Deborah Boyle
Descartes on Innate Ideas.
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Innate ideas were a central element in the Cartesian philosophy. Most famously there are the innate idea of God, which lies at the heart of the *Meditations*, and the innate sensory ideas of the *Comments on a Broadsheet*. But these by no means exhaust the list of innate Cartesian ideas. Also included are, among others, the cogito and the idea of the self, the idea of extension, and our many 'common notions'. As the first book-length treatment of Cartesian innate ideas in either English or French, Boyle's engaging contribution is a most welcome addition to the field.

One can conceive various ways of approaching the topic of Cartesian innate ideas. One might, for instance, try to use contrasts to illuminate Cartesian innatism and its motivations. Thus, one might try approaching Cartesian innatism from the standpoint of the late scholastic debates regarding first principles (whether logical, moral, or natural) and regressus theory, and contrast Cartesian appeals and defenses of it with those of the schoolmen. Or one might try approaching it from the standpoint of the Cartesian empiricists (Desgabets, Regis, Lamy, Bayle, et al.) and Malebranche, who all rejected Cartesian innatism while remaining staunchly Cartesian. Alternatively, one might approach it head-on and hope that through the force of textual analysis alone one can uncover the meaning of Descartes' appeals to and depictions of innate ideas. Boyle opts for the latter approach.

Her thesis is that Descartes had a unified conception of innateness. There are, she argues, 'three senses of "innate idea"', yet they 'are interdependent, thus providing a more unified account of Cartesian innate ideas' (3). Half of the book, Chapters 1 through 3, is devoted to establishing this thesis. The argument seems to have the following structure. First Boyle clears the ground by dismissing the alternative interpretations, namely the 'purely dispositional' account, the 'present but submerged' account, and McRae's 1972 mixed account of dispositional, recollective, and reflective innatism. Boyle provides two primary bases for dismissing these alternatives: their uncharitableness and failure to accommodate all of Descartes' texts. Second, she introduces her unified alternative, which rests on Descartes' triple ambiguity of ideas in the objective sense, ideas in the material sense, and ideas in the dispositional sense. After introducing her interpretative alternative in the first chapter, Boyle next explores how Descartes' triple ambiguity affects both his distinction between the innate and the adventitious and his account of clarity and distinctness. In the third chapter Boyle explores the dispositional sense of innate ideas by explaining how our innate ideas in the objective sense (intentional objects) become innate ideas in the material sense (perceptions) through the exercise of

our capacity to perceive them (innate ideas in the dispositional sense). According to Boyle, 'this capacity is exercised through attending to or reflecting on our own thoughts. Thus the concepts of *reflection* and *attention* play a central role in Descartes' account of how we come to perceive our innate ideas'.

It is unclear, however, how Chapters 2 through 3 actually contribute to a defense of Boyle's interpretation. They really involve explaining how other aspects of Descartes' theory of ideas ought to be understood in light of her interpretation. But the real problem is that there is little even in Chapter 1 that actually motivates her interpretation. Boyle's own characterization of the structure of Chapter 1 may be indicative: Section 1 introduces the triple ambiguity in Descartes' ideas; Section 2 'describes and responds to the secondary literature'; Section 3 'turn(s) to John Cottingham's interpretation of Cartesian innate ideas'; and Section 4 'turn(s) to another account of Cartesian innateness found in the secondary literature, what Robert McRae has identified as the "recollection" account' (7-8). All things considered, not much is said about why we ought to assent to Boyle's interpretation, which will be a disappointment to those who demand more than a disjunctive syllogism to prop up an interpretation.

Putting aside the justification of her thesis, questions about the thesis itself might still arise. First of all, it is not clear how Boyle's interpretation is meaningfully different from McRae's. Boyle claims to find in Descartes three species of innate ideas (dispositional, objective, and material) that are interdependent; McRae claims to find in Descartes three species of innate ideas (dispositional, recollective, and reflective) that, Boyle suggests, McRae argued 'had something in common' (2). Indeed Boyle incorporates virtually everything McRae had to say about recollective and reflective innatism into her tripartite schema (26). So what's the difference between them?

