

DESCARTES' USE OF «IDEA» IN HIS EARLY WORK: A REVISITED INTERPRETATION*

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ABSTRACT

In the *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*, the term «idea» is sometimes used instead of «figura» (AT X, 414, 20) which refers to a geometrical entity, but also in some contexts to an embodied entity or a cerebral extended image. The fact that both terms are juxtaposed and are substituted one for the other in a context where corporeal imagination appears, led many commentators to argue that Descartes in his early years considered ideas as cerebral. In this paper, I argue against this interpretation, since it does not explain why this terminological equivalence goes on appearing in Descartes' later work. The reason also why Descartes still uses «figura/figure» instead of «idea/idée» cannot be because he was not totally untied from scholastic psychology, as some scholars have argued, and that he conceived ideas as something corporeal, but *because*, I claim, in all of his texts dealing with the possibility of perceptual experience and union, he favoured the metaphysical substantial unity of human being and cares less about ontological distinctions between soul and body. We will see how this favouring is linked with some methodological concerns.

Keywords: Descartes, idea, figure, perception, imagination, unity.

RESUMEN

En las *Regulae ad directionem ingenii* encontramos que el término «idea» es usado en ocasiones en lugar de «figura» (AT X, 414, 20), el que refiere a una entidad geométrica, aunque también en algunos contextos a una entidad corporal o a una imagen cerebral extensa. El hecho de que ambos términos sean yuxtapuestos y sustituidos el uno por el otro en un contexto en el que la imaginación corporal está

* René Descartes, *Oeuvres complètes*. Ch. Adam and P. Tannery (eds.), J. Be-aude, P. Costabel, A. Gabbey and B. Rochot, (11 vols.) 1964-1974, Paris: J. Vrin, 1996= AT. René Descartes. Tutte le lettere. 1619-1650, a cura di G. Belgioioso, con la collaborazione di I. Agostini, F. Marrone, F. A. Meschini, M. Savini e di J.- R. Armogathe, Milano, Bompiani, 2005= B.

presente, ha llevado a muchos comentaristas a argüir que Descartes en su juventud consideraba a las ideas como entidades cerebrales. En este artículo argumentaré en contra de esta interpretación dado que ella no explica por qué esta equivalencia terminológica continúa apareciendo en su obra posterior. La razón por la que Descartes sigue utilizando «figura» en lugar de «idea» no puede ser, tampoco, el que no estuviera del todo desligado de la psicología escolástica, como han sostenido algunos intérpretes, y que concebía, luego, a las ideas como algo corpóreo. Por el contrario, sostendré, la razón de dicho uso radica en que en todos los textos en que Descartes se ocupa de la posibilidad de la experiencia perceptual y la unión, él favorece la perspectiva de la unidad metafísica substancial del ser humano, dejando de lado la distinción ontológica entre mente y cuerpo. Se verá cómo este favorecimiento de la mencionada perspectiva está, además, estrechamente conectado con algunos aspectos metodológicos.

Palabras clave: Descartes, idea, figura, percepción, imaginación, unidad.

INTRODUCTION

THE QUESTION OF THE MEANING of «*idea/idée*» in Descartes' work has been studied by many scholars, and especially regarding to his *Meditationes*. But before providing in *Meditationes*, and, more precisely, in *Secundae Responsiones rationes more geometrico*, some various meanings of «*idea/idée*», Descartes used to define this term by synonymy with another terms: for example, we can find many times «*idée ou sentiment*» (AT XI, 3, 2-5; AT VI, 85, 18; 210, 16) and «*idées ou notions*» (AT VI, 38, 21-22 et 40, 9; AT VII, 440, 14; AT VIII, 25, 29). However, this enlargement of «*idée/idea*» did not draw into conflict with the metaphysical presupposition of the real distinction between mind and body. The way in which «*idea*» and «*figura*» are put together in the *Regulæ*¹, that Descartes probably began to write between 1619 and 1628², or later in the *Traité de l'Homme*³, gave rise to many interpretations about the definitions of «*idea/idée*» in his early work (before 1630), and influenced the

¹ For example, *Reg. XII*, AT X, 414, 16.

² See for example J.-P. Weber *La constitution du texte des Regulæ* (1964) and the note of Ch. Adam, AT X, 485-88.

³ *Traité de l'Homme*, AT XI, 176, 26-177, 4.

way scholars understood Descartes' «theory»⁴ of perception, and for example, whether this might be interpreted as a representationalist theory or not. In this paper, I will not deal with the notion of idea in all Descartes' work, but I will focus on texts where an equivalence between «*ideal/idée*» and «*figural/figure*» appears, and especially on *Regulæ*. In the context of *Regula XII*, where this juxtaposition appears, «figura» refers to a cerebral impression that codes objects' properties and gives «occasion à l'âme de sentir le mouvement, la grandeur, la distance, les couleurs, les sons, les odeurs, & autres telles qualités»⁵. Does it mean that there is just an extension of the meaning of «*ideal/idée*» as an intellectual entity, as it is almost always referred to in texts like *Discours de la Méthode*, or rather, does it suppose a break with the later works?

