

Clear and Distinct Perceptions of Extension in Descartes's *Meditations*

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ABSTRACT

Emily M. Kelahan: Clear and Distinct Perceptions of Extension in Descartes's *Meditations*
(Under the direction of Alan Nelson)

In the *Synopsis* of *Meditations on First Philosophy* Descartes claims that he will develop a clear and distinct perception of extension “partly in the Second Meditation, and partly in the Fifth and Sixth Meditations (CSM II p. 9).” Unfortunately, many commentators completely ignore this explicit declaration of Descartes’s goal of developing a clear and distinct perception of extension over the course of the three aforementioned *Meditations*. This leads to serious interpretive errors. In this thesis I argue that it is important to take Descartes at his word in the *Synopsis*. I also argue that doing so requires one to adopt a particular interpretive approach, which I contend is preferable to the alternatives. Finally, I offer a model for understanding Descartes’s development of an enduring, indubitable clear and distinct perception of extension in the *Meditations*.

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Section 1.

Introduction

In the *Synopsis of Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes claims that he will develop a “distinct concept” of extension “partly in the Second Meditation, and partly in the Fifth and Sixth Meditations (CSM II p. 9).” Despite this explicit declaration of his intended goal of developing a clear and distinct perception of extension over the course of the three aforementioned *Meditations*, many commentators completely ignore this professed intention, which leads serious to interpretive errors.¹ Descartes is never so explicit about his strategy for developing a clear and distinct perception of extension as he is in the *Synopsis*. Thus, it is no surprise that his quite rich development of the perception is generally overlooked or under appreciated. However, an investigation of how this perception is developed will not only illuminate the meditator’s arrival at her innate idea of extension, but also her innate ideas of self, God, and union. It is an interesting feature of Descartes’s proof of extension that it requires the meditator to make *three* attempts at developing a clear and distinct perception of extension before she arrives at a perception that is enduring and indubitable.² No other

¹ I should pause to make a couple of terminological points. First, Descartes generally uses the terms ‘concept’, ‘idea’, and ‘perception’ interchangeably. Though Descartes uses the term ‘concept’ in the quotation I reference, I prefer to use the term ‘idea’ because I think it highlights extension’s status as one of Descartes’s famous innate ideas. I will also use the term ‘perception’ frequently to connect extension to the “truth rule” established in the *Third Meditation*. Secondly, Descartes uses the term ‘corporeal nature’ in the *Synopsis* and I have chosen to use the term ‘extension’. Descartes uses the terms ‘corporeal nature’, ‘extension’, ‘extended substance’, ‘matter’, ‘material substance’, ‘body’ and derivative terms interchangeably.

² I refer to Descartes as “developing a *clear* and distinct perception of extension.” In the *Synopsis* Descartes professes the need for a “distinct concept” of extension. Most commentators agree that distinctness entails clarity.

innate idea is quite so demanding. There is much we can learn about the structure of the *Meditations* by charting the elusive development of the perception of this innate idea.

In this paper I give a novel perspective on three important passages in the *Meditations*: the “wax argument” of the *Second Meditation*, the examination of the “true and immutable natures” of the subject matter of geometry in the *Fifth Meditation*, and the proof for the existence of material things in the *Sixth Meditation*. Most of my analysis is intended to supplement, rather than replace, the traditional accounts of these famous passages. I do, however, recommend abandoning certain interpretive approaches as well as certain characterizations of Descartes’s objectives in the *Meditations*. It is my hope that I am able to clearly display Descartes’s development of a clear and distinct perception of extension in the *Meditations*.

Clear and Distinct Perceptions

It is important to take a moment to examine the nature and job of clear and distinct perceptions. “Clear and distinct perception” does not immediately strike the reader as a technical term. However, it is clear that Descartes did use it as a technical term and had a highly developed account of what goes into achieving clear and distinct perceptions.³ The account I offer of Descartes’s development of a clear and distinct perception of extension in the *Meditations* requires a full appreciation of the powerful role played by clear and distinct perception. Descartes’s famous “truth rule”, a useful tool for navigating through the many confused and obscure perceptions the meditator encounters on the way to her clear and distinct perceptions, depends on a powerful notion of clear and distinct perception. The “truth rule” comes in two formulations, one positive and one negative. The positive

³ For a detailed account of Descartes’s systematic view of thinking and clear and distinct perceptions see Alan Nelson’s ‘Descartes’s Ontology of Thought’ and ‘Cartesian Innateness’.

formulation, given in the *Third Meditation*, establishes a procedure for determining perceptions of true things:

I am certain that I am a thinking thing. Do I not therefore also know what is required for my being certain about anything? In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting; this would not be enough to make me certain of the 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 (CSM Vol. II, p. 24).

Here it seems clear that Descartes does not think one arrives at true perceptions via inference.

Rather, what goes on is a performance or intuitive grasping of a truth.⁴ What does the work for Descartes is not a traditional deductive proof, but rather, the mental state of the meditator.

The negative formulation of the “truth rule” is given to us in the *Fourth Meditation*:

What is more, even if I have no power to avoid error in the first way just mentioned, which requires a clear perception of everything I have to deliberate on, I can avoid error in the second way, which depends merely on my remembering to withhold judgment on any occasion when the truth of the matter is not clear (CSM Vol. II, p. 43).

This formulation of the “truth rule” establishes a procedure for avoiding falsity.

The case for understanding the meditator’s arrival at the truth of our innate ideas as a performance rather than the result of a deductive proof is bolstered by the fact that relationship to the will is, as Nelson argues, “perhaps the most salient feature of clear and distinct perceptions.”⁵ In the text of the *Meditations* and in the *Second Replies* Descartes is rather explicit about this relationship. In the *Fourth Meditation*, for example, he writes:

...during these past few days I have been asking whether anything in the world exists, and I have realized that from the very fact of my raising this question it follows quite evidently that I exist. I could not but judge that something which I understood so

⁴ Many ideas including interpretive approach, analysis of clear and distinct perception, and “cognitive routing” (a term I will employ in later sections of this paper) are borrowed and/or derived from class lectures given by Alan Nelson in his *Modern Philosophy* seminar at UNC-CH held during the Fall semester of 2006. Class discussions with my peers also contributed greatly to my understanding of these ideas.

⁵ Nelson, Alan. ‘Descartes’s Ontology of Thought’, *Topoi* 16 (1997): 163-178, p 163.

clearly was true; but this was not because I was compelled so to judge by any external force, but because a great light in the intellect was followed by a great inclination in the will...(CSM Vol. II, p. 41).

It is not the case, then, that when a meditator is entertaining a clear and distinct perception she will pause for evaluation before assenting to the truth contained in the perception. Her will will assent automatically or she is not, in fact, entertaining a clear and distinct perception.

In addition to understanding clear and distinct perceptions by charting their relationship to the will, we also have the luxury of consulting Descartes's own definitions of these terms. In the *Principles, Part I, 45*, Descartes describes what is meant by "clear perception" and "distinct perception":

I call a perception 'clear' when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind – just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye's gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility. I call a perception 'distinct' if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear (CSM Vol. I, pp. 207-208).

There we have it, a clear and distinct perception is one that is present to the mind, accessible, sharply separated from other perceptions, and invariably affirmed by the will. The only feature of Cartesian clear and distinct perceptions left to discuss is their relationship to the doctrine of innate ideas. Descartes, a rationalist, thinks that certain of our ideas are innate, or "inborn" in us. Most commentators agree that at least the ideas clearly and distinctly perceived by the meditator are, according to Descartes, innate.

