The Ontological Status of the Cartesian Simple Natures

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THE ONTOLOGICAL STATUS OF THE
CARTESIAN SIMPLE NATURES

by

Michael D. Smith

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Loyola University of Chicago in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts
April 1976
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Descartes proposes in his Regulae a theory of simple natures (naturae simplices) as the most basic elements of all knowledge. Certain knowledge is possible only because of the clear and distinct intuition of these natures. He further claims that all knowledge consists in various combinations of these natures.

Though the full title of the Regulae (Rules for the Direction of the Mind) indicates that Descartes' intention was to provide some principles for an efficient and reliable method of inquiry, some commentators claim that the method presupposes at least a rudimentary epistemology. The precise nature of this epistemology is still a matter of dispute. A prime focus of this dispute is the doctrine of simple natures. One group claims that these simple natures are ideas, and not themselves part of an extra-mental world. Witness, for example, the claim of LeBlond: "...l'inventaire des natures simples est présenté, non comme un examen des choses, mais seulement des idées...."¹ If the simple natures are, in fact, ideas, and if we take seriously the

claim that all knowledge is compounded out of these ideas, then we must conclude that the Regulae espouses an epistemological position best characterized as representationalism.

This claim about the nature of the epistemology has, however, been disputed by other scholars, who insist upon a realist interpretation. Consider, for example, Keeling's position:

Ce réalisme ne réside pas dans le fait que les existences sont toujours visées par nos idées et nos jugements, mais dans le fait que la réalité existante est appréhendée directement, sans l'intervention ni l'aide d'une idée ou d'un jugement.2

To characterize the epistemology of the Regulae as a realism is to claim that to know the simple natures is to know the extra-mental world directly. Thus, the simple natures are considered to be themselves extra-mentally real.

The competing interpretations of the epistemology of the Regulae depend, in the end, upon fundamentally different interpretations of the doctrine of simple natures. Are these simple natures ideas or are they extra-mental existents? If the former is correct, then the epistemology of the Regulae is representationalism; if the latter, then it is direct realism. The purpose of the thesis is to assess the evidence for each of the two interpretations concerning the status of the simple natures.

The representational interpretation is initially

attractive, for under it the Regulae appear to foreshadow the later philosophy, which Descartes openly declared to be representational. Those who see the Regulae as espousing realism claim, though, that this same realism is present in the later philosophy. Thus, each of the interpretations claims the continuity of the Cartesian doctrine as support. It seems useful, therefore, to conduct a careful study of the internal evidence of the Regulae in order to avoid reading into it a doctrine he may not have held at that time.

To call the one interpretation a theory of "representative" ideas can be somewhat misleading, for traditional (e.g., the Lockean) representative theories have been doctrines about sensa or sensory images that somehow picture to the mind what is extramental. If the simple natures of Descartes are to be called representative, it cannot be in this way. First, Descartes did not consider such mental

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3See the letter to Gibief, January 19, 1642: "I am certain that I can have no knowledge of what is outside me except by means of the ideas I have within me; and so I take great care not to relate my judgments immediately to things in the world..." In this and all future citations from the correspondence I employ the translation of Anthony Kenny in Descartes: Philosophical Letters (London: Clarendon Press, 1970).

images themselves knowledge. Second, many of the simple natures could not be representative in this way. The natures of the first group (thought, doubt, will, etc.) cannot be the subject of mental pictures; they refer to nothing physical and therefore to nothing picturable. Some of the common notions of the third group present similar difficulties, for in this group Descartes includes principles of inference and various necessary relations. He claims also that the negations of all the simple natures are themselves simple natures. None of these could be pictures. If the Cartesian simple natures are representative, it cannot be because they provide a sensible picture or copy of extra-mental reality.

A somewhat different notion of representation is required. First, the doctrine must accomodate all those things that Descartes regards as simple natures. This is best accomplished by regarding the natures as basic units of intelligibility (intelligibilia) rather than sensa. This successfully takes into account also his claim that mental images are not themselves knowledge.

Second, our understanding of representation must preserve the essential claim that we do not know extra-mental reality directly, but only through the mediation of ideas. Thus, the claim of representationalism is that what

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5This will be shown in Chapter 3, in the discussion of the objectivity of the simple natures.
we know directly are our own ideas. Further, it claims that in knowing our ideas, we have reason to believe that we know what extra-mental reality must be like. The difficulty for such an epistemology is to establish good reasons for such confidence, without the petitio of appealing to some extra-mental existent as guaranteeing the correlation. There is, then, a negative aspect to the representational claim: we do not know extra-mental reality directly. What we do know are our own ideas. According to the Regulae the most basic ideas are the simple natures, and all other ideas are compounded from them.

The realist position holds that what is known directly is extra-mental reality. It claims that the intelligible structure of the object and the intelligible structure as present to the mind are numerically one. It would reject the contention that our ideas represent reality, because such a contention would deny the immediacy of the knower's contact with the world. Note that both positions would claim that the knower is in immediate contact with the known; they differ on what it is that is most immediately known. Under a realist interpretation the exclusively mental character of the simple natures would be denied; and their importance in knowledge would be attributed to the

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6 In the Meditations Descartes attempts to establish this correlation of mind to world by establishing the divine guarantee. This is not a petitio if he can establish the necessity of the existence of this divine guarantee by appealing only to ideas.
claim that they are the extra-mental world, insofar as it is intelligible.

I shall examine what I take to be the most forceful arguments for each interpretation. The arguments for the realist interpretations will be for the most part, those of Keeling and O'Neil. The representational interpretation presents some difficulties in this regard. It is the received doctrine and has been largely accepted by Cartesian scholars without criticism. There is, therefore, a paucity of careful argumentation in support of it. I will take it upon myself to formulate the strongest arguments and most explicit textual support for this position.

I shall, in the end, be forced to conclude that the textual evidence of the Regulae does not yield a definitive case for either interpretation. I believe that the inconclusiveness is Descartes' own; he had not yet developed a well thought out, consistent epistemology. Because the Regulae is primarily a work on method, it is not surprising that no doctrine about the relation of knowledge to its objects can be found there. The problems of error and uncertainty would eventually lead Descartes to a theory of mind and so to a more explicit doctrine of representative ideas; but, by that time, he had begun to neglect the doctrine of simplicity, and the representative ideas of the later philosophy are for the most part complex rather than simple.
CHAPTER II

THE GENERAL DOCTRINE

The doctrine of simple natures is an early theory of Descartes and receives scant attention in what are regarded as his more definitive philosophical works. Therefore, I do not wish to presume in the reader more than a general acquaintance with the doctrine. Accordingly, this chapter provides a more detailed account of that doctrine. I do not here enter into the area of dispute outlined in the introduction; my intention is, instead, to establish what seems indisputably true about the doctrine. This will provide the context within which the controversy about the ontological status of the simple natures must be resolved, if it is resolvable. The chapter will consider three topics: the nature of the method, the role of the simple natures in the method, and the three groups of simple natures.

The Nature of the Method

A superficial reading of the Regulae might give birth to the assumption that method, in its two-fold procedure of analysis and synthesis, is a post facto artificial device for testing and re-verifying what we already know. Such an assumption would be wrongheaded for two
reasons. First, Descartes views his method as being in no way an artificial device used to supplement the natural procedures of the mind. The method is itself the mind's natural way of proceeding in the acquisition of knowledge. Rule IV states repeatedly Descartes' claim that the cultivation of method is the cultivation of reasoning itself, of our own innate capacities for arriving at certain truth.\(^1\) Analysis and synthesis are, therefore, not a quality-control device imposed upon knowledge ab exteriore, but the natural procedure of knowledge itself. The simple natures, as end-points of analysis, must therefore belong to the natural procedure of knowing.

Second (and this follows readily from the first point), the method does not have as its goal the re-verifi-cation of what we already know. It is only through the method that we achieve that insight or mental vision that

\(^1\)"Such a science [the Mathesis Universalis] should contain the primary rudiments of human reason. . . ." (AT X, Rule IV, 374\(^7\)-9). In Rule V he claims that in the proposed method "lies the sum of all human endeavor." (AT X, Rule V, 379\(^2\)-23)

Given this, it is not surprising that in the Discourse the cultivation of method has taken on an ethical import:

I felt it incumbent on me to make a review of the various occupations of men in this life in order to try to seek out the best. . . . I thought that I could do no better than to continue in . . . cultivating my Reason, and in advancing myself as much as possible in the knowledge of the truth in accord-ance with the method which I had prescribed myself.

