: "It would be beside the point for me to say that since I have from time to time seen bodies of triangular shape, the idea of the triangle may have come to me from external things by means of the sense organs" (AT VII, 64; CSM II, 45). That Descartes should reintroduce the threefold classification of ideas in the Fifth Meditation, after having proved the rule that whatever we clearly and distinctly perceive is true, is highly significant. In the Third Meditation he said that the true origin of our ideas could not, at that point, be clearly and distinctly perceived. I submit that Descartes reintroduces this classification scheme here in the Fifth Meditation because he thinks the meditator is now able to perceive clearly and distinctly the origin of her ideas, particularly those which are innate.³⁸

4. *Immutable and Eternal Natures that do not Depend on the Mind*

The main argument for my thesis is now complete but a few difficulties remain whose solution will reinforce what has been established so far. One of the other reasons commentators have tended to resist a conceptualist interpretation of Cartesian essences, besides the Platonic language that Descartes uses in the Fifth Meditation to refer to them, is the statement in passage [A] that an immutable and eternal nature "does not depend on my mind" (*nec a mente mea dependet*). This has standardly been interpreted to mean that natures or essences do not depend *ontologically* on finite minds but enjoy an extra mental status. Wilson, for example, states: "Descartes presumably means to hold that geometrical essences strictly depend on the will and understanding of God, and not at all on any finite minds that may think of them. In this ontological respect Descartes' position seems at least quasi-Platonic."³⁹

I think an alternative understanding of the notion of 'dependence' is in order here, one which accords with my conceptualist thesis, but before

discussing it, it is worth observing that the standard interpretation of this notion is ruled out by Descartes' statements at the beginning of the passage. As we saw above, he characterizes geometrical figures as objective beings that exist within his mind whether or not they have any counterparts outside his mind. Having already portrayed geometrical objects as mental entities, Descartes cannot be claiming later in the passage that they or their natures do not depend ontologically on the mind, on pain of contradiction. He must be invoking another notion of dependence and, as the evidence I shall now consider makes clear, this is indeed the case.

Descartes' claim about the non dependence of natures on the mind must be understood in light of his efforts to distinguish natures from invented ideas. In the full statement he says that even supposing there are no triangles existing in the world, there is still an essence or nature of a triangle "which was not invented by me, and does not depend on my mind" (*quae a me non efficta est, nec a mente mea dependet*). I take the grammatical relation between these two clauses to be something like apposition; the second clause is a kind of elaboration or elucidation of the first. Something which was not invented by me does not depend on my mind. The link between being invented and being dependent on the mind is drawn even more explicitly later in the Fifth Meditation, where Descartes discusses God's true and immutable nature. There he claims to know that the idea of God "is not something fictitious depending on my thought . . ." (*non esse quid fictitium a cogitatione mea dependens*) (AT VII, 68; my translation). The implication is that invented ideas *do* depend on the mind, but in what sense? If we can answer this question, then we can get a handle on the sense in which true and immutable natures, by contrast, are 'independent' from the mind. All ideas depend on the mind ontologically, insofar as they are modes or modifications of mental substance. But presumably invented ideas depend on the mind in some other sense that is peculiar to them. One very plausible suggestion is that they depend on my mind in that they have been created or, as Descartes said in the Third Meditation, 'composed' (*componere*) by me (or at least by some human mind). Following the literal meaning of the verb *componere* invented ideas have been literally put together by me from other simpler ideas. Innate or true and immutable ideas, by contrast, do not depend on my mind in that sense since they have been implanted in me by God.

Support for this reading may be found in passage [A] and even more explicitly in the First Replies. In the latter text Descartes says that one obstacle to perceiving that God's existence follows from the essence of such a being is not knowing whether his essence is invented or true and immutable (AT VII, 116; CSM II, 83).⁴⁰ To remove this difficulty, he says, "we must notice a point about ideas which do not contain true and immutable natures but merely ones which are invented and put together by the intellect" (*sed tantum fictitias & ab intellectu compositas*) (AT VII, 117; CSM II, 83). This

passage gives a clearer sense of the contrast that Descartes drew in passage [A] between invented ideas and true and immutable natures; unlike the latter the former are compositional in character.

So Descartes is claiming that true and immutable natures do not depend *causally* on human minds. Not coincidentally, this is the same notion of dependence that Descartes invoked against Gassendi and which later occupied the Sixth Set of Objectors, who wondered about the type of causal relation that the eternal truths bear to God.⁴¹ Their queries gave Descartes the opportunity to reaffirm his voluntarist thesis that absolutely everything depends on God's efficient causality.⁴² As in the Fifth Meditation, he states that essences or the eternal truths do not "depend on the human intellect" (*pendere ab humano intellectu*), but once again not for the purpose of denying that they reside within the mind, only to insist that they are created by "God alone, who, as the supreme legislator, has ordained them from eternity" (Sixth Replies; AT VII, 436; CSM II, 294).