Interpretive Approaches

It is natural to discuss differences between my interpretive approach and that of other commentators who have written on this subject on the heels of my characterization of the relationship between clear and distinct perceptions and the doctrine of innate ideas. Speaking

broadly and vulgarly, the major differences between my preferred interpretive approach to Descartes's *Meditations* and that of well-known commentators, such as Daniel Garber and Desmond Clarke, are two.⁶ First, I take it as given that there are innate ideas to clearly and distinctly perceive. That this is the case is simply a fundamental Cartesian premise. In contrast, Garber especially, sees Descartes as *needing to prove* the existence of his innate ideas. Consequently, Garber finds Descartes's arguments for their existence less than satisfactory.⁷ Secondly, I see Descartes's conception of the foundations of empirical science as falling out of his metaphysics. This would seem obvious if it were not the case that commentators like Garber see Descartes's metaphysics as serving his physics. There is ample textual support for the view that Descartes saw his physics as following from his metaphysics rather than his metaphysics validating what he took to be good physics. In the *Preface* to the *Principles of Philosophy* Descartes emphasizes the priority of metaphysics:

...the word 'philosophy' means the study of wisdom, and by 'wisdom' is meant not only prudence in our everyday affairs but also a perfect knowledge of all things that mankind is capable of knowing, both for the conduct of life and for the preservation of health and for the discovery of all manner of skills. In order for this kind of knowledge to be perfect it must be deduced from first causes; thus, in order to set about acquiring it – and it is this activity to which the term 'to philosophize' strictly refers – we must start with the search for first causes or principles. These principles must satisfy two conditions. First, they must be so clear and so evident that the human mind cannot doubt their truth when it attentively concentrates on them; and, secondly, the knowledge of other things must depend on them, in the sense that the principles must be capable of being known without knowledge of these other matters, but not *vice versa* (CSM Vol. I, p. 179-180).

⁶ See Daniel Garber's *Descartes' Metaphysical Physics* and Desmond Clarke's "The Existence of Matter" in *The Blackwell Guide to Descartes' Meditations*.

⁷ In *Descartes's Metaphysical Physics*, Garber frequently saddles Descartes with the task of needing to show that our idea of body is an idea of a thing whose only properties are geometrical properties. On my account, Descartes needn't show that all other properties are excluded from our idea of body. I take him to be showing that our clear and distinct perception of body is really a clear and distinct perception of pure extension, which has only geometrical properties. We clearly and distinctly perceive body insofar as it comprises the subject matter of mathematics. A good meditator's will cannot but affirm the geometrical properties as belonging to extension. Any other properties we perceive are obscure and confused.

It is a consequence of what Descartes considers proper order of philosophizing that we are more certain of metaphysical first principles than of the results of empirical science.

Descartes says as much in his *Discourse on the Method*:

...if there are still people who are not sufficiently convinced of the existence of God and of their soul by the arguments I have proposed, I would have them know that everything else of which they may think themselves more sure – such as their having a body, there being stars and an earth, and the like – is less certain. For although we have moral certainty about these things, so that it seems we cannot doubt them without being extravagant, nevertheless when it is a question of metaphysical certainty, we cannot reasonably deny that there are adequate grounds for not being entirely sure about them (CSM, Vol. I, pp. 129-130)

In short, metaphysical first principles are both prior to and more certain than the results of physics.

I think my interpretive approach is preferable to those advocated by Garberian commentators for two reasons. First, the principles of charity require us to take the systematicity of an early modern philosopher like Descartes seriously. Once we have taken him to be a certain kind of philosopher, we will be able to see that premises, such as the existence of innate ideas and our ability to perceive them, which seem surprising to us are actually quite sensible for Descartes to take as given. We should then see him as systematically and rigorously arguing from them to interesting conclusions. If we do not grant Descartes these initial premises, we, like Garberian commentators, will see his project as going far off the rails not far from the station. As I see it, Descartes is most open to criticism on account of the initial premises he accepts; not on account of the seemingly absurd conclusions he reaches. Secondly, I do not think we should be seduced into believing that Descartes's philosophy was driven by what he regarded to be good physics. Descartes wrote many more pages on the sciences than he did on metaphysics, however, this does not mean that his metaphysics was intended to serve his physics. In fact, he has made explicit

statements to the contrary, as quoted above. It is important to make a distinction between Descartes's biography and Descartes's philosophical doctrines.

Section 2.

Strategy

The fact that developing an enduring, indubitable clear and distinct perception of extension takes Descartes three *Meditations* ranging from very near the beginning of the text until the final *Meditation* is a source of puzzlement. Why isn't the meditator able to completely achieve a clear and distinct perception of extension in the *Second Meditation*? What has changed for the meditator by the time she arrives at the *Sixth Meditation*? I have a hypothesis about why the meditator's clear and distinct perception of extension takes so long to develop and about what has changed for her by the close of the *Meditations*. The short answer to the first question is that she *does* achieve a clear and distinct perception of extension in the *Second Meditation*, and also, I think, in the *Fifth*. What has changed by the time the meditator reaches the *Sixth Meditation* is that all of the doubts that previously impeded the meditator's arrival at an enduring clear and distinct perception of extension are eliminated. By the *Sixth Meditation*, the meditator has acquired all the tools she needs to eliminate the various manifestations of doubt that creep up over the course of the *Meditations*.

The doubts the meditator must eliminate in order to achieve an enduring and indubitable clear and distinct perception of extension come in four varieties: illusory doubt, dream doubt, defective nature doubt, and unknown faculty doubt. Illusory doubt is the general skepticism about the senses that faces the meditator as early as the third paragraph of the *First Meditation*: "Whatever I have up till now accepted as most true I have acquired either from

the senses or through the senses. But from time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once (CSM Vol. II, p. 17).” Close on its heels, is the introduction of dream doubt. The dream doubt hypothesis is the following: if my dream experiences are qualitatively indistinguishable from my waking experiences, then I have no business placing more confidence in my waking experiences than in my dream experiences, which are dubitable. The third variety of doubt at play in the *Meditations* is defective nature doubt. Defective nature doubt takes many forms, but, at core, it is the idea that we may have a nature such that we go wrong even when we think our knowledge is most perfect. Many commentators distinguish between madman doubt, deceptive God doubt, and evil demon doubt. I, however, think these doubts are manifestations of defective nature doubt. The madman example, the consideration that God might have made us such that we go wrong even in simple matters of arithmetic, and the possibility that a demon is trying his best to deceive us at all times are introduced as tools to remind us that we are still subject to defective nature doubt.⁸ The final obstacle to the meditator’s clear and distinct perception of extension is unknown faculty doubt. Unknown faculty doubt makes its first appearance in the *Third Meditation*, becoming more prominent in the *Fifth*. In the *Fifth Meditation* the meditator has a clear and distinct perception of something she knows not what. When she contemplates the true and immutable natures of the objects of geometry, she knows their natures do not depend on her. She does not know what possesses formally all of the reality these natures possess objectively. Unknown faculty

⁸ For a more developed account of defective nature doubt see Newman and Nelson, ‘Circumventing Cartesian Circles’, *Noûs* 33:3 (1999) 370-404.

doubt is generated on account of the meditator's inability to eliminate herself as the cause of her ideas of true and immutable natures.⁹

These various forms of doubt operate on the meditator's modes of thought, forcing her to take particular "cognitive routes" to the innate ideas she is attempting to clearly and distinctly perceive. "Cognitive route" is a term I will be employing to signify the particular confused modes of thought the meditator must use to access Descartes's innate ideas under the various confused attributes they possess. The doubts shape the "cognitive routes" the meditator must take and the "cognitive routes", in turn, determine the attribute under which the innate idea in question is perceived. Please allow me to make this clearer with an example:

When the meditator performs the cogito, she is placed on the doubting "cognitive route" by illusory doubt. Illusory doubt determines her "cognitive route". Doubting, her "cognitive route", in turn, forces her to perceive herself under the thinking attribute, which is, in this case, the principal attribute of the substance in question: thinking substance.

