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Abstract

In this article I examine the concept of innate idea as present in Descartes's argument in the Fifth Meditation in order to show its fundamental role in enabling the distinction between ideas of essences produced by the mind and ideas of true and immutable essences. Besides showing that, this analysis has, I suggest, the advantage of avoiding difficulties concerning the whole of the Cartesian system, since it harmonizes the Fifth Meditation with the *Meditations* as a whole, in considering it as possessing not only an ontological dimension, as traditionally understood, but also, and essentially, an epistemic dimension like all the others.

Résumé

Dans cet article j'examine le concept d'idée innée dans l'argumentaire présenté par Descartes dans la cinquième des Méditations métaphysiques, en vue de montrer son rôle fondamental pour la distinction entre les idées d'essences produites par l'esprit et les idées d'essences vraies et immuables. En outre, la lecture ici suggérée a l'avantage d'éviter des difficultés concernant la totalité du système cartésien, puisqu'elle harmonise cette méditation avec l'ensemble des *Méditations*, en la considérant comme ayant non seulement une dimension ontologique, telle qu'elle est traditionnellement comprise, mais aussi, et surtout, comme ayant une dimension épistémique, comme toutes les autres.

Innate Ideas and the idea of God in Descartes's Fifth Meditation

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In the fifth of the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, combined with the theory of true and immutable natures, Descartes sets out a new argument as an additional proof to the one presented in the third Meditation in favour of the existence of God.¹ As Descartes says in the Synopsis, “In the fifth Meditation [...] there is a new argument demonstrating the existence of God” (AT: VII, 15; 1985 CSM: II, 11). This new proof is often taken to be the Cartesian version of the ontological argument² presented by Anselm in his *Proslogion* in favour of the existence of God. However, as Descartes himself says, it is not his principal argument for this end for, in his own words, it is “in the Third Meditation [that he] ha[s] explained [his] principal argument for proving the existence of God” (AT: VII, 14; CSM: II, 10). In fact, if considered just as a proof for the existence of God, the argument presented in the fifth Meditation generates a number of problems. These include, for example, the need to explain why Descartes would introduce another proof in favour of the existence of God in this Meditation, or indeed why Descartes would temporarily abandon his epistemological project in this Meditation in order to dwell on purely ontological considerations, or yet, how could this be a sound proof in favour of the existence of God if it supposes the rule of truth already guaranteed by a veracious God, according to

¹ Here I assume that there are no fundamental differences between the two arguments presented in the 3rd Meditation in favour of the existence of God, at least no differences so fundamental as to justify identifying them as two distinct proofs. As Descartes writes in a letter to Mesland on May 2nd 1644: “It makes little difference if my second proof, which is based on our own existence, is deemed to be different from the first or merely an explication of it” (AT: IV, 112; CSM: III, 232).

² For the analysis of the ontological argument in Descartes see, for example: Gueroult, 1953; Dicker, 1993; Carnes, 1964; Forgie, 1974; Kane, 1984; Alston, 1960.

Quoting this article

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which everything clearly and distinctly perceived is true.³ In this article I examine the concept of innate idea in the context of Descartes's argument in the fifth Meditation in order to show its fundamental role in enabling the distinction between ideas of essences produced by the mind and ideas of true and immutable essences. As well as allowing us to understand the function performed by the concept of the innate idea in Descartes's argument, this analysis has, I suggest, the advantage of avoiding the aforementioned difficulties by locating the fifth Meditation within the *Meditations* as a whole, taking it to possess not only an ontological dimension, as traditionally understood, but also and essentially an epistemic dimension like all the others.⁴ As a consequence of this analysis of Descartes's argument of the fifth Meditation, it will be clear that the Cartesian theory of true and immutable nature complements the first and principal proof of the existence of God, presented in the third Meditation.