The 'independence' of true and immutable natures from the mind is closely connected with the sense in which they are 'immutable'. My thesis that true and immutable natures just are innate ideas raises no special problems for how ideas can be 'true', since Descartes maintains that truth is something that attaches to ideas (rather than propositions), but in what sense are innate ideas 'immutable'?⁴³ This seems problematic since our ideas are constantly changing. The solution that Descartes suggests in passage [A] is that innate ideas are immutable in the sense that they cannot be altered by our thought. He says that the properties that can be demonstrated of the idea of a triangle, for example, are ones "which now I clearly recognize whether I want to or not [*velim nolim*], even if I in no way thought of them before, when I imagined a triangle, and therefore were not invented [*effictae*] by me." Here Descartes is assuming the compositional theory of invented ideas just discussed.⁴⁴ Because invented ideas are composed by us – i.e., because they depend on our mind – we can add or remove anything from them that we like. There are no constraints on how we compose or decompose such ideas except for the simple ideas that we have at our disposal to serve as their parts. True and immutable ideas are not like that. Because they were created by God and not by us, these ideas impose their content on our thought, compelling us to think of them in certain prescribed ways *velim nolim*. This is not to say that we are ever compelled to think about any of our innate ideas. As Descartes makes clear at the beginning of passage [A], we can think of such ideas more or less at will (*ad arbitrium*). His point is that we cannot *alter* them at will; they cannot be corrupted in any way by our thought.⁴⁵

The 'independence' and 'immutability' of natures are thus complementary notions. True and immutable ideas are immutable insofar as they do not depend on our mind for their content. There is nothing about this claim that commits Descartes to a transcendent realm of extra-mental

objects. These two notions which initially appeared suggestive of Platonism ultimately cohere with our view of natures as conceptual entities.

If so-called 'true and immutable natures, essences, or forms' are simply objective beings innately implanted within our mind, then why does Descartes use such a misleading term to describe them? Why not use the more generic term 'innate ideas'? I think that the notions of immutability and independence that we just discussed answer these questions as well. The Platonic theory of forms is being used as analogy to highlight the sense in which natures are immutable and not dependent on our mind. Our innate ideas of geometrical objects, God, extension, etc. are *like* Platonic forms insofar as they are objective realities which cannot be altered in any way by our thought. In a passage designed to dispel the appearance of Platonism in Descartes' account of essences, Gueroult deftly writes:

If one is allowed to speak of the realism of essences, it is to the extent that, within my mind, clear and distinct ideas are presented as realities against which my own thought cannot do anything, since it is powerless to annihilate them or to modify them – in brief, it is to the extent that they are true and immutable natures, implanted in me by God. (DP, vol. I, 277)

More than using the theory of forms as an analogy, Descartes seems to conceive himself as amending Plato. By referring to innate ideas as 'true and immutable natures' he is consciously transplanting forms from Platonic Heaven to the minds of human beings.

Another apparent difficulty for a conceptualist interpretation of Cartesian natures is explaining their eternity. In the Fifth Meditation and elsewhere Descartes insists that essences are eternal, but how can this be reconciled with the view that essences are merely ideas in the minds of human beings? According to the Christian conception that Descartes accepts, the soul is merely immortal not eternal. Since ideas depend on human minds for their existence, this implies that prior to human existence there were no essences and no truths concerning them. So in what sense is the essence of a triangle, for example, eternal?

One strategy for resolving this problem would be to deny that essences are really eternal in the strict or literal sense of the term.⁴⁶ This solution however has the appearance of being ad hoc, especially since there is little or no textual basis for supposing that Descartes uses the term 'eternal' in any but a literal sense.⁴⁷

Fortunately we do not need to deny that essences are eternal, for much of the objection's force can be deflected. The problem of the eternity of essences is not endemic to a conceptualist interpretation of their ontology but arises independently as a result of Descartes' radical voluntarism and its implication that the eternal truths are created.⁴⁸ Indeed, one of the things that the Sixth Set of Objectors to the *Meditations* found so shocking

and incoherent about the latter was precisely the claim that created truths are eternal: "How can the truths of geometry or metaphysics, such as those you refer to, be immutable and eternal and yet not be [causally] independent of God?" (AT VII, 417; CSM II, 281).⁴⁹ Thus, whether or not essences reduced to ideas, there would still be a question of how anything created can be eternal. That having been said, I think that Descartes handles this problem by appealing to divine incomprehensibility.

It should be pointed out first that Descartes distinguishes the creation of the eternal truths from the creation of the world. It is an article of Christian faith that the world was created in time. Being a good Christian, Descartes endorses this view but, as Curley observes, he rejects the general assumption that all creation takes occurs in time, insisting that the eternal truths in particular were created "from eternity" (*ab aeterno*).⁵⁰ You might think that this latter statement relieves some of the tension between the eternality claim and the creation doctrine, but it is not clear that it solves all the problems. For one thing, how are we to understand creation "from eternity"? Curley also wonders whether we can reconcile Descartes' assertions that God created the world in time and the eternal truths from eternity with his view that God created all things by one perfectly simple act.⁵¹

In view of these remaining difficulties, of which I suspect Descartes was aware, I think his final position is that the eternality of essences (or eternal truths) is beyond human comprehension. We know that essences are created *and* we know that they are eternal, but we cannot reconcile these two pieces of knowledge. Descartes responds in this way to Gassendi who, as we saw in the introduction, had trouble understanding how anything immutable and eternal could exist apart from God. Descartes writes:

I do not think that the essences of things, and the mathematical truths which we can know concerning them, are independent of God; but nevertheless I think that they are immutable and eternal [*immutabiles & aeternas*], because God willed [*voluit*] and arranged [*disposuit*] that they should be so. Whether you suppose this is hard or easy to accept, it is enough for me that it is true. (Fifth Replies; AT VII, 380; my translation)⁵²

Here Descartes acknowledges the tension ("but nevertheless . . .") between his two positions regarding essences. He accepts this tension, however, because for him the eternality of essences is a brute fact – i.e., something to be affirmed whether or not one understands how it is compatible with their causal dependence on God.