"Cognitive routes", modes, and attributes are shrouded in what Descartes calls confusion and obscurity.¹⁰ This makes perfect sense, as Descartes's meditator is attempting to work from confused ideas to clear and distinct ones. When she has actually arrived at a clear and distinct idea she will know she that has because her will will invariably and inevitably assent. I call this model for understanding the structure of the development of the meditator's clear and distinct perception of extension the "doubt/route/attribute" model, as it traces the meditator's path from doubt to "cognitive route" to the attribute under which she eventually arrives at a clear and distinct perception of extension. In what remains of this paper I am

⁹ For a more developed account of unknown faculty and a general account of the structure of doubts in the *Meditations* see Lex Newman, 'Descartes on Unknown Faculties and Our Knowledge of the External World', *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 103, No. 3, (Jul., 1994), 489-531.

¹⁰ For a good discussion of Cartesian modes, attributes, and substances see Lawrence Nolan, 'Reductionism and Nominalism in Descartes's Theory of Attributes', *Topoi* 16: 129-140, 1997.

going to use this model to explain the development of the meditator's clear and distinct perception of extension in the *Second*, *Fifth*, and *Sixth Meditations*.

Section 3.

A clear and distinct perception of extension in the *Second Meditation*

According to one standard interpretation, the purpose of the famous “wax argument” of the *Second Meditation* is to show us that we are more certain of ourselves as thinking things than of the objects of sense perception. In short, mind is better known than body.¹¹ I agree with this interpretation, however, I think it is important to emphasize the secondary purpose of this passage. The wax argument does some important foreshadowing of what is to come and it displays one attribute under which extension can be clearly and distinctly perceived. It will be helpful to review at this time the structure of the wax passage. For my purposes, those of developing a supplementary account of the wax argument that displays the partial development of the meditator’s clear and distinct perception of extension, the wax argument is best understood as developed in three stages. In the first stage, Descartes begins by considering a piece of wax just taken from the honeycomb:

...it has not yet quite lost the taste of honey; it retains some of the scent of the flowers from which it was gathered; its color, shape, and size are plain to see; it is hard, cold, and can be handled without difficulty; if you rap it with your knuckle it makes a sound. In short, it has everything which appears necessary to enable a body to be known as distinctly as possible (CSM Vol. II, p. 20).

The sensory qualities of the body appear, at first, very distinct. However, if you place the wax near the fire, these qualities change completely. The wax loses its smell and taste; its color, shape, and size change; it becomes liquid, hot, and difficult to handle; and it no longer

¹¹ According to another standard interpretation, the purpose of the wax argument is to find the essence of matter.

makes a sound when you rap it with your knuckle. We do not conclude from these observations that the wax no longer remains. On the contrary, we are sure of this. However, it is difficult to pinpoint just why we are sure of this.

We know the sensible qualities of the wax are not essential to it. The wax that tastes of honey and the wax that does not taste of honey is the same wax. Perhaps the wax is a body that presents itself to us in various different forms. In the second stage of the argument, Descartes encourages the meditator to contemplate whatever is left of the wax when the sensory qualities we seem to perceive in it are removed:

But what exactly is it that I am now imagining? Let us concentrate, take away everything which does not belong to the wax, and see what is left: merely something extended, flexible and changeable (CSM Vol. II, p. 20).

When the meditator uses her imagination to arrive at the conclusion that the properties that constitute the wax are those of flexibility and changeability she comes close to arriving at the essence of the wax. However, the essence of the wax cannot be captured by meditator's imagination.

During the third stage of the wax argument, the meditator realizes that her imagination is not what allows her to know the wax as flexible and changeable. She begins to hone in on the faculty actually responsible for this knowledge. She notices that "the wax is capable of countless changes...yet I am unable to run through this immeasurable number of changes in my imagination, from which it follows that it is not the faculty of imagination that gives me my grasp of the wax as flexible and changeable (CSM Vol. II, p. 21)." The meditator is forced to conclude that the nature of the wax is "in no way revealed by my imagination, but is perceived by the mind alone (CSM Vol. II, p. 21)." In the third stage of the argument the meditator has ruled out her faculties of sensation and imagination as responsible for her

knowledge of the wax. Her clear and distinct perception of the wax, she realizes, is facilitated by pure understanding:

The perception I have of [the wax] is a case not of vision or touch or imagination- nor has it ever been, despite previous appearances- but of pure mental scrutiny; and this can be imperfect and confused, as it was before, or clear and distinct as it is now, depending on how carefully I concentrate on what the wax consists in (CSM Vol. II, p. 21).

There we have it: the meditator does indeed develop a clear and distinct perception of extension in the *Second Meditation*.

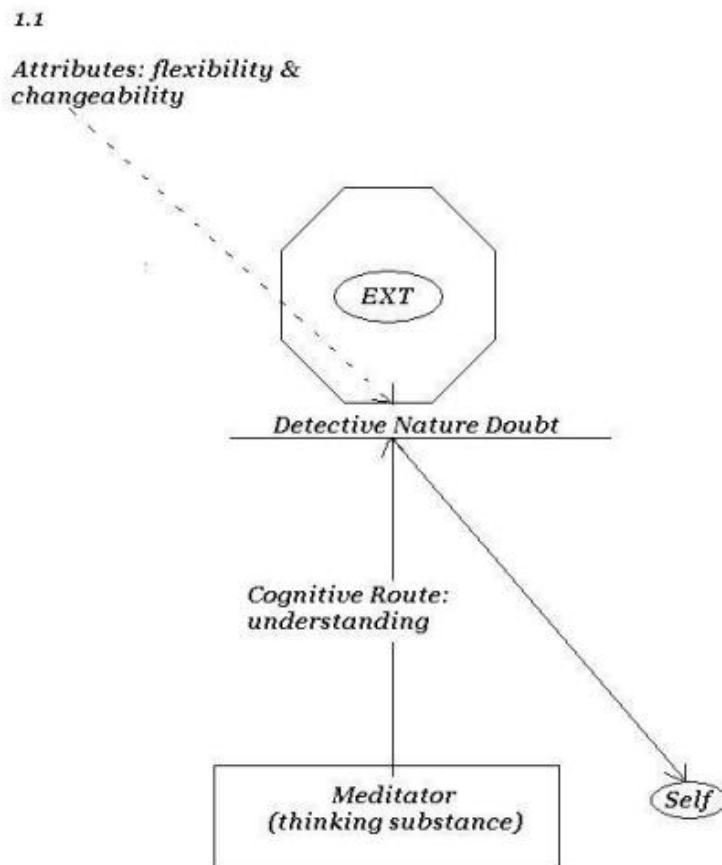
Of course, this clear and distinct perception is not long-lived. As is well known, the wax argument, traditionally understood, takes a definitive turn at this point. Descartes's meditator begins to realize that she is far more certain of herself than of her ideas of body. For my supplementary account of the wax argument, this is a pivotal point as well. The meditator has clearly and distinctly perceived something in the wax, which we know from the *Synopsis*, must be extension, but this perception is fleeting. It does not take much to distract the unpracticed meditator. Once her concentration is broken, she is consumed by defective nature doubt: "...as I reach this conclusion I am amazed at how <weak and> prone to error my mind is (CSM, Vol. II, p. 21)."