In the *Regulæ*, Descartes never argued that the mind is really distinct from the body⁶, and, at the same time, it seems that «idea» refers to figures impressed on internal senses. Maybe we have to consider that what Descartes calls «figures» is in fact immaterial. How to reconcile this interpretation with the many passages where «figura», in the context of perception, refers to a bodily entity? Unquestionably, there is a sort of ambivalence on the word «figura», because it also sometimes refers to immaterial geometrical entities, depending on the *loci* in which it occurs. Could this term refer to an entity both material and immaterial? By arguing this, however, Descartes would be postulating an intermediary third entity in his «dualist» doctrine, which would lead to a contradiction. Thus, the problem of how could we reconcile these two meanings of «figura» and why Descartes needed an ambivalent usage of that word, remains an important one.

Of course, Descartes could just have used «idea» in a non technical sense, to refer to brain patterns, but we cannot infer only by this usage that in his early years he really believed that ideas are corporeal; but the fact is that to understand what the concept of «idea» meant for Descartes in his early years and how he conceived

⁴ Descartes proposed a theory of natural vision but not a theory of perception strictly speaking. By «theory» I refer to the collection of pieces of his texts about perception or sensation.

⁵ *Ibid.*, AT XI, 176, 13-15.

⁶ *Reg.*, AT X, 411, 18-19; 415, 13-16; 416, 5-6; 420, 1; 422, 1-2; cf. *Descartes à Mersenne 25 novembre 1630*, AT I, 182, 17-22.B 36, 178.

of perception, we have to clarify the terms he uses in *Regulæ* and other texts written before 1630. Indeed, the fact that no stipulative definition of «idea» appears in the *Regulæ*, adds to the difficulty of precisely determining what this term meant to Descartes at that time.

At first sight, it seems that *Regulæ*'s purpose was not to do metaphysics, that is, to treat about God and soul and give a foundation to knowledge by establishing doubt, or to argue for an ontology; rather, it defends a conception of knowledge as universal and proposes a method that gives the intellect the tools to differentiate knowledge from opinion and, by exercise, helps us to reach *humana sapientia*. The fact that a metaphysical treatment of notions was not a priority, can in some way explain this sort of confusion between «idea» and «figura». Although *Regulæ* contains some metaphysical notions and tries to establish an ontology, these metaphysical elements are treated from an epistemological point of view, that is, concerning human knowledge's characteristics. How can we know something and what is the extension of human knowledge (AT X, 397-8)? Do we have to conclude, as Ferdinand Alquié did, that there is no «trace de metaphysique» at all in the *Regulæ*?⁷ As Jean-Luc Marion successfully argued in his book *L'ontologie grise*, we can rather consider that ontology is the aim of this epistemological treatment⁸ and conclude that there is in the *Regulæ* a «mise à l'écart de l'enquête sur la nature de la chose, au profit d'une préoccupation de pure intelligibilité»⁹. It is possible to propose an ontology but one considered from an epistemological point of view.

I think that knowledge furnishes at least a supposed ontology, represented by the simple natures, which conceptual distinction must have a foundation in reality¹⁰. So we have good reasons to seriously take in consideration the use of «figura» and «idea» in the *Regulæ* and to try to understand it. How to explain that this synonymy between «idea» and «figura» goes on appearing even

⁷ *La découverte métaphysique de l'homme chez Descartes*, PUF, 2000, p. 78-79.

⁸ P. 183 and 187. Also p. 181. see also, Gilles Olivo, *Descartes et l'essence de la vérité*, p. 73.

⁹ P. 181.

¹⁰ «...neque enim quicquam possumus cogitare absque fundamento...» *Descartes à Mesland, 1645 ou 1646*, AT IV, 349, 28-29; see also *Descartes à X*** 1645 ou 1646*, B 536, p. 2132.

Descartes has elaborated his *prima philosophia*? Why would Descartes have brought these two terms together? The synonymy between «idea» and «figura» appears not only in *Regulae* but also in Descartes' later work like *Passions de l'âme*: thus, the reason why Descartes still uses «figura/figure» instead of «idea/idée» cannot be the debt that the philosopher still had to scholastic psychology in his early years, as many scholars have argued; rather, I argue that *in all of his texts dealing with the possibility of perceptual experience and union, Descartes favoured the metaphysical substantial unity of human being considered as a whole* and just leave aside the distinction between idea and brain pattern.

By «metaphysical substantial unity», I mean the consideration of human being not as a composite entity of two distinct natures, but as a *whole*, as if body and soul united constitute one substance. I do not deny that Descartes used the term «idea» to refer to brain events, but *this synonymy does not signify that he exclusively conceived ideas as bodily entities*. Consequently, my interpretation of this synonymy supposes to defend a coherent view of Descartes' conception of ideas. This also shows how Descartes modulated his definitions (sometimes in extending them or, on the contrary, in restricting them) relatively to the point of view he chose to adopt. We will see in the last part how this favouring one or the other perspective is linked with his methodological concerns.

I. TWO CLASSICAL HYPOTHESES IN DISCUSSION

The scholars who think that «idea» and «figura» are synonymous, that is, that we can substitute one term for the other without changing the meaning of the sentence in all possible contexts, argue that:

- 1) Idea and figure of sensation or imagination impressed on the *phantasia* were both conceived by Descartes as bodily entities: according to them, these were conceived as cerebral images¹¹.

