

Innateness as nature in Descartes

The interest of Descartes lies constantly in the acquisition of the true and certain knowledge. But to be more precise, what kind of knowledge is in question? It would be possible to say briefly that it is the knowledge about the nature, because a question: “what am I able to know?” for Descartes leads immediately to another one: “what am I able to know about the nature?” or “how understand it?” And now, what does nature mean here? Is it the world given before our eyes? Yes, in the sense of the matter or of the extension, but the sense of the nature is not unequivocal in Descartes; it is therefore necessary to note it in the plural, as natures, in order to address the question. The aim of this presentation is to study a mode of natures, originally in us, i.e. which exists since our birth – thus innateness, as well as the development of its conception in the thought of Descartes. This notion of innateness, severely criticized by Locke and the empiricists, is not peculiar to Descartes, as Étienne Gilson remarks, but is developed in the religious situation of the period, in order to prove the mark of the divine creation and to fight against the atheism¹. The originality of Descartes lies rather in both epistemic and ontological aspects of the notion, which assure in two ways for *ego* the naturalness in its indubitable ideas; indubitable because founded by God and obviously conceived by *ego*. And we will find that this notion of innateness itself is not as unequivocal as it seems.

1. The innate idea rediscovered in my nature

The innate idea is not mentioned in *Regulae ad directionem ingenii* (i.e. *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, henceforth called *Regulae*) nor in *Discourse on the method*, but for the first time in his *Third Meditation*, during the development of his doctrine on the three species of ideas. Let us remind that Descartes works on this question, having found in his *Second Meditation* the first truth that he exists while he thinks, in order to find “whether I can still discover in myself anything further which I have not yet hitherto observed” (*Med. III*, AT VII, 35, 5-6). In fact I conceive all the things in my thoughts, some of which are the images of things, while the others take other forms of operation as will or affects. It is to this first form of thoughts only, that is, to the images of things only, that the name of idea is given here. The innate idea constitutes, with the adventitious and the factitious, one of three species of ideas, by which I conceive generally a thing, a truth or a thought. It is called innate because it is drawn only from my own nature (*ibid.*, 37, 29-38, 4 ; 29). The idea is thus put in my nature when I was born, which means that it is inseparably a part of my nature, that my nature is the unique source of the idea. However, there is a particular idea in me, which could not be caused by my nature, although innate, because it indicates the idea of infinity, of eternity, perfection and almighty, whereas I am by nature finite and imperfect. By pursuing the cause of this idea which exceeds my nature, I cannot but conclude that there is another existence than me in this world, which must be the author of this idea in me. The innate idea is therefore introduced in order to demonstrate the existence of God, by means of the causality, which supports directly the constitution of the onto-theological system of Descartes. Then, is the innate idea found only in the

¹ cf. Gilson, *Études sur le rôle de la pensée médiévale dans la formation du système cartésien*, Paris, Vrin, 1930, I, chap. I.

Meditations because it is necessary to wait for them to prove the existence of God, and not in the previous works of Descartes because they did not need the innate idea, for want of this prove of divine existence?

To answer this question, we shall use as guiding concept the equivocity of the idea in Descartes, as he specifies it in the preface of the *Meditations*: “sumi enim potest vel materialiter, pro operatione intellectus... vel objective, pro re per istam operationem repraesentata; (the term idea) may be taken either materially for an act of the understanding... or objectively, for the thing represented by that act” (*Praefatio*, AT VII, 8, 20-23). Hence, the innate idea can be taken both as the innate operation of the intellect and as the thing represented in an innate way. And if the idea of God, taken objectively, means God himself as objective reality in my thought, is there its equivalent, taken materially²? Yes, and that is the natural light, according to Descartes: “quaecumque lumine naturali mihi ostenduntur, ut quod ex eo quod dubitem, sequatur me esse, et similia, nullo modo dubia esse possunt, quia nulla alia facultas esse potest, cui aequae fidam ac lumini isti, quaeque illa non vera esse possit docere; all that is shown to me by the natural light, for example, from the fact that I doubt, it follows that I exist, and similar things, would be in no manner doubtful, because there could be no other faculty which I trust as much as this light and which could teach that it is not true (*Med III*, AT VII, 38, 27-39, 1). The natural light, the scholastic term in opposition to the light of the grace, must teach me the truth, because it is a faculty naturally given to the intellect since my birth by the Creator, the source of the confidence par excellence, independent from any experience which could cause errors. In the same way: “all the men having the same natural light, they seem to must have the same notions...; for me, I distinguish two kinds of instincts: one is in us as men and purely intellectual: it is the natural light or *intuitus mentis*, only which I hold that we must trust” (*To Mersenne*, 16 October 1639, AT II, 598, 1-3; 599, 5-9). Being natural not only to me but also to all men as faculty to know the truth, besides equated with the *intuitus mentis* or eyes of the mind, the natural light serves for us to conceive the innate ideas, inevitably true in our mind. Now, what makes possible this process of innate knowledge? What are in question here are the nature and the structure of knowledge itself, from which innate ideas flow, and to examine this, we would need to go back to the original point of this problem in earlier works of Descartes.