To say that we cannot understand the sense in which created essences are eternal offends our desire for a philosophical explanation and seems ad hoc, but from Descartes' perspective the appeal is grounded in his view that divine infinity is incomprehensible to finite minds. Any matters requiring us to fathom God's infinity automatically invoke this appeal. In keeping with this principle, divine incomprehensibility is recalled

explicitly in most statements of the doctrine that the eternal truths are created.⁵³ On some of these occasions, Descartes is responding to the difficulty of reconciling the necessity of the eternal truths with God's infinite power, which would seem to include the ability to have made them false.⁵⁴ But in at least one passage, constructed as an imaginary dialogue, he confronts the tension between the eternity (and immutability) of mathematical truths and their causal dependence on God:

It will be said that if God had established these [mathematical] truths he could change them as a king changes his laws. To this the answer is: Yes he can, if his will can change. 'But I understand them to be eternal and unchangeable.' – I make the same judgment about God. 'But his will is free.' – Yes, but his power is beyond our grasp. In general we can assert that God can do everything that is within our grasp but not that he cannot do what is beyond our grasp. It would be rash to think that our imagination reaches as far as his power. (Letter to Mersenne, 15 April 1630; AT I, 145–46; CSMK III, 23)

Rather than reconciling the eternity of mathematical truths with God's freedom (given their dependence on his will), Descartes discourages us from trying on the ground that our minds are finite and divine power is infinite. As a matter of fact, he seems to think that the difficulty in conceiving how these two things are compatible stems from trying to fathom God's infinity in the first place. If we wish to speak truthfully and avoid contradiction, we should say only that the eternal truths are eternal because, as he told Gassendi, God willed that they be eternal. We should not try to understand how this is possible or if it is compatible with the divine attributes since this would require us to grasp God's infinity, something that our finite minds are not equipped to do.⁵⁵

5. Conclusion

I have argued that Cartesian true and immutable natures are innate ideas considered with regard to their objective being. This reading becomes quite apparent, I have shown, once one uncovers the link between Descartes' characterization of natures in the Fifth Meditation and the theory of ideas that he articulates in the Third Meditation.

This interpretation is attractive for at least three important reasons. First, it reconciles Descartes' account of natures in the Fifth Meditation with the conceptualist treatment of universals that one finds in some of his other works, especially the *Principles*, part I. It also preserves Descartes' mind-body dualism which the Platonist interpretation of natures, with its supposition of third realm entities, severely threatens. Finally, it better suits the method and epistemic project of the *Meditations* as a whole. True and immutable natures are introduced in a context where

one can doubt whether material objects exist, but not that one has true ideas of those objects. As in the Third Meditation, ideas are used in the Fifth Meditation to advance the meditator's epistemic project. These ideas are called by a peculiar name in the latter but only as a way of highlighting their status as objective realities which are innate to the mind and impose themselves on our thought.

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NOTES

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² In the First Replies, Descartes contrasts the method he used to prove God's existence in the Third Meditation "by means of his effects" with the method employed in the Fifth Meditation "by means of his nature or essence" (*essentiam sive naturam*) (AT VII, 120; CSM II, 85). Descartes uses the terms 'true and immutable nature' (or for short 'nature'), 'essence', and, to a lesser degree, 'form' interchangeably.

References to Descartes' work are abbreviated as follows: AT: *Oeuvres de Descartes*, revised edition, eds. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: J. Vrin/C.N.R.S., 1964–1976); CSM: *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and (for vol. III) Anthony Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); CSMK is used when vol. III is cited; CB: *Descartes' Conversation with Burman*, trans. John Cottingham (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976). In citations of AT, CSM, and CB, Roman numerals refer to volume and Arabic numerals to page. In some instances I supply my own translation, as noted in the text.

³ As he acknowledges in a reply to Hobbes who had expressed bewilderment about how something which does not exist could have a nature. Descartes curtly dismisses Hobbes' concern: "The distinction between essence and existence is known to everyone" (Third Set of Objections with Replies, Fourteenth Objection and Reply; AT VII, 193–94; CSM II, 135–36).

⁴ As Descartes states in the First Replies, "That which we clearly and distinctly understand to belong to the true and immutable nature, or essence, or form of something, can truly be asserted of that thing" (AT VII, 115; CSM II, 83). In the Fifth Meditation he also writes: "But if the mere fact that I can produce from my thought the idea of something entails that everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive to belong to that thing really does belong to it, is not this a possible basis for another argument to prove the existence of God?" (AT VII, 65; CSM II, 45).