The first proof of the existence of God presented in the third Meditation proceeds from the infinite degree of objective reality, which the content of the idea of God allegedly possesses. It is presupposed, and this, at that moment, seems to be enough to claim that the idea of God is caused by a formal infinite reality: God. However, as it is clear by Descartes's replies to Caterus's objection concerning the argument of the fifth Meditation, having a clear and distinct idea of God is not enough to claim that it does exhibit an true and immutable essence: it might be the case that the content of this idea of God which seems to depict an infinite degree of objective reality is produced by the finite mind that thinks it and, therefore, is a fiction of the finite intellect, which would entail that it does not in fact exhibit an infinite true and immutable essence. As Descartes says:

[W]e do not distinguish what belongs to the true and immutable essence of a thing from what is attributed to it merely by a fiction of the intellect. So, even if we observe clearly enough that existence belongs to the essence of God, we do not draw the conclusion that God exists, because we do not know whether his

³ One of the steps of the Cartesian ontological proof of the existence of God consists in the affirmation that "everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive to belong to that thing really does belong to it" (AT: VII, 65; CSM: II, 45). I think that this is what allows him to go from the idea of God to the essence of God and, therefore, to the knowledge of a property of God himself.

⁴ By that, I do not mean to assume a sharp split between ontological and epistemological projects in Descartes work, but only to emphasize that in the *Meditations* Descartes has mainly an epistemological project, as he writes to his editor Mersenne: "[M]ay I tell you, between ourselves, that these six meditations contain all the foundations of my physics" (AT: III, 298; CSM: III, 173).

essence is immutable and true, or merely invented by us. [...] To remove [...] the difficulty, we must notice a point about ideas which do not contain true and immutable natures but merely ones which are invented and put together by the intellect (AT: VII, 116; CSM: II, 83).

As it is clear in this answer to Caterus, besides admitting that the idea of God that exhibit it as infinite could be a fiction, Descartes seems to admit the possibility that fictitious ideas present factitious essences since he says “we do not know whether his essence is immutable and true, or merely invented by us”. Descartes, then, seems to admit the possibility of clear and distinct fictitious ideas as well as clear and distinct innate ideas, both of them exhibiting essences. That is, if after having established the rule of truth in the fourth Meditation, according to which every clearly and distinctly perceived idea is true in the sense that it exhibits an essence, and if the rule of truth is not enough to enable one to distinguish among his ideas those which exhibit true and immutable essences from those which exhibit fictitious essences, then both fictitious and innate ideas can be clear and distinct and, therefore, exhibit essences as their contents. As Descartes says in his replies to Caterus, “possible existence, at the very least, belongs to such a being [God], just as it belongs to all the other things of which we have a distinct idea, *even to those which are put together through a fiction of the intellect*” (AT: VII, 119; CSM: II, 85; my emphasis). Being so, I claim, in the fifth Meditation Descartes introduces his theory of true and immutable essences in order to be able to distinguish fictitious ideas from ideas that exhibit true and immutable essences as their contents.

In fact, in the third Meditation Descartes defines ideas as images of things: every idea is an image of things, that is, an idea of something which appears in the intellect as something different (independent) from the mind. As Descartes puts it in the preface of the original version of the *Meditations*, the term “idea” involves an ambiguity: it can be considered as an act of the intellect that consists in exhibiting a content in it (if considered materially), or as a content exhibited by this act (if considered objectively). Moreover, it is the content of an idea that renders it different from another: “[I]n so far as different ideas represent different things, it is clear that they differ widely” (AT: VII, 40; CSM: II, 28). This entails that the content of an idea is not “simply nothing”, but rather is an objective being, that is, “the object’s being in the intellect in the way its objects are normally there” (AT: VII, 102-1003; CSM: II, 75). This content of an idea, an objective being, which is not a “simply nothing”, has a degree of objective reality, that is, a degree of reality in the mind: the ideas which exhibit as its content substances contain more objective reality than the idea of modes, and the idea of infinite substance contain more objective reality

than those of finite substances and those of modes (see AT: VII, 40; CSM: II, 28). Thus, every idea exhibits a being or essence with a particular degree or objective reality.

Now, among what we usually call “idea”, some are so obscure and confused that we “do not even know whether they are true or false, that is, whether [...] the ideas are of real things or of non-thing”; moreover, “since there can be no ideas which are not as it were of things” those ideas that are obscure and confuse either “deserves to be called false” (AT: VII, 44; CSM: II, 30), or, I suggest, are not ideas in the strict sense proposed above. They are (materially) false ideas because they do not exhibit as their content a being, that is, an objective being.⁵ On the other hand, clear and distinct ideas present as their contents beings that can exist in reality. “But”, says Descartes in his replies to an objection compiled by Mersenne, “even if we conceive of God only in an inadequate or [...] ‘utterly inadequate’ way, this does not prevent its being certain that his nature is possible, or not self-contradictory [...]. Self-contradictoriness in our concepts arises merely from their obscurity and confusion: there can be none in the case of clear and distinct concepts” (AT: VII, 152; CSM: II, 108). If this is so, what characterizes an idea in strict sense is that it exhibits a being (an essence) whose existence is at least possible (that is, its existence is not contradictory), and since in order to do so they are clear and distinct, then ideas in strict sense are the clear and distinct ideas.