2. Innateness as naturality of knowledge: from *Regulae* to the *Discourse*

Although the term innate idea is clarified neither in *Regulae* nor in *Discourse*, we already have as guiding concept the natural light or the *intuitus mentis*, the notion of which can be frequently found in these works. In *Regulae*, the natural light is not a simple means, but compose one of the main purposes of the research: “cogitet tantum de naturali rationis lumine augendo... ut in singulis vitae casibus intellectus voluntati praemonstret quid sit eligendum; that he thinks only of the increase of the natural light of the reason so that in each occasion of life the understanding can indicate to the will which party to choose” (*Reg. I*, AT X, 361, 18-21). Indeed, developing the natural light can lead directly to the knowledge of the

2 cf. Here “the idea taken materially” means a mode of thinking: “si vero (ideae) spectarentur, non prout hoc vel illud repraesentant, sed tantummodo prout sunt operationes intellectus, dici quidem posset materialiter illas sumi” (*Resp. IV*, AT VII, 232, 15-17). The idea, as a mode of thinking, is therefore materially made by the thought, or by the material of the mind, so to speak.

truth, i.e. to the good control of *intuitus mentis*. The *intuitus mentis* is accordingly “more than the equivalent, the completion of the natural light, only which he can implement”³. Drawn from the natural light, the *intuitus mentis* is the surest and the most reliable faculty without need of any syllogism or demonstration, because the most natural in mind, independent from any sensitive experience. Hence it sees, all at once without cognitive development, the truth of the innate idea explained in the *Third Meditation*: “unusquisque animo potest intueri, se existere, se cogitare, triangulum terminari tribus lineis tantum, globum unica superficie, et similia; everyone can see by mind, that he exists, that he thinks, that the triangle is limited by only three lines, the sphere by a single surface, and similar things” (*Reg. III*, AT X, 368, 21-24). Obviously, these truths aimed by *intuitus mentis* are not named innate ideas in *Regulae*. Nevertheless, it does not mean that they are not taken as innate, on the contrary, they appear under other names whose meaning is not far away, for example as seed of the truth in mind: “facile mihi persuadeo illam (methodi utilitas) jam ante a majoribus ingeniis, vel solius naturae ductu, fuisse aliquo modo perspectam. Habet enim humana mens nescio quid divini, in quo prima cogitationum utilium semina ita jacta sunt ; I am easily convinced that the mind of the ancients, even led by the simple nature, had already seen it (the usefulness of the method) in any way. Because the human mind possesses something divine, in which the first seeds of the useful thoughts were so much cast”; “prima quaedam veritatum semina humanis ingeniis a natura insita; some first seeds of truth that the nature has put into the mind of men”⁴. These seeds of the truths can be taken as innate, because they are the part of *ingenium*, which means innate or natural qualities of man, especially the intellectual disposition by nature. The word *ingenium* is usually translated simply as mind, but this English word may lose the perspective that the Latin word contains originally.

Descartes seems always conscious of the connotation of the word, because for example, already in his *Cogitationes privatae*; “Praescripti omnium ingeniis certi limites, quos transcendere non possunt ; Certain limits are beforehand indicated to the minds of all, that they are not able to exceed” (AT X, 215, 5-6). What limits of the minds are in question here? It is not the limit of the capacity or the nature of any particular person, because there is an impassable limit by nature for all men, the universal limit which precedes all those limits of the individuals⁵. The *ingenium* is therefore the mind with a view to the perfection of its spiritual innate qualities, always conscious of its original limits. Now, how could we perfect our *ingenium*, knowing our inherent limits? For this, it would be necessary at first to find and to know the seeds of the truths put naturally in us, because “sunt in nobis semina scientiae, ut in silice; there is in us seeds of science, as in a flint (seeds of fire)” (*ibid.*, 217, 20). And then, what should we do more exactly? Descartes explains its method in the whole work of *Regulae*, because in there lies precisely its main theme, the summary of which can already be found in the title of the *Rule I*: *Studiorum finis esse debet ingenii directio ad solida et vera, de iis omnibus quae occurrunt, proferenda judicia ; The end of the studies has to be the direction of mind, so that he can form solid and true judgments, concerning all the things which*

3 J.-L. Marion, *Règles utiles et claires pour la direction de l'esprit en la recherche de la vérité*, La Haye, 1977, annexe I, n. 3, p. 295.

4 *Reg. IV*, AT X, respectively, 373, 5-9; 376, 12-13.

5 cf. *Discourse*, III: “unceasingly occupied in considering the limits which were prescribed to them by Nature, they (Philosophers) were persuaded so perfectly that nothing was in their power than their thoughts” (AT VI, 26, 22-25).

appear” (*ibid.*, 359, 5-7). The purpose of *Regulae* are therefore to direct *ingenium*, to know well by intellect with the development of the natural light, though the final goal is indicated as judging well, and since the judgment belongs to the will, *Regulae* do not address it at all; we shall find its reason after our examination on the *Meditations*.

