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### DESCARTES' SOCRATIC METHOD

Descartes once emphatically stated: “I have a habit to study no other thing more than the observed simplest truths that are innate in our minds, which when they are pointed to anyone, he does not think he was ever ignorant of them” (7.464).<sup>1</sup> It can be disputed whether it really was *always* his goal to find truths in *innate* ideas, but certainly his goal was to find scientific and philosophical truth and he found it eventually in himself, in innate ideas, but not of himself, since these ideas were not truly his, because they were given to him.

At first, Descartes tried to find the truth through intensive study of ancient authors (6.6). He found it unsatisfactory since, for instance, the ancient authors spoke about virtues, but they did not teach how to recognize them. Also, he encountered so many different views concerning the same subjects, and yet he was convinced that there must be only one truth. Therefore, even if something appeared to be only likely, and thus uncertain, Descartes considered it to be “almost false” (6.8). This stemmed from the conviction that in order to establish something certain and lasting, everything has to be abolished and certainty has to be built from the ground up (7.18). If he found any reason to doubt some conviction, he rejected it (18, 21). He abandoned reading books and wanted to

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<sup>1</sup> References are made to Charles Adam and Paul Tannery’s edition of *Oeuvres de Descartes*, Paris: Cerf 1897–1913, vols. 1–13, in particular, to the 15 April 1630 letter to Mersenne, 1.135–147; the 16 June 1641 letter to Mersenne, 3.382–383; the 22 July 1641 letter to Mersenne, 3.415–418; the 21 May 1643 letter to princess Elizabeth, 3.663–668; the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland, 4.110–120; a 1646 letter to Clerselier, 4.442–447; *Conversation with Burman*, 5.146–179; *Discourse on the method*, 6.1–78; *Meditations on first philosophy* 7.1–603; a letter to Voetius 8B.3–194; *Notes on a certain program*, 8B.341–369; *Principles of philosophy*, 9.1–325; *The search for truth by natural reason*, 10.495–527; Descartes’ annotations to his *Principles of philosophy*, 11.654–657.

find truth in himself and in nature, in “the great book of the world” (6.9, 10). Descartes used methodical doubting, doubting in everything that did not strike him with certainty, which was very much doubting in everything. He admitted that this method was not universal. Not everyone can follow the idea of abandoning all opinions held up until now. There are people who think too much about their abilities and are impatient about keeping rules of reasoning and by abandoning their convictions they would be lost (15). The modest ones are better off by using the authority of others. Descartes counted himself in this category, but he did not find yet a master who could be such an authority (16). His method of investigation was systematically delineated in the four rules presented in the *Discourse on the method*: 1. accept nothing that is not grasped clearly and distinctly; 2. break up each problem into smaller problems and analyze each one separately; 3. reason from the simple to the complex; and finally, 4. make sure that nothing was missed in the investigation (18–19).

Descartes was convinced that everyone has a natural light allowing for discerning truth and falsehood (6.27). Therefore, he relied on his inborn natural faculty to establish what truth is. He doubted the testimony of the senses, since they frequently deceive us and often require proper interpretation to see through them (a distant object appears to be small; a stick in water appears to be bent, etc.). Even the existence of the body is not altogether certain. However, one thing is certain: that I think, and the fact that I think means that I exist; whence comes one of the most celebrated philosophical statements: *cogito ergo sum* (33).<sup>2</sup> What thinks is the soul, the true self, the thinking substance (39), that is, a being able to think and endowed with imagination, judgment, volition, and emotions (7.28, 34).

Among the ideas the mind possesses is the idea of a perfect being, the being that is infinite, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, perfectly benevolent and loving. Natural light indicates that there cannot be more reality in the effect than there is in the cause; that is, nothing more perfect can arise from something less perfect (7.40). Since the self is finite and imperfect, an idea of a perfect and infinite being could not have been generated by the self, and thus, it must have been implanted in the soul by this very being, who is God (6.34; 7.45). It is the clearest and most distinct idea in the mind, and there is more reality in it than in any other idea (7.46). Therefore, the fact of the existence of the idea of God in the mind proves that God exists and that the idea itself is innate; that is, God put this idea in every person’s soul (51).

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<sup>2</sup> About the *cogito ergo sum* (“our soul exists”) principle he said that “there is no other principle on which it depends nor anything else that can be found rather than this” principle (4.444; *Principles* 1.10).

In this way, Descartes discovered in himself two truths which he considered to be firmly established and thus beyond doubt and, consequently, discovered in himself the inborn truth that he is a thinking substance that exists and that God, a perfect being and his Creator, also exists. The truth concerning his own existence Descartes considered to be the first philosophical principle he sought (6.33; *Principles* 1.7); the truth concerning the existence of God, however, is the first principal idea as a foundation for any other ideas. Regardless of the area of investigation, the idea of God should be assumed as the foundation of the truths arrived in this investigation, since God is the Creator of all, even of the eternal truths. Therefore, an atheist can clearly know that three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, but this would not really be true knowledge since it can be doubted, because without the underlying knowledge of God, nothing is free from the possibility of doubt (7.141): a mathematician who doubts in the existence of God does not do reliable mathematics, since if he can doubt in one of the clearest and principal ideas, the idea of God, how can he arrive at reliable knowledge? There must be something wrong with his mind to prevent him from perceiving what is clear and distinct, or he willingly blocks out the knowledge of God, and thus he would be ready to block out any other type of knowledge.