⁵ I take this to be the force of Descartes' claim in the *Discourse* that he has examined the simpler demonstrations of the geometers and "noted that the great certainty which everyone ascribes to them is founded solely on their being conceived as evident (in accordance with the rule [that everything I clearly and distinctly perceive is true] stated above)" (AT VI, 36; CSM I, 129).

⁶ Just before this passage, Descartes writes: "Certainly, the idea of God, or a supremely perfect being, is one which I find within me just as surely as the idea of any shape or number. And my understanding that it belongs to his nature that he always exists is no less clear

and distinct than is the case when I prove of any shape or number that some property belongs to its nature" (AT VII, 65; CSM II, 45).

⁷ See e.g., the letters to Mersenne dated 15 April 1630, 6 May 1630, and 27 May 1630; AT I, 145–46, 149–53; CSMK III, 23–25.

⁸ "The Cartesian Circle and the Eternal Truths", *Journal of Philosophy* 67 (1970), 685–700.

⁹ *Descartes* [D] (1978), Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul. In an earlier work on Descartes, Kenny compares true and immutable natures or, more exactly, things such as geometrical figures which possess them, with Meinongian pure objects which are subjects of true predication whether or not they exist (*Descartes: A Study of His Philosophy* [DSP] (1968), New York: Random House, 150–56). Although these objects differ in important ways from Platonic Reals, Meinong's theory has a very Platonic ring to it. Commentators like E.M. Curley have accepted this version of Kenny's interpretation, though again with some reservations: "the Cartesian doctrine is one which only resembles Meinong's" (*Descartes Against the Sceptics* [DAS] (1978), Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 149).

¹⁰ As Hoffman has pointed out to me, one might object that hyperbolic doubt extends only to existences and not to essences, but I take seriously the universal character of Cartesian doubt.

¹¹ "Platonism and Descartes' View of Immutable Essences" [PD], *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 73 (1991), 129–70.

¹² In arguing for the claim that essences are divine decrees, Schmalz relies on the fact that Descartes identifies the essences of created things with the eternal truths (see Note 15 below). Thus Descartes' pronouncements regarding the ontology of the eternal truths can be applied to essences. In the absence of any direct evidence for his view, Schmalz extrapolates from texts where Descartes speaks metaphorically about eternal truths, comparing them with laws and 'moral entities' produced by God. Schmalz takes these metaphors very seriously and interprets Descartes as claiming that eternal truths are merely divine decrees which reside in God himself. To persuade us of this point he finds precedents in scholastic thinkers like Aquinas and Suarez for treating eternal laws (which are morally rather than physically binding) as divine decrees (136f). I find this whole line of argument highly speculative.

¹³ Schmalz has graciously responded to these two objections in correspondence. He tries to absolve Descartes of the charge of heresy on his account by distinguishing divine *causation* of eternal truths from divine *creation* of existing things, using as the basis for this distinction the following passage from an early letter to Mersenne: "You ask what God did in order to produce them [the eternal truths]. I reply that from all eternity he willed and understood them to be, and by that very fact he created them. Or, if you reserve the word 'created' [*creavit*] for the existence of things, then he 'established them and made them' [*illas disposuit & fecit*]" (27 May 1630; AT I, 152–53; CSMK III, 25). Schmalz argues that because God only 'established' or 'made' the eternal truths, and did not create them, there is no heresy in identifying them with the divine essence. But I think this reads too much into the passage. It is unfortunate that we do not have Mersenne's original letter, to see what Descartes was responding to when he says "if you reserve the word 'created' for the existence of things . . .". The most likely explanation is that he is making a purely semantic point. Mersenne may have wanted to reserve the term 'created' for actually existing substances, outside the mind. Descartes would be willing to grant this terminological concession, so long as it was understood that the eternal truths are products of divine will. He is often disdainful of verbal disputes and may simply have been trying to avoid one here. Further evidence against Schmalz's reading comes from the opening lines of the same letter, where Descartes insists that all things depend on God in the same way: "You ask me 'by what kind of causality God established the eternal truths'. I reply: 'by the same kind of causality' as he created all things, that is to say, as their 'efficient and total cause'. For it is certain that he is the author of the essence of created things no less than of their existence; and this essence is nothing other than the eternal truths" (AT I, 151–52; *ibid.*).

Distinguishing God's causation of eternal truths from his creation of existing things also constitutes another violation of the doctrine of divine simplicity, which brings us to Schmaltz's reply to my second objection. He claims that his account does not violate divine simplicity because eternal truths that are diverse in our intellect are unified in God. This move pushes Descartes even closer to Aquinas, who held that essences are unified in the divine intellect and that their diversity is engendered by an attenuation of this unity (see Emile Bréhier, "The Creation of the Eternal Truths in Descartes's System", *Descartes: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1967), ed. Willis Doney, New York: Anchor Books, 192–208, at 194f). But you might think that the reason Aquinas could hold such a view is precisely because he denied that essences are creatures of God's will. By affirming that essences are products of God's efficient causality, Descartes seems compelled to say that they are created as diverse, in which case they could not be in God without violating his simplicity. See Schmaltz, PD, 154–55.