The aim of *Regulae* by natural light or *intuitus mentis* is shown, globally in *Rule I*, as *humana sapientia, bona mens* or *universalis Sapientia*, which refer all to the totality of the human wisdom, thus to the perfection of the seeds of the truths in us, and that by the innate faculties of *ingenium* in which lies these seeds. Hence we see on one hand the *ingenium* as the whole of the innate faculties, of which the natural light and the *intuitus mentis* are in the highest degree, and on the other hand, the seeds of the truths as aims originally put in the *ingenium*, hence innate, of which the *humana sapientia* is the ultimate end. And it is not all, as innate aim of the wisdom, because there is another particular form of knowledge in *Regulae*, expressed by naturality, purity, simplicity or easiness. Here is an example: “talem ordinem in cognitione rerum quaerenda pertinaciter observare statui, ut semper a simplicissimis et facillimis exorsus; I resolutely decided to observe such an order in search of knowledge of things, that starts always with the simplest and the easiest” (*Reg. IV*, AT X, 378, 26-379, 1); “Absolutum voco, quidquid in se continet naturam puram et simplicem, de qua est quaestio... idem primum voco simplicissimum et facillimum; I name absolute, all that contains in itself the pure and simple nature, which is in question... I also name this first (term) the simplest and the easiest” (*Reg. VI*, AT X, 381, 22-382, 1); “illi, qui... ad simplicissima quaeque et facillima consideranda totam semper occupant, fiunt perspicaces; Those, who occupy it (their thought) always entirely with considering some others very simple and very easy, acquire a transparent view (*Reg. IX*, AT X, 401, 7-10). The characteristic of this naturality, purity, simplicity or easiness of the knowledge is realized in a specific and unit form, which is called simple natures, among which: “Pure intellectuales illae sunt, quae per lumen quoddam ingenitum... ab intellectu cognoscuntur: Those are purely intellectual, that our understanding knows by a certain light put in us by nature” (*Reg. XII*, AT X, 419, 8-11), namely the knowledge, the doubt, the will, in short all the forms of the thought. But there are two others of them, the material simple nature, on one hand, like the figure, the movement, the extension and all that is found in the body, and on the other hand, common simple natures, like the existence, the unit, the duration, therefore those which are commonly found in the intellectual and the material simple natures. A simple nature is a minimum unit of knowledge, and all the knowledge is made by one or several simple natures, including their privation or a negation. The simple natures are the immediate knowledge, because the most natural and the simplest for the *ingenium*, and without deduction because seized all at once by *intuitus mentis*, they are accordingly the most original truths to be known, put in *ingenium*. Therefore, “naturas illas simplices esse omnes per se notas, et nunquam ullam falsitatem continere; these simple natures are all known by themselves, and never contain any falseness” (*ibid.*, 420, 14-15). The same holds true when the simple natures are bound in a necessary way, in clauses like this for example: “um, ergo Deus est; item, intelligo, ergo mentem habeo a corpore distinctam; I am, therefore God is; in the same way, I understand, therefore I have the mind distinct from the body” (*ibid.*, 421, 29-422, 1). The seeds of the truths take accordingly the form the most concretized in the simple natures, as units of the

knowable truths, originally put in *ingenium*.

This concept of innate truths described in *Regulae* is found also in the posterior writings of Descartes, in an obvious or tacit manner, and almost the same or more developed. In his letter to Mersenne of 15 April 1630, for example, they are expressed as the laws of nature: “it is God who established these laws in nature, as well as a king establishes laws in his kingdom... they are all *nostri mentibus ingentiae* (i.e. inborn or innate to our minds), as well as a king would print his laws in the heart of all his subjects” (AT I, 145, 14-20). These are about the truths of nature, which is not the same meaning as simple nature, but the world in general, thus the unity of all the material simple natures according to the vocabulary of *Regulae*. Although these laws of nature only concern the physical world and not the intellectual nor their community, Descartes says clearly that they are the innate truths in our mind, established by God. And he wrote his treatise of the *World* in the same interest: “The knowledge of those laws is so natural to our souls that we cannot but judge them infallible when we conceive them distinctly... Thus, those who can examine sufficiently the consequences of these truths and of our rules will be able to know effects by their causes and... will be able to have demonstrations *a priori* of everything that can be produced in that new world” (VII, AT XI, 47, 17-28). Since these laws of nature is beforehand fixed in our minds at the creation of the world, everything related to the natural phenomena can be deduced *a priori* from this immutability of innate truths, therefore everything that happens in the world is knowable. Let us note here 1) that it does not mean that we know it always or at present, but simply that our knowledge of the world is possible; 2) that the notion of causality manifests itself at first in the physical field, although its idea is already expressed in *Regulae*, less developed however and in another term which is deduction⁶.

The *Discourse on the Method* underlines, by describing the intellectual route of the author, this possibility of the knowledge put universally in our mind, with the concept already explained in *Regulae*, but developed more metaphysically by means of the law of causality: “First, I tried to find in general Principles or the First Causes of everything which exists or could exist in the world, without considering anything, for this effect, but God alone, who created the world, nor drawing them anywhere but from certain seeds of Truths which are naturally in our souls” (VI, AT VI, 63, 31-64, 5). It is not by chance that we find this sentence in the sixth chapter of the *Discourse*, because this chapter outlines physics or research on the nature of Descartes continued since his youth. And to think of God as the first cause of the nature does not appear there for the first time, but constantly since the letter to Mersenne of 15 April 1630. The specificity of the *Discourse* on this point lies in the metaphysical causality of the innate idea, rather than in the physical causality of the laws of nature: “it (the idea of a being more perfect than mine) had been put in me by a nature that was truly more perfect than I was, and even that had in himself all the perfections of which I could have some idea, that is to say, to explain in a word, that was God” (IV, AT VI, 34, 19-24). The seeds of the truths in us are known, with the right direction or method of our mind, in the two fields, i.e. on one hand in physics, developed from the material simple natures, and on the other hand in metaphysics, developed from the intellectual simple natures (common simple natures are found equally