Descartes presented himself as an originator of the entire approach to the discovery of truth; on the other hand, he considered his views to be most ancient of all (7.464); it is, thus, interesting to see how much he owes to the investigative method of Socrates. He did say that the method of gaining knowledge he proposed is not taken from Plato or Aristotle (10.498), but by mentioning Plato he may not have meant Socrates as described in Plato's dialogues. Descartes knew the *Meno* and he mentioned that Socrates interrogated a boy in the subject of geometry to show that there were in the boy's mind truths that the boy did not know about and which he could recollect. The same way we know God, concluded Descartes (8b.167). That is, the Socratic method of investigation was quite suited for the Cartesian discovery of God, or rather, of the truth concerning God's nature and existence.

Socrates used his maieutic, or midwifing, method of bringing the truth from the inside of an interlocutor in two phases: first, he used the elenctic method of demolishing the interlocutor's convictions and then proceeded to coaxing the truth from him. The first step of the Cartesian method, the step of methodical doubt, is just a version of the Socratic elenctic method. Descartes applied it to himself, but he also applied it to others in the true Socratic spirit as illustrated in his unfinished dialogue, *The search for truth*.

Eudoxus, Descartes' spokesman in this dialogue, makes first Polyander doubt his dearly held opinions; as Eudoxus phrased it, "let me converse a bit with

Polyander so that I may, first of all, abolish all the knowledge he acquired until now" (10.509). Epistemon, the third participant of the conversation, was unable to make this step since, in his view, "such general doubts would lead us straight to the ignorance of Socrates, or to the uncertainty of the Pyrrhonists" (512). That is, the road to discovery of the truth was closed to Epistemon, since he was unwilling to go through the first, elenctic stage of the discovery process. Then Eudoxus suggested to Polyander that he knows that he exists because he doubts, with which Polyander readily agreed (515), and then Eudoxus just encouraged Polyander to discover by himself the truth to show "how far good sense (*sanus sensus*) can bring us" (521). Following gentle questioning of Eudoxus, who served in this process as an epistemological midwife, Polyander discovered by himself that he is not a body and that he is "a thinking thing," which is a conclusion to which Polyander came, "someone who is uneducated (*illitteratus*) and who did not busy himself with any studies." Polyander was able to accomplish it since "who gives himself properly to doubt, he can deduce from it most certain knowledge" (522). Like Socrates' slave-boy interlocutor (cf. 8B.167), Polyander, an unlettered man, was able to arrive at the truth of his being a thinking thing. Because Eudoxus assured him that from the universal doubt, the knowledge of God will be derived, and because we know God just as the slave-boy knows geometric truths, we can be quite certain that in the lost part of the dialogue Polyander, also by himself, arrived at the knowledge of the existence and nature of God. In this approach, Descartes closely followed Socrates.

Interestingly, in spite of vast ontological, theological, and eschatological differences between Plato and Aristotle, Descartes saw just one difference between them, which was the fact that "the former, following in the footsteps of his master Socrates, ingenuously confessed that he had never yet been able to discover anything for certain, and was content to set down the things that seemed to him to be probable," whereas Aristotle, with less candor, pronounced Plato's principles to be true. "The main dispute between their disciples was about knowing whether all things should be doubted, or whether there are some [things] which are certain" (9.6). This allowed Descartes to say that the greatest discussions in metaphysics are about the need to understand clearly and distinctly the first principles (7.157): not the content of these principles was a subject of discussion, in his view, but how clear they were. However, if clarity of mental principles is equated with their certainty, then unclear principles may be considered unreliable, until proven outright false, or are made clear. The problem of certainty, or assured philosophical footing, was the principal problem for Descartes and claiming too much certainty was for him a sign or unreliability of a particular view. The doubt is the beginning of certainty; the doubt is the assured road to reliability of knowledge; certainty is founded on doubt.

About the nature of one's knowledge and the origin of this knowledge Socrates said very little, in fact, just one sentence: "the soul is immortal and it has been born many times, and has seen all things here and in Hades and there is nothing that it has not learned" (*Meno* 81c; *Phaedo* 72e–73a, 77b). Thus, he believed in reincarnation and some way of acquiring knowledge by the discarnate soul. Later, Plato provided an ontological foundation for this epistemology by proposing the existence of the eternal world of forms/ideas which are models of everything that exists and which are viewed by the discarnate soul somewhere beyond the rim of heavens (*Phaedrus* 247c–e). The Socratic soul simply remembered what was already in it and thus gaining knowledge amounted to recollection, to releasing from inner resources knowledge which was there all along. Descartes spoke about God as the source of knowledge: God so created the soul that all the requisite knowledge was imprinted on it and it was just a matter of releasing it, making it explicit. The world of forms/ideas did not disappear, but became part of the mind of God, it was, as it were, fused with God. Therefore, Descartes could speak about remembrance, but it was not the remembrance, or *anamnesis*, in the Socratic-Platonic sense, since, Descartes, by expressing his allegiance to Christian theology, could not accept the theory of reincarnation, although he deliberately avoided the subject of the origin and the fate of the soul considering this to be part of revealed knowledge and thus something that cannot be simply decided upon by natural light (7.153). However, he was at least certain that his analyses lead to the accepted belief that the soul is immortal (6.59–60),

In the Platonic universe, all existing entities seem to be modeled on forms/ideas, and thus there was an inborn knowledge related to everything that exists. Descartes spoke about innate truths and he very likely may have been as generous about their scope as Plato. However, he did not provide one comprehensive list of innate ideas, only some partial lists.