Concerning the fictitious ideas, Descartes never says neither that they necessarily do not depict an essence, that is, an objective being, nor that they necessarily are contradictory. If they are not necessarily either of these, then at least some of the fictitious ideas might be clear and distinct. In effect, as we saw, he says, in his replies to Caterus’s objections concerning the objective being of the idea of a perfect being: “[P]ossible existence, at the very least, belongs to such a being [...] just as it belongs to all the other things of which we have a distinct idea, even to those which are put together through a fiction of the intellect” (AT: VII, 119; CSM: II, 83). Moreover, if we attend to how Descartes defines a clear perception and a distinct perception, it is clear that he would

⁵ The Cartesian concept of the materially false ideas has been extensively discussed in secondary the literature. To mention just a few: Alanen, 1994a and 1994b; Arbini, 1983; Beyssade, 1994; Bolton, 1986; Brown, 2010; De Rosa, 2004 and 2009; Field, 1993; Hoffman, 1996; Kaufman, 2000; Wells, 1984; Willson, 1978, 1999a, and 1999b. For my purpose in this article, I assume that Descartes might consider that sensations are not ideas in the strict sense since they do not operate as it were images of things.

admit clear and distinct fictitious ideas; he says: “I call a perception ‘clear’ when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind. [...] I call a perception ‘distinct’ if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perception that it contains within itself only what is clear” (AT: VIII-A, 22; CSM: I, 22-23). At first glance one might think that Descartes is claiming that no composed idea, that is, no idea that presents a composed objective being, can be clear and distinct, since in order to be so it must be sharply separated from all others. Consider, however, Descartes’s answer to Caterus’s objections: “[I]f I consider a triangle inscribed in a square [...] then the nature of this composite will be as true and immutable as the nature of the triangle alone or the square alone” (AT: VII, 118; CSM: II, 84). We must conclude from this answer that there can be a content of an idea that is a composed true and immutable essence. And since the idea that exhibit a true and immutable being as its content is a clear and distinct idea, then there can be clear and distinct composed ideas and at least some of them exhibit true and immutable natures. However, since some of the composed ideas are fictitious, and since there can be clear and distinct composed ideas, then clearness and distinction is not enough to distinguish ideas that exhibit a fictitious nature as its content from ideas that exhibit true and immutable essences.

From all that, I claim it is reasonable to say that in the fifth Meditation, Descartes assumes that the rule of truth is not enough to distinguish fictitious ideas that present as their content fictitious essences from innate ideas that present true and immutable essences as their contents, since both fictitious and innate ideas can be composed, clear, and distinct. Being so, he presents criteria that enable to distinguish fictitious ideas from innate ideas, and this will consist in criteria that distinguish true and immutable essences from fictitious essences.⁶ These criteria will allow recognizing that the true idea of God indeed exhibits an infinite true and immutable essence and, therefore, cannot be forged by a finite mind. Since the ideas that exhibit true and immutable essences are innate and thus, the concept of innate ideas in the Cartesian system have a double function:

1. It allows to avoid a possible objection to the cosmological proof of the existence of God, according to which the infinite content of the idea of God is enough to conclude for the existence of God;

⁶ That Descartes introduces the theory of true and immutable natures to distinguish fictitious ideas from innate ideas is clearly indicated by Margaret Wilson; see Wilson 1978. See also Alston, 1967; Abbruzzese, 2007; Beyssade, 1992; Curley, 2005; Edelberg, 1990; Gueroult, 1984; Wertz, 1990.

2. It allows to avoid a possible objection to what would be an ontological proof of the existence of God which intends to be based on the idea of God.