¹¹ J. Brunschvicg, in its French translation of the *Regulae*, joined the adjective «corporelle» to «idea» but «corporea» does not occur in the Latin text, R. Descartes, *Œuvres philosophiques*, F. Alquié (ed.), Garnier, 1963, p. 174. See also J.-R. Armogathe «Sémantèse d'Idée/Idea» in *IDEA-VI Colloquio internazionale del Lessico Europeo 5-7 gennaio 1989*. M. Fattori and M. L. Bianchi (eds.). Rome: dell'Ateneo (coll. Lessico Europeo 51), 1990, pp. 188-9; F. De Buzon and D. Kambouchner, *Le vocabulaire de Descartes*,

Or that:

2) Idea and figure of sensation or imagination were conceived as intellectual entities¹².

Let us begin by examining the second hypothesis; this thesis rests on a passage in which Descartes says that the «figuras vel ideas» come from common sense «puras sine corpore». Does it mean that figures and ideas are immaterial? This latin expression was understood to mean that a figure is spiritualized when it comes from common sense to imagination¹³. First, the figure is said to be not separately distinctly conceivable from an extended support¹⁴ (and that is why we have to use our imagination) which means that, in reality, figure is an intrinsic property of material objects: there is an ontological dependence between extension and figure. Second, sensation in the *Regulæ* is supposed to exclusively take place through a physical process (movement and impressions on organs); and third, postulating a material entity that can become intellectual is not consistent with a dualist ontology *à la* Descartes. The expression «puras sine corpore» translated in French by V. Cousin and J.-L. Marion as «pures et incorporelles» could lead to understand that the figure is not extended, but, as J.-M. Beyssade pointed out¹⁵, it just means that the mode of transmission to the organ takes place without the moving of a material entity: this is exactly what Descartes wanted to explain when he used the famous analogy of the pen whose inferior and superior part wiggle, *absque ullius entis reali transitu ab uno aliud*¹⁶: the figure is not a substance but a property of corporeal internal senses which are modified by a movement of mechanical impression.

On the other side, the first hypothesis seems to be more compat-

Ellipses, 2002, p. 32.

¹² Jean-Henry Roy, *L'imagination selon Descartes*, Gallimard, coll. «La jeune philosophie», pp. 16-18. This is the only scholar I found who seriously defended this interpretation.

¹³ J. Roy, pp.16-18.

¹⁴ *Reg.*, AT X, 421, 5-11.

¹⁵ J.-M. Beyssade, *Descartes au fil de l'ordre*, PUF, 2001, pp.83-84. See also Celia Wolf-Devine, «Descartes on Seeing. Epistemology and visual perception» in *The Journal of the History of philosophy* (Monograph series), Southern Illinois University Press, 1993, p. 23.

¹⁶ *Reg.*, AT X, 414, 3-4.

ible with the letter of the text of the *Regulae*; let us consider its main arguments:

- 1) There is an explicit equivalence in the text between «idea» and «figura»¹⁷: «figuras vel ideas» (Reg., AT X, 414, 17).
- 2) There is also an implicit match: «idea» and «figura» are interchangeable in the same context¹⁸.
- 3) Idea depends on corporeal imagination¹⁹ and is explicitly said to be localized in it (Reg., AT X, 441, 11-13).
- 4) There is no mention in the *Regulae* of ideas of intellect²⁰.
- 5) In other texts, Descartes says that only figures impressed on the pineal gland have to be considered as ideas (*Le Monde*, AT XI, 176, 9-25; *ibid.*, 178, 7-14; *L'Entretien avec Burman*, par. 31: «...ideam seu potius figuram...», AT V, 162).
- 6) Sometimes the adjective «corporea» is joined to «idea» (AT X, 419, 12-13; 443, 2).
- 7) A superior number of occurrences of «figura»: 60 occurrences of «figura» but only 22 occurrences for «idea»²¹.

J.-L. Marion defended the thesis that, because of its form and etymological similarity with the Greek term *εἴδος*, the term «idea» is used by Descartes only to state or clarify what «figura» means, or rather, the function of this figure in the sensation, which is in fact similar (but not identical) to the Aristotelian *εἴδος*²², the form of sensed bod-

¹⁷ J.-L. Marion, *Sur l'ontologie grise de Descartes*, 2000, p. 117; *Sur la Théologie blanche de Descartes*, PUF, 1991, p. 241.

¹⁸ J.-L. Marion, *Sur la théologie blanche de Descartes*, p. 241.

¹⁹ J.-L. Marion, *Questions cartésiennes*, tome I, PUF, 1991, pp.80-81; but the author indicates that there are also ideas depending on Intellect In the *Regulae*.

²⁰ Cf. G. Olivo, *Descartes et l'essence de la vérité*, PUF, 2005, p. 278-280.

²¹ Cf. J.R. Armogathe, J.-L. Marion, *Index des «Regulae ad directionem ingenii» de René Descartes*, dell' Ateneo (Lessico Intellettuale Europeo X, Corpus Cartesianum 1), 1976; G. Olivo, *Descartes et l'essence de la vérité*, p. 277.

²² *L'ontologie grise de Descartes*, p.117; *Sur la théologie blanche de Descartes*, p. 241-2.

ies²³. Similar but not identical because «figura» refers in the *Regulae* to what gives occasion to sense but also to a set of ordered lines²⁴ which is not a meaning that Aristotle gave to the sensible *εἶδος*; as Jean-Luc Marion argues in *L'ontologie grise*, this second sense of «figura» is an implicit critic of the Aristotle's *εἶδος*. The aristotelian form contains no matter and is the essence of each thing²⁵ and is distinct from its shape (morphè). This ontological distinction will disappear with Descartes²⁶: the form of bodily entities is also their shape²⁷.