For statements of the doctrine of divine simplicity, see the Third Meditation; AT VII, 50; CSM II, 34; the *Principles I*, 23; AT VIIIA, 14; CSM I, 201; and CB, 31–32. Also see the Letter to Mersenne, 27 May 1630; AT I, 153; CSMK III, 25–26 and the Letter to Mesland, 2 May 1644; AT IV, 119; CSMK III, 235.

¹⁴ Like the Platonist interpretation first suggested by Gassendi, this third reading of Cartesian essences has its source in one of Descartes' contemporaries. Nicolas Malebranche understood Descartes to be advancing a kind of conceptualism against which he opposed his own view that essences are uncreated and reside within God. He rejected the Cartesian account in part because he thought it produced skepticism:

We can see clearly . . . that to maintain that ideas that are eternal, immutable, and common to all intelligences, are only perceptions or momentary particular modifications of the mind, is to establish Pyrrhonism and to make room for the belief that what is moral or immoral is not necessarily so, which is the most dangerous error of all (Elucidation X, *Nicholas Malebranche: The Search after Truth*, Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp, trans., Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1980, 620).

¹⁵ Kenny and Schmaltz both understand that Descartes' views regarding the status of essences are closely related to his doctrine that the eternal truths are created. But they have not confronted the problems this relation poses for their respective interpretations. In one of the earliest expressions of the creation doctrine, Descartes identifies the essences of created things with the eternal truths: "[God] is the author of the essence of created things no less than of their existence; and this essence is nothing other than the eternal truths" (Letter to Mersenne, 27 May, 1630; AT I, 152; CSMK III, 25). This identification is very important because it implies that anything that Descartes claims for the ontology of eternal truths also applies to essences. Just so, in a previous letter to Mersenne Descartes indicates that eternal truths are innate ideas. In addition to be created by God, such truths "are all inborn in our minds just as a king would imprint his laws on the hearts of all his subjects if he had enough power to do so" (15 April 1630; AT I, 145; CSMK III, 23). Descartes makes a similar point some fourteen years later in the *Principles I*, where he asserts that "eternal truths have no existence outside our thought" but have "a seat within our mind" (*in mente nostra sedem*) (articles 48–49; AT VIIIA, 22–23; my translation). Descartes is quite explicit that eternal truths and, by the transitivity of identity, essences are nothing more than innate ideas in the minds of human beings.

If this were not sufficient indication of his position, Descartes proceeds in the *Principles* to give a conceptualist account of essences, mathematical entities, and all universals. He first identifies the "principal attribute" of a substance with its essence or nature (I, 53; AT VIIIA, 25; CSM I, 210). Later we are told that a substance and its attributes, most notably its principal attribute or essence, are merely *rationaly* distinct (I, 62–63; AT VIIIA, 30; CSM I, 214). This latter claim is crucial to Descartes' account of essences because it means that outside our thought a substance and its essence are "in no way distinct". The distinction

occurs only within our thought by a process of intellectual abstraction, making essences purely conceptual entities (Letter to an unknown correspondent, 1645 or 1646; AT IV, 349–50; CSMK III, 280).

The same treatment is given for mathematical entities like numbers which Descartes says are not something distinct from things which are numbered but “simply modes under which we consider these things” (*tantum modos, sub quibus illas consideramus*) (*Principles I*, 55; AT VIIIA, 26; my translation). The distinction between a substance and its number is merely a rational one resulting from a difference in our concepts (II, 8; AT VIIIA, 44; CSM I, 226).

As evidence of the consistency and longevity of Descartes’ thought on these issues, this account of essences and mathematical entities predates the *Principles* and can be found in a less developed form as early as the 1620s in the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*. In Rule 14, Descartes warns against treating extension, the essence of body, as something distinct from extended substance, and number as something distinct from the thing numbered. He apparently did not yet have the notion of a rational distinction, but his main point is the same: a substance can be distinguished from its essence or number within our thought by a process of abstraction even though it is not diverse in these ways in itself (AT X, 444–47; CSM I, 60–61).

Descartes’ conceptualism in both these texts is all the more noteworthy in that it appears to be informed by a staunch anti-Platonism. This is one reason Kenny’s interpretation of the Fifth Meditation rings so discordantly. After warning us in Rule 14 against reifying numbers, Descartes comments: “Those who attribute wonderful and mysterious properties to numbers do just that. They would surely not believe so firmly such sheer nonsense, if they did not think that number is something distinct from things numbered” (AT X, 445–46; CSM I, 61). Descartes does not specify which mysterious properties that he has in mind, but one does not have to speculate to see that he is referring to something like the ideal, extra mental status purportedly enjoyed by Platonic Reals. He is concerned to guard against Platonism because he thinks that even the best trained minds are easily seduced into reifying mathematical entities:

Although I am explaining these points at some length here, the minds of mortals are so prejudices that very few, I fear, are in no danger of losing their way in this area Even arithmetic and geometry lead us astray here in spite of their being the most certain of all the arts. For does not every arithmetician think that numbers are abstracted from every subject by means of the intellect and that they are even to be really distinguished from every subject . . . ? (AT X, 446; CSM I, 61).