This and all future citations from the Regulae, Discourse, Meditations, and Principles are taken from the Haldane-Ross translation. Any significant departures from their text will be noted.
becomes knowledge.\(^2\) This seems initially a rather puzzling position, for what we usually regard as knowledge are the individual "facts" that we learn about the world through the senses. Descartes would be unhappy with such a characterization of knowledge. Real knowledge, he believes, is scientia, an ordered system of certain truths. He declares that certainty is not to be found in isolated bits of data, but in some system in which the interconnection of all knowledge becomes obvious:

If, therefore, anyone wishes to search out the truth of things in serious earnest, he ought not to select any special science, for all the sciences are conjoined with each other and interdependent...\(^3\)

Though he does not disparage the use of the senses, he refuses to characterize sense experience as knowledge. It cannot provide the interconnectedness that is the mark of true knowledge or scientia. The testimony of the senses "fluctuates,"\(^4\) and generalizations made from such testimony are "frequently fallacious."\(^5\) The only true sources of knowledge are intuition and deduction.\(^6\) Intuition and deduction are certain only because analysis and synthesis afford us insight into the simplest and indubitable elements of knowledge and the ways in which they may be

\(^2\)AT X, Rule V, 379\(^{15-17}\).
\(^3\)AT X, Rule I, 361\(^{14-18}\).
\(^4\)AT X, Rule III, 368\(^{14}\).
\(^5\)AT X, Rule II, 365\(^{4-5}\).
\(^6\)AT X, Rule III, 368\(^{9-14}\).
combined. Various areas of knowledge are interconnected because they are all constructed from these simple natures. Since this thesis is concerned with the theory of knowledge in the *Regulae*, it must concentrate on those simple natures and their role in knowledge. Though sense data may sometimes stimulate or at least occasion the knowing process, the essential characteristics of the early Cartesian theory of knowledge can be discovered only by discovering the nature of that which is revealed in analysis and combined in synthesis.

The Role of the Simple Natures in the Method

Analysis is that mental activity by which we "... reduce involved and obscure propositions step by step to those that are simpler." This is done to gain an understanding of what is involved in the concept or proposition examined and how its various aspects are related. Our use of analysis is most often pragmatic. On such occasions, we cease dividing the issue when we have brought the problem within manageable limits for the purpose at hand. Further analysis is often possible, but we may have no

7 AT X, Rule V, 379\(^1\)7-19.

8 I employ such vague terminology at this point in order to avoid a premature commitment to some interpretation of the ontological status of the basic elements out of which knowledge is constructed. In fact, the thesis examines the case for a more definitive interpretation of these elements and concludes that the vagueness is Descartes' own and cannot be resolved in the *Regulae*. 
immediate use for it. Descartes calls the end-point of analysis the "absolute." In this case it is the relatively absolute (relative to the purpose at hand).

On the other hand, it is possible, Descartes believes, to push analysis beyond the point at which our present purposes will be satisfied. Ultimately, we will arrive at the most basic elements of knowledge, those that are no longer complex and cannot be further divided by analysis. These truly absolute (maxime absoluta) end-points of analysis are the simple natures. We have an intuitive apprehension of them that guarantees the certainty of our knowledge of them. This certainty extends to more complex knowledge insofar as it is constructed from these simple natures. We need to determine precisely what this simplicity is and why Descartes claims that it provides the foundation for certainty in knowledge.

The simplicity of which he speaks is simplicity in the order of thought. Any individual existing object is in itself simple, but this is different from the order in which we consider the nature of the object. Thus, although analysis enables us to consider extension separately from figure and motion separately from duration, this

9AT X, Rule VI, 381-382.

10"We assert that relatively to our knowledge single things should be taken in an order different from that in which we should regard them when considered in their more real nature." AT X, Rule XII, 418.
provides no justification for assuming the possibility of their existing independent of each other.

In the search for simple natures, how does one know when to stop analyzing? This does not seem at all problem­atic, for we would expect the analysis to stop at the point at which it can no longer continue. Nevertheless, this will not be an adequate criterion, for it is sometimes possible to further abstract from a simple nature. For example, the mind can separate the notion of a limit from the notion of a figure (because a figure has limits). But limit does not qualify as a simple nature, for it cannot function unambiguously as a simple element in knowledge. It is parasitic and equivocal. Its meaning remains obscure until it is linked with something like figure, motion, time, power, etc.; and, in each case, the limit becomes something different from what it would be in any of the other cases. We have no clear notion of limit apart from what is limited;

"... consequently it is something compounded out of a num­ber of natures wholly diverse, of which it can be only am­biguously predicated."\textsuperscript{11}

Because the goal of analysis is to acquaint us with the simple natures as the most basic elements of cer­tain knowledge, it would be self-defeating to pursue the analysis to the point at which certain knowledge is no

\textsuperscript{11} AT X, Rule XII, 419\textsuperscript{3-5}.
longer to be had. Descartes expresses this evidential requisite in the following way: "We shall call only those simple the perception of which is so clear and distinct that they cannot be divided by the mind into several more distinct perceptions." This stipulation guards against the introduction of such notions as limit as simple natures, since they do not have the requisite clarity and distinctness. Nothing in knowledge is gained and much is lost by pushing the analysis too far. Analysis has a point of diminished epistemological returns. Simplicity may be defined as the point in analysis at which further analysis becomes less clear and distinct; the simplicity is one of evidence.

As can be seen, Descartes is even at this early period using some sort of doctrine of clarity and distinctness. There is no further explanation of this in the Regulae, but it is safe to assume that the doctrine is the same as that in the later philosophy; for the simple natures of the Regulae meet the criteria for clarity and distinctness implicit in the Meditations and formulated explicitly in

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12 AT X, Rule XII, 418–17. To be consistent, Descartes should have said that they cannot be divided into several perceptions as distinct. The point of arrest in analysis occurs when distinctness and clarity begin to lessen.

13 Throughout his philosophical career, Descartes criticized those who attempt to further analyze the simple and end up confusing rather than clarifying. See the Regulae, AT X, Rule XII, 4269–13, 42619–21; Search After Truth, AT X, 523–524; Principles I, X; Letter to Mersenne, October 16, 1639.
the Principles. To show this will afford us further insight into the doctrine of simplicity of the Regulae.

According to the Principles, a clear (clara) idea is one that

... is present and apparent to an attentive mind in the same way as we assert that we see objects clearly when, being present to the regarding eye, they operate on it with sufficient strength.¹⁴

When vision is clear, the object of vision operates on the eye with sufficient strength, so that no part of the object is ignored; when an idea is clear, we attend to all parts of it, so that no part is left unthought. Any perception of any simple nature must be clear;

For, if our mind attains the least awareness of it ..., it can be concluded just from this that we know it entirely. Otherwise, it could not be said to be simple, but composed of that which we perceive and of that of which we think we are ignorant.¹⁵

The simple natures satisfy the criterion for distinctness as well: "... the distinct is that which is so precise and different from all other objects that it contains within itself nothing but what is clear."¹⁶ That the simple natures meet this criterion may be shown in two ways. First, any idea that is perfectly clear must also be distinct. A perfectly clear perception carries with it a guarantee that we perceive that by which the object in question

¹⁴Principles, I, XLV.
¹⁵AT X, Rule XII, 420²⁵-421².
¹⁶Principles, I, XLV.
is different from all other objects. The simple natures are, we have seen, perceived with perfect clarity, if they are perceived at all. They must, then, be perceived distinctly. Secondly, simplicity itself (even without reference to clarity) guarantees distinctness. To see this, consider the hypothesis that two simple natures, \( x \) and \( z \), are not distinct from each other. The hypothesis could be true under either of two conditions. First, \( x \) and \( z \) might be exactly the same perception. If that is so, then we are merely using two names to refer to the same perception; of course, there is no question of a perception being distinct from itself, so the hypothesis could not be true under the first condition. The second condition is that \( x \) and \( z \) are two different perceptions. If that is so, then they could be indistinct or confused only if \( z \) is a compound of \( x \) and something else, or vice-versa. In such a case, only one would be a simple nature. We have shown by a reductio that the indistinct perception of a simple nature is an impossibility.

This perfect clarity and distinctness in our perception of the simple natures guarantees them a special epistemic status. When simple natures are known as simple, they are known with an apodictic certainty. Descartes says that "all these simple natures are known per se and never

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contain any falsity.\textsuperscript{18} If we admit to some knowledge of a simple nature as well as to the knowledge that it is simple, we must also grant that our knowledge of it is complete and certain.