Marion explains that figure or idea, conceived as corporeal entity, is no more a representation of sensible objects but the object itself with only its intelligible features²⁸. Does it mean that ideas or figures do not represent? If this is the case, we can object that Descartes explicitly attributes a function of representation to ideas and shapes²⁹. But the most important thing is that in the *Regulae*, nothing but the explicit or implicit equivalence of «idea» and «figura», indicates that Descartes, in using the word «idea» wanted *figura* to play the same role as sensible *εἶδος* (as essence of sensible things). Descartes goes back to the *eidos* of *De Anima* with the intention of criticizing it. According to Marion, Descartes implicitly substitutes «figura» for «eidos» by an equivalence between «figura» and «idea», that is to say, «shape» must have the same function that had «sensible» for Aristotle's *εἶδος*. Actually, J.-L. Marion's hypothesis is grounded on a similarity between some passages of the *Regulae* and some passages of the *De Anima*; I do not want to argue that Descartes did not criti-

²³ Aristote, *De l'Âme*, III, 8, 431b25-432a5, Gallimard, 2005, p.173.

²⁴ J.-L. Marion, *L'ontologie grise de Descartes*, p.119.

²⁵ Aristote, *Méta physique*, livre Z, 1032 b.

²⁶ Cf. Beyssade, in *L'entretien avec Burman* p. 192

²⁷ See Jean-Marie Beyssade «RSP ou le monogramme de Descartes», in Descartes, *L'entretien avec Burman*, (1981) p. 192.

²⁸ See p. 129-130: «aucun écart ne distend la figura/idea, intelligible dès le début, puisque construite d'emblée au profit d'une intelligibilité entièrement abstraite de la chose même...; aucun progrès n'est plus possible dès lors que ce n'est plus la chose même qui doit évidemment advenir à l'intelligibilité, et que l'idée abstraite de la chose même y substitue une intelligibilité figurative construite tout exprès; l'idée devient représentation non représentative, uniformément valide, mais sans histoire, objet pétrifié sous le regard de l'esprit.» (my italics).

²⁹ AT X 417, 2; 419, 12-13; 423, 13; 444, 25-27.

cize *εἶδος*, nor that he did not refer to Aristotle or to Aristotelian in the *Regulae*; he actually replaced the Aristotelian distinction between form as essence of things and figure («*morphe*») by the figure as a mode of extension which constitutes the essence of body. Nonetheless the sensible *εἶδος* translated in latin as «*forma*» or «*species*»³⁰, that Descartes criticizes, more precisely come from the Conimbrarian commentators that he studied at La Flèche like Emmanuel de Goes, Toletus, or Ruvio³¹ (Rubio, Rubius), who were themselves influenced by the Thomistic interpretation of the Stagirite's texts, rather than directly from Aristotle himself. Maybe Descartes thought that the Thomistic term of «*species*» (that is the way in which St. Thomas translated «*εἶδος*») referring both to intellectual and corporeal entities³² was too confused³³ to be mentioned in his physics grounded on the metaphysical presupposition of distinction between material and intellectual entities³⁴.

We find some occurrences of «*species*» in the *Regulae* or «*espèces*» in French so we can suppose that Descartes, influenced by Ruvio's commentaries on the Thomist species, conceived of *species* as bodily entities³⁵. *Species intentionales* are, as he will write in his *Dioptrics*, bodily entities copying the physical object; they are «petites images voltigeantes qui travaillent tant l'imagination des Philosophes» (VI, 85). The representational relation between *species* and the external object was understood by Descartes as a relation of similarity, something that he rejects³⁶: representation, that is an

³⁰ R. Goclenius, *Lexicon philosophicum*, Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1964, p. 1068.

³¹ *Descartes à Mersenne 30 septembre 1640*, III, 185, 11-12. B 272, p. 1284. The courses of Conimbrarian commentaries were put together in *Commentarii Collegii Conimbricensis* republished in early XVII century.

³² E. Gilson, *Etudes sur le rôle de la pensée médiévale sur la formation du système cartésien*, Vrin, 1984, p. 24-25.

³³ AT X, 428, 6-10.

³⁴ L.J. Beck, *The method of Descartes. A study of the Regulae*, Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 27.

³⁵ *Commentarii in Libros Aristotelis De Anima*, Q. III, Johannem Pillehotte, Lugduni (ed.), 1613, pp. 331-332.

³⁶ V. Aucante, «La vision chez Descartes et Plempius», in *Il Seicento e Descartes*, A. Del Prete (ed.), Le Monnier Università/Filosofia, Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi su Descartes e il Seicento, Università degli

asymmetric relation is not resemblance, that is a symmetric relation. St Thomas did not conceive of *species* or *phantasmata* as copies of objects but as the object *qua* being in the senses³⁷. Thus, as scholars have pointed out³⁸, it seems that Descartes assimilated *species* to bodily pictorial images³⁹, a conception originated in Democritus⁴⁰.