Now that I have outlined the general structure of the wax passage of the *Second Meditation*, please allow me to apply the "doubt/route/attribute" model more perspicuously. In the first stage of the wax argument illusory doubt forces the meditator to abandon sensation as a "cognitive route" to the essence of the wax, which we, having read all six *Meditations*, know is extension. Illusory doubt, in effect, forces the meditator off of the sensation "cognitive route" and onto the imagination "cognitive route". Once on the imagination "cognitive route", the meditator is not forced off of this route by a doubt of one kind or another, but rather by her own realization that the potentialities of the wax outstrips

her ability to imagine them. This realization quickly places her on the understanding, or “pure mental scrutiny”, “cognitive route”. This “cognitive route” leads her to a clear and distinct perception of extension under the attributes of flexibility and changeability. Her figurative travels on the understanding “cognitive route” end abruptly when defective nature doubt enters the scene. Not having much practice as a meditator, she is unable to hold onto her clear and distinct perception, and falls back into skepticism regarding external things. An interesting feature of the *Second Meditation* that will not be entirely clear until the close of this paper is that Descartes does some very explicit foreshadowing of events to come. In my supplementary account of the wax argument, Descartes actually mentions all three of the “cognitive routes” the meditator will explore in her quest for a clear and distinct perception of extension, including the route that will, once all of the doubts have been laid to rest, lead her to an enduring, indubitable clear and distinct perception of extension. Another way to think about the path the meditator is forced to travel in the *Second Meditation* is to focus on the number of doubts that require removal, rather than the number of routes on which the meditator travels. She takes *three* “cognitive routes” because there are *two* doubts to which she must respond: one about truth generally (illusory doubt) and the other about the identity of the truth.

Below you will find a figure representing the “doubt/route/attribute” model as applied to the wax argument of the *Second Meditation*. The oval containing the letters ‘EXT’ represents the innate idea of extension the meditator is attempting to clearly and distinctly perceive. I have chosen to represent the attributes of flexibility and changeability as one of the facets of an octagon. This way of representing the attributes is intended to make clear that the attribute structure of ideas is imposed by the meditator, and is not a part of the idea

itself. That is, we as meditators impose the attribute structure onto the ideas we perceive, but the ideas themselves are simple. The rectangle labeled ‘Meditator (thinking substance)’ represents the meditator. The upward pointing arrow extending from the rectangle represents the “cognitive route” taken by the meditator to her clear and distinct perception of extension. The horizontal line labeled ‘Defective Nature Doubt’ represents the particular doubt that prevents the meditator from achieving an enduring clear and distinct perception of extension. Finally, the diagonal line extending from ‘Defective Nature Doubt’ to the oval containing the word ‘Self’ represents the meditator’s retreat to an idea of which she is more certain than extension. The oval containing the word ‘Self’ represents the meditator’s clear and distinct perception of herself *qua* thinking thing.



Section 4.

A clear and distinct perception of extension in the *Fifth Meditation*

With regard to the *Second Meditation* I suggested that a careful reader of Descartes's *Meditations* should acknowledge that there is a secondary purpose of the wax argument. The wax argument is used primarily to establish that the meditator has more certain knowledge of herself as a thinking thing than she has of body, but it is also important to notice the impact the wax passage has on the development of the meditator's clear and distinct perception of extension. My analysis of the meditator's contemplation of the true and immutable natures of the subject matter of geometry in the *Fifth Meditation* is more aggressive than my analysis of the wax argument of the *Second Meditation*, and is intended to replace, rather than supplement, the traditional interpretation.

The "true and immutable natures" of the *Fifth Meditation* have puzzled many commentators, leading them to make such misguided assertions as "Descartes is a Platonist about mathematics." Traditional interpretations of the "true and immutable natures" passage seem to miss the connection between the work that was done in the *Second Meditation* and the work about to be done in the *Sixth*. Thus, it is often assumed that Descartes is either trying to develop a form of Platonism or is trying to use the "true and immutable natures" discussion to lay some groundwork for the ontological proof of God's existence he gives in the *Fifth Meditation*. Margaret Wilson, for example, writes:

Descartes tries to enlist the conception of true and immutable natures as a bulwark for the ontological argument. He wants to hold that only true and immutable natures can be used in deductions that derive real predications from concepts. This is supposed to

forestall certain kinds of counter-examples, that would tend to show that the ontological argument if sound could be readily adapted to prove the existence of myriads of things...¹²

Pierre Gassendi was probably the first commentator to suspect Descartes of Platonism. In the *Fifth Set of Objections* he writes, “But I do not want to stop and raise objections here; I will only suggest that it seems very hard to propose that there is any ‘immutable and eternal nature’ apart from almighty God (CSM Vol. II, p. 221).” It is clear from this quotation that Gassendi believes Descartes to be discussing some kind of bizarre “other realm” entity.

Many contemporary commentators have followed in this tradition. I do not think Descartes was a Platonist, nor do I think he was setting himself up for the ontological argument with an intriguing discussion of the “true and immutable natures” of the objects of geometry. There is a much more charitable and a much more sensible way to interpret this passage.¹³

To begin, it is important to review what has transpired since the meditator’s momentary clear and distinct perception of extension in the *Second Meditation*. As mentioned in the Introduction to this paper, Descartes develops the “truth rule” in the *Third* and *Fourth Meditations*. I hope this was made clear then, but it is worth reiterating now that this rule does work for Descartes only if we grant him a strong theory of clear and distinct perceptions. The “truth rule” helps the meditator to realize that she is, in fact, contemplating something true when she contemplates the “true and immutable natures” of the subject matter of geometry. She can tell that she has successfully clearly and distinctly perceived *something*, though she cannot tell what. This is, of course, because she has a present and

¹² Wilson, Margaret. *Descartes*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978, p. 172.

¹³ For more on the “true and immutable natures” of the *Fifth Meditations* see Lawrence Nolan’s ‘The Ontological Status of Cartesian Natures’, *Pacific Philosophy Quarterly* 78 (1997) 169-194. Nolan gives and defends an alternative account of the *Fifth Meditation* “true and immutable nature” passage that both avoids the interpretive errors of his predecessors and reconciles the passage with Descartes’s *Principles*.

accessible idea that is sharply separated from all other ideas to which he will cannot help but assent. Descartes also gives a causal argument for God's existence between the *Second* and the *Fifth Meditations*. In the *Third Meditation*, Descartes argues that God must exist because only God could be responsible for the idea the meditator has of God. This proof coupled with the ontological proof for God's existence he will give in the *Fifth Meditation* will help the meditator to combat one of the doubts I mentioned in the second section of this paper: defective nature doubt. The opportunity to lay this doubt to rest, however, will not present itself until the *Sixth Meditation*. As in the *Second Meditation*, the clear and distinct perception of extension the meditator achieves in the *Fifth Meditation* is momentary because it shifts into a clear and distinct perception of something more certain.

Let us take a closer look at the opening pages of the *Fifth Meditation*. The meditator, now in possession of a procedure for discriminating between truth and falsity, turns her attention to material things:

But now that I have seen what to do and what to avoid in order to reach the truth, the most pressing task seems to be to try to escape from the doubts into which I fell a few days ago, and see whether any certainty can be achieved regarding material objects (CSM Vol. II, p. 63).