In the fifth Meditation, in ensuring the possibility of distinguishing fictitious (clear and distinct) ideas from innate (also clear and distinct) ideas, Descartes shows that the proof of the existence of God introduced in the third Meditation cannot be rejected with the supposition that its starting point (the idea of God as an infinite being) is a fictitious idea and also shows that from an innate idea of God it is possible to conclude something about God (that he exists), and not only about the thought of God, which is done in the fifth Meditation.

According to this alternative reading, in the fifth Meditation, Descartes, already assuming the legitimacy of the rule of truth according to which every effectively clear and distinct perception is true – and, thus, already taking as proven the existence of God –, seeks to resolve two problems:

1. Assuming that the fact that an idea is clear and distinct and thus true in a certain sense – that is, insofar as it exhibits an essence – does not preclude the displayed essence from being fictitious, Descartes provides the criteria for distinguishing among the clear and distinct ideas those that exhibit fictitious essences from those that exhibit true and immutable essences, a distinction achieved through the introduction of a Theory of True and Immutable Natures (or essences);
2. Showing that certain ideas exhibit true and immutable natures in the mind does not necessarily imply the existence outside of the mind of the things of which they are the essences, Descartes introduces in his system the thesis that existence outside of the mind is a perfection.

In this sense, Descartes's central objective in the fifth Meditation will be to set out criteria that enable fictitious clear and distinct ideas to be distinguished from innate clear and distinct ideas, and to explain why it is not the case that any clear and distinct idea that exhibits a true and immutable essence – that is, an innate idea – necessarily exhibit a thing that exists outside of thought.

Therefore, we shall see that the criteria for the recognition of non-fictitious ideas is based on a theory of true and immutable essences, which allows Descartes to liken the idea of God to mathematical ideas: in both cases the essence exhibited by clear and distinct ideas are essences that are independent of the intellect or mind and cannot for this reason be modified by the latter. In contrast to fictitious ideas, both the idea of God and mathematical ideas exhibit immutable essences. The first part of the argument of the fifth

Meditation establishes this similarity through the introduction of the theory of true and immutable natures. It remains for Descartes to show why things that have true and immutable essences, as the essences exhibited by mathematical ideas, do not necessarily exist – that is, may not exist –, though the same does not apply in the case of God. This comprises the second part of the Cartesian argument, where the thesis that existence is a perfection is fundamental.

Descartes's argument in the fifth Meditation therefore seems to encounter two problematic moments: the passage from the clear and distinct idea of God to the knowledge of the immutable essence of God, and the thesis that existence is a perfection. These two moments of the argument became the target of contemporary critiques of Descartes, represented by Caterus, who revives Thomas Aquinas's criticism of Anselm's argument, and Gassendi, whose criticism is later picked up and developed by Kant. Indeed, for both the critiques, the argument's conclusion is the same: in the ontological argument, the conclusion can only concern the thought or the idea of God and not what would God be. In other words, if the argument is premised on the idea of God, the argument can only lead us to conclude something about the idea of God.

In this paper, only the first moment of the argument of the fifth Meditation is to be analysed. We shall see that Descartes's *Meditations*, through the theory of true and immutable natures, evades the problems contained in Anselm's argument, which provided the grounds for Aquinas's objection. Caterus, on reviving Aquinas's critique to Anselm's argument, concedes to Descartes the thesis that we can know the essence of God through a clear and distinct idea. Despite this concession, he insists that Aquinas's critique legitimately applies even to the Cartesian version: all we can conclude from the argument is that the concept of existence is inseparable from the concept of the Supreme Being, and not its actual existence. But as we shall see, by introducing his theory of true and immutable natures, Descartes precisely avoids the problem of passing unduly from the level of the idea to the level of the thing itself, by showing that if I know a true and immutable essence then I know the thing of which it is an essence. And since his argument is premised on the knowledge of God rather than the concept of God, we can legitimately infer the existence of God, since this inference expresses a necessary relation between God's essence and his existence, and not between the concept of God and the concept of his existence.