Innate ideas include the idea of God, ourselves, thing, truth, thought (7.38, 51), substance, duration, order, number (*Principles* 1.48), freedom (1.39), being (3.665), extension (3.666), the number three (5.165), "God, mind, body, triangle, and, generally, all those which represent true, immutable and eternal essences" (3.383). Moreover, "the very ideas of the motions themselves and of the figures are innate in us," and so are "the ideas of pain, colors, sounds and the like" (8B.359). On the other hand, he also spoke about foundational ideas that he called "primitive notions which are the originals which are models to form all other knowledge. And there are only very few of such notions" (3.665). It would appear that because of the possibly large number of "immutable and eternal essences," most of these essences are formed from primitive notions, and thus there is a hierarchy of innate ideas. For example, he considered the idea of motion and figure to be innate (8B.359) and, at the same time, derived from

the primitive notion of extension (3.665). He considered an idea of the triangle to be innate, but apparently, also an idea of the chiliagon (7.72–73). Would an idea of a square, pentagon, hexagon, etc. be also innate? That would amount to an infinity of ideas just for geometric figures. He mentioned an idea of number three to be innate, which would indicate that ideas of numbers 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, etc. are also innate. On the other hand, there is an innate ability (*vis*) to think that for each integer there is a greater one (7.139). This does not seem to mean that this faculty literally generates integers: there is an infinity of ideas of integers in the mind, but these ideas are connected to one another through the ability, or rather just an innate principle, allowing to pass from an integer to a larger integer (that would be a faint adumbration of innate Peano’s arithmetic). There may be posited a similar faculty for geometric figures, which would indicate the existence of some organization among innate ideas, which would greatly enhance the process of searching the space of these ideas, and thus it would speed up the process of bringing them to the consciousness.

Innate entities are not limited to ideas; they also include eternal truths (common notions or axioms, although a difference between them and ideas is somewhat blurred when Descartes spoke about ideas or notions or innate axioms (8B.357)).<sup>3</sup> According to Descartes, eternal truths cannot be enumerated – and there is no need for it. It is because there are so many of them, some of them may not be brought to the conscious mind. Eternal truths include “nothing comes from nothing,” “it is impossible for the same [thing] to exist and not exist at the same time,” “what has been done cannot be undone,” “he who thinks cannot not exist while he thinks” (*Principles* 1.49), two things “which are equal to a third are equal to one another,” things “which cannot be related to a third in the same way are different from one another in some respect” (10.419; 8B.359; 5.146), “if equals are added to equals, what comes out from it are equals” (*Principles* 1.13, the second axiom of Euclid), “what can do more, can also do less,” “the whole is greater than its part” (4.111), and “there must be at least [as much reality] in the efficient and total cause as in an effect of that cause” (7.40). Eternal truths also include truths of mathematics that “are all inborn in our minds just as a king would imprint his laws on the heart of all his subjects if he had the power” (1.145), and of geometry when Descartes stated that the truth that the three interior angles of a triangle are equivalent to the sum of two right angles and other geometrical truths are “things whose knowledge is said to be by nature implanted (*indita*)

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<sup>3</sup> Fritz O. Rose, *Die Lehre von den angeborenen Ideen bei Descartes und Locke. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Apriori*, Bern: Sturzenegger 1901, 18, made a somewhat artificial distinction when he stated that principles are not inborn, but they are “placed in the soul, a priori.”

in us" (8B.166). Moreover, God created natural laws and ideas about these laws are also innate (6.41).<sup>4</sup>

However, not all ideas are innate (5.165). Generally, "among [my] ideas, some seem to me to be innate, some adventitious, some made-up by me, since my understanding of what a thing is, what truth is, what a thought is I seem to have from nowhere else but from my own nature; but my hearing now a sound, seeing the sun, or feeling the fire, as I judged until now, proceed from things which are outside of me; finally, sirens, hippogriffs and the like are have been invented by myself" (7.37–38; 8B.358). This classification is, however, only provisional, a point which Descartes himself made: "since I have not yet clearly perceived their true origin" (38). "Nothing comes to our minds from external objects through the organs of the senses except some corporeal motions ... But neither the motions themselves nor the figures stemming from them are conceived by us the way they occur in the organs of the senses ... Thus, it follows that the very ideas of the motions themselves and of the figures are innate in us. Also, the ideas of pain, colors, sounds and the like must be all the more innate so that our mind could represent them to itself on the occasion of corporeal motions, since [these ideas] bear no similarity to the corporeal motions" (8B.359). That apparently sensory ideas are not really sensory is obvious in the Cartesian system, where the body is identified only with extension; that is, "nothing belongs to the concept of body except that it is a long, wide, and deep thing capable of various shapes/figures and various motions," so that "colors, smells, tastes and the like are only sensations existing in my thought" and different from the body (7.440). This would indicate that innate ideas constitute a framework for any other ideas. There are no purely adventitious ideas; the latter are but occasions for the manifestation of the former.<sup>5</sup> In that sense, the theory of recollection is retained by Descartes: adventitious ideas hark back to the innate ideas, and the latter are brought to the fore through the means of adventitious ideas.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, he could state that there is in us an idea of a triangle, and when seeing a drawing of a triangle with all its imperfections, we

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<sup>4</sup> These are mechanical laws which are the same as the laws of nature (6.54).