6 cf. *Reg. III*: « per quam (deductionem) intelligimus, illud omne quod ex quibusdam aliis certo cognitis necessario concluditur; by which (deduction) we understand, all that is necessarily concluded from some other (things) known with certainty (AT X, 369, 20-22).

in these two fields). And what connects the two fields is the principle of causality, which leads finally to the only first cause that is God. As for the faculty to know the innate truths, it is always the natural light⁷, the good sense⁸, or the reason⁹. And it is exactly thanks to the reason, according to the *Discourse*, that we find the first cause of all the things both physical and metaphysical, the truths of which are put in us as innate ideas. The *Discourse* develops and reinforces, in a way, the doctrine of the innate ideas by the notion of causality, which unifies the intellectual and the material in the sole foundation. But his research on this point is not sufficient, because, on one hand this foundation, although discovered, is not yet strictly demonstrated in a metaphysical manner, and on the other hand, he leaves still intact the question of the faculty of judging, i.e. the will, with regard to the innate idea¹⁰. The *Discourse* is therefore situated, in this regard as well as in other issues, between *Regulae*/the *World* and the *Méditations*/the *Principles*.

3. The innate idea as objective reality and operation, inseparable of its first cause: the *Meditations* and the *Replies*

We saw in our first part that the doctrine of the innate idea, by means of the natural light, was presented for the first time in the *Third Meditation* to discover indubitably the infinite and almighty Creator as the origin of this innate idea of the infinity, of the perfect being, etc., through the principle of the causality. The innate faculty which aims at knowing the innate idea is accordingly the natural light, as described in *Regulae* and in the *Discourse*. Now, the interest peculiar to the *Meditations*, with regard to the causality, lies in the degrees of the perfection according to the effects, i.e. the cause must contain more objective reality than its effect, and thus by going up this way, I cannot but conclude that the cause of my idea of the infinity contains more objective reality than its effect, which is my idea of the infinity put in a finite being that I am. It should be noted that the causality here is explained within my ideas and that I turn eyes of my mind towards my own nature, because what counts here is only the reality as object of my idea, and not the reality outside me. It is therefore about the causality of the pure idea; pure, because it results not from things outside, but from my own nature. And since this idea of infinity, although drawn initially from my nature, contains more objective reality as cause than the idea of myself as its effect, there must be indeed a being whose nature exceeds that of myself. The nature of this being is very well summarized in this expression: “substantiam quamdam infinitam, independentem, summe intelligentem, summe potentem, et a qua tum ego ipse, tum aliud omne, si quid aliud extat, quodcumque extat, est creatum; a certain substance infinite, independent, all-knowing, all-powerful, and by which I myself, and every other thing that exists, if any such there be, were created” (*Med III*, VII, 45, 11-14). Among these enumerated attributes, the one which occupies a particular and privileged position is the infinite substantiality, and

7 cf. “I delivered myself little by little from many errors, which could offend our natural light, and make us less able to listen to reason” (*I*, AT VI, 10, 23-26).

8 cf. “The good sense is the thing of the world the best shared; the power to judge well, and distinguish the true from the false, which is really what we name the good sense or the reason, is naturally equal in all men” (*ibid.*, 1, 17-18 ; 2, 5-8).

9 cf. “it (the reason) dictates to us well that all our ideas or notions must have some foundation of truth; because it would not be possible that God, who is completely perfect and completely true, had put them in us without that” (*IV*, AT VI, 40, 8-12).

10 It was precisely the unfinished theme of *Regulae*, because this work is about the knowledge of the intellect so that the intellect can show to the will how to judge, and not about the judgment of the will itself.

more precisely, the infinity itself, first because the notion of substance is shared also by myself, being drawn from anywhere else but my own nature, secondly and especially because “manifeste intelligo plus realitatis esse in substantia infinita quam in finita, ac proinde priorem quodammodo in me esse perceptionem infiniti quam finiti, hoc est Dei quam mei ipsius; I clearly perceive that there is more reality in the infinite substance than in the finite, and therefore that in some way I possess the perception of the infinite before that of the finite, that is, the perception of God before that of myself” (*ibid.*, 26-29). The infinite, which causes formally and eminently my idea of the infinite, is not the negation of the finite, but the sole source of all the perceptions in the *res cogitans* finite that I am. Consequently, the principle of the causality shows here evidently the necessary existence of the cause of the innate idea of the infinite in me, which I would never be by nature¹¹. What is highlighted here, let us note, is less the idea of infinite itself than its cause, though both can be equally held for the innate idea. It is first because the principle of causality is in question to present the last cause of the idea of the infinite in me, naturally, but especially because I am not conscious of this last cause in my ideas without using the principle of causality. The ultimate cause is in this sense exemplary and definitive as innate idea which is not always explicit in me, because it represents the infinite being whose reality exceeds mine, and thus guarantees the real existence of this being, as direct cause of my idea of the infinite, apart from my own existence, and it is not however known at the beginning of my activity to think. For the first time in his *Meditations* Descartes comes expressly to the notion of innate idea, and it is presented from the beginning as implicit although originally implanted in me. He will explain later in detail this implicit characteristic of the innate idea.