Because Descartes denies the model of pictorial similarity and the possibility of the transit of a real entity at a distance⁴¹, he does not need to keep the *concept* of *species*; nonetheless he conserves the *term* «species» (even if he limits its use) and, by making it a synonym of «figura» (and consequently of «idea» if we suppose that «idea» and «figura» are synonymous), he gives to this term a new sense (AT X, 369, 3-10): now, *species*, *forma* and *phantasmata* have to be understood as figures that are not copies of objects but signs representing it. His epistemic conception of external perception is accompanied by a new ontology, but also a new terminology. I do not think that the presence of «*species*» in his texts is a concession made to the scholastics⁴², but rather, a way to show that he is substituting the concept of *figura* for the concept of *species*, and this substitution shows his break with the aristotelico-thomist ontology. In this manner, we can suppose that «*ἰδέα*», often associated with «*εἰδός*», and «*eidolon*», might explain why Descartes used «*idea*» and «*figura*» as synonymous. However, this hypothesis, as the one of J.-L. Marion, presupposes to decide the meaning of «*idea*» only on the basis of its etymology and regarding to the function of *εἰδός* in sensation. To use only the Aristotelian *corpus* to understand what Descartes had in mind when he juxtaposes «*idea*» and «*figura*», by supposing that *idea* is similar (but not identical) to the Aristotle's *εἰδός* is what I contest in this interpretation. This view cannot be

Studi di Lecce, 2004, p. 244.

³⁷ S. Thomas, *Summa theologiae*, I, 84, 6, *ad Resp.*

³⁸ L.J. Beck, *The method of Descartes* :..., p. 29 ; and C. Wolf-Devine, *Descartes on seeing (...)*, in *Journal of the History of philosophy* (Monograph series), p. 32.

³⁹ *Descartes à Mersenne* 21 avril 1641, AT, III, 361, 9-13. B 309, p. 1446. *Discours de la méthode*, AT VI, 112.

⁴⁰ Democritus is cited in *Lettre à Morus du 5 février 1649*, AT, V, 271, 17. B 677, p. 2618.

⁴¹ *Reg.*, AT X, 402, 18-25.

⁴² L. Alanen, *Descartes's Concept of Mind*, p. 145-146.

satisfactory because, first, we just have seen that there are other relevant sources like Conimbricians who understood Aristotle's *εἶδος* as a material entity; how then, could we explain Descartes's consideration of idea as figura in the *Regulæ* with Aristotle's *εἶδος* only? Secondly, because until his latest work *Les passions de l'âme*, that is, after that Descartes defended his conception of what is an idea for him, i.e. the form of thought, we find some similar substitutions: why going on talking about ideas as impressions or figures whereas they have been defined as *cognitiones*? This equivalence between «idea/idée» and «figural/figure» goes on appearing in Descartes' later work and that is why I think that the standard interpretation cannot be entirely right.

What takes place in the *Regulæ* is just the beginning of a series of a repetition of occurrences of the same type. Having noticed this regularity, Jean-Marie Beyssade (2001, p. 74) claimed that this can be explained by the fact that Descartes could have given the same name to the corporeal mode (i.e. the figure) as to the thought it produces, its intellectual correlate. In the second section, I will examine how the terminology of «idea» and «figura» varies according to the context of imagination in which the terms appear: since imagination is a faculty that depends on the union of the body and human soul, this variation is probably due to the supremacy of the metaphysical unity of the human being or union in all Cartesian texts dealing with perception.

II. COGNITIVE IMAGINATION AND TERMINOLOGICAL VARIATION OF «IDEA»

The first occurrences of «figura» in the *Regulæ* appear in a context where Descartes talks about arithmetic and geometry and refers first to a geometrical object⁴³, the set of ordered lines that can be a concept of a pure intellect or an image of the imagining intellect; as a mathematical object or intellectual *verum ens*, the ontological status of figure is in abeyance. Figure, in general, is a *natura simplex*, known by itself and that I cannot distinctly conceive independently of some extended thing, because the two are necessarily joined⁴⁴. Thus, if the figure is distinctly conceived only in bodies, it is a materially simple nature that the

⁴³ *Reg.*, AT X, 375, 5-6; 375, 14-15.

⁴⁴ *Reg.*, X, 421, 5-11.

intellect can know by itself, but in an easier way through imagination, that is, by using a bodily image. These figures conceived by intellect or imagination are distinct from the figures impressed or projected on a material support, and from the inscriptions or *compendiosae figurae* that are conventional algebraic notations signifying pure measures for the intellect. «Figura» refers also to an intrinsic property of bodily objects, a mode of extension (extension reductive to geometry), the real figure, or what Descartes calls «figura vera». These figures are geometrical figures made real in our world. In the process of external perception exposed in the *Regula XII*, «figura» refers to what, by a causal mechanism, is impressed on imagination when senses are in contact with an object that exercises a pressure on them. This impressed figure is not a body but is embodied in the bodily imagination and so it is extended. What we can call a cerebral impression results from a process of reduction of matter to a simple extension that is supposed to immediately schematize sensation: the intrinsic and extrinsic properties are reduced to a set of ordered lines. In fact, this reduction of intrinsic properties includes sensible qualities, even if they are not real for Descartes, since the figure schematizes also the disposition of properties in objects⁴⁵ that produces some *qualia*. The fact that Descartes thought of the relation between *qualia* and properties of objects as a relation of non-resemblance is linked with his choice to use in this context the term «figura», less equivocal than «species». However, we have seen why «species» is still mentioned by Descartes and it appears that he always used it to talk about figures impressed on the *phantasia*, that means, to talk about figures that are embodied and so have an ontological status⁴⁶, which is corporeal.