Now insofar as our access to any essence occurs through ideas, the starting point of the argument is the idea of God and mathematical ideas. But the premise for its conclusion is knowledge of the immutable essences of God, and of mathematical objects. What Descartes will show is that certain ideas are ideas of non invented essences – that is, true and immutable essences –, and that for this reason the properties associated with these essences in the mind are not arbitrarily posited by thought but belong to the things of which they are essences. As we will see, Descartes's argument presumes the validity of the rule of truth according to which every clear and distinct idea is true. This implies that the clear and distinct idea of something represents the thing truly; that is, represents its essence. However, this thesis does not necessarily imply either that the represented essence is not produced by thought, or that the thing whose essence is represented by a clear and distinct idea actually exists. In the fifth Meditation, another three steps are added to the validity of the general rule:

1. Show that some clear and distinct ideas (which, as we already know, represent essences) represent true and immutable essences (in opposition to other clear and distinct ideas that present produced, fictitious essences invented by the mind) – a distinction between fictitious idea and innate idea established by the theory of true and immutable natures;
2. Show that, as a consequence, when clear and distinct ideas are ideas of true and immutable essences and, for this reason, of essences that are not invented by thought, every property clearly and distinctly perceived to belong to this essence is a property of the thing of which it is the essence – a fundamental step for the argument's passage from the level of the essence to the level of the thing;
3. Show that a particular true and immutable essence involves the necessary existence of the thing of which it is the essence – a passage that involves the thesis that existence is a property.

These points in mind, the problem of the first moment of the Cartesian argument is to demonstrate that certain ideas represent true and immutable essences; that is, they are ideas of essences that are not produced and cannot be modified by thought. Having proven (in earlier Meditations) that certain ideas (the clear and distinct) represent essences, it remains for Descartes to show that we have criteria for recognizing among these ideas that represent essences those that represent immutable essences. Based on this thesis (certain ideas represent immutable essences), we can affirm that the clear and distinct perception of properties in these essences implies the perception of properties of the thought thing.

Thus, the reconstruction of the first part of Cartesian argument presented here centres on the interpretive hypothesis that Descartes's intention in the fifth Meditation is to formulate the criteria needed to distinguish between fictitious and innate ideas, and that it is in this context that the thesis of existence as a perfection appears (as a means to explain why mathematical essences do not exhibit things that necessarily exist). Hence the argument's premise is knowledge of the immutable essence (rather than the concept) of God and mathematical objects. Furthermore, following this interpretation, the central point of the Cartesian proof is the thesis that innate clear and distinct ideas represent essences of things whose properties are independent of thought and, for this very reason, are properties of the things represented by these ideas.

Cartesian argument in the fifth Meditation

a. *I have an idea of God as the perfect being and ideas of mathematical objects as extension.*

Having the idea of God means having the idea of a supremely (or infinitely) perfect entity. Descartes does not distinguish the object from the property that characterizes it (perfection) insofar as, according to his ontology, the essential attribute or property of something is its own nature.⁷ Thus the idea of God and mathematical ideas represent not just objects, or any object, but objects characterized by an essential property.

b. *The idea of God and mathematical ideas are clear and distinct.*

At the outset of the fifth Meditation, Descartes claims that the ideas of extension, numbers, figures and so on – mathematical ideas, in other words – are clear and distinct, that is, non-contradictory, and likens the idea of God to these ideas.

As shown already in the earlier Meditations, clear and distinct ideas are true; that is, their content exhibits something real. This merely means that these contents exhibit an objective reality and, consequently, that the things represented by these contents possess at least a possible existence. It does not necessarily follow that the things represented by clear and distinct ideas exist outside of thought. Thus, the objective realities of clear and distinct ideas represent (possible) entities that may have an actual existence.

⁷ See *Principles of Philosophy*: I, 53, in AT: VIII-A, 25, and CSM: I, 210.

Descartes's next step will be to prove that the contents of certain clear and distinct ideas, which are possible entities even if they do not exist "outside" of thought, have "true and immutable" properties; that is, properties that do not depend on thought.

c. *The idea of God as a perfect entity and clear and distinct mathematical ideas represent true and immutable essences and, in this sense, are innate.*

An idea is characterized by its presentation of a content to the thinking subject. A clear and distinct idea is characterized by the fact that the content it presents is a real entity; that is, an essence (something non-contradictory, which may exist). Now Descartes will show that an innate idea is characterized by the fact that its content exhibits a true and immutable nature (essence).