The meditator's first step in this investigation is to examine her ideas of material things, which are merely modes of thought, so as to determine which ones are clear and distinct and which are obscure and confused. The meditator discovers that of all of her ideas of material things, she most clearly and distinctly perceives quantity. Specifically, she perceives the extension of "the thing which is quantified (CSM Vol. II, p. 63)." She can enumerate many features of the thing she clearly and distinctly perceives, such as its having parts and these parts having specified sizes, shapes, positions, motions, and durations. She clearly and

distinctly perceives quantity not only generally, but also in particular cases. The truth of these perceptions is completely transparent to her.

Having recognized the truth of her perceptions of quantity, the meditator immediately launches into an investigation of the source of this truth:

But I think the most important consideration at this point is that I find within me countless ideas of things which even though they may not exist anywhere outside of me still cannot be called nothing; for although in a sense they can be thought of at will, they are not my invention but have their own true and immutable natures (CSM Vol. II, p. 63).

The meditator is quite sure that the geometrical figures she has been contemplating do not rely on her for their reality. She observes that though no figure may exist outside of her corresponding to her idea of, for example, a triangle, the triangle nevertheless possesses a unique, unalterable nature that is in no way constructed by her. She knows this because she is able to demonstrate many properties of the triangle that could not have been somehow invented by her. Furthermore, she knows that her ideas of geometrical figures do not come to her through her dubious faculty of sensation, for although some figure-ideas, such as triangles, may have entered the meditator's mind through the senses, there are countless other figures of which there is no suspicion that they were encountered with the senses. The meditator does not make much headway on finding the source of the truth she perceives, but she remains certain that she does perceive a truth:

All these properties [properties demonstrated to be true of my figure-ideas] 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. And even if I had not demonstrated this, the nature of my mind is such that I cannot but assent to these things, at least so long as I clearly perceive them (CSM Vol. II, p. 64).

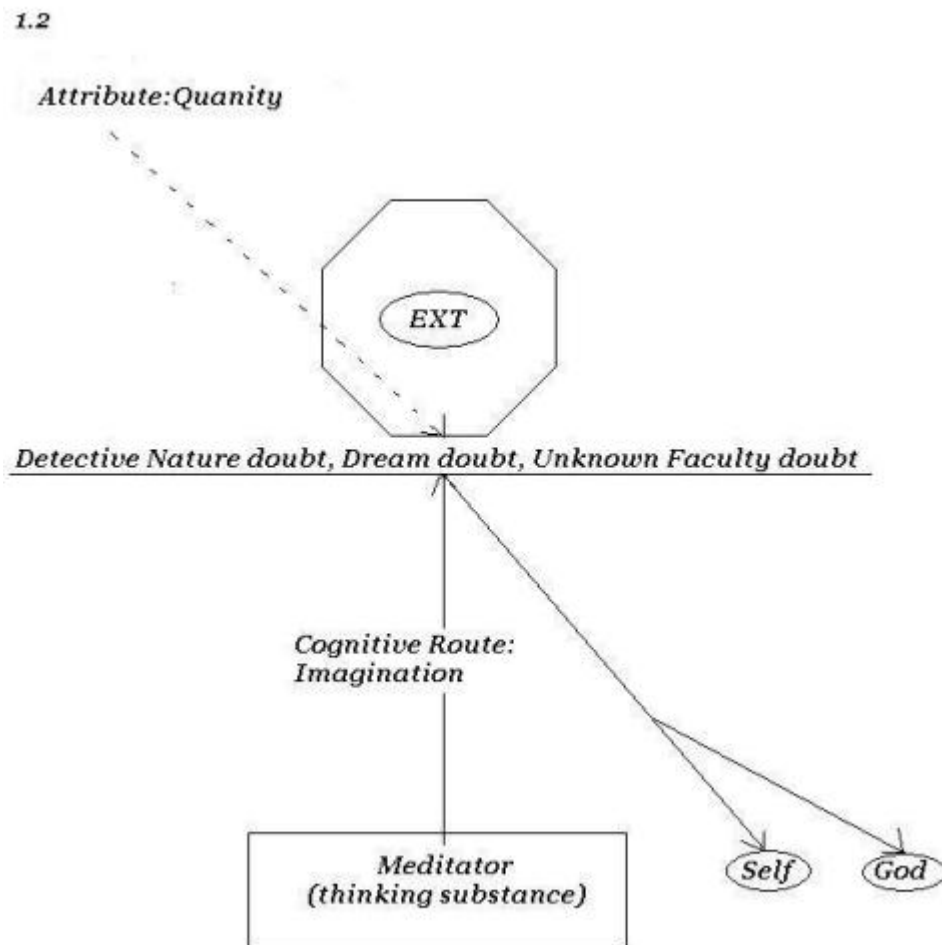
The meditator has undoubtedly achieved a clear and distinct perception of something, which we, having read the *Synopsis*, are privileged to know, is extension. Having a much more

developed clear and distinct perception of her innate idea of God, she turns to this idea once more, abandoning extension until the *Sixth Meditation*.

The “doubt/route/attribute” model applies slightly less directly to the *Fifth Meditation* than to the *Second*. This is because it is not as obvious how the doubts are working to shape the path of the meditator in this case. One thing that is clear is that the meditator is not permitted to take the sensation “cognitive route” at this time, as she has not yet eliminated illusory doubt. The meditator instead takes the imagination “cognitive route” that was abandoned midway through the wax argument on account of its limitations with respect to making sense of the attributes of flexibility and changeability. This time the meditator is honing in on a different attribute of extension: quantity, or the true and immutable natures of the subject matter of geometry. Imagination is well suited to contemplate this attribute. To recapitulate more perspicuously, illusory doubt forces the meditator to take either the understanding “cognitive route” or the imagination “cognitive route”. Having already pursued the understanding “cognitive route” to a clear and distinct perception of extension under the attributes of flexibility and changeability, the meditator takes the imagination “cognitive route” in the *Fifth Meditation* to a clear and distinct perception of extension under the attribute of quantity. The meditator quickly loses her grip on this clear and distinct perception because she is unable to determine in what its formal reality consists, and her attention shifts to something of which she is more certain: God.

Below you will find a figure representing the “doubt/route/attribute” model as applied to the true and immutable natures discussion of the *Fifth Meditation*. The representations in figure 1.2 are identical to those of figure 1.1 with the exception of one additional geometrical representation and a few label modifications. The additional geometrical representation is

the oval containing the word ‘God’ located next to the oval containing the word ‘Self’. By the *Fifth Meditation* the meditator has a second idea of which she is more certain than extension, God. You will also notice that the horizontal line representing the doubt that prevents the meditator from achieving a clear and distinct perception of extension is identified by two additional labels: ‘Dream doubt’ and ‘Unknown Faculty doubt’. The attribute represented by the indicated facet of the octagon is labeled ‘Quantity’. Finally, the “cognitive route” represented by the upward pointing arrow is labeled ‘Imagination’.



Section 5.

A clear and distinct perception of extension in the *Sixth Meditation*

An enduring and indubitable clear and distinct perception of extension is finally achieved in the *Sixth Meditation* with Descartes's famous proof of the existence of material things. Before I summarize how this task is accomplished, it is beneficial to situate the proof in the context of the other five *Meditations*. In the *First Meditation* Descartes introduces a methodology, the method of doubt, which calls into question the foundation of our knowledge. He also imposes an order for the building of a new foundation that dictates what is to be accomplished in the subsequent *Meditations*. In the *First* through the *Fourth Meditations* Descartes attempts to demonstrate the existence of the self *qua* thinking thing, God, and, less successfully, extension, while defending these ideas against skeptical doubts. The *Fifth Meditation* places the meditator at an interesting starting point for the *Sixth Meditation*.