Then, Descartes shows another way to prove the existence of God, i.e. through the reason of my own existence¹². If I existed by myself, I would not doubt nor lack anything, because I would be thus a perfectly independent and autonomous being. On the contrary, I doubt and indeed lack a lot of knowledge, which means the imperfection of my existence, therefore the dependence of my existence towards another being more perfect and more independent than me. And this dependence concerns not only my birth, but also my conservation, because I owe the guarantee of my current existence, only as *res cogitans*, not to the previous time nor to the other imperfect creatures in their infinite series of causality, but alone to the first efficient cause that is the unique perfect Creator of all the creatures, and I am thus newly created every moment to subsist, otherwise at any time I could lose my existence and return to nothing (*Med. III*, AT VII, 48, 25-50, 10). It is not without reason to say that I am an effect of the first cause, because it left, on my creation, some ideas printed in me of which I could not be an author, and it shows clearly that I am created as effect and mark of the almighty Creator¹³. It is this mark that assures me the image and the similarity which I bear towards the Creator, and which I perceive by the same faculty as I perceive myself (*ibid.*, 51, 15-23). Which faculty is in question then? It is specified in the *Fourth Meditation*: “Sola est voluntas, sive arbitrii libertas, quam tantam in me experior, ut nullius majoris ideam apprehendam ; adeo ut illa praecipue

11 cf. AT VII, 40, 16-20; 42, 6-15; 45, 9-22; 46, 21-28.

12 cf. Obviously, it is about my existence as thinking thing, and not as union of the soul and the body, because what is established as the most certain before the demonstration of the existence of God is the existence of my mind different from the body, based on the fact that “Ego sum, ego existo... quoad cogito; I am, I exist, as long as I think (*Med. II*, AT. VII, 27, 9-10).

13 We have seen that one of them is the innate idea of the infinite.

sit, ratione cujus imaginem quandam et similitudinem Dei me referre intelligo; It is only the will, or freedom of decision, which I experience to be so great in me that I have no other bigger idea; so that it is mainly my will which makes me recognize that I bear a certain image and similitude of God” (AT VII, 57, 11-15). We thus see the role and the reason of the will, the question of which was left open in *Regulae* and *Discourse*. The reason of its existence is that God left his similarity in the created thinking thing as mark of his creation, and its role is to let me be conscious of its infinite power to want, as reflection of the divine will. It is the will that points out to me that I could want without limit following the example of the Creator, in contrast to the fact that I could know and understand only in a limited manner. Just as God is something of such as nothing greater could be thought (Saint Anselm, *Proslogion*, chap. II), the will is something of such as nothing greater could be conceived in my faculty to think, since it is, as a mark of God, “in suo genere perfecta; perfect in its kind” (*Med. IV*, AT VII, 58, 16-17) according to its model.

The schema of the innate idea is now clearer. All the ideas have their causes so that they are aroused, and an idea has inevitably as cause God when it concerns the objective reality greater than that of myself, because it extends beyond my own capacity to produce its objective reality. The innate faculty in me which corresponds to this idea of God is not any more the natural light, although it is necessary to find this idea in me by this light, but it is in fact the will, the functional proof left by the first cause in the created thinking thing, because, although I could know myself created by God by means of my natural light, it is only thanks to the infinite will discovered in me that I realize myself really created in the image of God. The infinity is not foreign any more to my own finite nature, but is realized in my faculty to want, which testifies directly the creation according to the original Holder of the infinite will. Consequently, the innate idea par excellence, seen from its material side, i.e. from the operation of the thought, means the will, because it reflects best the faculty of the Creator of all the innate ideas, and on the other hand, seen from its objective side, i.e. from the contents of what is thought, the ultimate innate idea is that of God, the first cause of all that exceeds my nature but perceived in my nature as its author.

Obviously Descartes draws the innateness only from his own nature and not outside his existence as *res cogitans*. Thence, a question arises quite naturally: could we identify the innate idea of Descartes with the reminiscence of Plato? Descartes seems to identify it himself when he admits “ natura, sive essentia, sive forma, immutabilis et aeterna; nature, or essence, or immutable and eternal forme” of the triangle, so that “dum illa primum detego, non tam videar aliquid novi addiscere, quam eorum quae jam ante sciebam reminisce; the first time that I discover them, I do not have so much the impression to learn anything new, as to remember what I already knew” (*Med. V*, AT VII, 64, 15-16 ; 1-3¹⁴). There are however certain differences between the two. First, Descartes does not admit the celestial pre-existence of the soul before his birth, contrary to Plato, and the soul could not naturally have the knowledge beforehand acquired in the heaven. Then, the term reminiscence of Descartes refers not to the metaphysical ideas, but always to the physical ideas, and more exactly to the figures in the imagination¹⁵, and this is the reason

14 cf. *Res. V*: “quia jam ante in nobis erat idea veri trianguli, et facilius a mente nostra, quam magis composita figura picti trianguli, concipi poterat, idcirco, visa ista figura composita, non illam ipsam, sed potius verum triangulum apprehendimus”, 382, 8-13 ; *Epistola ad Voetium*, AT VIII, 166, 21-167, 7.