In what could any uncertainty consist? We have already seen that we cannot maintain consistently both the knowledge that it is simple and that "... over and above what we have present to us or attain to by thinking, there is something hidden from us."\textsuperscript{19} That would be to claim knowledge of only a part of that which has no parts.

Can our knowledge of a simple nature be falsified through a failure to refer to some existent extra-mental object? This question presumes a resolution to the central problem of the thesis: what is the relation of simple natures to the extra-mental world? I will show eventually that the problem is not really solvable within the Regulae. Descartes himself does not consider this issue because he believes that knowledge can proceed without making judgments about the conformity of mind to world,\textsuperscript{20} i.e., that there can be 'non-existential knowledge.' The simple natures are understood, and as long as we understand them (without attempting to make existential judgments) we do

\textsuperscript{18}AT X, Rule XII, 420^14-15.

\textsuperscript{19}AT X, Rule XII, 420^21-23.
not run the risk of falsification.

But the understanding of a wise man will not be deceived. . . , since he will judge that whatever comes to him from his imagination is really depicted in it, but yet will never assert that the object has passed complete and without alteration from the external world to his senses, and from the senses to his imagination, unless he has some previous ground for believing this. 20

The Three Groups of Simple Natures

In Rule XII Descartes divides the simple natures into three groups: the purely intellectual, the material, and those which can be ascribed univocally to either the intellectual or the material. Almost as an afterthought, he includes the negations of the natures of all three groups.

He says that the first group, the intellectual simple natures, "are known by the intellect through a certain inborn light and without the aid of any corporeal imagery." 21 They include thought, knowledge, doubt, ignorance, volition, etc. That they are known through a natural light does not distinguish the first group from the others, for he characterizes all the simple natures as being known or intuited through this natural light. When he claims that

20 AT X, Rule XII, 423-20. If this, in fact, avoids the problem of falsification, it would also seem to preclude any characterization of the simple natures as true. As I shall show later, Descartes skirts this issue with an objectification of the idea.

21 AT X, Rule XII, 419-11.
the natures are free from falsity, he makes a distinction between "... that faculty ... by which it [the understanding] has intuitive awareness of things ... [and] that by which it judges ... ." 22 None of the simple natures can be doubted, because and as long as we restrict ourselves to such an intuitive awareness of them. In Rule V, he states in a similar vein that there is an "intuitive apprehension of all those that are absolutely simple." 23 And the light metaphor is used to characterize any intuition whatsoever: "... intuition is the undoubting conception of an unclouded and attentive mind, and springs from the light of reason alone. ..." 24

The second part of his statement seems to be the criterion for distinguishing the first group of natures. He claims that the first group are all known "without the aid of any corporeal imagery." This should not be surprising when we recognize that corporeal imagery would be useless: "... it is impossible to construct any corporeal idea which shall represent to us what the act of knowing is, what doubt is... ." 25 As it stands, the criterion is only negative, but it does have a positive claim to make. The

22 AT X, Rule XII, 42016-18.
23 AT X, Rule V, 37919-20.
24 AT X, Rule III, 36818-20. The emphasis is mine.
simple natures of the first group are knowable, but the knowledge of them is not at all dependent on corporeal imagery. There are actually two criteria here: the first concerns the appropriate use of the power of knowing (the understanding unaided by the imagination); the second concerns the nature of the object of knowledge (that which is real but non-corporeal).

The second group is composed of the material simple natures. These, Descartes says, "are discerned only as being in bodies." To understand this statement, we must examine his discussion of necessary relations. He says that two natures are united necessarily "... when one is so implied in the concept of another in a confused sort of way that we cannot conceive either distinctly, if our thought assigns to them separateness from each other." The criterion for a necessary relation between natures $x$ and $y$ is not that we should be unable to intuit $x$ without intuiting $y$. In fact, if that were the criterion, Descartes would have great difficulty explaining how $x$ and $y$ could be distinct. He wants, instead, to maintain that the criterion for the necessary relation between $x$ and $y$ should be the impossibility of intuiting $x$ clearly and distinctly while stipulating the absence of $y$. As examples of such necessary relations he offers figure and extension, motion and duration,

26 AT X, Rule XII, 419-18-19.

27 AT X, Rule XII, 421-5-8. The emphasis is mine.
etc. When he claims that the second group of simple natures are discerned only as being in bodies, he is stating the necessary relation of these with corporeity or extension. This would distinguish them from the natures of the first group.

Further support for this interpretation can be gleaned from what he says about the third group of natures, those that can belong to either of the first two groups without any change of meaning. He says that they are "ascribed now to corporeal things, now to spirits, without distinction."²⁸ As examples he offers existence, unity, and duration. He immediately adds that the common notions, because they are members of the third group, "can be discerned by the understanding either unaided or when it is aware of the images of material things."²⁹ This further distinction will prove interesting for us because of its intimation that the imagination has a role on the perception of the second and third groups. The role of the imagination could have implications for the ontological status of at least these simple natures. We will examine this more carefully later.

Besides the common notions, the third group includes various necessary relations. These relations function as "bonds for connecting together the other simple

²⁸ AT X, Rule XII, 419²⁰-²¹.
²⁹ AT X, Rule XII, 419²⁹-⁴³⁰².
natures, and on their evidence depends whatever we con­clude through reasoning."30 As an example he cites: "things that are all the same as a third thing are the same as one another."31 He offers a more comprehensive list in the Replies to the Second Objections but has reservations about which are primary and which are derivative.32 Moreover, that list is restricted to those necessary relations employed in arguments for the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. The third group seems to be rather mixed; it includes Euclidean axioms and (he claims without benefit of examples) all the basic rules of inference,33 as well as such natures as existence, unity, and duration.

We might initially be taken aback at finding what seem to be judgments included in a catalogue of simple per­ceptions of the understanding. After all, Descartes him­self reminds us of the difference between understanding and judgment.34 He does not, though, regard these necessary

30 AT X, Rule XII, 419 24-26.
31 AT X, Rule XII, 419 26-27.
32 Henri Gouhier has compiled a list of these rela­tions as they occur throughout the works of Descartes. See his La pensée métaphysique de Descartes (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1962), pp. 271-3.
33 Smith regards Descartes' claim that these natures are bonds of inference as some unfortunate regress to Schol­astic thinking. See his Studies in the Cartesian Philosophy (New York: Russell and Russell, 1962), p. 37, n. 2.
34 Although this distinction does not appear as clearly in the Regulae as it does in the later works, it is nonetheless there. He claims that we cannot fall into error
relations as judgments: for (1) they do not assert any extra-mental existence, and (2) they do not affirm the inclusion of anything beyond what is clearly and distinct­ly perceived. It is a feature of his philosophy that the truth of at least some propositions can be perceived without any act of judgment.

Nor are these natures as complex as they might seem. They are, Descartes believes, as simple as the other simple natures. As expressions of necessary relations among na­tures, they cannot be reduced to relations that are simpler; and as principles of inference they cannot be broken down into simpler principles. Their sentential form is decep­tive. It is not the number of words that distinguishes simplicity from complexity; it is the non-simplicity of the "thought" by which the concept in question is perceived.

In addition to the presentation of the three groups, Descartes includes the negations of and privative terms corresponding to the simple natures as themselves simple.35 This is not surprising. He intends to give an account of the fundamentals of all knowledge; some way of dealing with with negation must be found. For two reasons it would be wrong to claim that the negation of some simple nature x is a complex of two natures, x and something like negation, as long as we attend only to what we understand, without making judgments about it. AT X, Rule XII, 42315-20.

35AT X, Rule XII, 4203-5.
privation, non-being, etc. First, negation cannot itself be a simple nature, for we can never have the requisite clear and distinct knowledge of it. Negation, like limitation, is parasitic in that it acquires its specific meaning from the character of that which is being negated. Second, there is something counter-intuitive about claiming that the negation of \( \sim x \) is something added to \( x \). Descartes saw this quite clearly, I am sure, by the time of the Meditations. He argues there that the infinite cannot be a negation of the finite, "for, . . . there is manifestly more reality in infinite substance than in finite. . . ."\(^{36}\)

If Descartes wants to preserve his picture of knowledge as being built entirely out of atomic elements, he must regard the negation of each of the natures as itself a simple nature.