In the *Fifth Meditation* the meditator has a clear and distinct perception of extension, but she is not sure of what truth it gives her knowledge. The big question at the start of the *Sixth Meditation* is: what formally has all of the reality that is contained objectively in the meditator's clear and distinct perception of a true and immutable nature? In the *Fifth Meditation* the meditator does not yet have the tools she needs to eliminate the possibility that the formal reality of her clear and distinct perception of a "true and immutable nature" consists in the self *qua* thinking thing or in God. The *Sixth Meditation* is designed in part to eliminate those possibilities and much of the proof of the existence of material things will be

dedicated to doing just that. I should take a moment at this point to reiterate the controversial nature of this interpretation. Many commentators would, as mentioned in the previous sections, claim that the true and immutable natures of the subject matter of geometry contain formally all of the objective reality the meditator perceives in the ideas she contemplates. I suggest that we should not believe that the story ends there, especially since Descartes has told us in no uncertain terms in the *Synopsis* that he addresses subject matter in the *Fifth Meditation* that is ultimately to be tied up in the *Sixth Meditation*. The idea that the formal reality of the meditator's *Fifth Meditation* clear and distinct perception of quantity consists in a quasi-Platonic "true and immutable nature" is at odds with Descartes's methodology and creates systemic interpretive problems. As Lawrence Nolan writes:

...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.¹⁴

It seems much more reasonable to take Descartes at his word in the *Synopsis* and see him as working up to an enduring clear and distinct perception of extension in the *Sixth Meditation* with his discussion of the true and immutable natures of the subject matter of geometry in the *Fifth*.¹⁵

¹⁴ Nolan, Lawrence. "The Ontological Status of Cartesian Natures", *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 78 (1997), p. 171.

¹⁵ See David Cunniff's unfinished manuscript 'Confusion and Mind-Body Union' and Lawrence Nolan's 'The Ontological Status of Cartesian Natures', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 78 (1997) or 'Reductionism and Nominalism in Descartes's Theory of Attributes', *Topoi* 16: 129-140, 1997 for more on this alternative interpretation.

For ease of exposition, I am going to include a somewhat shallow numerical representation of Descartes's *Sixth Meditation* proof of the existence of material things. Once it is on the table, I will justify and explain the steps:

- (1) I have a passive faculty of sense perception, but this requires a complementary active faculty since every action requires a passion and vice versa.
 - (2) The active faculty cannot be in me because I am not aware of it. It presupposes effort on my part, and I do not put out any effort.
 - (3) I am wholly and essentially thought (Proof of the Real Distinction).
 - (4) I clearly and distinctly perceive God, and I know she is no deceiver.
 - (5) God has given me a great inclination to believe that my sense perceptions are produced by material things.
 - (6) God has *not* given me a faculty for determining that she is the source, formally or eminently, directly or indirectly, of my sense perceptions.
 - (7) I cannot doubt the contents of a truly clear and distinct perception when I am clearly and distinctly perceiving it.
 - (8) Insofar as material things are quantified bits of extension, I clearly and distinctly perceive them. Therefore,
-
- (9) Material things exist insofar as they are quantified bits of extension.

The conclusion that material things exist is tantamount to proving the existence of extension, as Descartes thinks that we can clearly and distinctly perceive material things only insofar as they are modes of extension.

Process of Elimination, part I

The task of this proof is to execute an important process of elimination, that of eliminating the self *qua* thinking thing and God as possible formal causes of the meditator's sensory ideas of material things. Premises (1)-(3) are designed to block the possibility that the meditator *qua* thinking thing is responsible for her clear and distinct perception of the "true

and immutable natures” of the subject matter of geometry. They are intended to make clear that the meditator is not herself responsible for the active faculty required for sense perception.¹⁶ This arm of the process of elimination lays to rest one of the doubts the meditator must remove in order to achieve an enduring, indubitable clear and distinct perception of extension: unknown faculty doubt. These premises derive their strength from the *Sixth Meditation* proof of the real distinction between mind and body. In a moment I will attempt to reconstruct that proof, but first I should cite a bit of supportive text:

I find in myself certain special modes of thinking, namely imagination and sense perception. Now I can distinctly understand myself *as a whole* without these faculties; but I cannot, conversely, understand these faculties without me, that is, without an intellectual substance to inhere in. This is because there is an intellectual act included in their essential definition; and hence I perceive that the distinction between them and myself corresponds to the distinction between the modes of a thing and the thing itself. Of course, I also recognize that there are other faculties (like those of changing position, of taking on various shapes, and so on), which, like sensory perception and imagination, cannot be understood apart from some substance for them to inhere in, and hence cannot exist without it. But it is clear that these other faculties, if they exist, must be in a corporeal or extended substance and not an intellectual one; for the clear and distinct conception of them includes extension, but does not include *any* intellectual act *whatsoever* (CSM Vol. II, pp. 54-55, my emphasis).

Below you will find a reconstruction of the proof of the real distinction between mind and body derived from the quotation above:

- (1) I clearly and distinctly perceive thought “as a whole.” (In the above quotation “myself” refers to thinking substance.)
- (2) I clearly and distinctly perceive extension “as a whole.” (In the above quotation Descartes cites position, shape, etc as modes of a substance that cannot be intellectual because a clear and distinct perception of those modes essentially “includes extension, but does not include *any* intellectual act *whatsoever*.”)
- (3) The clear and distinct perceptions in (1) and (2) are distinct from each other (that is, they exclude each other).

¹⁶ I should distinguish between two senses of “responsible.” In one sense, the self is responsible for clear and distinct ideas in that they are innate. The other sense is that in which the objective reality of those ideas represent something other than the self.

- (4) God is omnipotent and capable of creating everything that I am capable of perceiving as I perceive it.
 - (5) Whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive is true.
 - (6) I clearly and distinctly perceive that I am a thinking substance only. Therefore,
-
- (7) I exist completely as a thinking substance.

This proof establishes that the meditator exists *completely* as a thinking thing. Though she may be joined to a body, that body cannot supply her with an *intellectual* faculty that is responsible for the content of her clear and distinct perception of extension.

To eliminate the possibility that the thinking substance is responsible for the meditator's clear and distinct perception of extension, the meditator must accomplish two tasks. First, she must show that none of the intellectual faculties of which she is aware of possessing supply the active faculty responsible for the perception of extension. Then, she must show that she cannot be in possession of an *unknown* intellectual faculty responsible for her perception of extension. Let us begin with the first task. In the *Sixth Meditation* Descartes mentions and contrasts three mental faculties: understanding, imagination, and sensation.

He begins by contrasting understanding and imagination:

I notice quite clearly that imagination requires a peculiar effort of the mind which is not required for understanding; this additional effort of the mind clearly shows the difference between imagination and pure understanding...[Furthermore], this power of imagining is not a necessary constituent of my own essence...For if I lacked it, I would undoubtedly remain the same individual as I now am; from which it seems to follow that it depends on something distinct from myself (CSM Vol. II, p. 51).