15 *Reg. XII*: “si (vis cognoscens) ad imaginationem solam ut diversis figuris indutam, dicitur reminisce”, AT X, 416, 1-2.

why he applies it only in the geometrical notion. Finally, and what seems more important, is the fact that the innateness of soul for Descartes lies more in the faculty to think or to acquire the knowledge than in the knowledge itself; what I have since my birth in me is first and foremost the power to draw the ideas from anywhere else but my own nature, independently of all the sensitive experiences, although these can provide occasions to point out the ideas in me¹⁶. Descartes develops this point in his *Replies to the Objections*, by the need to clarify his theory of the innate idea, which is equivocal and thus arouses objections of the opponents.

When Descartes says in his *Replies* that, in order to have the innate idea in us, we only have to have the faculty to evoke it¹⁷, or that we only have to know that we think and exist solely by the innate internal *cognitio*, even though we are not conscious of it¹⁸, he maintains in principle the same schema as in the *Meditations*, but by underlining more the operating side of the idea, namely that innateness is foremost the faculty or the power to bring out the ideas which are not always present, of which the first according to the causal order is the idea of God. Therefore, a small child as well as an adult has the ideas of God, of himself or of all the truths known by themselves, even if he does not pay attention to them¹⁹, because he has them only in an implicit way, i.e. what is currently in him is the natural disposition which enables him to perceive them explicitly²⁰. Thence the key to interpret the declaration which seems decisive on the innate idea: “all those (our ideas) which do not wrap any assertion nor negation, are to us innate; because the organs of the senses do not report to us anything that is such as the idea which is awaked in us on their occasion, and thus this idea had to be in us previously” (*To Mersenne*, 22 July 1641, AT III, 418, 3-8). The experience, intellectual or sensitive, gives us only the occasion to bring out the ideas, thus to incite the mind to recognize and to clarify the cognitive forms originally in him. This functional process to evoke the ideas, the ultimate form of which is to want to express and to experience the ideas, is precisely what is innate in us, and in this sense it has neither assertion nor negation as power of the mind.

4. The innate idea as witness to the divine infinity: From the *Principles* to *Notae in programma*

In the *Principles of philosophy* the notion of innateness appears only in the parts which concern God, namely I, §22 for the object of the thought: “ad ejus ideam nobis ingentam respicientes, videmus illum esse aeternum, omniscium, omnipotentem, omnis bonitatis veritatisque fontem, rerum omnium creatorem ; turning our attention towards the innate idea of him (God), we see that he is eternal, omniscient, almighty, source of all goodness and truth, creator of all the things” (AT VIII-1, 13, 17-20); and I, §39 for the operation of the thought: “Quod autem sit in nostra voluntate libertas,... adeo manifestum est, ut inter

16 cf. Rodis-Lewis explains in detail the connaturality of the innate idea with faculty to think. *Le problème de l'inconscient et le cartésianisme*, chap. I, §6-7, surtout p.78-84.

17 “cum dicimus ideam aliquam nobis esse innatam, non intelligimus illam nobis semper observari ; sic enim nulla prorsus esset innata ; sed tantum nos habere in nobis ipsis facultatem illam eliciendi” (*Res. III*, AT VII, 189, 1-4).

18 “sufficit ut id sciat cognitione illa interna, quae reflexam semper antecedit, et quae omnibus hominibus de cogitatione et existentia ita innata est, ut,... non possimus tamen revera non habere” (*Res. VI*, AT VII, 422, 12-18).

19 “Nec minus tamen in se habet ideas Dei, sui et earum omnium veritatum, quae per se notae esse dicuntur, quam easdem habent homines adulti, cum ad ipsas non attendant” (*To Hyperaspistes*, August 1641, AT III, 424, 12-15).

20 “quamvis non dubitem quin omnes ideam Dei, saltem implicitam, hoc est aptitudinem ad imsam explicite percipiendam, in se habent, non mirer tamen quod illam se habere non sentiant, sive non advertant” (*ibid.*, 430, 16-20).