It seems, then, that Descartes has really attempted to group all elements in knowledge within his doctrine of simple natures. The natures themselves are a heterogeneous lot: they include attributes of mind only, attributes of body only, attributes of both, principles of inference, axioms of geometry, necessary relations, and negations. The mode of cognition varies; some can be perceived by the understanding alone, some require imagination, and others may be known in either way. This, then, is a general

\(^{36}\)Meditation III.
account of the simple natures of the Regulae. The thesis will raise the question: are they ideas or are they elements of extra-mental reality?
CHAPTER III

THE SIMPLE NATURES AS REPRESENTATIVE IDEAS

This chapter will examine the case for interpreting the simple natures as representative ideas. One claim (seldom made explicit) is that such an interpretation is required in order to make the early doctrine compatible with the later doctrine of representative ideas. I shall not examine this claim as it would involve us in a detailed study of the later philosophy. Moreover, such external evidence is to be admitted only in support of or after despairing of the possibility of internal evidence. I shall restrict this chapter, therefore, to the internal evidence of the \textit{Regulae} for the doctrine of representative ideas. Such evidence, if present, will indicate that what we know most directly are our own ideas. Because Descartes claims that what we know directly are the simple natures, this sort of evidence would enable us to conclude that the simple natures are ideas rather than extra-mental reality. What an argument for the representational interpretation must establish, then, is the essentially mental character of what is immediately known.

The Order of Thought and the Order of Nature

In Rule VI, Descartes claims that his method
differs from that of the Scholastics in that it requires us to compare things in the order of their interdependence in knowledge. ¹ His presumption is that the Scholastics neglected the order of knowledge in favor of the order of nature. Rule VIII offers a similar claim—that the examination of the simple natures is a consideration of things only insofar as they are in the understanding.² In Rule XII he notes that the simplicity of any singularly existing substance is altogether different from simplicity in the order of thought.³ His message is clear: the simplicity on which certain knowledge depends is a feature of the way we understand the world rather than of the way the world exists independently of our understanding. He seems, therefore, to be claiming that there is something mental about the simple natures.

LeBlond regards the distinction between the two orders as crucial for the determination of the ontological status of the simple natures:

Notons tout d'abord qu'il ne s'agit pas de " choses" mais de "notions": Descartes a soin de préciser, en commençant cette étude des objets de la connaissance, qu'il ne s'occupe pas des êtres "prout revera exis-tunt," mais seulement "in ordine ad cognitionem nostram."⁴

¹AT X, Rule VI, 3817-16.
²AT X, Rule VIII, 399⁵-⁶.
³AT X, Rule XII, 418¹-15.
⁴LeBlond, p. 165.
So far, what LeBlond says seems supported, both by the text he cites and by the texts I have cited above; Descartes himself has told us that the simplicity with which he is concerned is not the simplicity or unity that any existing substance has. It is therefore not an issue of simple things.\(^5\) LeBlond quite safely uses the more non-committal term "notions." However, he then commits himself to something further; when he says "notions" he means "ideas":

\begin{quote}
Dès le premier pas, donc, notions et choses sont séparées: certes Descartes ne doute nullement que les choses ne répondent aux idées; mais enfin, dès l'abord, il laisse de côté la relation de la connaissance aux choses.\(^6\)
\end{quote}

Thus, he arrives at the conclusion that the simple natures are ideas: "l'inventaire des natures simples est présenté, non comme un examen des choses, mais seulement des idées."\(^7\) LeBlond's claim is that because Descartes is not discussing the simplicity of substances, he must therefore be discussing the simplicity of ideas. This he believes to be the significance of the distinction between the order of under-

\(^5\) We should not presume any ontological significance when Descartes describes the simple natures as "res" (AT X, Rule VI, 381). A res may indeed be a subsisting entity; but it can also be a mode, a disposition, a distinction, a law, an idea, etc. It has the same ambiguous all-purpose usage as the English "thing." Haldane and Ross translate "res simplicissimae" as "what is quite simple," thereby preserving the Cartesian ambiguity. See James Collins, Descartes' Philosophy of Nature (London: Blackwell's, 1971), p. 12.

\(^6\) LeBlond, p. 165.

\(^7\) LeBlond, p. 172.
standing and the order of nature. What is important here is whether the distinction that Descartes makes between thought and nature requires that what is simple be the thinker's own ideas.

S. V. Keeling has pointed out a gap in the type of argument proposed by LeBlond: although the process of analysis is assuredly mental, this by no means insures that the end-point of analysis (the simple nature) is similarly mental. I will show later that there is some reason to believe that the product of analysis is not merely the thinker's own idea, that Descartes, rather, believes it to have some sort of an objective status. Presently, though, the mental or extra-mental character of what is directly known is still open to question.

Though Keeling merely points out the gap in LeBlond's argument, Brian O'Neil has a more substantive point to make. He shows that the Scholastic realist tradition in which Descartes was educated did not regard the thought-nature distinction as requiring a theory of representative ideas. Realists ordinarily drew such a distinction while still

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8See S. V. Keeling, "Le réalisme de Descartes et le rôle des natures simples," p. 77. "C'est le processus d'analyse seul qui est mental et non ce qu'il atteint ou découvre. La subjectivité du processus n'entraîne aucune-ment la subjectivité de ce qui est révélé."

9See Chapter IV.

10O'Neil, pp. 177-178.
maintaining the directness of their realism. It is true, as we saw above, that Descartes distinguishes his position from that (those?) of the Scholastics. His point, though, was that the Scholastics proceeded to develop knowledge through the syllogism rather than through the method of analysis and synthesis. His rejection of Scholasticism is, at least in this passage, not a blanket one. It is entirely possible, then, that he could share the Scholastic tenet that the ability to mentally divide what is known does not necessitate that what is known be itself mental.

Realists, as well as other epistemologists, must find some way of accounting for the fact that we can and do separate mentally what does not actually exist separately. A theory that attempts to account for this is a doctrine of abstraction. It is essentially such a doctrine of abstraction that permits Descartes to divide (analyze) mentally that which he acknowledges as being connected and even necessarily connected extra-mentally. Within the Scholastic tradition, the possibility of abstraction did not indicate at all to philosophers that their knowledge of reality was anything less than direct or immediate. Aquinas saw the necessity of acknowledging an order of thought distinct from the order of reality:

11 In the Regulae Descartes reserves the term "abstraction" for those attempts to further analyze what is already simple. See above, pp. 5-6. He seems later to abandon such a restrictive usage. See the letter to Gibieuf, January 19, 1642.
For it is quite true that the mode of understand­
ing, in the one who understands, is not the same
as the mode of a thing in being; since the thing
understood is immaterially in the one who under­
stands, according to the mode of the intellect,
and not materially according to the mode of a
material thing. . . .12

Similar statements can be found in many of the Scholastics.
See, for example, the Summa Philosophica Quadrepartita of
Eustace of St. Paul, one of the standard textbooks of the
seventeenth century.13

Indeed, the notion that thought differs from nature
must be regarded as ordinary and common-sensical; yet, at
the time of Descartes, it was not generally believed that
it required a theory of representative ideas. O'Neil has
expressed it well:

The distinction between thought and nature. . .
says nothing more than the well known Scholastic
axiom: "The thing known is in the mind of the knower
after the fashion of the knower." This does not
interpose a veil or deny directness and accuracy
of understanding. It merely says that the process
of understanding is sui generis and will, in conse­
quence, somewhat rearrange the elements of the
world in the process of grasping them.14

12 Summa Theologica, Part I, qu. 85, art. 1, cited
in O'Neil, pp. 177-178.

13 Eustachio a Sancto Paulo, Summa Philosophica, IV,
11-12. This reference is provided by Gilson in his Index
Scholastico-Cartesien, p. 1. Gilson claims that this work
"Résumé fidelement . . . l'enseignement de l'Ecole" (p. v).
While it is possible that Descartes did not know of
this work in his youth, we can be sure that he knew of it
at least by 1640, when he refers to it as a "typical text­
book." See the letter to Mersenne, November 11, 1640.

14 O'Neil, p. 177.
This does not establish conclusively that there is no doctrine of representative ideas in the *Regulae*. Nor does it establish realism in that work. It does not even establish whether a realist can offer an intelligible account of abstraction. It does show that it was widely held at the time of the *Regulae* that one could make a distinction between thought and nature and still maintain the directness or immediacy of the knowledge of extra-mental reality. Unless there is some evidence to the contrary, we have no reason to believe that Descartes objected to this assumption.

It is worth noting that, by the time of the *Meditations*, when he has openly declared for the doctrine of representative ideas, it is not primarily in order to develop a doctrine of abstraction. Instead, he is concerned with providing an epistemological framework within which both doubt and certainty can be conceptually accounted for. In order to do this, he proposed a rather rigid gap between thought and world. The gap accounts for doubt and error; the arguments of the various meditations will show how to bridge the gap and arrive at certainty.