<sup>5</sup> The difference between these two kinds of ideas is abolished altogether in the statement that Descartes' "distinction between innate and adventitious ideas is not that there are some ideas (such as the idea of God) which are innate, and others (such as those of heat) which are adventitious, but that one and the same idea (e.g., that of heat) is *qua* capacity innate and *qua* episode accompanied with extra-mental judgment adventitious" Anthony Kenny, Descartes on ideas, in W. Doney (ed.), *Descartes: a collection of critical essays*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1967, 233.

<sup>6</sup> "Descartes apparently means to indicate that even those ideas which arise on the occasion of external stimuli, and are therefore (under the previous classification) adventitious, have an innate character as well," Timothy McGrew, Unraveling Innate Ideas, *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 9 (1992), 311.

do not grasp the drawn triangle but the true triangle (7.382)<sup>7</sup>; in other words, a drawing of a triangle is an occasion for the recollection of the true, mental triangle. Generally, “it is surely obvious to everyone that sight [functioning] properly and of itself, presents nothing beyond pictures, and hearing nothing beyond voices or sounds; thus, what we think of beyond these voices or pictures as being symbolized by them is presented by ideas which come from nowhere else but from our faculty of thinking, and are along with it innate in us; that is, they always exist in us potentially, since existence in any faculty is not actual but only potential, because the word ‘faculty’ designates nothing else but potentiality” (8B360–361). In this way, “all those [ideas] which do not include any affirmation or negation are *innate* in us; for the organs of the senses do not bring us anything which would be like the idea which reveals itself in us on the occasion [of their occurrence], and thus this idea must have been in us before” (3.418). The reference to affirmation and negation here indicates that Descartes was speaking of concepts or perceptions rather than judgments, an exception which he reiterated in the polemic with Regius: “there is nothing in our ideas which is not innate to the mind, that is, to the faculty of thinking, with the sole exception of those circumstances which indicate experience, [the fact] that we judge that this or that idea which we now have present before our thinking refers to some thing outside of us” (8B.358–359). This becomes clearer in the case of fictitious ideas. Chimerical ideas, the ideas of non-existing entities, are combinations of entities which are simple and universal, real and true, such as corporeal nature in general, its extension, the form of extended things, their number, position, duration of their existence, and the like (7.20). This indicates that these universal, simple, real, and true entities are innate ideas which are used by the mind to create imaginary entities. In a way, such entities point more forcefully to the existence of innate ideas than the adventitious ideas. As Descartes stated himself, not all we see is true, but it surely tells us that our ideas are founded on truth (6.40).

The foundational ideas, which are innate, become the basis on which adventitious and fictitious ideas can be formed. Although there does not appear to be an idea of this particular stone, that particular man, or a siren, the combination of latent ideas of time, space, form, the self, etc. allows for the formation of the adventitious idea of this stone upon seeing it, of this particular man upon encountering him, and of a siren. In that sense, learning is remembering as Descartes himself suggested (7.63–64), in which he simply repeated the statement made by Socrates (*Meno* 81d).

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<sup>7</sup> A similar argument is found in Plato, *Phaedo* 74b–75a; Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, L’arrière-plan platonicien de débat sur les idées: de Descartes à Leibniz, in *Permanence de la philosophie: mélanges offerts à Joseph Moreau*, Neuchâtel: la Baconnière, Payot, 1977, 228.



How can innate ideas be recognized? They should become clear and distinct and the only definition of clearness and distinctness reads: "I call that clear which is present and apparent to the attentive mind, just as we say that we see objects clearly when, being present to the regarding eye, they move it with sufficient strength. The distinct is that which, being clear, is so separated from anything else and so precise that it contains in itself nothing but what is clear" (*Principles* 1.45; 7.157). That is, the truth is reached when enough attention (*satis attendam*) is given to the separation of things perfectly understood from the ones confused and obscure (7.62). There must be willingness and effort on the part of the cognitive subject to arrive at the truth. Innate ideas reside in the mind, and yet it is not always simple to reach them, to uncover them, to make them explicit. This is because the habits and prejudices accumulated from early childhood stand in the way and also a fear of plunging into the unknown by abolishing these prejudices and thorough self-examination. The innate ideas are always "present but submerged"<sup>8</sup> since they are obfuscated by attention directed to the carnal side of the human being.<sup>9</sup>

However, the definition of the clear and distinct is not altogether clear. It states that clear ideas should affect the attentive mind with sufficient strength, but what strength would be satisfactory to consider it a mark of clarity? Also, a distinct idea appears to be defined as very clear, clear without a shadow of unclarity; therefore, a clear but not distinct idea appears to be not perfectly clear. However, it seems that distinctness can be better defined in terms of comprehensiveness. Since an idea represents the essence of a thing (7.371), a distinct idea would be the one which includes all tenets of essence and, in that sense, it contains only what is clear.<sup>10</sup> Errors would arise when an idea is too broad, since some features of ideas are missed in perception (e.g., 7.371) or when it is too narrow by including some features which do not belong there (e.g., *Principles* 1.54–55). Therefore, it can be stated that the child's mind as being "immersed in the body" can perceive clearly but not distinctly (*Principles* 1.47).

