

Like an Image: Sensibility and Reflexivity in Descartes' Metaphysics

Augustin Dumont
Saint-Louis University, Brussels

Abstract

This paper aims at questioning the role of image and imagination in Descartes' Metaphysics, especially in the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, by holding both a certain doctrinal or theoretical discourse *on* image/imagination and the Cartesian *use of* images/imagination. Besides the fact that this rarely considered perspective prevents from freezing the original text, this strategy allows to highlight the ambiguity of these notions, revealed through what is *doing* by the act of imagining compared to the act of conceiving with the understanding.

Keywords: Descartes, Sensibility, Reflexivity, Metaphysics, Image, Imagination, Understanding

Introduction: The Cartesian imagination “contract”

It is no simple task to examine the work of the father of modernity in the hope of gaining a better understanding of the concept of “image.” While there may be a specifically Cartesian conceptual use of “image,” most modern uses of the term borrow from Descartes at the same time as they criticize him, and this has resulted in a degree of obfuscation of the Cartesian thought process itself. Indeed, modern and contemporary philosophers have each in their own way inherited and challenged the manner in which Descartes framed the inquiry into vision in general, opening if not an era, at least a history of representation, with which the faculty of imagination, and therefore the image, is closely related.

How can we hold both a certain theoretical discourse on “image” and the Cartesian use of the term? Certainly, there are many ways to proceed since, from the famous “*larvatus prodeo*” furtively noted in the *Preamble* to the dreams of November 10, 1619 and the treatise on optics entitled *Dioptrics*, from the writing presented as a fable in the *Discourse on the Method* to the fascinating reference to dramatic representation of the passions in *Passions of the Soul*, we have to admit that Descartes uses images constantly in his writing at the same time as he suggests several doctrinal descriptions of such use. We have chosen to concentrate on metaphysics, more specifically on metaphysics “in the process of being done.” In other words, we will look at the metaphysics that experiences itself day after day and places itself on the stage (or in the image) in the uncertainty of the *Meditations*, and we will leave aside the *Principles of Philosophy*, which came later and is less innovative in terms of writing.

Let us begin with what we would like to call the Cartesian imagination “contract.” We often hear that seventeenth century science and philosophy were born out of distrust of the imagination, “that mistress of error and falsity,” according to Pascal, and elevation of cold, dry, disembodied understanding. In reality, Descartes opened the way to modern thought by giving imagination true constituting power, more strongly asserted than often thought, but he did so while assigning it to a specific, well-defined role, and asking us not to consider as flowing from imagination the very action by which those boundaries were instituted. In other words, such a contract says: *reflexivity* as such belongs to understanding alone and not to imagination, with which it *in other respects* stands in solidarity. The theoretical and practical strangeness of this contract needs to be studied.

1. Beginning with the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*

A brief detour through the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* may prove to be an instructive way to begin this inquiry. In the third Rule, Descartes explicitly contrasts valid acts of

understanding with the “wavering assurance of the senses” (Descartes 1908, Ed. Adam and Tannery, vol. X, 368) and the “deceitful judgment of a misconstrued imagination” (Descartes 1908, AT, X, 368). Such valid acts of understanding, sources of clear and distinct knowledge, are intuition – in other words, in this case, the strictly intellectual intuition of notions and simple natures – and deduction – also certain, but less obvious than intuition because it infers one evident thing from another evident thing without itself producing an intuitive “in the moment” aspect with respect to the conclusion. Intuitions and deductions are ideas to which the order and measure required by the method, the famous *mathesis universalis*, must always give precedence over ideas flowing from the senses or the imagination, of which the latter is merely an intermediary faculty between the senses and the mind. When we have the pure intuition of the fact that a triangle is a geometrical form delimited by three straight lines, we have an idea of a triangle, according to Descartes, but that idea is not an image. An image does not provide the guarantee of certainty provided by an intuition or deduction. Indeed, an idea understood specifically as an image supposes the intervention of sensibility, by definition confronted with the *res extensa* and not with innate ideas or simple natures that could be simply intuited. By producing an image of the thing, the imagination makes it *present* and thus generates an “effect of reality,” and then an “effect of certainty,” both of which are equally precarious with respect to the solidity of intuitive and deductive actions. Thinking about the Cartesian image in this way seems to be a means of taking seriously the dimension of producing an effect: an image generates an effect of reality.

While acts of pure understanding are given precedence, a dim view is not to be taken of the materialization of ideas by the imagination and the senses. It is even recommended by Descartes in his *Regulae*, in particular in the case of scientific activity. Images are essential and can never be overlooked in constructing knowledge. Indeed, as Rule 12 says, “we must make use of all the aids which intellect, imagination, sense-perception, and memory” (Descartes 1954, rule XII; Descartes

1908, AT, X, 410) can provide in order to establish relationships between known representations and those that are unknown. Creating an image is a necessity for mathematicians, physicists and doctors when they try to describe their subject matters. Next, using images in scientific *discourse* in the sense of comparisons and metaphors is strongly recommended: all images are physical and belong entirely to the extended thing. Use of an image simply extends, in all senses of the term, the familiarity of the sensible world by adapting the unknown to that which is already known by the body by making it present, in the moment. The same Rule does not hesitate to describe fantasy as part of the body itself, more specifically, part of the brain that is subject to the opinions of common sense and in which sensory data are imprinted. Descartes says that fantasy is a veritable reservoir of figures, and every cognitive action of the mind has to employ it if it seeks to know about the physical order: sensation, perception, imagination and memory are thus caught in constant interaction with understanding, which is supposed to be the only faculty with access to non-physical truths.