It might be presumptuous to attribute any such epistemological sophistication to the *Regulae*. Descartes does not here seem primarily concerned with such problems.

It seems, then, that the mere occurrence of a distinction between thought and nature does not impel us to
conclude that Descartes had already opted for a theory of representative ideas (or for realism).

The Simple Natures: Innate Ideas?

There occur in the *Regulae* various allusions to the inneity of knowledge. If it can be established that Descartes held a doctrine of innate ideas and that these ideas are to be identified with the simple natures, then we may be able to build a case for the representational interpretation. It would, of course, have to be further established that the inneity of these simple natures is inconsistent with any claim to the direct knowledge of extra-mental reality.

Jean Laporte has offered such an interpretation of the simple natures. He cites, first, Descartes' later contention that those ideas are innate which "involve no affirmation or negation." The cognition of the simple natures, as we saw earlier, requires no affirmation or negation. The natures are, therefore, innate. The argument relies on the assumption of the continuity of the doctrine, an assumption which for purposes of the thesis I do not wish to make. Hartland-Swann claims that what is really shown by this is that the simple natures of the early

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16 See Chapter 2.
philosophy become the innate ideas of the later philosophy.\textsuperscript{17}

LeBlond claims the innenity of at least some of the simple natures exclusively on the evidence of the \textit{Regulae}. As we have already seen, LeBlond claims that the simple natures are representative ideas. He believes that at least the first group should also be considered innate, because of Descartes' claim that they are known "by an in-born light."\textsuperscript{18} He is reluctant to include the natures of the second group as innate, because Descartes claims that experience (the use of the imagination) is essential for their perception. Hartland-Swann points out the same difficulty.\textsuperscript{19} Their reluctance in this respect seems unwarranted. It has not been established that extra-mental input, if indeed that is what the imagination provides, would necessarily be inconsistent with a doctrine of representative and innate ideas. This will be discussed in a later chapter. For now, let us assume that the restriction of innenity to the first group is unwarranted. If LeBlond has a case, it will be applicable to all the simple natures.

\textsuperscript{17}John Hartland-Swann, "Descartes' Simple Natures," \textit{Philosophy}, XXII (1947), 139-142. He finds at least a partial correspondence of the simple natures with the later innate ideas but concludes that the natures do not "fit unambiguously into the epistemology and ontology of the \textit{Meditations} and \textit{Principles}."\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{18}LeBlond, p. 168, n. 2.

\textsuperscript{19}Hartland-Swann, p. 141.
This is supported by the fact that the "natural light" to which he refers is the condition for the intuition of any of the simple natures.\textsuperscript{20}

The supporting text that LeBlond cites is the following: "... we must note that there are but few pure and simple natures which either our experiences or some sort of light innate in us enable us to intuit ..."\textsuperscript{21} If the doctrine of inneity expressed herein is to support the representational interpretation, the inneity must be of such a sort to support the claim that the immediate object of knowledge is itself mental (rather than extra-mental) and that it is somehow inborn.\textsuperscript{22}

It is significant that in the passage that LeBlond cites Descartes is not claiming that the immediate object of knowledge is innate. What is innate is the "light" which enables us to intuit the simple nature. This does not establish the sort of inneity that is needed to conclude that the simple natures are ideas; it says merely that we have an innate capacity for understanding these natures.

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{20}See Chapter 2, where I discuss the claim that the first group of natures are known by a natural light.

\textsuperscript{21}AT X, Rule VI, 383\textsuperscript{11-14}.

\textsuperscript{22}I use "inborn" with some hesitation, because innatists do not, as a rule, regard the neo-nate as mentally cognizant of those ideas that are claimed to be innate. It would be more proper to regard such ideas as belonging to the mind solely in virtue of its existence as a rational mind. Ordinarily, being born is the preface to one's existence as a rational mind; hence, innate ideas are said to be "inborn." See the letter to Hyperaspistes, August, 1641.
\end{footnotesize}
This is consistent with other references to innity that occur in the Regulae. In Rule X Descartes speaks of an "inborn faculty of invention" that becomes articulated as the rules of method.\(^{23}\) In Rule I he states that the cultivation of this same method is itself the cultivation of the lumen naturale.\(^{24}\) The thrust of these passages is that we have a natural capacity for using that method which will enable us to "see" the truth of things. The visual metaphor is appropriate for the description of intuition; it further explains the light metaphor. What is innate, then, is the natural capacity for understanding the natures through the use of method. This is similar to Descartes' later doctrine of innity, as expressed by Kenny:

\begin{quote}
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 is not given us by the stimulus that on a particular occasion makes us think of or experience X.\(^{25}\)
\end{quote}

There is, therefore, evidence for a doctrine of innity in at least this minimal sense. The passage LeBlond cites invokes this minimal sense of innity. It is not sufficient, however, for the establishment of a doctrine of innate ideas that would lead necessarily to representationalism. The claim for an innate capacity of understanding

\(^{23}\)AT X, Rule X, 403.\(^{19}\)

\(^{24}\)AT X, Rule I, 361.\(^{18}\)

does not assert the kind of innenity that restricts direct knowledge to a knowledge of one's own mind. It says merely that knowledge of any sort presumes an innate capacity for that sort of knowledge.

That this is innenity in a sense so minimal that it does not distinguish innatists from other epistemologists is a rather troubling possibility. That there is no knowledge without a capacity for knowing seems a rather trivial claim--one that should be acceptable to all but the skeptic. Perhaps the claim becomes something more than trivial when we recognize that Descartes regarded the various intellectual capacities as being an explicit product of an intentional design by a creator. That these capacities are matched to the way the world exists is part of the miracle of creation, a manifestation of the creator's goodness, and a necessity if there is to be any knowledge of the extra-mental world.

In conclusion, we have seen that the only sense in which Descartes can be said to have explicitly committed himself to a theory of innate ideas seems compatible with realism as well as with the representative theory. We have seen also that the distinction between the order of understanding and the order of nature does not provide sufficient evidence for concluding that the simple natures are essentially ideas. These are the two major arguments I have found for the representative interpretation. Neither has been found to be conclusive.
CHAPTER IV

THE SIMPLE NATURES AS EXTRA-MENTAL EXISTENTS

In the last chapter, textual grounds for the representational interpretation were examined and found insufficient. The present chapter will conduct a similar examination of the grounds for the realist interpretation and will arrive at similarly negative conclusions. To make a case for the realist interpretation, it is not sufficient to establish that, if we know the simple natures, we necessarily know the nature of extra-mental reality. Such a claim would indeed be true of a realist interpretation of simple natures, but it could also be true of any doctrine of representative ideas that does not lapse into solipsism. A realist interpretation must show also that the simple natures do not just represent the extra-mental world but that they are actually constitutive of it, that they are "ontal elements."¹

This chapter is composed of four sections. In the first, I will examine two arguments offered by O'Neil. These will be shown to have been based on remarks taken out of context by him and misinterpreted. In the second, I will examine the relevance of sense experience to the

¹The term is employed by Keeling. See his Descartes (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), p. 236, n. 1.
claim for realism. This will be dealt with specifically by an analysis of the role of imagination in knowledge.

In the third, I will examine the claim that the simple natures are somehow "objective." While there is good reason for accepting this claim, I show that the objectivity of the natures does not demand the realist interpretation.

In the fourth, I will look at Keeling's claim that, because the simple natures cannot be universals, they must be particulars and, so, must exist in nature.

Two Short Arguments

In this section I will examine two short arguments for a realism of simple natures. Both of the arguments have been proposed by O'Neil. I have chosen to group them together because they are short, because their author is the same, and because they both misinterpret remarks made by Descartes in a discussion of occult qualities.

In Rules XII and XIV Descartes, as an example of the application of his method, cites the search for the simple natures that are involved in a magnet. He says that "there can be nothing to know in the magnet which does not consist in certain simple natures evident in themselves." By proceeding methodically in the examination, one can feel confident that "he has discovered the real nature of

\[2\text{AT X, Rule XII, 42716-19.}\]
the magnet insofar as it can be discovered by human intelligence with the data of experience."\(^3\) Descartes cites the example of the magnet as an instantiation of his claim that "the whole of human knowledge consists in a distinct perception of the way in which those simple natures combine in the composition of other objects."\(^4\) If we remember this, we will avoid the error of hoping to discover something new and occult in the magnet.\(^5\) Descartes' intention, then, in the discussion of the magnet is to warn us that there is nothing occult here; everything about the magnet that we can know is the combination of simple natures and is discoverable through the method.