Another term, «phantasmata», occurs in the text and, as «species», refers to cerebral impressions; it is interesting, here again, to see in which

⁴⁵ Descartes à Morus 5 février 1649, AT V, 268, 30-269, 2; B 677, p. 2615.

⁴⁶ First, *speciebus*, that can be caused by figures drawn on a piece of paper and that I look with attention (X, 453, 6-7), are «in phantasia depictis» (440, 29) that is a «verum corpus reale extensum & figuratum» (441, 12-13). They also can help the intellect to conceive or imagine magnitudes in general which must be reduced to an only species that will be «omnium facilimè & distinctissimè in imaginatione nostra pingetur» (441, 7-8). From a particular figure, drawn on a support that I try hard to represent to myself, I can distinctly conceive of universal properties belonging to all figures. These magnitudes that are painted in our *phantasia* (454, 16-17) are images.

context Descartes prefers to use this equivocal term instead of «figura». First, the term «phantasmata» occurs in opposition with the *veras rerum figuras* (AT X, 423, 6). This is not surprising since «phantasmata» signifies also an illusion or an appearance. How to know if what appears in my sensory experience corresponds or not to what it is in the external world? We must be careful not to judge that *imaginationem fideliter referre sensum objecta, nec sensus veras rerum figuras induere, nec denique res externas tales semper esse quales apparent* (AT, X, 423, 4-7). Descartes uses this term in a context where he talks about the possibility of error of judgement; for example, if we judge that there is a similarity between the external object and the content of our sensation due to imagination. Because of the imagination's corruption, the initial natural coding of figures caused by external things, that is supposed to figure the external object's properties, is disturbed (*turbata*) or, more precisely, disordered; indeed, the process of figuration consists in reducing object's properties to a set of lines, that is, to measure; but, besides this, the imagination makes order in this set and, according the order of lines, the figure will produce such or such phenomenal content. As a cerebral faculty, imagination, like memory, produces order between sensible data⁴⁷. Therefore, to avoid error, that is, to prevent us to give our assent to a confused representation, we must have in mind that the object of our thought, that our intellect intuits⁴⁸ (*intuiteatur*) or looks at with the

⁴⁷ Descartes wrote earlier in *Compendium musicae* (AT X, 94) that imagination (and memory) conceives («concipit») sounds that is, organizes by periods or orders the sensible *data*.

⁴⁸ *Reg.*, AT X, 368, 13-19. Contrary to deduction, having an intuition means here to be aware of that something is evident, that is, immediately true. In his *Secondes Réponses*, Descartes wrote: «& lorsque quelqu'un dit: *Je pense, donc je suis, ou j'existe*, il ne conclut pas son existence de sa pensée comme par la force de quelque syllogisme, mais comme une chose connue de soi; il la voit par une simple inspection de l'esprit (*simplici mentis intuitu*)», AT, IX, 110. The statement «je pense, donc je suis» is not grasped by intellect successively, by sequences, but entirely and instantaneously. In the second Meditation, *intuitus* is assimilated with the *inspectio mentis*: «Mais ce qui est à remarquer, sa perception, ou bien l'action par laquelle on l'aperçoit, n'est point une vision, ni un attouchement, ni une imagination, & ne l'a jamais été, quoi qu'il le semblât ainsi auparavant, mais seulement une inspection de l'esprit (*solius mentis inspectio*), laquelle peut être imparfaite et confuse, comme elle était auparavant, ou bien claire et distincte, comme elle est à présent, selon que mon attention se porte plus ou moins aux choses

mind's eyes in itself or in a phantasm⁴⁹, does not always represent *fideliter* the real sensible thing. What precisely the intellect intuits and how does it do that? Cartesian intuition is a direct awareness of something, but what exactly is the object of this awareness?

First, the phantasms in the *phantasia* caused by sensible objects, cause in the intellect sensations or imaginations: the physiologic information provided by cerebral phantasm is perceived by the passive intellect (passive because it is sensing) as a sensation. Because of the union between mind and body, these cerebral impressions have such a relation with the intellect that they can produce some species of thoughts like sensations. When we sense something, the intellect perceives not the phantasm as an embodied entity but rather, as Descartes specifies it, the object of thought, that is, the sensory information that the phantasm or the figure impressed on the *phantasia* represents. I can experience the world only *via* these cerebral impressions, so my perceptual access to the world is not direct, but on the other hand, by the *institution de nature*, my mind is directly aware of what these phantasms represent, i.e. the properties of the extended object. The intellect perceives the object as it appears to itself, via this impression to which it applies, that is, it considers the object *qua* the content of its thought. That is the meaning of «object of thought in the phantasm». Does it mean that this content or object of thought is what Descartes means by «idea» in the *Regulae*? This would be fallacious: of course, it would not be false to call this content of thought an «idea» but we cannot be sure that what Descartes meant by «idea» in the *Regulae* corresponds *only* to this definition. Indeed, we find in the text the expression «idea corporea»⁵⁰ that seems to refer also to a cerebral impression and occurs a few lines after «imago corporea»⁵¹. The first occurrences of «imago» take place in a purely physiological context, that indicate that this term refers also to

qui sont en elles, & dont elle est composée.», AT IX, 24-25. The intellectual intuition consists in an apprehension or clear and distinct perception of an idea. When the intellect uses the senses or the imagination, the perception is confused but when he examines the object of its thought in itself with attention its actual perception is an intuition.