At the other extremity of his work, in Article 21 of *Passions of the Soul*, Descartes again evokes imaginings caused by bodies, but independently of the nerves, in other words, not caused by outside stimulation and free of the will of the soul. Dreams, musings and other spontaneous fantasies are thus veritable passions: “And they proceed from nothing but this: that the spirits being agitated several ways, and meeting the traces of diverse impressions preceding them in the brain, they take their course at haphazard through some certain pores, rather than others.” (Descartes 1909, AT, XI, 344-345; see also Descartes 1989, 29). They therefore produce a wide variety of images. This means that the topic is not imagination as a faculty of the mind properly speaking in the latter case (see the remarkable commentary by Guenancia 2010, 97) since the ability to imagine encompasses both sensible data and a purely internal source, namely, ideas of understanding, which are inaccessible to the brain. In the end, it is still a process of knowledge and recognition of bodies.

However, in cases where non-physical truths are the exclusive purpose of the reflection, we have to take care to eliminate all images and fantasies from the mind so as to keep only simple objects and, among the simple objects, the strictly intellectual objects of the understanding. Descartes explains this in Rule 12:

The purely intellectual objects are those that the understanding knows by means of an innate light, without the help of any corporeal image. For there certainly are some such objects; no corporeal idea can be framed to show us the nature of knowledge, doubt, ignorance, or the action of the will (which we may call volition), or the like; but we really do know all these things, and quite easily at that; we need only have attained to a share of reason in order to do so. (Descartes 1954, Rule XII; Descartes 1908, AT, X, 419)

As we can see, no image, in other words, no strictly physical idea or representation, can provide an adequate representation of notions such as knowledge, doubt, will, etc. Properly speaking, we do not imagine what it is to doubt: we know it immediately by conceiving of it through the understanding. However, for a man of science, no understanding can function properly if it is not “helped by images depicted in fantasy” (Descartes 1954, Rule XIV; Descartes 1908, AT, X, 440), for images particularize the general, abstract notions of the understanding, and make the understanding’s ideas visible to the mind. Nonetheless, imagination’s help is dangerous, and this is why Descartes uses it more discreetly and subtly in his metaphysics. While scientific understanding may miss the extension of the thing if it is too formal and not aided by images, imagination remains the very faculty of common sense, and it is in this sense the realm of opinion and not of metaphysics, which it inevitably leads into error.

2. Image, fiction and reflexiveness

We all have a natural tendency to imagine God or the soul without seeing that it is a dead end. In fact, the objects of metaphysics cannot be imagined. The greatest risk of misunderstanding the *Mediations on First Philosophy* lies precisely in imagining such things. Descartes himself warns

us of this in his Synopsis “...I was there desirous to avoid the use of comparisons taken from material objects, that I might withdraw, as far as possible, the minds of my readers from the senses” (Descartes 2010, synopsis, 3; Descartes 1904, AT, IX, 11). Descartes sees the approach in the *Meditations* and what it definitively establishes as free of any debt to imagination. Strictly analytical, metaphysics inherits from the method, in other words, the *mathesis universalis* set out in the *Rules*, the necessity for regulated ordering of thought, but now the order is clearly protected from images because it is the result of the understanding alone. In his magnificent analyses of Descartes, which have been a major source of inspiration for us, Pierre Guenancia writes:

Whereas [in the *Rules*] the combination and alternation of order and measure make it possible to see *proportions* and to thus find equality between the known term and the unknown term, consideration of order alone [in the *Meditations*] leads the understanding, with no recourse to the senses or imagination, to perceive a series of *disproportions*: between the finiteness of the thinking self and the idea of the infinite (Third Meditation), between the limited nature of the understanding and the limitlessness of the will (Fourth Meditation), between the idea of God that alone implies its necessary existence and the ideas of mathematical essences (Fifth Meditation), and finally between the soul, a substance that it one and indivisible, and the body that is both divisible and changing (Sixth Meditation). (Guenancia 2000, 137-138).

Let us summarize the situation. Necessary to subjectivity in everyday operations and to science, the imagination makes the extended ever more familiar to the mind and simultaneously gives it presence and reality. The result of this is that while a certain criticism of the imagination decries the unreality of the image and its ability to distract us from things and the world, the image is for Descartes the very connection to the world, at the same level as the senses. The image in question here is present and certain, and refers to what could seem to us as two separate levels of images: images as fantasies of the mind (for example, an imagined chimera) and images as metaphors or comparisons in scientific discourse, the very discourse that Descartes recommends. The two types of images are

fundamentally related: both are physical and expand the familiarity of the world to which we belong. Naturally, philosophers submit this membership and belief to doubt and reflexive examination, but its legitimacy is guaranteed in science and common knowledge. Opposed in advance to the criticism, Descartes sees the image as a guarantee of escaping from the understanding's excessively strong hold, which is too able to abstract us from the world and things. In phenomenological terms, we could say that the image is part of the starting point of natural consciousness. The effect of reality generated by the image should not be understood as simply an illusion that needs to be deconstructed in an ironic manner. Through the senses and images, we gain the right to embrace the physical, according to Descartes.