O'Neil believes that the passage has another significance: "Certainly the factors which make a magnet behave the way it does are not ideas in our head."\(^6\) The remark is somewhat elliptical. I believe that the following amplification remains true to O'Neil's intent: Descartes is claiming that to know the simple natures involved is to know the factors that make a magnet behave the way it does. Ideas are not what make the magnet so behave. Therefore, the simple natures are not ideas.

\(^3\)AT X, Rule XII, 427\(^{25-26}\).
\(^4\)AT X, Rule XII, 427\(^3-6\).
\(^5\)AT X, Rule XIV. Such new discoveries would be possible only in the case of a divine intellect or with the acquisition of some new sense.
\(^6\)O'Neil, p. 169.
What O'Neil neglects to consider is this: to claim that in knowing the simple natures involved we thereby understand the behavior of a magnet does not necessarily commit Descartes to the claim that the simple natures are what make a magnet behave in its characteristic way. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the realist interpretation must establish more than that if we know the simple natures, we know what extra-mental reality must be like. It must be further established that these natures are constitutive of extra-mental reality. O'Neil has found Descartes claiming that, in knowing certain simple natures, we know the essential nature of the magnet. Descartes does indeed say that much, but that is not enough to establish realism. Descartes, in the passage in question, is best read as merely claiming that the method, with the knowledge of simple natures that it provides, should be considered adequate for the knowledge of all that is knowable. It is a mistake to read into the passage any claim about the ontological status of the simple natures.

O'Neil presents a second argument that purports to establish the extra-mental existence of at least the material simple natures.7 Extension, Descartes has said, is itself a simple nature.8 In Rule XIV he makes several other statements about extension: "By extension we understand

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7O'Neil, p. 170.

8AT X, Rule XII, 41919.
whatever has length, breadth, and depth, not inquiring whether it be real body or merely space . . . "9 "Hence we announce that by extension we do not here mean anything distinct and separate from the extended object itself. . . ."10 O'Neil merely presents these texts and immediately concludes: "I think the conclusion is unavoidable that some simple natures have a species of ontological independence, and are constituent of the world."11 He presents no argument for this conclusion, but we can surmise what the argument might be:

The extended object is extra-mentally existent. Extension is not separable from the extra-mental object. Extension, then, is extra-mentally existent. Extension is a simple nature. Therefore, this simple nature is extra-mentally existent. The simple natures are known directly. Therefore, to know this simple nature is to know directly an extra-mental existent.

If the argument is correct, it must follow that Descartes is a realist, at least in the case of knowledge of material objects.

What O'Neil fails to note is the context of Descartes' remarks. Descartes is attempting to show that careful use of the method will rectify what he regards as "ill-conceived principles." One such principle is that space is

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9 AT X, Rule XIV, 442.17-19.
11 O'Neil, p. 170.
something distinct from extended objects. He claims that space is not anything different from real bodies. It is not some occult entity that will still exist even in the absence of all extended being; space is not some container for the world. This discussion occurs in the very passage from which O'Neil quotes. If, when we say "extension" we mean "space," we are not really referring to anything but the extended object, because "... we make it a rule not to recognize those metaphysical entities that cannot really be presented in the imagination."¹² This is a position that he continued to maintain through the later philosophy.¹³

O'Neil interprets Descartes as saying that extension as a simple nature is not in any way different from the extended body. On this rests his claim to realism in the knowledge of this nature. All that Descartes is actually claiming here is that space is not empty, that there can be no such thing as a vacuum. O'Neil's interpretation is textually unsupported; the passage makes no claims about the ontological status of the simple nature extension.

¹²AT X, Rule XIV, 442²6-²9.

¹³See Principles, II, X; Descartes to Mersenne, January 9, 1639; Descartes to Chanut, June 6, 1647. Most important, though, are the text of Rule XIV and the letter to Mersenne of April 15, 1630, which indicates that Descartes was already claiming that he could prove the impossibility of a vacuum.
The Argument from the Role of the Imagination

Descartes says that the imagination has a role to play in the perception of the simple natures of both the second and third groups, namely, those that are material and those that may be either material or spiritual with no change in meaning. All sensory input from the extra-mental world is channelled ultimately through the imagination. Thus, it might appear that, in claiming a role for the imagination, Descartes is affirming the necessity of a cognitive contact with the extra-mental world for the perception of the second and third groups of natures. To determine whether this contact with the extra-mental world necessitates a realist interpretation, we must examine what the imagination is for Descartes and make more specific its role in knowledge. That is the project of this section. It will ultimately be shown that, while the imagination has a role to play in the perception of these natures, that role is not of a sort to necessitate the realist interpretation. Moreover, it provides evidence for the impossibility of the realist interpretation.

Kemp Smith has postulated a realism on the above basis:

In the Regulae there is . . . no doctrine of innate ideas and no doctrine of representative perception—none at least, of the type which postulates that physical entities can be known only by way of mental duplicates.¹⁴

In the case of those simple natures that can be in material objects (i.e., those of the second and third groups), the realism is supported thus:

The self, which in its earthbound life is an embodied self, is . . . immediately aware of the physical patterns which external objects, by way of their action on the bodily sense-organs, imprint on the brain.\textsuperscript{15}

Smith cites no specific texts in support of this interpretation. What we must establish is whether this immediate awareness of patterns of physical objects is the same thing as the perception of a simple nature and, if not, what its relation is to the perception of simple natures. This is essentially the problem of the relation of understanding to imagination.

The Cartesian discussion of the imagination in the \textit{Regulae} takes two divergent directions, which must both be accounted for. On the one hand, we find Descartes insisting that we be wary of the entrapments of a misplaced confidence in sense experience. In the acquisition of certain knowledge, we must rely only on intuition and deduction (which is itself a serial intuition).\textsuperscript{16} Intuition, he writes, is "not the fluctuating testimony of the senses, nor the misleading judgment that proceeds from the blundering constructions of the imagination . . ."\textsuperscript{17} This might lead us to believe that sense experience and imagination have absolutely

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., p. 52.
\textsuperscript{16}AT X, Rule IX, 400\textsuperscript{16-19}.
\textsuperscript{17}AT X, Rule III, 368\textsuperscript{14-16}.
no role in knowledge.

On the other hand, Descartes decries those philosophers who, "... neglecting experience, imagine that truth will spring from their brain like Pallas from the head of Zeus."\(^{18}\) This would make us suspect that the imagination will be relevant to the acquisition of knowledge. The discussion of simple natures in Rule XII reafirms this role of the imagination always and necessarily in the perception of the second group of simple natures and always but not necessarily in the perception of the third group.\(^{19}\) Whether this role commands the direct realist interpretation is the matter under discussion.

Initially, we must clarify exactly what the imagination is for Descartes. Although the \textit{Regulae} says that it is actually a physical organ that takes on the shape of the object perceived,\(^{20}\) it soon becomes clear that the role that he accords to the imagination is not explicable in purely physical terms. He seems often to regard the imagination as the awareness of the shapes taken on by the physical organ. Some years later, he admits in the correspondence to using the term in both senses.\(^{21}\) The active knowing

\(^{18}\) AT\textit{ X}, Rule XII, 419\textsuperscript{15-25}. Note that even if it can be established that the role of the imagination requires a direct realism, this would hold true only of the second group. The first group would not be affected, and the status of the third group would remain ambiguous.

\(^{19}\) AT\textit{ X}, Rule V, 380\textsuperscript{14-16}.

\(^{20}\) AT\textit{ X}, Rule XII, 414\textsuperscript{19-24}.

\(^{21}\) Descartes to Mersenne, April 21, 1641.
power (*vis cognoscens*) sometimes along with the imagination is applied to the *sensus communis*; in this case we are said to sense.\(^{22}\) But this is not the role of the imagination that interests us, for Descartes never equates sensing with knowing. Kemp Smith seems oblivious to this point; his interpretation does not draw the distinction.