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<sup>8</sup> John Cottingham, *Descartes' Conversation with Burman*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1976, xxxii–xxxiii.

<sup>9</sup> Ideas "are impeded or obstructed by bodily thoughts," Cottingham, *op. cit.*, xxxiii, and thus the soul must be "freed from the bonds of the body," Eduard Grimm, *Descartes' Lehre von den angeborenen Ideen*, Jena: Hossfeld & Oetling 1873, 59, since the attention of the mind "is shackled by sensory feeling and perception," p. 58.

<sup>10</sup> "A perception which is clear but not distinct would thus be a perception which fails to include some of the 'contents' of the idea of which it is a perception," Deborah A. Boyle, *Descartes on innate ideas*, London: Continuum 2009, 49.

Descartes, however, proposed another criterion or clarity, noncontradictoriness, by stating that obscure and confused ideas lead to contradiction, but never clear and distinct ideas (7.152).<sup>11</sup> In this way, even an idea of a concept that is difficult to comprehend would be considered clear when it does not lead to a contradiction. In this, Descartes again aligned himself with Socrates who rejected any tentative definition when it showed that it allowed for contradictory conclusions.

Importantly, clarity characterized innate ideas but is not limited to them. Sensory perception can also be clear, but clear sensory knowledge is not reliable, as in the case of optical illusions. Only what is clearly known by the mind is reliable (7.145).<sup>12</sup>

As everything else, the certainty stemming from clear and distinct ideas is founded on God. What is comprehended clearly and distinctly is true (6.33, 38; 7.35, 115), which is guaranteed by the perfection of God from whom ideas proceed (6.38). That is, each clear and distinct grasp is something real and positive and thus cannot stem from anything else but from God: God is the author of such grasping, the God, whose nature excludes a possibility that He is a deceiver, whereby there is no doubt that each clear and distinct concept is true (7.62, 70). In this way the certainty of knowledge is based upon the knowledge of God; God becomes the epistemological point of departure (71). Importantly, clear and distinct cognition is not perfect cognition. Because of the finitude of the mind and because of the infinite perfection of God, God cannot be perfectly known by the mind; knowledge of God can be known clearly and distinctly according to what the finite mind can comprehend (114). The mind clearly sees that God's power is infinite, although the nature of infinity itself cannot be fathomed by the mind (112). Paradoxically, just as God is the foundation of knowledge so is infinity – one of God's attributes – the foundation of the finite. Although the mind cannot fully comprehend infinity, the idea of infinity allows for a better knowledge of the finite.<sup>13</sup>

There remains the problem of the nature of innateness. Descartes gave in that respect somewhat incongruous signals which led to different interpretations of innateness: in the sense of the possession of innate disposition of abilities to ge-

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<sup>11</sup> "So, a proposition which is clear and distinct is a proposition whose opposite is a contradiction ... and this means that it is an analytic or necessarily true proposition," Robert E. Alexander, *The problem of metaphysical doubt and its removal*, in R. J. Butler (ed.), *Cartesian studies*, New York: Barnes & Noble 1972, 109.

<sup>12</sup> Thus, the distinction between clear-distinct and unclear-indistinct ideas is not the same as the difference between innate and adventitious ideas, Robert McRae, *Innate ideas*, in Butler, *op. cit.*, 46.

<sup>13</sup> This was termed Descartes' principle in Adam Drozdek, *Descartes: mathematics and sacredness of infinity*, *Laval théologique et philosophique* 52 (1996), no. 1, 168.

nerate ideas<sup>14</sup>; in the sense of the actual possession of ideas at all times, although not always and not all being brought to awareness; or, combining both senses, disposition and actual possession, but in respect to different types of ideas.<sup>15</sup> Ideas reside in the mind since he spoke repeatedly that God imprinted these ideas there. On the other hand, it was proposed that innateness is only a disposition to generation of ideas: they are not present in the mind all along, but when need be, when an occasion arises, that the inborn faculty or disposition generated them. However, with the latter interpretation, the difference between empiricism and innatism disappears, since, in both cases, the mind would begin with the *tabula rasa* which is gradually populated by ideas generated by the mind – due to impulses stemming from sensory perception or from images generated by imagination. However, it would be difficult to reduce Cartesianism to such a version of empiricism.

Descartes spoke about objective ideas, which are mental objects of thought: an objective idea of the sun is a mental entity which expresses the essence of the sun, since ideas represent true and immutable natures or essences of things (3.383; 7.64). It is not just an image of the sun, but a form which infuses sensory images with meaning; Descartes called it an objective idea. There is, of course, the

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<sup>14</sup> “No matter what X may be, the idea of X is innate in the sense that the capacity to think of X, imagine X, feel X, experience X, is inborn in us and not given to us by the stimulus that on a particular occasion makes us think of or experience X,” Anthony Kenny, *Descartes: A study of his philosophy*, New York: Random House 1968, 104. Descartes’ is dispositional innatism, according to which “not the ideas themselves that are innate but the disposition to form them,” Dominic Scott, *Recollection and experience*, New York: Cambridge University Press 1995, 92–93, 225–227. “We create Innate ideas from ourselves, they are not given by nature ... The innate idea designate not an ability of cognition in general, but an ability directed by nature at particular contents,” Rose, *op. cit.*, 25.