In the context of the ontological proof, Descartes then draws a distinction between "true and immutable essences" and fictitious essences; namely, those produced by the mind. Descartes admits that certain essences are "invented by us" or are "fictitious natures composed by the intellect" and, therefore, depend on thought and have no correlate outside of the latter. These "fictitious essences" are not false essences of properties that do not belong to an object, but properties that, through the mind's invention or fiction, belong to a thought object. "Fictitious essences" are thus essences of fictitious objects. Fictitious objects (i.e. objects produced by the mind) are objects that are represented by compound ideas, produced by the mind through the arbitrary composition of given ideas. These objects are only real because they are thought. Thus fictional objects only exist in the mind and are arbitrarily produced by the mind.

In opposition to these fictitious essences, Descartes introduces the idea of true and immutable essences whose immutability makes them independent of the mind. These essences are essences of things that may exist only in thought (such as mathematical objects), though not depending on thought. Descartes intends to show this through the theory of true and immutable natures, presenting two criteria for recognizing a clear and distinct idea whose essence is not fictitious, that is, produced by the mind. These criteria therefore enable fictitious clear and distinct ideas that represent fictitious essences of fictitious objects (produced by thought and that only exist in thought), to be distinguished from innate clear and distinct ideas that represent true and immutable essences of

non-fictitious objects and, in this sense, are independent of thought (though they may exist only in thought, as in the case of mathematical objects, for example). These criteria are:

1. True and immutable essences are such that their properties are not foreseen by me when I think of them, which indicates that thought does not add to the properties of this essence at its own will; the properties involved in the true and immutable essences are not given by definition. This is in contrast to fictitious essences whose properties are provided at the moment of the formulation of the idea, for example, the idea of a mermaid (woman-fish, that enchants through her singing, swims, etc.), as opposed to the idea of a triangle (has at least some properties of which I am not necessarily aware);
2. The properties of a true and immutable essence cannot be separated by a clear and distinct operation, which indicates a necessary link between the properties of these essences. In other words, by separating (through abstraction as opposed to through a clear and distinct idea) a property from a true and immutable essence, a contradiction is obtained (e.g. a triangle that lacks the property of its angles totalling 180 degrees).

These true and immutable essences, insofar as they contrast with fictitious essences and are not given by the senses (which are not the source of ideas of essences, but, at most, ideas of singular things), are the contents of innate ideas. Thus if the clear and distinct idea of God is an innate idea, then this idea represents the essence of God. If the clear and distinct ideas of mathematics are innate ideas, then mathematical essences would be represented by these ideas. Hence it is necessary to demonstrate that the idea of God and mathematical ideas are innate; in other words, it is necessary to demonstrate that they represent immutable essences.

Applying the aforementioned criteria, we can comprehend that the idea of God and mathematical ideas represent immutable essences rather than invented essences, insofar as the link that connects the properties to objects is a necessary link. It is not possible, for example, to separate a perfect essence clearly and distinctly from its perfections without contradiction, and insofar as I necessarily do not know all God's properties, which indicates that its properties are not increased at the mind's discretion. For example, in contrast to the (fictitious) idea of the existent lion, which represents a fictitious content (an essence), the idea of God represents an immutable essence. From the idea of the existent lion arises the fact that it is contradictory to think of the existing lion as non-existent, which implies that the idea of the existent lion implies that it is necessary to think of the existent lion as existent (or implies the idea that the lion exists), but nobody argues that it implies the fact that the

lion exists. This is because the idea of the existent lion represents an essence produced by thought. And we know that this is so because, according to Descartes, it is possible for a clear and distinct operation to separate existence from the lion. It is possible (not contradictory) to think of existence without thinking of a lion and it is possible to think of a lion without existence. That is, there is no necessary link between the idea's composite content. On the other hand, the idea of a perfect being cannot be separated by a clear and distinct operation from any of its perfections without contradiction. Just as we cannot separate clearly and distinctly a property of the triangle from the triangle without contradiction, so we cannot separate a perfect being from any of its perfections.

Thus, in this context, claiming that an idea is innate means that if it represents an essence, the essence it represents is "true and immutable" and, as such, does not depend on thought – in the same way as the essence represented by the fictitious idea. Through the notion of innate idea, Descartes shows that although innate ideas, by being ideas, are in a certain sense dependent on thought (having an idea is a way of thinking), the properties exhibited of the objects represented by them do not depend on thought since they belong to immutable essences or natures.