We are properly said to understand, Descartes claims, only when the *vis cognoscens* operates alone. This is a rather strange claim for Descartes, for in the very next paragraph he asserts that the "understanding can be moved by the imagination."\(^{23}\) He goes on to claim that ". . . if the understanding proposes to examine something that can refer to a body, we must form the idea of that thing as distinctly as possible in the imagination."\(^{24}\) This is what is again proposed in the cases of the second and third groups of simple natures. What exactly is Descartes proposing? Is he claiming that the consciousness of the image is itself certain knowledge? If so, then he might be a direct realist. I say "might," for it would have to be further established that the imagination, or better, the image imagined was a faithful representation of extra-mental reality. Descartes, though, warns us against such a presumption. The wise man

\(^{22}\) *AT X*, Rule XII, 415\(^{27}-416\).  
\(^{23}\) *AT X*, Rule XII, 416\(^{17}\).  
\(^{24}\) *AT X*, Rule XII, 416\(^{28}-417\).
... will judge that whatever comes to him from his imagination is really depicted in it, but yet will never assert that the object has passed complete and without any alteration from the external world to his senses and from his senses to his imagination ... 25

A direct realist would have to assume prima facie the faithfulness of this passing, and Descartes does not. If we regard the imagination, then, as not having any certain and direct connection with extra-mental reality, it would become quite difficult to maintain that, because the imagination serves the understanding, the understanding thereby has a direct contact with extra-mental reality.

Moreover, even if we could presume that the world was faithfully reproduced in our imagination, we would still have to ascertain the nature of the relation between imagination and understanding. Descartes would be a realist only if this relation was of a sort to preserve the directness of knowledge. He says that the understanding can be moved (moveri possit) by the imagination. 26 In Rule XIV he affirms that a question about extension (meaning about any of the second group of natures) "... must be set before the imagination ..., for this is the best way to make it clear to the understanding." 27 Somewhat later in the same rule, he tells us that it is possible and

26 AT X, Rule XII, 416-17.
27 AT X, Rule XIV, 438-10-11.
even necessary to use the imagination as an aid (imagina-
tionis adjumento). For, he tells us, by fixing an image
in the imagination we will insure that we do not imprudently
exclude some nature that belongs to it. This is similar to
the claim in Rule XII that, while the understanding alone
is capable of perceiving truth, it ought nevertheless to be
aided by the imagination.

In summary, there are two distinct occurrences when
a simple nature is understood with the aid of the imagina-
tion. First, there is consciousness of an image. Second,
there is an understanding of the nature(s) which the image
instantiates. The two should not be confused; the occur-
rence of a mental image is not itself understanding of the
natures instantiated in that image. This explains Des-
cartes' warning against dependence on the imagination.

What needs to be established is the relation be-
tween the two occurrences. Having a mental picture before
us seems to insure that we will omit nothing relevant and
will not count as a material nature something unimaginable.
To claim that something is material and yet in principle
unimaginable is, according to Descartes, a contradiction.
The constant use of the imagination as an aid to understand-
ing will prevent such errors as pretending to understand
empty space.

\[28\text{AT X, Rule XIV, 445}^{16-23}\]
\[29\text{AT X, Rule XII, 410}^{17-23}\]
Any attempt to construe this as realism must deal with a difficulty that Kemp Smith has not acknowledged. As we discussed earlier, we must account for the Cartesian claim that certain knowledge is possible only when we refrain from judging that our mental images pass from the world directly, i.e., without alteration. This indicates that we cannot count on being in immediate cognitive contact with the extra-mental world, and the search for knowledge ought not to proceed under the assumption that we are. This poses a major problem for the realist interpretation. In addition, when the actual role of the imagination is made explicit, we find that it by no means presumes contact with the extra-mental. It serves as a useful picture in the mind, a mental picture of an instance of what we are trying to understand. The understanding does not abstract from the mental picture, but Descartes presumes that we can nevertheless compare our understanding of nature \( x \) with an imaginary picture of some object incorporating \( x \). The imagination provides a psychological help for directing attention, but knowledge is not in any way extracted from it. Thus, even if it could be established that the imagination faithfully pictures the extra-mental world, the way in which the understanding makes use of the imagination again precludes directness of knowledge. With such a lack of direct cognitive contact with an extra-mental world, I doubt that a case could be made for realism on the grounds of what Descartes
says about the imagination in the *Regulae*.

**The Argument from the Objectivity of the Simple Natures**

There are numerous considerations that indicate that Descartes regarded the simple natures as having a sort of objective status. By "objective," I mean that their reality and place in knowledge is not merely that conferred upon them by the knower. The simple natures would be what they are regardless of the thinking processes of any given thinker. One way of accounting for this objective status would be to interpret the natures as "ontal elements" of extra-mental reality. I will examine the reasons for claiming this objective status and will show that there is a much more plausible basis for it than the realist interpretation offers. Let us first examine the reasons for claiming the objective status of the simple natures.

As evidence, note first of all that the criteria of clarity and distinctness, with which the natures are known, are put forth as logical criteria. One may object (with Leibniz) that these criteria end up being psychological. That may be true, but it is still true that Descartes intended them to be logical.\(^{30}\) It is not by choice or by the whim of the thinker that some perceptions are clear and distinct while others are not. Some perceptions can be had

clearly and distinctly and others cannot; the content of
the perception (as well as the methodical approach of the
perceiver) guarantees this. I have shown earlier that the
simplicity of the nature apprehended guarantees the clarity
and distinctness of its apprehension. This simplicity is
not a property of the perceiver as subject; some perceptions
are simple and they can only be perceived as simple. There
is something about them that imposes itself on the thinker.
What can be perceived as simple and what can be perceived
clearly and distinctly are determined, not exclusively by
the thinker, but by the nature of what is thought.

Second, there are real distinctions among the simple
natures; each is different from the others and necessarily
so. Keeling states that "... chacune a son caractère
unique et homogène qui la distingue de toute autre. Cette
distinction n'est pas rationis mais realis ..."31 This
guaranteed heterogeneity is due to the fact that, if two na-
tures were not different (in content) from each other, they
would be only one nature. Each nature is perceived as distinct
from all others. The distinctness is grounded in the
nature itself, not in the thinker.

Third, Descartes himself claims that the simple na-
tures have an objective status. This claim occurs in one
of the few references to simple natures after the Regulae.

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31 Keeling, "Le réalisme de Descartes et le rôle des
natures simples," p. 78.
Descartes is discussing another theory of common notions, that of Lord Herbert of Cherbury. Cherbury had claimed that universal assent was the criterion of indubitable common notions.\textsuperscript{32} Descartes rejects this; his own common notions (a subset of the third group of simple natures) may be universally assented to, but that is not why they are indubitable. Universalized assent is merely generalized subjectivity. Descartes claims that there needs to be an objective foundation for this universalized assent:

\ldots I have no criteria for \ldots [the common notions as truths] except the light of nature. The two criteria [universal assent and the light of nature] agree in part; for since all men have the same natural light, it seems they should have the same notions. \ldots\textsuperscript{33}

This natural light is, of course, the light of reason. It is not merely the fact that all rational men assent to the common notions that makes them indubitably true; more important is the claim that it is \textit{rational} to assent to them. They seem, therefore, to be objectively grounded in some way, so that it would be not merely exceptional but \textit{irrational} to refuse to assent to them.

Fourth, as I remarked earlier, the knowledge of the simple natures is characterized as both true and certain. There must be some sort of objective foundation for truth, or the term is meaningless. This objective foundation must enable us to account for both truth and falsity.

\textsuperscript{32} Lord Edward Herbert of Cherbury, \textit{De Veritate}.

\textsuperscript{33} Descartes to Mersenne, October 16, 1639.
Moreover, all knowledge must be about something. The simple natures are objects of knowledge.

It seems necessary, therefore, to attribute some sort of objective status to the simple natures. If they could be regarded as "ontal elements," their objectivity would indeed be established. A correspondence theory of truth could then be developed, resting on the claim that the natures, as extra-mental, must be objective. If there is another plausible account, though, which also establishes the objectivity of the natures and is based on the texts, then we have no reason for preferring the realist interpretation. I believe that there is such an alternative account, explicit in the later philosophy and at least seminal in the Regulae. Let us examine it.

In the Meditations Descartes states that "... every clear and distinct perception is without doubt something and hence cannot derive its origin from what is nought..." The same indication that clear and distinct truths are themselves something real seems to be implicit in Meditation I. We may regard certain eternal truths (e.g., the truths of mathematics and geometry) as still true even if we doubt the existence of an extra-mental world. In such a case, the truths expressed in these propositions, would not be founded in the physical world. Descartes wants to maintain that such truths are

34Meditation IV.
not founded in the world, but in something else.