<sup>15</sup> This appears to be the interpretation given in the statement that “ideas of true and immutable natures are innate in a *narrow sense*, viz., they are implicitly present in the mind and employed in our explicit thoughts. They are ideas of the intellect and as such are employed in our sensory representation of the world. Ideas of color and the like are innate in a broader sense – viz., they are *causally* produced in us *in virtue of how we are built*. They are the ‘outcome’ of how we are immediately (and involuntarily) predisposed to experience the world (as colored, as sweet, as cold) in virtue of how the sensory faculty is built. In other words, ideas, according to Descartes are innate in a *narrow* sense when they are ideas of the intellect; and in a *broad* sense when they are the product of an innate sensory faculty,” Raffaella De Rosa, *Innate ideas and intentionality: Descartes vs Locke*, PhD diss., New Brunswick: Rutgers University 2002, 198. This also seems to be the understanding included in the statement that “innateness comes in degrees”; therefore, “maximally innate ideas are those which depend entirely on the power of thinking—that is, they appear to come from no externally existing object. Ideas which are innate to a lesser degree, then, would be those which seem to be in us due partly to some external object. Finally, the least innate ideas would be those which seem to come to us entirely from an external object. They would count as innate insofar as all ideas, as modes of thought are in us due at least partly to our power of thinking. But because they also seem to us to come from external objects, they would be only minimally innate,” Boyle, *op. cit.*, 44; at least the “minimally innate” ideas are reduced to the mind’s ability to recognize ideas coming from the outside, which reduces innatism to simple learning.

mind's ability or disposition to mentally view such objective ideas, and, finally, there is an act of perceiving this idea, and this act he called the material idea. For Descartes, there is a mental store of objective ideas, the store present in the mind from the very birth of each person, although the person does not become aware of this store, and it is quite possible that most people will never become aware of the entire content of this store. The access to it is blocked by the bodily side of the human being. It takes a great deal of cognitive effort to reach it, at least some parts of it – through the Socratic-Cartesian method of universal doubt and through scrutinizing everything which is presented as inviolable truth. Some parts of this store of ideas and eternal truths may never be needed: not everyone is interested in geometry; thus, innate ideas pertaining to geometry may never surface in people's consciousness. Innate ideas are always there, under the surface, buried in subconsciousness and only in the act of thinking about them do they become real to a person, that is, when they become material ideas visualized by the inborn reflective faculty.<sup>16</sup> The mind is able to generate ideas – fictitious ideas – only because it can base this generative act on the existing store of innate ideas. The finite and thus imperfect human mind is incapable of generating eternal truths because their perfection exceeds the ability of the finite mind. If the mind knows such truths, it is because they were put there by God upon creating the human soul, that is, the human mind. Starting with the *tabula rasa* and ending with the knowledge of eternal truths would be hubristic in Descartes' eye, since it would make man equal with God, the finite with the infinite, the creation with the creator. Perfect knowledge is possible not by generating it, but by making explicit what resides dormant in the human mind.<sup>17</sup> In this, Descartes followed in the footsteps of Socrates and Plato using the Socratic method of methodical doubt and questioning all apparent certainties and accepting the actual existence

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<sup>16</sup> In the statement that ideas are *non semper actu ... sed potentia* (11.655), “‘actu’ means that that we are aware of them, ‘potentia’ – that we have an ability to become aware of them”; “it is not an essential [characteristic] of an idea that it [we] should be aware” of it, Hartmut Brands, *Untersuchungen zur Lehre von den angeborenen Ideen*, Meisenheim/Glan: Hain 1977, 48. “Inborn ideas are not from the outset present in the consciousness; however, neither they are created by thinking; they are concepts that though attention can be brought to the consciousness,” Reinhard G. Kottich, *Die Lehre von den angeborenen Ideen seit Herbert von Cherbury*, Berlin: Schoetz 1917, 50; cf. Grimm, *op. cit.*, 54.

<sup>17</sup> Therefore, “nativism reveals what empiricism leaves *unsaid*. Nativism proves empiricism ‘wrong’ by revealing the *preconditions* that make the empiricist story of content determination true. Postulating innate ideas, nativists claim, is necessary to explain our ability to “acquire” from causal encounters with the environment (or experience) ideas *which exhibit a certain representational content*. So nativism doesn't present itself as a substitute, for a false theory (i.e., empiricism) but as a necessary emendation of some key-tenets of empiricism (i.e., there are no innate ideas) while retaining its basic intuition that experience (or causal encounters with the environment) plays some role in our becoming aware of (or acquiring) ideas,” De Rosa, *op. cit.*, 160–161.

of built-in knowledge that is manifesting itself to anyone who wants to take the cognitive trouble to uncover it.<sup>18</sup>

### Appendix: Cartesianism today: generative linguistics

Descartes was convinced that there is an unbridgeable gap between humans on the one hand and animals and humanlike robots on the other. He proposed the test which would prove the specificity of humans and their higher status than animals and robots. One criterion was the presence of language which characterizes only humans (6.56–57).<sup>19</sup> There is a good reason for this, namely the presence of the soul which has a built-in linguistic ability and a built-in store of ideas which are activated through this linguistic ability. Today, the presence of linguistic knowledge is acknowledged by generative linguists who see their debt in Cartesian philosophy, particularly, to his innatism, although they usually purge any theological aspects from their understanding of how language exists in the human mind and how it functions.