Yet, if, as Jean-Marie Beyssade has suggested, doubt is perhaps in itself the ultimate principle of Cartesian metaphysics (see Beyssade 2001, 148), since it structures it to such an extent, we have to note that the image became – at the time of the *Meditations* – consubstantial with such skepticism. Doubt dwells at the heart of the image. This is not in contradiction with what we have just said. The image is the first thing the metaphysicist casts doubt on precisely because it is what is most certain for common sense. Such belief in the world through the image indeed occurs beyond reflexive judgment, but not beyond simple judgement since all sensible perceptions are already forms of judgment, common judgment, not subject to the understanding. Ultimately validated by intuition and deduction, and they alone, the reflexive operations of the understanding make it possible to go beyond the level of the image by describing, on one hand, metaphysical *objects* (the soul or God), and on the other hand, what can be called metaphysical *actions*, in other words, actions through which metaphysics develops, discovers the objects in question and situates itself reflexively in accordance with a new analytical order. To imagine, thus to make material the action of doubting, desiring or knowing, is to prevent oneself from knowing them. Properly speaking, reflexivity is unavailable to the sensible image. In this sense, all of the *Meditations* appear as writing about the

understanding, and the understanding assigns imagination a specific role.

This is what Descartes *says*. However, what *does* he do in his metaphysics? He feints, doubts, plays, thereby undeniably activating his readers' fantasies. He creates scenarios – how can we not say that he imagines? – about his *cogito's* adventures, even those with *results*, if we are to believe him, that are cut off from any images because they are purely conceived. Here, the goal is not to track down some “contradiction” in Descartes' discourse, not just because it would be facile or even childish since such an enterprise would not take us very far, but above all because the best way of investigating the Cartesian imagination today is precisely to see that, for the author, there is no contradiction. Naturally, we could analyse how the Cartesian scenarios are set up in order to understand the interlocking of the truths of understanding and the quasi-theatrical fiction of his discourse, a fiction that, in one way or another, belongs to the order of the visible because it involves depicting imaginary scenarios. However, we think that this kind of interpretative strategy has already revealed its best secrets in the work of more than one commentator, though it is still difficult to reconcile the uses of images with the discourse on the image.

In a book entitled *Ego sum* that was published more than 30 years ago, Jean-Luc Nancy investigated at length the aspect of “fiction” in Descartes' work. However, one of the premises of his inquiry is that Descartes is a fiction writer. Careful to show, from a post-Heideggerian perspective, how the Cartesian establishment of the subject corresponds to the “instantaneous exhaustion of its possibilities of essence” (Nancy 1979, 33), and already announces the end of metaphysics of subjectivity, Nancy is not really concerned with Descartes' *project*, especially when he speaks of images, fables, fantasies or fiction. In a valuable work entitled *Le vertige d'une pensée. Descartes corps et âme* (2003), Antonia Birnbaum attempts a kind of clinical analysis of the Cartesian *cogito*. Trying to take into account what happens following the precisely *fictional* disjunction of the soul and the body in the individual René Descartes, given that he enacts metaphysical

propositions, she is led to describe the *cogito* as suffering from melancholia, in a certain way, of course (Birnbaum 2003, 37). Remaining within the back-and-forth – and pointing out the lack of symmetry – between the “order of reasons” and ordinary life, her subtle analysis works only if Descartes implicitly “sticks” to his role. While bringing out, in a novel fashion, the concrete, physical effects created by the Cartesian feint, Birnbaum forces herself to take literally all that Descartes himself says about his own emotional states throughout the feint and the game. However, if we believe what he says, do we not fall into Descartes’ trap? Is he Diderot’s poor actor (see Diderot 2000) who is unable to take distance from his role? From this point of view, Spinoza probably demonstrates great lucidity. He does not have much of a taste for all that “baroque theatricality,” that fictional, fantastical display, now in a pejorative sense, with respect to a *cogito* engaging in a complete one man show. Since Descartes is precisely nothing but an actor, Spinoza cannot imagine that he has really doubted. In so far as the subject cannot sense beyond his or her own will in Spinoza’s theory, if he had really doubted, Descartes would probably not have kept the mental health he is said to have had. This is what Spinoza suggests since he is also riveted on “the letter,” as Deleuze saw so well, though he takes a direction different from that of Birnbaum since he does not believe the letter in question. Fully understanding that it also would not have been advantageous for Descartes to stick to his role entirely, at risk of losing everything, Spinoza prefers to simply remove the theatrical dimension thereby causing us to risk missing the *cogito*’s realistic encompassing in the infinity of substance – since this encompassing does not, in *The Ethics*, allow any primordial reflexivity and even less any scenarios. This said, while Spinoza refuses to get “caught up in the game,” – this is the least we can say – he also refuses to take into account the power of the game. It may belong to fantasy, but the power is nonetheless quite real, and that is what is important in Descartes.