In 1630 (less than a year after the estimated date of the *Regulae*), Descartes goes so far as to maintain that such eternal truths or essences have a reality of their own both as God's ideas and as what must be true of any world. In fact, it seems plausible to regard the simple natures as themselves having their foundation in the deity, as any essence must be expressed in terms of these simple natures. To establish the case for this more definitively, it would have to be shown that the same things (or types of things) that Descartes called eternal essences must be collections of inter-related natures. I am confident that this could be done, although it is beyond the scope of this thesis. Thus grounding the simple natures in the deity would enable us to establish the objectivity needed to characterize the knowledge of the simple natures as true and as dependent on the light of reason. It would also provide a context for the rather opaque statement about the quasi-divine character of the human intellect: "... The human mind has in it something we may call divine, wherein are scattered the first germs of useful modes of thought." 

If we should ultimately find this interpretation acceptable, how will it affect the status of the simple natures? It would indicate that the realist interpretation

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35Descartes to Mersenne, May 6 and 27, 1630. See also Meditation V.

36*AT* X, Rule IV, 3737-9.
is not the only way of accounting for the objectivity of the simple natures. It does not, though, provide a move definitive statement of what the epistemology of the Regulae actually is. Certain pertinent questions are still left unanswered. First, we have no positive statement about the relation of our ideas to God's ideas. Do our ideas "represent" God's ideas? If so, then the representative theory would be the appropriate interpretation. The representativeness would then be double: our ideas would represent God's ideas which, in turn, would represent extra- mental reality. If, instead, we know the divine ideas directly, we will have a direct knowledge of something extra- mentally real, inasmuch as God's ideas have a reality not dependent on our thought. But this would not be a direct knowledge of something extra- mentally existent; it would, therefore, not constitute a realism as we have understood it in this thesis.

Second, there is no indication whether the term "simple natures" refers to our ideas, to God's ideas, or to both indifferently. This makes it impossible to establish what we are claiming to know most directly and immediately when we know the simple natures. It seems that, even under this alternative explanation of the objectivity of the simple natures, we are still not able to give a definitive characterization of the epistemology of the Regulae. It has been shown, though, that the realist
interpretation is not the only explanation for the objective status of the simple natures and not even the most plausible one.

The Simple Natures and Universals

Keeling, in support of the realist interpretation, argues that the simple natures cannot be interpreted in the representational framework. The representational interpretation would require viewing the natures as universals or concepts that would represent various individuals. This, he argues, is inconsistent with what Descartes says about the simple natures:

• • • Les concepts sont des abstractions ayant compréhension et extension, donc essentiellement des idées qui sont applicables aux choses. Mais les natures simples n'ont ni compréhension ni extension. On ne peut pas dire qu'on les applique à quelque chose; on les découvre tout simplement et on les connait pour ce qu'elles sont.37

Keeling cites no text from the Regulae in support of his claim.38 He assumes that the simple natures will be either universals or extra-mentally existing singulars. Let us not question this assumption of the basic epistemological framework, though he offers no foundation for it. Instead, let us see why he refuses to characterize the simple natures

37Keeling, "Le réalisme de Descartes et le rôle des natures simples," p. 78.

38My own reading of the text shows only one obvious reference to a doctrine of universals in the Regulae. See AT X, Rule XIV, 43911-19. This passage is so ambiguous that I fail to see in it support for any specific doctrine of universals.
as universals.

The natures cannot be universals, he says, because they are "quite simply discovered and known for what they are." This seems to allude to Descartes' claim that the natures are per se nota. I believe that Keeling has mistaken the significance of this claim. In Rule VIII, Descartes distinguishes the simple natures from compounds formed by the understanding. The simple natures are known in themselves (per se nota) precisely because they are not compounded out of and therefore not known in terms of anything else. When Descartes says again in Rule XII that they are per se nota, we find that it is with something similar in mind. He says that, because the natures are per se nota, they are wholly free from falsity. Either you understand one or you don't; as shown in Chapter II, nothing in between the two extremes is even intelligible. The claim that the simple natures are per se nota is not itself a claim that they are never applied in any way to singular objects; it is merely a claim that we do not arrive at an understanding of the simple natures through an understanding of anything else. That the simple natures are discovered in themselves has no implications for the

\[39\text{AT X, Rule VIII, 399}^{16-19}. \text{Here Descartes claims that the simple natures are }\text{"per se cognitis," but I do not believe that he means anything other than }\text{"per se nota."}\]

\[40\text{AT X, Rule XII, 420}^{14-15}.\]
question of whether they are subsequently to be "applied" to individual extra-mental existents. For this reason I find Keeling's argument unsatisfactory. He needs to establish that a direct knowledge of the simple natures is inconsistent with their being "applicable to things." He has failed to do so; moreover, he has failed even to notice that he must do so.

In summary, our discussion of the realist interpretation has failed to establish any conclusive evidence for it. All the arguments presented have been shown to be either inconclusive or based on a misinterpretation of the texts.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The chapters of this thesis have led to very few positive conclusions about the status of Cartesian epistemology at the time of the Regulae. I have shown that the distinction Descartes draws between the order of the understanding and the order of nature should not be uncritically regarded as evidence for the representational interpretation. Similarly the various references to unity are inconclusive, and, taken in a minimal sense, would be compatible with a realist interpretation. In short, I find no conclusive evidence for the representational interpretation.

Nor can the realist interpretation be established conclusively. We have seen Keeling's argument that the natures must be interpreted as parts of extra-mental reality because they cannot be universal concepts applied or referred to things. His argument was rejected because it was not established that the simple natures cannot be referred to things. The two short arguments by O'Neil, when interpreted in context, were similarly dismissed as irrelevant to the issue. The attempt to establish realism on the basis of some extra-mental input fed through the imagination was dismissed. If anything, the role
that Descartes accords the imagination establishes a lack of direct contact with the extra-mental world. It seems, therefore, to be more amenable to the representational interpretation. Again, though, the doctrine is not clear enough to be conclusive.

I feel compelled to conclude that the Regulae does not have an epistemology that falls squarely within one of the two interpretations under discussion. Descartes does not appear to have been conscious of or concerned with the distinction between direct realism and representationalism. Consider all the topics we have discussed: the nature of mental abstraction, the nature of innenity, the nature of universals, the relation between thought and world, and the role of the imagination (and, therefore, of sense) in understanding. Each of these is an area in which the direct realist and the representationalist would propose substantially different theories. We have found, though, that Descartes is ambiguous on each of these issues. The ambiguity should not be surprising. Descartes is not primarily concerned in the Regulae with the establishment of an ontologically grounded epistemology. His concern is to establish rules for the use of the mind; the Regulae is essentially a treatise on method. We should not, therefore, expect to find considered responses to the questions this thesis has examined. In the Regulae Descartes did not consider the importance of the distinction
between direct realism and representationalism. The doctrine of the simple natures is best regarded as a somewhat naive and superficial account of the various "parts" of knowledge, perhaps adequate for considerations of method but not an answer to fundamental epistemological issues. It is only on a naive level that quantity, relations, principles of inference, negations, existence can all be regarded as one a par in knowledge, as parts or pieces of knowledge. If we seek out a level on which all these can be dealt with alike, I believe that level must remain rather superficial. On this level, the question of their ontological status does not arise and is therefore not resolved.

The *Regulae* seek to establish practical rules for the acquisition of certain knowledge. It is only later that Descartes seriously poses the question of whether certain knowledge is even possible. Only when he begins to take the device of the methodic doubt seriously, does the question of the ontological status of the natures (which by then are made complex and called ideas or essences) come into discussion. Under the doubt, we are forced to acknowledge the possibility that all that we formerly thought we knew about the world might be merely ideas in our mind with no extra-mental referent. This doubt is sustained, at least partially, through the first five *Meditations*. While sustaining the doubt, Descartes
develops his conception of the nature of human consciousness. This must account for the possibility of my ideas being nothing more than mental events with a certain representational structure. The conception that emerges is of consciousness as a container; the intentional aspect of consciousness, a requirement for realism, is not considered. When consciousness is viewed as a container for ideas, Descartes commits himself to the doctrine of representative ideas. Thus, it is only the concerns of the later philosophy that impelled Descartes to assert the doctrine of representative ideas. These were not his concerns at the writing of the Regulae.

I find no compelling reasons for not regarding the simple natures as a rather undeveloped proto-representative theory, but the justification for selecting such an interpretation could not come from the internal evidence of the Regulae. It is, therefore, legitimate to use the later doctrine to shed light on the Regulae, but the seminal character of the earlier work should not be overblown into a definitive epistemology.
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APPROVAL SHEET

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The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

4-26-76
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