The main point in favor of innatism is the poverty of the stimulus argument which indicates the fact that a child can, apparently effortlessly, learn a language and its underlying formal structure in a very short time without any special schooling. A child can speak fluently at the age of 4 and the level of mastery of language about the same for all levels of intelligence of the child. By the age of six, the child knows 14000 words or 8000 if inflected and derived words are excluded.<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, blind children learn language at the same pace and at the same complexity level as other children.<sup>21</sup> Deaf children exposed to no sign language including deaf children of hearing parents with no knowledge of a sign

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<sup>18</sup> What Descartes deliberately wanted to accomplish was “the adaptation of the Platonic doctrine, whose good name was restored by some theologians, to the mechanistic physics of extension and motion,” Étienne Gilson, *Études sur le rôle de la pensée médiévale dans la formation du système cartésien*, Paris: Vrin 1967, 50.

<sup>19</sup> Another specifically human characteristic was the lack of specialization of newborns. More on the issue, see Adam Drozdek, Descartes' Turing Test, *Epistemologia* 24 (2001), 5–29.

<sup>20</sup> Ray Cattell, *Children's language: consensus and controversy*, London: Continuum 2007, 18.

<sup>21</sup> Blind children begin to speak slightly later than other children and they acquire the mastery of auxiliary verbs later than other children (when the latter are able to say, “I am drinking juice,” the former still would say “I drinking juice”). Besides these differences, “we are struck by the normalcy of the blind child's language on all the other measures ... The two populations are essentially indistinguishable from each other by the third birthday, including internal organization of syntax, thematic relations, and vocabulary,” wrote Barbara Landau and Lila R. Gleitman, *Language and experience: evidence from the blind child*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1985, 42, 49.

language were able to construct a structured language with its own grammatical characteristics.<sup>22</sup>

This ease of learning is not limited to one language. If one language is used at home and another is used in school or on a playground, the child can master both languages down to proper syntax and pronunciation. If their parents are native speakers of two different languages and another language is used in school, the child can handle three languages as well with astonishing speed and precision. However, easy come, easy go. When the parents move, say, from one country to another with a different language spoken in school, the child equally astonishingly quickly forgets the language learned in the old school and, if the language is not used anymore, he cannot reproduce even the simplest vocabulary.

The mastery of language does not depend on a particular language. Each language allows for generating an infinity of phrases and sentences, and a child is able to understand them and himself generate potentially an unlimited set of sentences – within the confines of the acquired vocabulary and with an implicit use of, at first, a limited set of grammar rules. Many sentences are heard for the first time and yet easily understood by the child without detailed instruction of grammatical scanning. The child can construct grammatically correct sentences on the basis of the child's limited linguistic experience. Theoretically, there is no limit to grammar rules that can account for the sentences heard by the child, and yet, the child is able to construct the grammar used in the environment as testified by the way the child speaks. These rules also account for ill-formed sentences which, usually, the child is not exposed to, and yet the child's mental grammar rules exclude these incorrect linguistic productions as well.<sup>23</sup>

One answer for the fact of such quick and effective acquisition of natural language was proposed by generative linguists in the form of an inborn linguistic competence. Innatism was introduced to modern linguistics by Noam Chomsky as a reaction to behaviorism and its reliance on instruction and conditioning as the means of acquiring language. Chomsky believes that a human baby comes into the world fully equipped with the ability to learn a language, any language, and with requisite linguistic knowledge to make this possible; that is, a child begins with “highly organized and very restrictive schematism,” “innate language or instinctive knowledge,” that is “one fundamental constituent of human

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<sup>22</sup> Martina Penke, Anette Rosenbach, What counts as evidence in linguistics, in M. Penke, A. Rosenbach (eds.), *What counts as evidence in linguistics: the case for innateness*, Amsterdam: Benjamins 2007, 29.

<sup>23</sup> Penke, Rosenbach, *op. cit.*, 26.

nature.”<sup>24</sup> This knowledge is being gradually activated during childhood, and it enables the child to learn a particular language without the necessity to learn first its phonetic, lexical, syntactic, and semantic intricacies as it is the case when an adult tries to learn a foreign language. The linguistic experience of the child is limited – and, at first, apparently nonexistent – and yet the child is able to perform generative and comprehension tasks with astonishing ease.

Generative linguists are convinced that the mind comes with unconscious knowledge in the form of a richly structured linguistic system. All natural languages are only manifestations of this inborn system and they are captured by their respective grammars. The universal grammar (UG) expresses the universal grammatical elements of each language that remain stable across all languages.<sup>25</sup> Particular grammars show how such invariants are adopted in a particular language. In this way, in spite of apparently vast differences between languages, they have a common invariable, universal foundation, and thus Chinese is not so different from English, Russian, in reality, is not unlike Hindi. The differences are superficial and do not touch the linguistic core of these languages.