Without seeking to further expand our inventory of understandings of Cartesian scenography, the reading

strategy that we will use here complements the first one, but is more sober, and consists in reviewing the real power of the image while taking into account the articulation of discourse on images and their uses. In Descartes' metaphysics, there is reflexivity of understanding explicitly cut off from the imagination in its quest for purely *conceived* truths, and at the same time specific work performed by images and fantasies, which are irreducible both as metaphysical objects and with respect to the action of conceiving of them, but nonetheless acting and performing. While the image cannot belong to pure *conceptions* of the understanding, we have to acknowledge that its efficiency rests entirely on what it *does*, not on what it conceives of but on what it generates as an *effect* in Descartes' mind and that of his reader, while leaving it up to the reflexivity of the understanding alone to become aware and conceive of the effects. Imagination is an action, but being an action is not sufficient to have metaphysical value – a metaphysical action is a self-conscious action by the understanding. Taking into account the philosopher's purpose and doctrinal consistency while being attentive to the practice underlying the image leads us to an initial conclusion: let us agree with Descartes that the image is powerless to conceive, in other words, to intuitively grasp the major metaphysical differences or disproportions mentioned above by Guenancia. However, at the same time, let us admit that the image remains active, and proves indispensable, in the examination and, to tell the truth, the construction of these disproportions. The question is then to know what it does, what it generates as reality, which is all the more difficult to understand since, in Descartes' mind, only the understanding's conception – not the image – is properly active and creative.

3. Uses of the image in *Meditations* (I)

Here, we will look at only the first major metaphysical disproportion shown in the *Meditations*. As has been noted, unlike in the *Rules*, in this case we take into account only the disproportions generated by the analytical order of the investigation, since that order is independent of measurement,

which is also desired in the *Rules* by the *mathesis universalis*. Thus, let us focus on the first disproportion, namely, the fact that *there is literally no comparison possible* between the finiteness of the thinking self and the idea of infinity.

First, let us examine the thinking self. The thinking self, which is first a doubting self, exists each time one says or thinks of in the mind the statement: “I am, I exist (*ego sum, ego existo*)” (Descartes 1904, AT, IX, 19). The performative nature of this statement has been pointed out many times. We need to insist on the fact that this statement has to be said or, which comes to the same, *conceived of*. The “I am” does not see itself, and does not become aware of itself even on being said – on the contrary. If there is a performative utterance, then effects are created and produced. However, clearly, for Descartes, what it produced, what asserts itself in “I am, I exist,” is not the membership of a self-conscious self in a sensible or physical world; it is not the appearance of the self as an image; it is simply the understanding’s consciousness of the self as certainly existing. First, Descartes does everything possible to remove the image from the “I am,” and, at the same time, to eliminate action from the image because a statement such as “I am, I exist” takes its performative power from the act of conceiving and from it alone. Just as we cannot imagine what it means to doubt or to know because these notions have to be conceived by the understanding, by *conceiving* the “I am, I exist” in the mind, the subject realizes that he or she exists. This immediate conception or realization is beyond the scope of the image, even though we needed fantasy to suppose that I was sleeping, that my memory was full of dreams, that an evil genius was using all his power to trick me, and, above all, “that body, figure, extension, motion, and place are merely fictions of my mind” (Descartes 2010, II.2; Descartes 1904, AT, IX, 19).

Even more than a deceitful God, it is the distortion produced by the imagination in the body, in extension, that is striking here. The image is supposed to lack metaphysical disproportion because it takes on the job of placing into proportion and measuring the unknown against the yardstick of the known, in other words, it makes the former familiar.

This is the reason for Descartes' warning to the reader in the *Synopsis* that images, comparisons and fantasy must be used with great caution. However, by asking the reader to imagine that bodies are nothing more than fictional, Descartes does the opposite and stimulates the imagination's power to lose itself in bodies and to make them strange, fictional – which they are not for common imagining consciousness. Suddenly, bodies can no longer be compared to anything since they are nothing. This “disproportion” is internal to the image. It is obviously not a metaphysical disproportion – in other words, a metaphysical truth – but it is necessary to gaining an understanding of such truths. Here the image seems to be truly active: without it, no performance by the *cogito* would be possible. However, if we are to believe Descartes, only the “I am” is a metaphysical reality because the image conceives nothing, thus does nothing. To put it another way, by using it skillfully, Descartes recognizes that the image produces effects, but he refuses to translate those effects into metaphysical truths. Yet, the former are nonetheless consubstantial with the latter.

This is fascinating: there is nothing static here and, although in Cartesian theory there are only things (extended or thinking), Descartes' metaphysics never ceases hinting in the direction of a philosophy of action. Every action produces an effect, whether the action is an image or a pure conception of the understanding. However, there is a hierarchy of effects: only effects produced by the understanding, by the action of conception, have metaphysical value and “reality,” properly speaking. Effects produced by images are equivalent to negative heuristics. Able to go from the known to the unknown, but also from the unknown to the known, as we have seen, imagination is both a stepping stone for and the opposite of metaphysical truths. At the heart of fiction, in the whirlwind of images, I must still *conceive* through the understanding that I am as a fictional being in order to be sure that I am, even if only fictional. For, as Descartes writes, even if my imaginings are false (for example, if my body and extension in general are only fictions), “the power of imagination does not cease really to exist in me and to form

part of my thought” (Descartes 2010, II.9; Descartes 1904, AT, IX, 23). Imagination does not produce any metaphysical truth on its own, but it is essential to the process of constructing such truths since they are disentangled by the mind when it realizes, with a mixture of joy and fear, that the “I am” is in any case absolutely imagining. The imagination then becomes a faculty for passing from the conceived truth to the other. However, once it produces its effects, it fades. If we follow the thread of the Cartesian reasoning, we have to admit that in the end it is fantasy that leads the mind to conceive the “I am, I exist.” However, once this truth has been extricated, the imagination’s effects cease for a time.