⁴⁹ *Reg.*, AT, X, 423, 2.

⁵⁰ AT X, 419, 12-13.

⁵¹ AT X, 419, 10.

cerebral impressions⁵². As the two terms, «idea corporea» and «imago corporea», can substitute each other in this context without changing the meaning of the proposition, they are synonymous. So both, «species» and «figura», like «phantasmata», refer to cerebral impressions.

Yet, we can see that in the passage that we are examining (AT X, 419, 12-13), «idea corporea» seems to refer to the result of the working of a faculty, that must be the intellect, because of the occurrence of the verb «fingere» that regularly appears in Descartes's work in the context of intellectual imagination; this indicates that the subject of this activity of discovering or representing something to itself cannot be a passive cerebral faculty. Why did Descartes choose to qualify these images and ideas as corporeal?

Yet, another passage in the *Regulae* draws explicitly into conflict with my interpretation since we can read that ideas are localized in the *phantasia*:

ubi phantasiam ipsam cum ideis in illa existentibus nihil aliud esse concepimus, quam verum corpus reale extensum & figuratum. (AT X 441, 11-13).

But if we compare this passage with three other similar ones (AT X 416, 8-10; 416, 28-417, 1; 444, 3-5), we notice that all have a common point: the intellect helped by imagination, a faculty that Descartes used to call *ingenium*, is what produces these ideas of extended things. The intellect does not forge images literally in the *phantasia* but applies itself to this part of the brain where the impressions converge and are retained. And, as in this context this image is a product of intellect imagining, it is an idea⁵³. In the *Traité de la lumière*, Descartes writes about ideas that intellect can form by imagining (AT XI, 35, 14-17) and this intellectual activity is illustrated by the verb «concevoir». In the same work, talking about the sensation of light, Descartes writes that ideas in imagination are «sentiments» (XI, 3, 2-5). Thus, in the *Regulae*, there is also a meaning of «image» as product of the intellect imagining⁵⁴, which is distinct from corporeal imagination that animals

⁵² AT X, 414, 29-415, 4; 416, 19-20.

⁵³ AT X, 445, 16-20.

⁵⁴ *Descartes à Mersenne juillet 1641* : «tout ce que nous concevons avec image en est une (i.e. une idée) de l'imagination», AT III, p. 395. B 318, p. 1484.

also have and that has no link with thought⁵⁵.

III. A TERMINOLOGICAL VARIATION OF «IDEA» CONDITIONED BY THE CONTEXT OF METAPHYSICAL SUBSTANTIAL UNION.

By «context of metaphysical union» I mean the contexts in which the human being is involved, but not in the restrictive metaphysical sense of *ego*, i.e. the thinking subject as distinct from body. The context I am referring to is the explanation of perception or passions that supposes or treats the notion of union, the way soul suffers the effects of the action of the body, the way in which the soul acts on the body and all the things that the soul could not do if it was not united with a body.

This meaning of «idea» as an intellectual image (a product of the intellect imagining) is not accepted by the scholars who think that, on the contrary, this term is employed by Descartes in the context of sensation, to refer to cerebral images impressed on the pineal gland⁵⁶; to them (who sometimes use it as an argument to defend an empirical direct-realist lecture) «image» refers only to bodily impressions, and ideas drawn on the gland H are literally figures. The passage generally cited to illustrate this interpretation is the following:

Or, entre ces figures, ce ne sont pas celles qui s'impriment dans les organes des sens extérieurs, ou dans la superficie intérieure du cerveau, mais seulement celles qui se tracent dans les esprits sur la superficie de la glande H, où est le siège de l'imagination, & du sens commun, qui doivent être prises pour les idées, c'est-à-dire pour les formes et images que l'âme raisonnable considérera immédiatement, lorsqu'étant unie à cette machine elle imaginera ou sentira quelque chose.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ In the *Regulae*, «phantasia» exclusively appears in a context of corporeal movements or impressions coming from senses whereas «imaginatio» also occurs in the context of thought's activity and is the other name of the intellect when it forms images: the phantasia, that receives impressions, is passive whereas imaginatio has also an active dimension since it can form (formare) and conceive of (concipere). See D. Sepper, «Descartes and the eclipse of imagination», in *The Journal of the history of philosophy*, vol. XXVII, n°3 July 1989, note 16, p.389; V. Foti, «The cartesian imagination», in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. XLVI, N°4, June 1986, note 16, p. 635.

⁵⁶ For example, Michael Costa «What cartesian ideas are not», *Journal of the history of philosophy*, vol 21, n°4, 1983, 537-549.

⁵⁷ *Traité de l'Homme*, AT XI, 176-177.