Descartes’ mission against realism is carried over in the *Principles*, where he points out that a thing’s number or unity can be distinctly understood only if we do not ‘affix’ (*affingamus*) the concept of substance (*substantiae conceptum*) to it or regard it as distinct from the thing which is numbered (I, 55; AT VIIIA, 26; CSM I, 211). He also extends his conceptualism to universals. In addition to considering number in relation to particular substances, we also sometimes regard number in the abstract or in general, apart from any created things. Number considered in this latter way is what we label a universal and is simply a mode or way of thinking (*modus cogitandi*), as are all universals (I, 58; AT VIIIA, 27; CSM I, 212). In the subsequent article Descartes equates universals more specifically with ideas: “universals arise solely from the fact that we make use of one and the same idea [*idea*] for thinking of all individual items which resemble each other” (I, 59; AT VIIIA 27; CSM I, 212). In the Fifth Meditation the paradigm case of something with a true and immutable nature is a geometrical object, specifically a triangle. In the *Principles* such an object forms the basis for several different universals, all of which reduce to ideas:

. . . when we see a figure made up of three lines, we form an idea of it which we call the idea of a triangle; and we later make use of it as a universal idea, so as to represent to our mind all the other figures made up of three lines. Moreover, when we notice that some triangles have one right angle, and others do not,

we form the universal idea of a right-angled triangle; since this idea is related to the preceding idea as a special case, it is termed a *species*. And the rectangularity is the universal *differentia* which distinguishes all right-angled triangles from other triangles. And the fact that the square on the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides is a *property* belonging to all and only right-angled triangles. Finally, if we suppose that some right-angled triangles are in motion while others are not, this will be a universal *accident* of such triangles. Hence five universals are commonly listed: *genus*, *species*, *differentia*, *property* and *accident*. (ibid; AT VIII A, 28; CSM I, 212–13).

Descartes uses the triangle example to extend his account of universals to all five of the most common scholastic predicables. It is unlikely that Descartes himself takes this fivefold division seriously; he mentions it only to make clear that universals of all types can be reduced in the same way. In all places where scholastic philosophers were prepared to posit universal entities outside the mind, Descartes admits only ideas. Also see the letter to an unknown recipient, 1645 or 1646; AT IV, 348f; CSMK III, 279f. Chappell (see Note 19), Gueroult (DP I, 270f) and Schmaltz (PD, 131f) have interesting discussions of some of these texts.

¹⁶ The alternative is to suppose that Descartes held one position in the 1620s (when writing the *Rules*), changed his mind before publishing the *Meditations*, and then retreated to his original view while drafting the *Principles* in the years immediately following. This seems very implausible, especially since there is no record of such a dramatic flip-flop in his extensive correspondence.

¹⁷ *Descartes' Philosophy Interpreted According to the Order of Reasons* [DP] (1984), 2 vols, trans. by Roger Ariew, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

¹⁸ As Schmaltz points out (PD, 131f).

¹⁹ One exception is Chappell's excellent paper "Descartes' Ontology" (forthcoming in *Topoi*). His independent work approaches the issues in this paper in a similar way though the focus of his exegesis is the *Principles*, part I.

²⁰ There have been a few other attempts to reconcile the Fifth Meditation with Descartes' other work (especially the *Principles*, part I) but, with the exception of Chappell's paper (see Note 19), they have been ill conceived. In an effort to temper Kenny's Platonist reading, Alan Gewirth has argued that Descartes veers between Platonic and Aristotelian accounts of essences, offering different views depending on the text. ("The Cartesian Circle Reconsidered" [CCR], *Journal of Philosophy*, 67 (1970), 668–85; and "Descartes: Two Disputed Questions" [TDQ], *Journal of Philosophy*, 68 (1971), 288–96). Gewirth agrees with Kenny that in texts like the Fifth Meditation, Descartes treats mathematical essences as "independent both of existents and of human ideas or thoughts" (CCR, 678). But he claims that in works like the *Rules* and the *Principles I*, Descartes gives an Aristotelian account of both the ontology of mathematical entities and of how we acquire the ideas of such entities "by abstraction from empirically observed particulars" (CCR, 678; TDQ, 289–90). According to Gewirth, these two seemingly incommensurable positions can be reconciled quite easily: "Descartes' total doctrine combines the Aristotelian view that mathematical entities are modes or attributes of physical substances with the Platonic position that both mathematical entities and physical substances have their own essences even if they do not exist" (TDQ, 290). I have already expressed my objections to the Platonist reading of the Fifth Meditation, concerning which it is part of the aim of this paper to dispel. I also think it is wrong to characterize the position in the *Principles* as Aristotelian, for in calling mathematical entities like numbers "modes under which we consider things" Descartes does not mean modes or accidents of substances as Aristotle did, but rather *ways of conceiving* extended substance (see Note 15 above). As for Gewirth's claim about how mathematical ideas are acquired, I accept Gueroult's line that although mathematical essences are occasioned in our intellect by abstraction, they are not derived from sensible particulars in the Aristotelian sense (DP I, 272). They could not be derived in this way since they are innate.

Schmaltz also conceives himself as reconciling the *Principles* with the Fifth Meditation, but rather than privileging either text he reinterprets both and weaves a middle path which

avoids the extremes of conceptualism and Platonism (see PD, 162f). I find this to be an unsatisfying compromise for the reasons already given.