Thus, in Meditation II, shortly after the assertion of “I am, I exist,” Descartes wonders, first, what he could indeed be, aside from a thinking thing, in other words, essentially doubting until then, or imagining, generating fiction. First, he writes: “I will stimulate my imagination with a view to discover whether I am not still something more” (Descartes 2010, II.7; Descartes 1904, AT, IX, 21). Between the lines, he thereby acknowledges that imagination has been crucial to conceiving that he is a thinking thing, in other words, to conceiving the “I am, I exist” in his mind. Yet, only a few lines later, he no longer gives it any credit:

It is, however, perfectly certain that the knowledge of my existence, thus precisely taken, is not dependent on things, the existence of which is as yet unknown to me: and consequently it is not dependent on any of the things I can feign in imagination. Moreover, the phrase itself, I frame an image (*effingo*), reminds me of my error; for I should in truth frame one if I were to imagine myself to be anything, since to imagine is nothing more than to contemplate the figure or image of a corporeal thing; but I already know that I exist, and that it is possible at the same time that all those images, and in general all that relates to the nature of body, are merely dreams [or chimeras]. [...] And, therefore, I know that nothing of all that I can embrace in imagination belongs to the knowledge which I have of myself, and that there is need to recall with the utmost care the mind from this mode of thinking, that it may be able to know its own nature with

perfect distinctness. (Descartes 2010, II.7; Descartes 1904, AT, IX, 21-22)

This is where all the interest in the image lies: it is by turning away from it that its (indirect) effects count for metaphysics. This can be seen with the famous example of the piece of wax, which we will not analyse in detail. The mind does not see well, intellectually, in other words, it has trouble conceiving of the unity of the changing wax until the thinking self stops seeing with the imagination. The image of the wax risks corrupting the pure notion. Descartes writes: “I must, therefore, admit that I cannot even comprehend by imagination what the piece of wax is, and that it is the mind (*mens*) alone which perceives it” (Descartes 2010, II.12; Descartes 1904, AT, IX, 24). In short, the “I am, I exist” is supported by a performance by the imagination, which is immediately erased in favour of a performance by the understanding, in other words, a pure *conception* of the “I” as absolutely existing in the hollow of its imaginative activity, and radically independent of that activity. Of everything that I can embrace or understand through the imagination, nothing belongs to knowledge but the self thinking about itself, or at least the immediate, intuitive knowledge that it can have. Conception alone generates reality, according to Descartes, because “conceiving is synonymous with understanding what is said; it is to realize, as we say, the meaning of a spoken or written word” (Guenancia 2000, 99).

4. Uses of images in *Meditations* (II)

Seeking whether it is something other than a thinking thing, following in that the analytical progression that requires going from the notions most immediate to the mind to those less immediate, little by little, the thinking self examines in Meditation III whether there is a God, and whether he is not a deceiver. Descartes then writes what may be one of the most crucial passages of the *Meditations*, a passage that is, in any case, remarkable enough to require remarking upon:

Of my thoughts some are, as it were, images of things, and to these alone properly belongs the name idea; as when I think [represent to my mind] a man, a chimera, the sky, an angel or God. Others, again, have certain other forms; as when I will, fear, affirm, or deny, I always, indeed, apprehend something as the object of my thought, but I also embrace in thought something more than the representation of the object; and of this class of thoughts some are called volitions or affections, and others judgments (Descartes 2010, III.5; Descartes 1904, AT, IX, 29).

We know that Descartes makes “idea” a generic concept, referring to all types of representation. If something appears in it, the mind is dealing with an idea. The word “idea” does not refer specifically to an ideal entity of the Platonic type, but to any thought content. In the *Appendix* to his *Replies to the Second Objections*, Descartes adds that the concept of idea implies self-consciousness. With “idea,” the subject knows immediately that it is dealing with a thought content (see Descartes 1904, AT, IX, 24). In the framework, sensible and physical images are only types of ideas. All ideas are not images, far from it. However, as we have seen, all ideas are certainly *like* images. This is always surprising. In the *Synopsis*, Descartes warned the reader that he was not going to use any comparisons taken from physical entities, in other words, any image, in order to draw out metaphysical truths. Yet, here he defines one of his most important concepts – that of idea – only by using a comparison, in other words, an image. An idea is, in effect, an idea *like*... All comparisons are images. On top of it all, the image used in the comparison is the image itself! For an idea is *like an image of things*. An idea is certainly not an image, but, in the image of an image, it is like an image of things. It is only an image when we say that an idea is an image; in reality, it is not. We have also seen that such ideas are connected to passions (I want, I fear, etc.) and are also the subjects of judgments (I assert or deny something concerning an idea). Truth and falsehood are strictly the jurisdiction of judgment. Descartes says that even though I may want something absurd or non-existent, it is true that I want it. Passions are never false, properly speaking, and neither are ideas taken in themselves. Even if

they are fantastic, the *cogito's* ideas are really thought by the *cogito*. In contrast, I can make a mistake by judging incorrectly. If no idea were an image, then judgment would probably be easy and correct most of the time. However, not only are many ideas very clearly physical images (angels, sirens, hippogriffs, etc.), but also all ideas can be confused with such images since they are – whether they are physical or not – just as much *like (tanquam)* images, even the idea of God, as we read in the last quote. An idea is like an image of the thing, but the human mind has nothing else: we never deal with things, only with ideas of things, and things have to be understood in an active sense. The being-like-an-image of the idea is not so much a being as a *function*, an act of representing (see Guenancia 2000, 117). An idea has the function of an image but it is not an image:

Even taking into account the “equivocal” (the word is Descartes’) nature of the word “image,” which can designate a physical figure impressed upon the brain (a “corporeal fantasy” that the mind uses when it imagines) or the idea’s fact of representing something (without considering the genesis of that representation), it remains that an idea is not an image... (Guenancia 1998, 108)

While we cannot say that Descartes uses fantasy in the strong sense of the term to define the idea, the image nonetheless intervenes in two ways to this end. This is not an accident: Descartes fully embraces his definition. It means that, even when it is neither physical nor in relation with a piece of extension, even if its object is only an innate idea, an idea is at least always in relation to itself. It is at least always its own image – *at least metaphorically*, and this is the point – since an image means the idea’s self-awareness. Right where Descartes uses the comparison of the image, he suggests that the idea is independent of the external world, and that it does not absolutely need to resemble or copy the external world since the idea is first a self-monstration of the self to the mind – as if the mind imagines itself at the same time as it imagines an object of any kind at all. The idea is certainly like an image *of things*, but it is at the same time always and first *like* an image for itself – which is to say that it is aware of

itself. Only the idea conscious of itself is an object of understanding – which never deals with things. To top it off, the comparison of the idea with the image becomes necessary in order to introduce the inequality of different forms of ideas:

If ideas are taken in so far only as they are certain modes of consciousness, I do not remark any difference or inequality among them, and all seem, in the same manner, to proceed from myself; but, considering them as images, of which one represents one thing and another a different, it is evident that a great diversity obtains among them (Descartes 2010, III.13; Descartes 1904, AT, IX, 31).

This is becoming captivating. For Descartes, the image always places the object in proportion to the idea that the mind makes of it, and the mind cannot do this without comparing with bodies – which is the source of the parasitic nature of the image in metaphysics. However, this in no way means that all ideas have to be understood with bodies since they are only like images; they are not images. Descartes compares the idea with the image, using the technique of placing the thing in proportion to the image, so that we can understand the nature of the idea. The image of the idea to be understood “like an image” produces an immediate effect on the reader. However, as we will see, once the effect is produced, the image fades away, and all that remains is the metaphysical truth, conceived of strictly, in other words, realized by the understanding, since only the effects of performative utterances of the understanding are real. This kind of metaphysical truth, compared with the image, is then explicitly conceived of as in *disproportion*, and the act of comparing the idea with the image no longer works. In other terms, in order to explain that the finite thinking self is literally incommensurate with the infinite God, in order to say that it is impossible to extend through the image or comparison the familiarity of the known (the self as “I am, I exist) to the unknown (God) because we cannot create an image of God, Descartes begins by making the idea of God familiar! Indeed, like all ideas, the idea of God is like an image, and in this case, like an image of God. However, the familiarity of the image, once created in the reader’s mind,

disappears and is replaced by a pure conception of the understanding. How is this sleight of hand performed?

Descartes needs to show that ideas are like images of things in order to validate his coming demonstration of the existence of God. Thanks to this comparison, it does indeed become understandable that all ideas do not have the same capacity to represent things – which Descartes expresses by referring to scholastic conceptualism. He thus calls the “objective reality” of an idea its ability to represent something, to make the being of the thing present to the mind. An idea with great objective reality is an idea in which the being or the thing is very present in it. If an idea has what Descartes calls objective perfection, it does so in so far as what we conceive of as belonging to the object represented exists objectively *in the idea itself*. (Only the perfection of the idea is at stake. The thing, whether or not it exists, is disqualified, since Descartes has no need for the representation to resemble the thing.) The “formal reality” of something means only that the thing indeed exists in the idea that one has of it, no matter what its objective content. All ideas thus have the same formal reality, but not the same objective reality. This clarification makes it possible to understand the first proof of the existence of God, very appropriately christened the “proof by effects.” Referring to the scholastic principle of causality, which is “manifest by the natural light alone” (Descartes 1904, AT, IX, 32), he says a little prematurely, Descartes notes that there must be at least as much reality in the cause as in the effect. We cannot have the idea of heat or stone unless it has been caused in us by something containing formally in itself at least as much reality as we conceive of in the heat or stone, in other words, with respect to the objective reality of such ideas. We know how Descartes then examines each of the ideas that appear so as to relate it to its efficient cause, which is most often related to the doubting self itself. In effect, the self has the capacity to create and to break down many different more or less clear and distinct representations, of which the subject is now the cause, since it sees in them no reality exceeding its own. As Descartes (who refuses to abandon the metaphorical regime of

the image and comparisons until the last moment) writes, the purpose of examining the links between ideas is to

...reach a first idea, the cause of which is, as it were, the archetype in which all the reality [or perfection] that is found objectively [or by representation] in these ideas is contained formally [and in act]. I am thus clearly taught by the natural light that ideas exist in me as pictures or images, which may, in truth, readily fall short of the perfection of the objects from which they are taken, but can never contain anything greater or more perfect. (Descartes 2010, III.15; Descartes 1904, AT, IX, 33)

In ideas, understood *like* images or *like* pictures (once again); there can be nothing in them that is more perfect than their cause, of which the primary is the original (*archetypi* in Latin). The causal origin of ideas-images is itself a kind of first, original image, a pattern or archetype. Now, the metaphysical object found through examination of ideas is God as the origin of the idea of the infinite, and God is not an image. The subject does indeed possess in himself the idea of God clearly and distinctly, and it is itself the most clear and distinct of all ideas, and yet it itself cannot formally be at the origin of such a clear and distinct, yet infinitely incomprehensible, idea. The idea of God – an infinite, eternal, unchangeable, all-powerful substance – is unimaginable, uncomparable. It cannot even be measured by negation since it is not finite. Descartes says, faithful to his conceptual strategy, that if a truly infinite substance had not placed in me, a finite being, the fully positive idea of the infinite, I would not be able to *conceive of it* now. Thus we have the finally demonstrated dependency of the “I am, I exist” on an external cause, sign of its finiteness and equally of the finiteness of all of its representations, so to speak, in parallel with the idea of infinite perfection that, though it accompanies all of the subject’s ideas, nonetheless remains infinitely incomprehensible and absolutely incommensurable.