Descartes clearly thinks that neither understanding nor imagination could be responsible for the meditator's sensory ideas. However, it is not entirely clear *why* understanding is ruled out. "Understanding" just is having ideas, so, in one sense, sensory ideas are caused by the understanding, the sense in which they are ontologically dependent on the understanding *qua*

ideas. On the other hand, there is a sense in which the understanding is passive with regard to sensory ideas, the sense in which the understanding does not seem to supply the *content* of the ideas. That is, the sensory ideas seem to come quite against the meditator's will. The understanding, then, cannot be the active faculty responsible for sense perception.

The imagination, unlike the understanding, is active in that it requires a special effort on the part of the meditator. The imagination is *an* "active faculty", but it cannot be *the* active intellectual faculty responsible for the meditator's sense perception for three reasons. First, as indicated in the quotation above, the faculty of imagination is not essential to the meditator. Secondly, sensory ideas do not require any effort on the part of the thinking substance, and the imagination requires a "peculiar effort." Finally, the objects of the imagination clearly seem to be copied from sensory ideas: "I perceive these things much better by means of the senses, which is how, with the assistance of memory, they appear to have reached the imagination (CSM Vol. II, p. 51)." The imagination involves the will, but sensation does not. Therefore, the meditator's having the faculty of imagination does not establish the existence of the body on which it seems to depend.

The meditator has completed her first task, that of showing that none of the intellectual faculties of which she is aware she possesses supply the active faculty required for sense perception. Now we must examine her execution of the second task, that of showing that she cannot be in possession of an *unknown* intellectual faculty responsible for her sensory ideas of body. The meditator is clearly worried about this doubt:

And despite the fact that the perceptions of the senses were not dependent on my will, I did not think that I should on that account infer that they proceeded from things distinct from myself, since I might perhaps have a faculty not yet known to me which produced them (CSM Vol. II, pp. 53-54).

Just how the meditator eliminates unknown faculty doubt is not immediately apparent.¹⁷ It is beneficial to take a moment at this time to explain what constitutes an unknown faculty. The unknown faculty worry is essentially this: the meditator's sensory ideas of body and the faculty responsible for her sensory ideas of body may both be modes of the thinking substance, however, she is aware of the ideas but not of their cause, which is also in her *qua* thinking thing. In short, both the sensory ideas and their cause may inhere in the thinking substance without the meditator's knowledge. To eliminate this worry, she must show that the cause of her sensory ideas of body does not inhere in the thinking substance.

Though Descartes is not at all explicit about this in the text of the *Meditations*, he is committed to the epistemic transparency thesis, "according to which *there is nothing in the mind of which we are not aware.*"¹⁸ In a letter to Mersenne, Descartes writes:

What I say later, 'nothing can be in me, that is to say, in my mind, of which I am not aware', is something which I proved in my *Meditations*, and it follows from the fact that the soul is distinct from the body and that its essence is to think (CSMK Vol. III, pp. 165-166).¹⁹

If the meditator's thought is completely transparent, then introspection will make known to her all of the operations of her intellectual faculties, whether those faculties are known or unknown. The meditator is aware of all current operations of her mind. Thus, if she possesses an unknown faculty, she will at least be aware of its operations when they occur. Since the meditator is aware of everything in her present thought, when she is having a sensation, she is aware of all the intellectual faculties required by that sensation. She is not

¹⁷ For a more developed account of unknown faculty doubt see Lex Newman, 'Descartes on Unknown Faculties and Our Knowledge of the External World', *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 103, No. 3 (Jul., 1994), 489-531.

¹⁸ Newman, Lex. 'Descartes on Unknown Faculties and Our Knowledge of the External World', *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 103, No. 3 (Jul., 1994), p. 496.

¹⁹ See also *First Set of Replies*, CSM Vol. II, p. 77.

aware of an active faculty in her. Therefore, the active faculty must not reside in the thinking substance.

The final nail in the coffin of unknown faculty doubt is delivered by the meditator's own clear and distinct perceptions. In the Introduction I argued that Descartes must be interpreted as employing a very strong, technical concept of clear and distinct perception. If we grant him this, it follows from the meditator's clear and distinct perceptions of herself and of God that she cannot be in possession of unknowable faculties. By definition, the meditator's clear and distinct perception of herself cannot include the confused idea of unknowable faculties. Additionally, the meditator's clear and distinct perception of God affirms that God is not a deceiver. Resultantly, God would not condemn the meditator to confused perceptions, which never reveal the true nature of the innate ideas given to her by God. Finally, part of her clear and distinct perception of extension must be the perception that her ideas of material things are not produced by her. The epistemic transparency thesis does a lot of work here. The meditator's thought is self-aware. If there is nothing but thought in the meditator, which was proven by the proof of the real distinction, then there is nothing in thought of which she is unaware.

Process of Elimination, part II

Premises (4)-(7) are designed to eliminate the possibility that the objective reality of the meditator's sensory ideas of material things is derived from God. The premises should establish that the truth of which the meditator gains knowledge through her clear and distinct perception of extension is not God. This arm of the process of elimination is easier to execute than the previous arm. It follows from the meditator's own clear and distinct perception of God that God cannot be the source of her sensory ideas of body. By the *Sixth*

Meditation the meditator has two proofs of God's existence and is able to achieve clear and distinct perceptions of God with ease. If the meditator's perception of God included a deceptive nature, this perception would be confused and obscure, not clear and distinct. As it stands, the meditator's perception of God is quite clear and distinct, and she is certain that God is no deceiver. God gave the meditator a great inclination to believe that her sensory ideas of body are caused by external things, and God gave the meditator no faculty for removing this inclination by determining that she is the source of the meditator's sensory ideas:

But since God is not a deceiver, it is quite clear that he does not transmit the ideas (of extended things) to me either directly from himself, or 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; on the contrary, he has given me a great propensity to believe that they are produced by corporeal things. So I do not see how God could be understood to be anything but a deceiver if the ideas were transmitted from a source other than corporeal things (CSM Vol. II, p. 55).

God would be a deceiver if she were the cause of the meditator's sensory ideas of body because God has given the meditator an irresistible inclination to believe otherwise. Thus, the meditator can confidently conclude that God is not the cause of her sensory ideas of body. The meditator's clear and distinct perception of God not only guarantees that God is not the source of the meditator's sensory ideas of body, but it also guarantees that the meditator's clear and distinct perception of extension indeed represents the essence of material things. God's veracity guarantees that things are as the meditator clearly and distinctly perceives them.

I am now going to apply the "doubt/route/attribute" model to the development of the meditator's clear and distinct perception of extension in the *Sixth Meditation*. Once I have completed this task, I am going to explain more perspicuously how each of the doubts I

discussed in the second section if this paper is systematically eliminated by the close of the *Meditations*. The meditator is finally allowed to follow the sensation “cognitive route” in the *Sixth Meditation* because her clear and distinct perceptions of God achieved in the *Third* and *Fifth Meditations* guarantee that her senses cannot be completely unreliable. These clear and distinct perceptions also guarantee that the meditator cannot have a nature such that she always goes wrong even in matters of which she feels most certain. In other words, illusory doubt and defective nature doubt are almost completely eliminated by the close of the *Fifth Meditation* by the meditator’s clear and distinct perceptions of God. In the case of the *Sixth Meditation*, the meditator’s path is shaped more so by the *elimination* of doubts than by the presence of doubts. Because the meditator can place more confidence in her senses in the *Sixth Meditation* than in any previous *Meditation*, the sensation “cognitive route” leads her to a clear and distinct perception of the objects of her senses: material things. What she is clearly and distinctly perceiving in bodies is extension. The meditator’s clear and distinct perception of extension is achieved under the attribute of actually existing bodies. This clear and distinct perception is enduring because the meditator is able to eliminate all of the doubts that threatened her clear and distinct perception of extension in all of the preceding *Meditations*.