²¹ Descartes draws the same distinction using somewhat different terminology in the Preface to the *Meditations* (AT VII, 8; CSM II, 7) and in the Fourth Replies (AT VII, 232; CSM II, 162–63).

²² As I read Descartes, ‘being’ and ‘reality’ are equivalent expressions. Here I diverge from Chappell who argues that being (either formal or objective) must be distinguished from reality (either formal or objective): “Being belongs to a thing or it doesn’t; either something is or it isn’t. But reality admits of degrees . . .” (190) (“The Theory of Ideas” [TI], *Essays on Descartes’ Meditations* (1986), ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 177–98). There seems to be some textual basis for distinguishing these terms, but there are also striking counter-examples. Descartes does not consistently use the terms ‘being’ and ‘reality’ in the way that Chappell’s distinction would indicate, and he sometimes speaks indifferently of “being or reality” (*realitatis, sive entitatis*) (Geometrical Exposition, Axiom VI; AT VII, 165; CSM II, 117).

The following philosophical consideration also decides against drawing an ontological distinction between being and reality. As I understand the Neo-Platonic scale of being that Descartes is appropriating, there is no sharp division between being and non-being. The scale from being to non-being is finely graded. One significant difference on the Cartesian picture is that there are three, and only three, discrete levels of being or reality – infinite being, finite being, and modal being (ibid.). Still, he preserves the traditional conception in its other respects. Something either does not exist or it has a certain level of being. To impose a sharp distinction between being and non-being on the medieval conception that Descartes inherits seems anachronistic. We make such a distinction in the twentieth century but only because the idea that being is scaled has lost favor.

²³ Descartes uses the locution *actualis sive formalis* reality himself at one point, suggesting his identification of these notions (AT VII, 41; CSM II, 28).

²⁴ The phrase ‘considered as images’ (*les considerant comme des images*) occurs only in the French translation of the *Meditations*, an edition that Descartes did not produce himself but is known to have approved (AT IXA, 31).

²⁵ Modes are properties which a substance can change. Thus, because he is immutable, God has no modes but only attributes. See *Principles of Philosophy*, I, 56; AT VIII A, 26; CSM I, 211.

²⁶ See Chappell (TI, 188f).

²⁷ One might recall Locke’s definition of ‘idea’ as the “immediate object of thought” (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 2.8.8).

²⁸ In speaking of ‘counterparts’ and the ‘internal object of thought’ I am relying on Chappell’s account of the Cartesian theory of ideas (TI, 185f).

²⁹ TI, 186.

³⁰ This point is repeated in the First Replies: “Now this [objective] mode of being is of course much less perfect than that possessed by things which exist outside the intellect; but, as I did explain [in the Third Meditation], it is not therefore simply nothing” (AT VII, 103; CSM II, 75).

³¹ I should explain the qualification ‘intellectual’. In *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*, Descartes famously asserts that even our so-called ‘sensory ideas’ are innate on the principle that nothing enters the mind from outside (AT VIII B, 359; CSM I, 304). Despite the innateness of sensory ideas, I do not think that Descartes intends to include them among true and immutable natures, or at least I am not making a claim to that effect.

³² It may seem odd for Descartes to use expressions like ‘outside me’ (*extra me*) or, as he says later in the passage ‘outside my thought’ (*extra cogitationem meam*), given his view that the mind is non-spatial, but of course this expression is simply a metaphor that he often uses to indicate whether something is ontologically independent from his mind.

³³ Burman reports Descartes as having used the term 'true and real entity' (*verum et reale ens*) when discussing these passages from the Fifth Meditation. Descartes also reiterates the point just made that whatever we clearly and distinctly perceive is a 'true and real entity' and hence has a true and immutable essence (CB, 23).

³⁴ A few commentators, including Kenny, have pointed out that there is a grammatical ambiguity in the first sentence of passage [A]; it is not clear from the relative pronoun 'which' (*quae*) whether ideas (*ideas*) or things (*res*) are the possessors of true and immutable natures (see e.g., Curley, DAS, 142 and Kenny, DSP, 150). But everyone agrees that the context resolves the ambiguity. The resolution could be put this way: surely Descartes would say only of things, not ideas, that they might not exist outside me. While this is certainly true, it does not show that the 'things' to which Descartes is referring are extra mental entities. The term *res* is ambiguous; it can refer to objective beings within the mind or to things with formal being outside the mind. I argue that in this instance Descartes is using it to refer to the former. Because of the dual reference, Descartes can say that these things that exist within his thought may not exist outside him, but all that means is that they may lack formal counterparts.

³⁵ DSP, 150.

³⁶ See, e.g., the passage quoted in Note 38 below.

³⁷ I treat the significance of the term 'true and immutable nature' at greater length in the next section.

³⁸ The attempt to locate true and immutable natures within the threefold classification of ideas is even more explicit in a letter to Mersenne written in the same year the *Meditations* was published:

I use the word 'idea' to mean everything which can be in our thought, and I distinguish three kinds. Some are adventitious, such as the idea we commonly have of the sun; others are constructed or made up, in which class we can put the idea which the astronomers construct of the sun by their reasoning; and others are innate, such as the idea of God, mind, body, triangle, and in general all those which represent true, immutable and eternal essences (16 June 1641; AT III, 383; CSMK III, 183).