When the soul imagines or feels, it immediately applies itself to consider the «formes ou images» that are the figures impressed on imagination and common sense; if it immediately happens, it implies that there is no *medium* or intermediary entity. Thus, if we defend the impossibility of having an immaterial image in Descartes' theory of perception, we would think that this immediate consideration cannot consist in a production of an immaterial image (i.e. an image composed of no matter) because it would be an intermediary between the soul and the figures impressed on pineal gland. But I don't think that we have to consider this immaterial image as an entity: when the soul considers an impressed figure, it can in virtue of the union feel or imagine external things, that is, by these particular thoughts the soul can represent to itself a phenomenal content produced from what this figure represents. To my mind, there is no need of postulating a third entity between cerebral impressions and the soul because the content is immanent to the act of thought itself. Because the soul cannot perceive material things directly, the real object of the *cogitatio* is not the figure itself but its referring to the world, their intentional content. This position has two advantages: first, the idea or intellectual image doesn't need to pre-exist, nor to be an intermediary entity since it is immanent to the thought; and, second, it doesn't draw into conflict with the thesis that the intellect can only directly perceive ideas. Collecting sensory information implies that the intellect has simultaneously ideas occasioned by cerebral patterns: we cannot feel anything without having at the same time the idea that we are feeling something. What the figure represents is the immanent object to the intellect, that is the thing thought objectively in the intellect, and that composes our thought⁵⁸.

The *Regulæ* and the *Traité de l'Homme* are not the only texts where the term «idea» is used to refer to figures, or impressions. In the *Discours de la Méthode*, ideas are said to be received in the common sense⁵⁹ or to be impressive ideas, whereas in the same text Descartes talks about ideas as content of thought, in the *Entretien avec Burman*, we find an explicit equivalence between «idea» and «figura»⁶⁰ and in the *Passions de l'Âme*, «idée» refers to an impres-

⁵⁸ AT X, 423, l. 24-25.

⁵⁹ *Discours de la méthode*, AT VI, 55, l.17 and l.20.

⁶⁰ AT V, 162.

sion on the brain⁶¹. How to explain this? In Descartes' theory of perception, the perceptive access to the world is made *via* an idea, an idea that is always i.e. –necessary in this case– produced from a figure. That is why I agree with the hypothesis of J.-M. Beyssade who claims that Descartes gave the same name to the corporeal mode as to its intellectual correlate. But we can go further.

The context where these terminological concessions occur is that of sensing or imagining. Thus, these concessions are conditioned: they appear when Descartes talks about the soul that acts or suffers with the body, as if in the context of union the metaphysical distinctions didn't come first. We find two definitions of «idea» that indicate in which conditions we can use «idea» to refer to something corporeal:

Car je n'appelle pas simplement du nom d'idée les images qui sont dépeintes en la fantaisie; au contraire, je ne les appelle point de ce nom, en tant qu'elles sont dans la fantaisie corporelle⁶².

Prima facie, Descartes doesn't restrict the use of the term «idée» to refer to cerebral image so we could think that is just enlarging a first meaning of it. Actually, the terminological concession of Descartes is about the name we should give to images. On the one hand, images can't be called «idées» if we consider them as cerebral impressions or physical impressed images. On the other hand, and that's the reason why he employs the adverb «simplement», these images can be called «Idées» when they are object of the mind's *visum* (intentional content of thought), and inform or modify the form of thought, i.e. the psychical mode of relation between the subject and its object. This reading is illustrated by this text:

Et ainsi je n'appelle pas du nom d'idée les seules (*non solas*) images qui sont dépeintes en la fantaisie; au contraire, je ne les appelle point ici de ce nom, en tant qu'elles sont en la fantaisie corporelle, c'est-à-dire en tant qu'elles sont dépeintes en quelques parties du cerveau, mais seulement en tant qu'elles informent (*informant*) l'esprit même, qui s'applique à cette partie du cerveau⁶³.

In the *Regulæ* and other texts dealing with the singular experience of perception and reciprocal action of mind and body, it seems that Des-

⁶¹ *Passions de l'âme*, AT XI, 405, 12-14.

⁶² *Descartes à Mersenne juillet 1641*, AT III, 392, 24-27. B 318, p. 1482.

⁶³ *Seconde Réponses aux Objections*, AT IX, 124.

cartes favoured for methodological reasons the metaphysical substantial unity (instead of its unity of composition for example) of human being (since the terminological concession takes place only in this context), and that this favour explains why ideas can be called «figures» or why the soul can be analogically said to be material⁶⁴ or the body's form⁶⁵. These terminological concessions only appear when Descartes mentions the mind that acts on body or suffers with him. Putting brain patterns from ideas on the same level permits to reinforce this intimate relation between mind and body and to enable us to conceive it more easily even if it implies to conceive ideas as something corporeal and extended. The attitude of Descartes was guided by methodological motivations. Our intellect can't understand how sensation or imagination is possible because it sees no affinity between brain patterns and conceptions. The rigorously metaphysical distinctions are useless and even harmful to understand union but also all what supposes union, like the possibility of sensible perception for example. Thinking about body and soul as two distinct substance makes it difficult to understand how they could interact. We have to recall that in the *Regulæ*, Descartes claimed that we have to consider first knowledge of things, as they are relative to our intellect and not as they are in reality. If we consider the epistemological models he offered, we can say that the intelligibility of his philosophy was something important to him. For Descartes, an intelligible model is not a simple conjecture of imagination but a conjecture validated by reason: a real hypothesis that can become certain. This methodological duty is probably the key to understand this equivalence between «*idea/idée*» and «*figura/figure*».

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⁶⁴ Descartes à Elisabeth 28 juin 1643, AT, III, 694.

⁶⁵ For example: AT X 411, 17-19; *Descartes à Mesland 9 février 1645*, IV, 168; *Descartes à Mesland 1645 ou 1646*, AT IV, 346, 20-22; B 535, p. 2129.

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