I have discussed at length the roles of the meditator’s clear and distinct perceptions of self *qua* thinking thing and of God in developing her clear and distinct perception of extension, but I have neglected to discuss her clear and distinct perception of mind-body union. This is perhaps because union is the last of the meditator’s innate ideas she perceives in the *Meditations*. Though it comes at the final stages of the development of the meditator’s clear and distinct perception of extension, its significance cannot be underestimated. The

meditator's clear and distinct perception of union performs two important functions. First, the meditator's inclination to believe that sensory ideas are caused by bodies external to her certainly comes from the mind-body union. The inclination serves the union well. The belief that the fire is really there or that the poison is a physical substance that really will cause harm is what compels the union to evacuate the burning building or to refrain from drinking from the bottle with the skull and crossbones label. Secondly, the meditator's clear and distinct perception of union helps her to eliminate dream doubt, the last remaining doubt. In his discussion of the role of the union, Descartes claims that the union is designed by God to inform the mind of what is beneficial or harmful to the union. He recognizes that he must explain why some people have a nature such that it leads them to do what is harmful to the union, as in individuals suffering from dropsy. Descartes gives a long explanation of why dropsy is not a counterexample to his claim about the role of the union, but the short explanation is that we always have the ability to correct apparent system failures. God gave us five senses and plentiful intellectual faculties all of which can be employed to correct system errors. Descartes's response to the dropsy case is equally on target in the dream doubt case. Dream doubt can be dismissed because the meditator can use all of her senses and intellectual faculties to determine that dream experiences are not linked to other life experiences in the same way that waking experiences are.

Doubts and their Removal

Before introducing the "doubt/route/attribute" model for understanding the development of the meditator's clear and distinct perception of extension in the *Meditations*, I claimed that there were four doubts that required removal before this clear and distinct perception could be achieved for longer than a moment. I am now going to review how these doubts were

removed in order to yield the enduring, indubitable clear and distinct perception of extension the meditator finds herself with in the *Sixth Meditation*. The first doubt to appear on the scene is illusory doubt, which is invoked by Descartes at the start of the *Meditations* to begin the building of a new foundation for our knowledge. Illusory doubt refers to general skepticism about the senses based on Descartes's conclusion that we mustn't trust the senses, as they often deceive us. It is removed partially in the *Third* and *Fifth Meditations* and completely in the *Sixth*. In the *Third* and *Fifth Meditations*, the meditator achieves clear and distinct perceptions of God, which guarantees that the meditator's sensory ideas cannot be completely misleading. Because God is no deceiver, it cannot be the case that the meditator's inclination to believe that her sensory ideas are caused by external bodies is misleading her. God's nature is such that if she is the cause of the meditator's sensory ideas, the meditator must be able to determine that this is so, and, if she is not, the meditator must be able to determine what is. In the *Sixth Meditation*, the meditator achieves a clear and distinct perception of mind-body union. She is able to ascertain that her inclination to believe that her sensory ideas are caused by external bodies comes from the mind-body union. This reinforces her trust in her senses.

The second doubt to enter the scene is dream doubt. In the *First Meditation* the meditator concludes that she cannot be certain of her waking experiences because they are qualitatively indistinguishable from dream experiences. By the close of the *Sixth Meditation*, the meditator knows that waking experience and dream experience almost always *are* distinguishable. She can use all of her senses and intellectual faculties to determine whether the experience in question links up to other waking experiences.

Defective nature doubt follows dream doubt. Defective nature doubt is eliminated at the close of the *Fifth Meditation* with the meditator's second, more developed, clear and distinct perception of God. Over the course of the *Fourth* and *Fifth Meditations*, the meditator discovers that God has given her the ability to correct her errors if she uses her faculties correctly. Thus, she need not feel threatened by defective nature doubt.

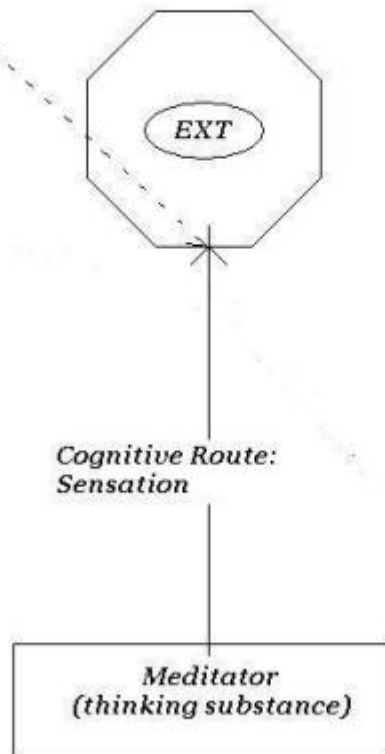
The final doubt to appear in the *Meditations* is unknown faculty doubt. In the *Fifth Meditation* the meditator has a clear and distinct perception of extension under the attribute of quantity, but she cannot tell that it is extension she is clearly and distinctly perceiving. For all she knows, she, thinking thing, may be the cause her clear and distinct perception. That is, she may possess an unknown faculty that is causing her to have sensory ideas. This doubt is eliminated in the *Sixth Meditation* with the proof of the real distinction between mind and body and the epistemic transparency thesis. With their assistance, the meditator can confidently conclude that she is aware of all of the present operations of her mind. Thus, she could not be in possession of an active faculty and be ignorant of its operation when it is operating.

Below you will find a figure representing the “doubt/route/attribute” model as applied to the *Sixth Meditation* proof of the existence of material things. The representations in figure 1.3 are identical to those in figures 1.1 and 1.2 with the exception of a few modifications. First, you will notice that the indicated facet of the octagon represents the attribute of actually existing body and that the upward pointing arrow extending from the rectangle that represents the meditator represents the sensation “cognitive route.” Secondly, you will notice that figure 1.3 contains no horizontal line. The absence of such a line indicates that all of the

doubts impeding the meditator's arrival at an enduring, indubitable clear and distinct perception of extension have been eliminated.

1.3

Attribute: actually existing bodies



Section 6.

Conclusion

I have argued that it is important to understand Descartes as developing a clear and distinct perception of extension partially in the *Second* and *Fifth Meditations* and partially in the *Sixth*. I have also argued that understanding Descartes in this way requires one to adopt a particular interpretive approach, an approach I believe is preferable to others for the reasons I cited in the Introduction. Finally, I have offered a model for understanding Descartes's development of a clear and distinct perception of extension in the *Meditations*, the "doubt/route/attribute" model.

This perspective on Descartes's objective with regard to the wax argument of the *Second Meditation*, the true and immutable natures discussion of the *Fifth Meditation*, and proof of the existence of material things of the *Sixth Meditation* is attractive for three reasons. First, it displays the connection between the three passages, seeing them as building on each other, rather than pursuing wholly independent projects. Secondly, it makes better sense of Descartes's works considered as a whole. Descartes explicitly declares that it is his intention to develop a distinct concept of extension over the course of the *Second*, *Fifth*, and *Sixth Meditations*. Refusal to take him at his word in the case of the *Meditations* often results in the unwarranted conclusion that Descartes is a Platonist of some kind. Platonism is clearly problematic for Descartes. Finally, this perspective provides a way of seeing extension as following from more fundamental metaphysical premises. The meditator's arrival at a clear and distinct perception of extension depends upon her having previously clearly and

distinctly perceived God and self. Extension was not introduced in an effort to support a view on physics, but rather because it followed from metaphysical considerations.

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