primas et maxime communes notiones, quae nobis sunt innatae, sit recensendum; that the freedom is in our will is so manifest ... that it is necessary to count it among the most common first notions, that are innate to us” (*ibid.*, 19, 25-29), except, for example, II, §3 : “sensuum praejudicia facile deponemus, et solo intellectu, ad ideas sibi a natura inditas diligenter attendente, hic utemur ; We shall easily put aside the prejudices of the senses, and shall use only the intellect here to fasten attentively our mind towards the ideas put in there by nature” (*ibid.*, 42, 1-3), since the ideas or laws put in our mind by nature must be sought by the intellect or the natural light, as *Regulae*, the *World* or the *Discourse* already say²¹. But, by nature of the innateness itself, what has to come first as object of the innate idea, in the sense of causality, is God, because he is the unique source of all the created innate ideas. The innateness as such of *ego* exists only in relation with his Creator, and thus it is found only where he transcends his finitude, both in the idea of the infinite itself and in the infinite will which exceeds the finite knowledge, thus the epistemological level outlined in *Regulae*. In fact, the argument of Descartes on this subject has always been coherent since this period, which is already shown in the letter to Mersenne of 27 May 1630²². The freedom being the absolute principle of God’s creation, what is created is created above all according to the divine will, and not according to the logical necessity independent of him in any manner²³. As well as the other creatures, I am created according to this principle, but with the capital difference from the extended substances, I am created as thinking substance, containing in myself the effect of this principle of the creation, namely the free will as great as that of the Creator. In *Regulae* Descartes does not approach the question of the will, because it is closely concerned with the faith, which is something obscure, according to him at that time²⁴. But it is § 22 and § 39 of the *Principles* (Part I), that we quoted above, which connect my creation and my will in my innate idea, by means of §38 on the absolute and free power of God. By the innate idea in me I conceive on one hand the attributes of God (§22) as the object of my thought, and on the other hand my will (§39) as the act of my thought, which corresponds best to the object of this thought, because only the will in me can be recognized as this infinitely free power following the example of the Creator²⁵. The free will, manifesting by his infinity most precisely an attribute of God put in me, is the faculty the most similar to that of God, the most original with regard to his model, therefore the first and the most completed among all the innateness as act of the mind. My freedom is thus the direct witness of the infinity of the Creator left in me, being the principle of the creation of God, who is himself *res cogitans*.

Les *Notae in programma* complement the *Principles*, emphasizing the functional side of innate idea.

21 In addition, since the second part of the *Principles* concerns physics, it is completely natural to find there the same thesis as in these works.

22 “Do you ask also what required God to create these truths? And I say that he was as free to make it not true that all the lines drawn from the center to the circumference were equal, as not to create the World. And it is certain that these truths are not more necessarily conjoined to its essence, than other creatures. Do you ask what God did to produce them? I say that *ex hoc ipso quod illas ab aeterno esse voluerit et intellexerit, illas creavit*”, AT I, 152, 19-28.

23 cf. *To Arnauld*, 29 July 1648: “Mihi autem non videtur de ulla unquam re esse dicendum, ipsam a Deo fieri non posse ; cum enim omnis ratio veri et boni ab ejus omnipotentia dependeat, nequidem dicere ausim, Deum facere non posse ut mons sit sine valle, vel ut unum et duo non sint tria ; sed tantum dico illum talem mentem mihi indidisse, ut a me concipi non possit mons sine valle, vel aggregatum ex uno et duobus quod non sint tria”, AT V, 223, 31-224, 8.

24 *Reg. III*: “illorum (illa quae divinitus revelata) fides, quaecumque est de obscuris, non ingenii actio sit, sed voluntatis”, AT X, 370, 21-22.

25 “ea (potestas) autem, quam Deus habet in omnes, est quam maxime absoluta et libera” (*op. cit.*, §38, AT VIII-1, 19, 20-21).

When Regius, a former disciple of Descartes, but his opponent at this time, says that the mind does not need innate ideas, but only the faculties to think for his actions, Descartes does not see its difference from what he maintains, because “unquam scripsi vel judicavi, mentem indigere ideis innatis, quae sint aliquid diversum ab ejus facultate cogitandi; I have never written nor judged that the mind needs innate ideas which are different from its faculty to think” (AT VIII-2, 357, 26-28). Regius concludes from it, however, that all the notions engraved in mind originate from the experience, whereas it only gives us the occasion, according to Descartes as we have seen, to evoke the implicit ideas in us, of God, of bodies or of sensitive qualities, because “nihil sit in nostris ideis, quod menti, sive cogitandi facultati, non fuerit innatum, solis iis circumstantiis exceptis, quae ad experientiam spectant; there is nothing in our ideas which is not innate to the mind or to the faculty to think, except the circumstances concerning the experience” (*ibid.*, 358, 25-28)²⁶. Finally Descartes turns to the idea of God again. Although we could come to know it through books, paintings or other experiences, it does not mean that the idea comes from them, on the contrary, it is always drawn out of the faculty to think in potentiality (*potentia*): “nobis repraesententur per ideas non aliunde advenientes quam a nostra cogitandi facultate, ac proinde cum illa nobis innatas, hoc est, potentia nobis semper inexistentes ; (all that we think as meant by words or paintings) is represented to us by the ideas which do not come from anywhere else but our faculty to think, consequently for us, with this faculty, innate, i.e. always existing in us in potentiality” (*ibid.*, 361, 1-4). We see there the decisive explanation of the innate idea, which does not always have to be in actuality (*actus*), but only in potentiality, with the faculty to conceive them, to be known sooner or later. All the ideas are thus in potentiality, except those which are already in actuality, i.e. already known by the faculty in actuality as well. The potentiality (*potentia*) means what is not yet realized in actuality, thus what is not yet manifest nor defined. This indefiniteness of ideas, or rather of innate power to think in us, expressed by the term potentiality, is not invoked without reason, because it corresponds exactly in a formal manner, although reduced, to the infinity of the first cause of the innate ideas. Thus, the object of the idea and the faculty to think always go hand in hand, in order to find and to think finally the most original innate idea, i.e. God: “per ideas innatas me nihil unquam intellexisse, nisi quod... nobis a natura inesse potentiam, qua Deum cognoscere possumus; by innate ideas I have understood no other thing than the potentiality put in us by nature, by which we are able to know God (*ibid.*, 366, 15-18). Here is the ultimate *raison d’être* of the innate idea, both as operational means and as end, thinkable but not fully knowable.