Let us try to understand what has happened. Descartes began by comparing the idea to an image or picture. In doing so, he made all ideas comparable and measurable, since those are properties of being an image. Since ideas are like images, there must be between them differences of degree, just as a physical image teaches us about the great variability of

extended things. Ideas are unequal in their capacity to represent things, and in the end, Descartes invites us to *see this*. An image produces an effect; it immediately generates in the reader's mind a spatial and thus physical representation of ideas competing with respect to their capacity to represent things. Since they are like images, ideas are measurable – some contain a lot of objective reality, others less; some are clear and distinct, other less. This is what we have to extract from the imagination in order to be able to *conceive*, in a mind that is no longer distracted by images, an existing, infinitely incommensurable God. It is as if, suddenly, the idea remembered that it is only *like* an image and nothing more, for an image is limited to “more or less,” and stops before the idea of a cause of my ideas that would be absolutely beyond all proportionality, and would be *incomparably* “more” perfect and real than any other. The idea of the infinite cannot be compared with anything because there is nothing that is more or less than it. This God is not an image, otherwise it would be a finite thing; it resembles nothing and cannot even be compared with the finite. Indeed, such comparison would be possible if it were a final cause, ordering finite things below it. However, the first of all ideas, the original idea, is simply the completely other. As Pierre Guenancia puts it so well:

Reasoning based on the end (the purpose) ceases to count outside of finite (limited) things; it cannot apply to the infinite, which is not *more* than the finite, but truly, essentially, *other* than it. The idea of the infinite is thus radically distinct from any other idea, which it could not be if it were *composed* through an assembly of notions produced by the mind. (Guenancia 1998, 187)

5. Uses of the image in *Meditations* (III)

The idea of infinity is incommensurable and the disproportion between the finite self and God is obvious. Indeed, it acquires metaphysical reality because it is conceived of in the strong sense. However, Descartes' extraordinary skillfulness runs into difficulties. While the subterfuge works when it comes to discovering the greatest metaphysical truth of all, namely the existence of God, there are nonetheless some

limitations. Descartes plays with the image, he exploits it efficiently and tries to control it, but it seems difficult to begin playing the image game without eventually becoming trapped by it. Obviously, the transformation of an idea initially quietly presented as *an image* but suddenly shown, at point x, that it is only *like* an image, is not surprising. Descartes exploits the potential of his own definitions, and does not contradict himself, properly speaking. His strategy is so effective that it goes unnoticed, and it is not for nothing that Descartes was prouder of the proof by effects than of the second proof of God's existence, set out in Meditation V, which simply repeats Saint Anselm's ontological argument. However, readers who were Descartes' contemporaries certainly criticized the circularity of the proof by effects, as we can read in the *Fourth Objections* in particular (see Descartes 1904, AT, IX, 166). Indeed, the proof works only if we are sure we have not made a mistake, if we do not cast doubt on the scholastic principle of causality. We have to be sure we are speaking clearly and distinctly about notions such as "objective reality" and "formal reality" for application of such a principle to be legitimate, and thereby the proof of God's existence also. Unfortunately, there is nothing to prevent us from doubting these arguments, which are presented as valid because they flow from the "natural light," in other words, in the end, common sense, which until then was presumed untrustworthy in principle. God has to enable the *cogito* to extricate itself in a single movement from solipsism and skepticism, but the proof of the existence of the divine does not cast doubt on natural light in this specific passage.

Should we say that Descartes has unfortunately forgotten to doubt? There is a temptation to test a different hypothesis: the image has doubted for him. By making the idea comparable and measurable, thanks to the image, in order to reveal inequalities, by seeking even an idea with an archetypical cause, since that first idea has to be understood in comparison with other ideas, it becomes difficult not to remain a prisoner of the common way of seeing things, which Descartes very rightly calls natural light, at the very place where there is nothing to shed light on or create an image of. Descartes himself is a victim of the "effects of reality"

produced by the image because he forgets for a brief instant to put its powers between parentheses. Why did God take the trouble to put the idea of the infinite in me? Because he produced me “after his own image and resemblance” (Descartes 1904, AT, IX, 41) adds Descartes who, though faithful to a long tradition, nonetheless no more wants to suggest the need to imagine God than the need to imagine the subject since only the thinking thing, the soul, is in the image of its creator, and the soul cannot be imagined. In fact, it is an image to say that the soul is in the image of God. An image’s performances are purely fictional, in other words, non-real. Even if the mind really exists as an imagining mind, the reality of that existence cannot be guaranteed by an image. Descartes notes that this resemblance to God is conceived by the very faculty that I use when I conceive of myself reflexively, in other words, by understanding alone. It is confident in the understanding’s now guaranteed power that Descartes begins Meditation IV, which begins with a triumphant assertion: “I am thus able now without difficult to abstract my mind from the contemplation of [sensible or] imaginable objects” (Descartes 2010, IV.1; Descartes 1904, AT, IX, 42).