In Boyle's eyes the difference seems to lie in the interdependence between these three species of Cartesian innatism. Indeed that seems to be the crux of her whole view. Unfortunately Boyle's discussion of their interdependence is unpersuasive. Explains Boyle: 'To have an objectively existing idea is to have the capacity to perceive it, for it surely makes no sense to speak of our having an idea in the objective sense that we could *never* perceive. Any nature that exists objectively in the intellect is such that it can be perceived; since the perceivability of the idea and the ability to perceive that idea are interdependent, ideas in the objective sense and ideas *qua* capacities are interdependent' (20). But of course it is always possible to have a capacity to perceive an idea without having the ideao (by which is mean idea as object), i.e. without being required 'to say that a certain object of thought is present in the mind' (12). No empiricist is going to grant that as false, let alone as analytically or necessarily false. Moreover, the dependence in the other direction is not so clear either. It would not be unreasonable, for example, to maintain that one might possess an idea in the objective sense that one never could perceive.

Much depends on the force of the modality involved. To invoke one of Boyle's examples: 'A baby (might have) a capacity to walk by virtue of having legs, even if exercising that capacity requires practice' (131), but even though the victim of severe spinal trauma possesses legs she is naturally said to lack the capacity to walk until physical therapy is able to re-produce the power in her legs. Likewise, Descartes might be right and I might contain the innate idea of God in the objective sense, but I still might not be able to perceive it even if I should live a millions lives, reprobate that I am. As just mentioned, much depends on the force of the modal involved here. Treating capacity simply in terms of logical possibility would get Boyle the result she wants, but why should we? Why shouldn't we treat the capacity in question as governed by a lesser grade of modality, metaphysical possibility, or natural possibility, or psychological possibility, or what-have-you? More to the point, why should we think that Descartes conceived of capacity in that way, as opposed to one of these lesser grades of modality? Why think that such would be the default position for a pre-Humean who developed in a resolutely Aristotelian intellectual milieu?

This is to say nothing about the connection with 'idea' in the material sense ('ideam'). Boyle's official line on that is 'for innate ideas, the material and objective senses of "idea" are less closely related: an innate idea can be present in the mind (that is, we can have an innate ideao) without there being any act of the intellect by which we perceive it (that is, without there being a correlative innate ideam)' (20-1). Given this loosening of the relationship between innate ideas in the objective and material senses, it's not clear what to make of the interdependence of the three species of innate ideas, or therefore the unity of Descartes' conception of innatism.

The latter half of the book consists of examinations of various examples of Cartesian innate ideas in light of the interpretation laid out and defended in Chapters 1-3. Chapters 4 and 5 explore the truths known by the natural light, Descartes' 'common notions'. Much of the fourth chapter is devoted to a critique of John Morris' interpretation of Descartes' natural light, and to Boyle's alternative, by which she understands Descartes to 'mean that (a) truth is discovered through the use of the pure intellect as it attends to its own process of thinking' when he says that the 'truth is perceived by the natural light' (105).

Chapter 6 explores the very interesting cases of the innate ideas of extension, shapes, geometrical and arithmetical propositions, and the laws of motion. These innate ideas are so interesting because they involve 'purely material simples', which even though they are 'perceived by the pure intellect, nonetheless require the use of the body in order to be so perceived' (119). Indeed, the dependence is even stronger according to Boyle: 'I want to argue that sensory experience is necessary for the meditator to explicitly perceive that idea; the idea (in the objective sense) of extension can only be made explicit by reflection on mental images that we possess through sense-perception' (122). It's not clear why Boyle believes that this necessary dependence on the images doesn't threaten

to undermine the sense in which these ideas are properly speaking innate rather than adventitious. Although she does not spell it out here, perhaps the reason she believes this is connected to her suggestion in Chapter 2 that innateness comes in degrees. 'Fully innate ideas are those which are apparently derived from the power of thought alone,' explains Boyle, whereas to 'the extent that the power of thought plays some role in our possession of an idea, that idea could be considered as innate.' But of course, as Boyle emphasizes, '*all* ideas are present in us due at least partly to the power of thought' (43). I wonder, however, what this does to the innate-adventitious distinction, and how, if this were so, Locke's critique of innatism as trivial wouldn't be correct? Unfortunately Boyle doesn't answer these questions.

The strength of Boyle's book lies in its critiques of the secondary literature. She marshals impressive arrays of texts from across Descartes' corpus in an effort to raise problems with McRae's, Cottingham's, and Morris' interpretations. Thus, her book is an excellent starting point for scholarship regarding Descartes' doctrine of innatism and for his doctrine of ideas generally. It is a most welcome addition to the field.

Benjamin Hill
The University of Western Ontario