Generative linguists try to uncover this system and call it the universal grammar, the grammar of the innate linguistic knowledge. Today's understanding is this is the principles-and-parameters UG: principles of the UG are parameterized and a particular grammar is considered an instance of the UG with particular values for the parameters. Learning a language thus amounts to extracting from one's experience the parameter values which are used by speakers of one's linguistic environment and using them to activate the rules of the UG in the manner best suiting this environment. Therefore, to some extent, generative linguists can say after Socrates that learning is recollection: this innate knowledge “would help to explain how babies learn their native language so quickly – because they don't have to learn it at all. They just learn selected facts, and the rest is filled out by inborn knowledge of the principles of language.”<sup>26</sup>

With Descartes, Chomsky believes that the language is “a distinctive feature of the human species” and that “there is no structure similar to UG in nonhuman organisms.”<sup>27</sup> However, Chomsky and all generative linguists eliminate from this

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<sup>24</sup> Noam Chomsky, Michel Foucault, *The Chomsky-Foucault debate*, New York: The New Press 2006, 4.

<sup>25</sup> The universal grammar has various, although interconnected meanings: UG is a set of features common to all languages; US is the initial state of the child who learns a language; UG is an initial state and, at the same time, the mechanism allowing to learn a language (language acquisition device so called by Chomsky), Simon Kirby, Kenny Smith, Henry Brighton, From UG to universals, in Penke, Rosenbach, *op. cit.*, 118–119; cf. Michael Tomasello, What kind of evidence could refute the UG hypothesis, in the same volume, 175–176.

<sup>26</sup> Cattell, *op. cit.*, 101.

<sup>27</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Reflections of language*, New York: Pantheon Books 1976, 40.

conviction any trace of nonphysical elements. Descartes saw his discussion of the specificity of language as the sign of the existence of the soul that is immortal. No soul and no immortality from the perspective of the generative linguistics and the claim of the existence of an immortal soul is said to be no more interesting than an empiricist's prejudice concerning innatism.<sup>28</sup> It is simply assumed that linguistic knowledge is hardwired in the brain, "a part of the human biological endowment is a specialized 'language organ,' the faculty of language," a "language acquisition device."<sup>29</sup> However, "the neural basis for language is pretty much of a mystery,"<sup>30</sup> and "we have no idea how or why random mutations have endowed humans with the specific capacity to learn a human language."<sup>31</sup> It is quite possible that this ability is the result of "the operation of physical laws yet unknown."<sup>32</sup> With such answers, the problem can be simply dismissed by saying that "we don't need a story about the origins of human language; we can take it for granted as an intrinsic part of the general story of humans themselves."<sup>33</sup> This amounts to the admission that the workings of the innate language can "not [be] readily explained by evolutionary biology as we know it."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Reflections of language*, 92. Therefore, Descartes' solution is immediately demoted to the level of quasi-mysticism or just plain mysticism, Mark C. Baker, *The atoms of language*, New York: Basic Books 2001, 228.

<sup>29</sup> Noam Chomsky, *On nature of language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002, 85.

<sup>30</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Reflections of language*, 40. "Mystery" acquires an epistemological significance when it is stated that problems are moderately understood, but mysteries "remain as obscure to us today as when they were originally formulated," p. 137, or that, unlike with a puzzle, "with a mystery, one cannot imagine how to get started using the tools of scientific inquiry," Baker, *op. cit.*, 227.

<sup>31</sup> Massimo Piattelli-Palmarini, *Language and learning: the debate between Jean Piaget and Noam Chomsky*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1980, 36.

<sup>32</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Reflections of language*, 92. Cf. the statement that "some [unspecified] law of physics happens to have the consequence that a language recipe cannot be specified in the brain without having parameters," Baker 215–216.

<sup>33</sup> Baker, *op. cit.*, 207.

<sup>34</sup> Baker, *op. cit.*, 216. "Nativists' claims concerning the evolutionary origins of innate components should in fact be best thought of as 'secondary' claims – resulting largely from nativists' desire to integrate claims concerning 'innateness as genetic specification' into a wider naturalistic framework – rather than as direct appeals to evolutionary origins," which is just "defeasible evidence" and not "a required part of a reasonable nativism," Tom Simpson, "Toward a reasonable nativism," in P. Carruthers, S. Laurence, S. Stich (eds.), *The innate mind: structure and contents*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005, 128. This can be carried to the extreme: "most of the work that linguists do wouldn't be changed one iota if we found that language was represented in one of the little fingers," not in the brain, Cattell, *op. cit.*, 258.



### Summary

Descartes considered himself as an originator of the method of methodical doubting, but, at the same time, he viewed his ideas as most ancient of all. In fact, he fairly closely followed in the footsteps of Socrates and his maieutic method of extracting the truth from an interlocutor in two phases: the elenctic method to demolish the interlocutor's convictions and then coaxing the truth from him. Descartes' methodical doubt is but a version of the elenctic method. Descartes also shares with Socrates the conviction of the existence of truth independent of the cognitive subject, which assured the possibility of successful conclusion of methodical doubting as well as the maieutic method.

**Keywords:** Socrates, Descartes, the maieutic method, methodical doubting.

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