³⁹ D, 170–71.

⁴⁰ The term 'essence' here is being used to denote ideas generically, not true and immutable ideas specifically since it is supposed to be an open question at this point whether God's essence is invented or innate.

⁴¹ Sixth Set of Objections; AT VII, 417–18; CSM II, 281.

⁴² As he had, unbeknownst to his objectors, many years earlier in the Letter to Mersenne, 27 May 1630; AT I, 152; CSMK III, 25.

⁴³ Regarding the 'truth' of ideas, Descartes famously states in the Third Meditation that his idea of God is "the truest and most clear and distinct of all my ideas" (AT VII, 46; CSM II, 32). The rule for truth also affirms that whatever we clearly and distinctly perceive is true, where the objects of those perceptions are ideas. Now in the Third Meditation Descartes asserts that strictly speaking truth and falsity apply to judgments. But even there he wants to claim that there is another sense of truth and falsity, which he calls 'material', that attaches to ideas. I think these two senses of 'truth' complement one another: true ideas are those which provide subject-matter for true judgments. This is simply the counterpart to Descartes' claim that materially false ideas provide subject-matter for judgment error (AT VII, 37, 43–44; CSM II, 26, 30).

⁴⁴ This understanding of the role the theory of composition plays in this passage has been aided by Walter Edelberg's discussion (496–97) ("The Fifth Meditation" (1990), *Philosophical Review* XCIX, 493–533).

⁴⁵ Descartes repeats this point later in the Fifth Meditation with specific reference to the innate idea of God: "Now, admittedly, it is not necessary that I ever light upon any thought of God; but whenever I do choose to think of the first and supreme being, and bring forth

the idea of God from the treasure house of my mind as it were, it is necessary that I attribute all perfections to him, even if I do not at that time enumerate them or attend to them individually" (AT VII, 67; CSM II, 46–47).

⁴⁶ This is Chappell's tack in "Descartes' Ontology" (see Note 19 above).

⁴⁷ In tentative support of his view Chappell cites an interpretation that he attributes to Jonathan Bennett, namely that the term 'eternal' in the phrase 'eternal truths' means nothing more than 'unchanging' and is thus synonymous with 'immutable'. Descartes may be read as offering something like this in the Fifth Replies: "since they [truths that can be demonstrated of essences] are always the same, it is right to call them immutable and eternal" (AT VII, 381; CSM II, 262). I would point out however that the phrase 'are always the same' may be intended to describe 'immutable' alone; Descartes is not necessarily defining 'eternal' here as 'unchanging'. Chappell himself concedes that this account is not fully satisfactory since elsewhere Descartes affirms that these truths are created "from all eternity", which suggests that they are eternal in the literal sense after all. See Bennett ("Descartes' Theory of Modality" [DTM] (1994), *Philosophical Review* 103, 639–67, at 665).

In Descartes' first reference to the doctrine that the eternal truths are created, he avoids calling them eternal, attributing this epithet to Mersenne: "the mathematical truths that you call eternal" (15 April 1630; AT I, 145; CSMK III, 23). In another letter to Mersenne several years later, Descartes writes similarly, "even those truths which are called eternal" (27 May 1638; AT II, 138; CSMK III, 103). These two texts might be taken as evidence that mathematical truths are not eternal, that Descartes was simply adopting the Augustinian expression familiar to his correspondents. This suggestion however is belied by Descartes' emphatic claim in texts like the Fifth Replies (see below) that essences are indeed eternal. See Bennett (DTM, 663).

⁴⁸ Bennett writes: "Their [the eternal truths'] eternity creates a problem for Descartes on any of the more usual readings of his voluntarism" (DTM, 663).

⁴⁹ Also see CB, 15. Curley, more recently, has attempted to sharpen this worry. As he points out, creation is typically conceived as an act or event and hence takes place in time. It always makes sense to ask with respect to any event when it occurred. The same question however cannot be posed regarding something eternal. If something is eternal, the questions about when it came to exist are improper ("Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths" [DCET] (1984), *Philosophical Review* 93, 569–97; 578).

⁵⁰ On creation of the world in time, see Sixth Replies; AT VII, 432; CSM II, 291 and CB, 6–7. On the creation of the eternal truths from eternity, see Letter to Mersenne, 27 May 1630; AT I, 152; CSMK III, 25; Sixth Replies; AT VII, 436; CSM II, 294; and CB, 15–16.

⁵¹ DCET, 578–579. See the texts on divine simplicity cited in Note 13 above.

⁵² Aiming for a more literal translation, I have modified CSM here somewhat (see CSM II, 261).

⁵³ See the letters to Mersenne cited in Note 7 above. Also see the letter to Mesland, 2 May 1644; AT IV, 118–19; CSMK III, 235 and the letter to Arnauld, 29 July 1648; AT V, 223–24; CSMK III, 358–59.

⁵⁴ See especially the letter to Mesland cited in Note 53 above.

⁵⁵ This interpretation is based in part on some of the other passages mentioned in Note 53.