- Conclusion: the innate idea as passion and action

We thus verified the constant, besides coherent, interest of Descartes on the innate ideas in his whole works, since his youth until his last years. The manners by which he treats them are not the same ones, however, and we indeed see its development, which goes hand in hand with the development of his metaphysical thought, precisely because the innate ideas constitute one of the most crucial points of

26 cf. In the *Interview with Burman* Descartes gives an example of the idea brought by the experience, i.e. adventitious: “quasdam etiam esse adventitias, ut quid sit urbs Ludgunensis, Alcmaria etc; some (ideas) are adventitious, for example, what is the city of Leyde, Alkmaar, etc.” (AT V, 165, éd. Beyssade, p. 94-95). Certainly, but the ideas on these cities, for example size, temperature, atmosphere, etc. are innate all the same.

Cartesian metaphysics.

The *Regulae* concern the composition of innateness, represented by the naturality of knowledge. And this naturality is explained in his turn in two ways, from the knowing side and from the knowable side, namely from the *ingenium* and from the seeds of the truths in him or the simple natures. The *ingenium* is a unity of all the innate faculties to know, while the simple natures are the gifts, natural, simple and easy for the *ingenium* to know. It is therefore a question of access to this double naturality in knowledge and of fully enjoying it, which is overall the same schema as in the *treatise of the World* and in the *Discourse*. The innateness is still presented in these works only as this naturality of knowledge, and not as *innatus* in a strict sense, for which we have to wait until the later works, and it is not without reason. The knowledge is limited there to that of as obvious as mathematics or as physics based on mathematics, concerning the quiddity of what can be known, through material simple natures among others, and it does not go up to a rigorous research of the metaphysical foundation. As a result, the question of will is not yet treated, as well as that of God, because both are equally “de obscuris; of obscure things” (*Reg. III*, AT X, 370, 21). From thence the necessity of the term *ingenium* and its limit *sui generis*.

The letters to Mersenne in 1630, mentioning God as founder of the eternal truths, show on the other hand the necessity to situate God in the naturality of knowledge. It is necessary for us to wait for the *Meditations* to see the fruit brought by this continued research, concerning the origin of the naturality of knowledge, i.e. the innateness itself this time. It is introduced initially as means, and not as aim to be clarified, in order to demonstrate the cause of *ego* thinking of innate ideas. What is in question here is the notion of causality, as necessary link among the ideas or the existing things, in which the innateness plays a role of effects. However, the innateness is not simply an effect of the creation or a sign of the passion in us by the idea of the Creator, but he also left us the will, which is the reflection of the divine infinite power and the unique source of actions in our mind, because “it seems to me that it is also a passion in the soul to receive such and such idea, and that there are only wills which are actions” (*To Mesland*, 2 May 1644, AT IV, 113, 27-28). The will, seen as the innate idea put in the soul “by the dispositions which even preceded in the soul” (*ibid.*, 114, 2-3), thus by the cause which created these dispositions, can be considered as a passion, whereas, with regard to the other ideas or the faculties in the soul, the will is a sole action²⁷. In this sense, paradoxically the will can be said passive action or active passion of the soul. Descartes specifies later that this passivity of the will, originating from its innateness in the soul, makes turn naturally the eyes to its Creator when it acts on the soul²⁸. We clarified that the innate idea par excellence is that of God, on one hand, as Creator of this idea in me, and my will on the other hand, as witness of the desired creation. Left also in me as mark of the Creator, both are inseparable and constitute the two faces of the same medal, namely to know or to recognize the innate idea leads naturally into the search of his origin, and thus to want this origin, besides, to want according to it. The faculty to know being finite, to want without knowing could be a source of error²⁹. This is not, however, to underline the insufficiency of my power to

27 cf. *To Regius*, May 1641: “Intellectio enim proprie mentis passio est, et volitio ejus actio”, AT III, 372, 12-13.

28 *Passions*, I, § 18: “our wills are of two kinds. Because some are actions of the soul which terminate in the soul, as when we want to love God” (AT XI, 342, 25 - 343, 3).

29 cf. *Med. IV*, AT VII, 58, 20-25.

know, with regard to the innate idea in me, on the contrary, my infinite power to want following the example of the Creator. This means that the will is not originally without root nor direction, precisely because it finds its foundation in its innate infinity, and consequently, although it is so powerful that it is able not to listen to what the reason or the intellect says, the soul knows nevertheless, potentially, therefore in the indefiniteness of his ideas, what he has to or will have to want and to do, because any faculty to think is innate and the innateness is equivalent to the potentiality, and that the soul recognizes the original model of his infinite will in his Creator necessarily true and good³⁰. The question of innateness leads thus, beginning with the epistemic level, through the community of the nature in both physic and metaphysic sense, finally to that of morals.

³⁰ cf. It is in the sense that we understand the excellent remark of O. Hamelin: “innateness, it is the independence, the aseity, the sufficiency of the thought”, *System of Descartes*, Paris, F. Alcan, 1913; 2nd ed. 1921, p. 176.