So, accepting that the idea of God and mathematical ideas satisfy these criteria, we can affirm that the idea of God and mathematical ideas are innate and, thus, represent immutable essences. The innate, clear and distinct idea of God, and the innate, clear and distinct ideas of mathematics therefore enable us to pass from the representation of God's essence to knowledge of God's true essence, and from the representation of mathematical essences to knowledge of mathematical essences.

d. *If an innate, clear and distinct idea represents that a property belongs to the immutable essence of a thing, this property belongs to this thing.*

This is the step that enables the passage from the idea of the property of an essence to the thing that possesses this property. If the innate, clear and distinct idea presents something real to me whose nature is not invented by me, this nature is the nature of the thing itself. And if so, the properties of the immutable essence of a thing are properties of the thing of which it is the essence. If a property belongs to the true and immutable nature of the triangle, the triangle has this property. If a

property belongs to the true and immutable nature of God, then God possesses this property.

- e. *Through the idea of God I know the immutable essence of God as the perfect being (in contrast to mathematical ideas).*

Given the criteria for recognizing an idea of a true and immutable essence, I know that I have a clear, distinct and innate idea of God and hence I know that I have an idea of a true and immutable nature. This innate, clear and distinct idea of God represents God to me as an infinitely perfect being. Consequently, the idea of God allows me to know the immutable nature of God, which is that of a perfect being.

But even if we accept that Descartes is successful in establishing the criteria for distinguishing true and immutable natures from fictitious essences and, therefore, that the starting point of the proof is not the concept of God but knowledge of the immutable essence of God, it still remains to resolve the second type of difficulty by showing that there is a necessary relation between the God's essence and his existence.

Descartes's objective, then, in this second moment of the ontological proof is to show that, on one hand, like the mathematical objects, God has a true and immutable nature, while on the other hand, in contrast to mathematical objects that do not exist outside of thought, God's essence necessarily involves God's actual existence. Descartes therefore argues for the necessary relationship between God's essence and his existence by resorting to the thesis that existence is a perfection. If God's immutable essence is perfection then God contains all perfections within himself. Now since existence is a perfection, God exists. The second problematic moment of the proof is now introduced, therefore:

- f. *Existence is a perfection.*

- g. *I have a clear and distinct idea that the property of existence belongs to the true essence of God.*

If existence is a perfection, I have a clear and distinct idea that existence necessarily belongs to the essence of God (but not mathematical essences).

- h. *God necessarily exists, but not mathematical essences.*

This reconstruction of Descartes's argument in the fifth Meditation is based on the possibility of distinguishing between immutable essences and fictitious essences. Immutable essences are represented by innate, clear and distinct ideas, and fictitious essences by clear and distinct ideas. If fictitious ideas can be clear and distinct, clearness and distinctiveness are not sufficient conditions for us to have a representation of immutable essences, since clear and distinct ideas could represent either immutable essences or fictitious essences. Consequently, it is necessary to distinguish those clear and distinct ideas that represent immutable essences from those that represent fictitious essences.

Following the reconstruction of the argument presented in this article, the function of the concept of innate idea is precisely to show which conditions a clear and distinct idea needs to satisfy in order to represent an immutable essence. On the other hand, if imaginative ideas cannot be clear and distinct, only immutable essences could be represented by clear and distinct ideas and, therefore, clearness and distinctiveness would be sufficient conditions for representing immutable essences. In this case, the notion of an innate idea would not perform any relevant function in the argument of the fifth Meditation. Since in principle no thesis of the Cartesian theory of ideas prevents fictitious ideas from being considered clear and distinct, it seems plausible to assert that the notion of innate idea performs an important function in the fifth Meditation's argument.

Now if this argument seeks to establish criteria for distinguishing ideas that exhibit fictitious essences from ideas that exhibit true and immutable essences, then the fifth Meditation indubitably maintains the epistemological character of the other Meditations. Moreover, it is the application of these criteria to the clear and distinct idea of God that enables Descartes to respond to the potential objection to the proof of the existence of God presented in the third Meditation: it is not only a clear and distinct idea, but, furthermore, a non-fictitious clear and distinct idea, that is, one that exhibits a true and immutable nature. But if so, although Descartes in this fifth Meditation deals with the existence of God, "a second time" as the title says, he not only presents a new argument (which would be his version of the ontological proof) for the existence of God, but also complements the former argument, responding to a potential objection.

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