Conclusion

With the last great metaphysical disproportion established in the *Meditations*, namely, the incommensurability of the soul – a substance that is one and indivisible – and the body – a substance that is divisible and changing – the reflexive dimension of the idea, which has already been pointed out, becomes essential.

One cannot have the idea of something without having at the same time the idea of one’s own soul as a power to have ideas. Until now, we have looked at the objective correlate of the idea, in other words, the “something,” whether it is a body, a triangle or even God. Now, the aim is to highlight the soul’s ability to grasp itself as independent of the objects of its representations. As we said above, since it is like an image, an idea reflects itself and – if we may say so – sees itself as an

idea. Obviously, this was not sufficient because, by having resort in this way to the register of the image, we lack the pure reflexivity of the mind. In a letter from July 1641, Descartes writes:

It is impossible that we could ever think about anything without having at the same time the idea of our soul as a thing able to think about all we think about. It is true that a thing of this nature would not be able to imagine itself, in other words, would not be able to represent itself by a physical image. However, this should not be surprising because our imagination is able to represent only those things that belong to the senses and because our soul has no colour, odor, taste or anything that belongs to the body, so it is impossible to imagine it or form an image of it. Yet it is nonetheless conceivable. On the contrary, since it is by it that we conceive of all things, it alone is also more conceivable than all other things combined (Descartes 1899, AT, III, 394).

What is the most conceivable, namely, the fact that we have a soul gifted with ideas, is – with God probably – what is least imaginable. Meditation VI begins with the same observation: Descartes insists once again on “the difference that subsists between imagination and pure intellection [or conception]” (Descartes 2010, VI.2; Descartes 1904, AT, IX, 57). While the imagination has skillfully distilled its effects of reality in a number of specific places in the analytical deployment of the order of arguments, it has to step aside this time *explicitly*. (Until now, Descartes’ warnings never really abandoned a tacit debt to the image.) Descartes continues:

I remark, besides, that this power of imagination which I possess, in as far as it differs from the power of conceiving, is in no way necessary to my [nature or] essence, that is, to the essence of my mind; for although I did not possess it, I should still remain the same that I now am, from which it seems we may conclude that it depends on something different from the mind. (Descartes 2010, VI.3; Descartes 1904, AT, IX, 58)

This explicit stepping aside of the imagination in the metaphysical processing of the union of the soul and body contrasts with its resurgence when this issue takes a specifically anthropological turn, and concerns, for example, medicine and morals. This is the case in *The Passions of the Soul*. In this final case, the mind alone is insufficient to think

about a phenomenon as complex as the union of the soul and the body, which brings into play all faculties, including the senses and the imagination. If this union is dealt with strictly by the understanding, then the reasoning still has metaphysical value. Indeed, in such a case, the mind reveals the separation more than the union. Some commentators, such as Martial Guérout and Pierre Guenancia, even suggest that Meditation VI already moves away from metaphysics in the strict sense since it introduces a series of anthropological questions. This seems perfectly justified from the point of view of the manner that Descartes understands himself. However, from the point of view of the Cartesian use of the image, the distinction is not clear. How could it be since Descartes explicitly presents himself as a painter (think only of the *Discourse on the Method*) or as a theatre director (throughout the *Meditations*), and pure conceptions of the understanding and the purity of the idea conscious of itself are strictly impossible without the imagination's effects of reality? Such effects are welcome in building scientific knowledge, but remain outside of metaphysical reality, where they are even pathological – this is what we have called the “Cartesian contract” with respect to the imagination.

In *Meditations on First Philosophy*, the image is everywhere. Its effects, in order to not be “merely” effects from the author's point of view, and not the pure and simple establishment – in other words, the conception – of metaphysical realities, are at the very point when they step back, the creators and revealers of these realities. We even have the impression, when we read Descartes closely, that the moment of conception is finally reduced to the point when the thinking thing becomes reflexively aware of the “effects of reality” generated independently by the image. Descartes is thus consistent: reflexiveness belongs to the understanding alone, but in so far as it *conceives of* the effects of the image, *and by that very deed* makes them (God and the soul) metaphysical objects – neither more nor less. Descartes often struggles against this implicit, formidably efficient strategy, but does he not finally admit this once and for all when he writes, in the *Reply to the Fifth Objections*:

Admittedly, when imagination or sensation is strongly active (as happens when the brain is in a disturbed state), it's hard for the mind to have leisure for understanding other things. But when the imagination is less intense, we often have thoughts that have nothing to do with it. For example, when we are asleep and are aware that we are dreaming: we need imagination in order to dream, but only the intellect will tell us that that's what we are doing (Descartes 1904, AT, VII, 358-359).

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Augustin Dumont, Post-Doctoral Researcher of the Belgian National Fund of Scientific Research / Associate Professor at Saint-Louis University – Brussels. Areas of specialization: Modern and Contemporary Philosophy, Classical German Philosophy (Kant and German Idealism), German Romanticism.

Address:

Augustin Dumont
Saint-Louis University – Brussels,
Department of Philosophy
43, Boulevard du Jardin Botanique
1000 Brussels, Belgium
Email: augustin.dumont@fusl.ac.be