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TRUE AND IMMUTABLE NATURES

Willis DONEY

RÉSUMÉ : On prend ici en considération trois questions disputées. 1) Qu'est-ce qui, selon Descartes, est le « propriétaire » ou le « possesseur » de natures vraies et immuables ? 2) Quelles sont au juste les idées qui manifestent des natures vraies et immuables ? 3) Quel est, pour Descartes, le critère d'une idée manifestant une nature vraie et immuable ?

SUMMARY : Three disputed questions are considered here. 1) What, according to Descartes, is the "owner" or "possessor" of true and immutable natures ? 2) Just which ideas exhibit true and immutable natures ? 3) What, for Descartes, is the criterion of an idea exhibiting a true and immutable nature ?

In the *Meditations*, we encounter the notion of true and immutable natures for the first time in Meditation V. It is presented shortly in two sentences.¹ Yet it seems to be of major importance for at least two reasons. First, the notion is introduced in the context of a discussion of the essence of material things, *i.e.* "extension [...] in length, breadth, and depth," and of "particular features regarding shape, number, motion, and the like." So the notion seems to be important for understanding Descartes's views about the subject matter of mathematics. Second, he maintains that this notion can be used to defend his *a priori* proof of God's existence against a very tempting objection. Nothing more is said about true and immutable natures in the body of the *Meditations*. Though there are references to the notion in the First and Second Replies and a few remarks in other places, we are left with some puzzling questions.² I shall be concerned with answers to three disputed questions. (1) What, according to Descartes, is the "owner" or "possessor" of true and immutable natures ? (2) Just which ideas exhibit true and immutable natures ? Finally, (3) what, for Descartes, is the criterion of an idea exhibiting a true and immutable nature ?

1. References to Descartes's works are to the Adam and Tannery edition, *Œuvres de Descartes*, Paris, Cerf, 1897-1910 (hereafter AT); and to the Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch translation *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985-1991 (hereafter CSM). AT VII, 64; CSM II, 44-45.

I

The first question is posed by Anthony Kenny.³ Quoting the first of the two sentences in Meditation V — “I find in myself innumerable ideas of things which, even if they perhaps have no existence outside me, cannot be said to be nothing, and though they can be thought of by me more or less at will, they are not my inventions, but have their true and immutable natures” —, Kenny points out that, in both the Latin and the French translation, it is not clear grammatically whether it is ideas (*ideae, idées*) or things (*res, choses*) that are supposed to have true and immutable natures. Addressing the question, he gives reasons for thinking it cannot be ideas and must be things. No account is given of what is meant by having or possessing a nature, and Kenny’s reasons are offered in the context of an attempt to prove that the things to which he thinks these natures belong are like Meinong’s “pure objects.” But the reasons he and others have given to show that these natures do not pertain to ideas can be assessed without attending to these complications since they depend on some questionable assumptions about Descartes’s views concerning ideas.

(a) After quoting the first of the sentences in Meditation V, Kenny cites a passage farther on :

[...] it is not necessary for me ever to imagine a triangle, but whenever I choose to consider a rectilinear figure that has just three angles, I must ascribe to it properties from which it is rightly inferred that its three angles are not greater than two right angles.⁴

Referring to Descartes’s claim in defending his proof of God’s existence that “it is not that my thought [...] imposes any necessity on any thing ; on the contrary, it is the necessity of the thing itself which determines my thinking [...],”⁵ Kenny argues that since, for Descartes, the necessity of attributing certain properties to a triangle does not depend on thought, “what has the true and immutable nature [...] is not the idea of a triangle.” Now Descartes would indeed be committed to this conclusion if he held that the content of an idea is determined by thought. But he certainly does not hold such a view. In the familiar classification of Meditation III, not all ideas are made by us and he implies that the content of innate ideas is by contrast not so determined. In a letter to Mersenne of 16 June 1641,⁶ he restates the Meditation III classification and contrasts properties that can be “drawn out” of innate ideas and those “put into” constructed ideas, and it is made explicit that the idea of a triangle is of the former sort.

(b) After citing the passage about the necessity of ascribing certain properties to a triangle, Kenny suggests a second reason : “It does not”, he writes, “seem that we can

2. See especially First Replies, AT VII, 116-119 ; CSM, 106-107 ; Second Replies, AT VII, 151-152 ; CSM II, 106-107 ; and “Conversation with Burman,” AT V, 160 ; p. 23 in the Cottingham translation *Descartes’s Conversation with Burman*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1970.

3. A. KENNY, *Descartes : A Study of His Philosophy*, New York, Garland Publishing, 1987, p. 149-151.

4. AT VII, 67-68 ; CSM II, 47.

5. AT VII, 67 ; CSM II, 46.

6. AT III, 382-383 ; CSM III, 183-184.

say for a triangle *dari est cogitari*.⁷ The argument suggested here is that, since it does not seem that the being — *dari* in Kenny's terminology — of a triangle depends on being thought and since the being of an idea does, the nature of a triangle cannot be attributed to an idea of a triangle. This argument seems stronger than the first. It does indeed appear that the ostensibly enduring nature of a triangle its "essence which is immutable and eternal" — cannot be identified with a momentary, ephemeral idea. But, again, the argument is flawed by a questionable assumption about Descartes's view of ideas, namely, the assumption (in Kenny's terminology) that their *dari* is *cogitari*. In the Preface to the *Meditations*, Descartes distinguishes two senses of *idea*.⁸ In the first sense, taken "materially" as an "operation of the intellect," it does indeed seem clear that the being of an idea depends on its being thought. Yet, in the second sense distinguished, viz. of *idea* taken "objectively" as "the object represented by an act of the intellect." it is not unequivocally Descartes's view that, as *res cogitata*, an idea cannot be supposed to exist independently of being thought. In the Preface, about *idea* in the second sense, *i.e.* as the thing represented, Descartes adds, "even if it is not regarded as existing outside the intellect," implying, so it seems, that the thing represented might exist outside the intellect. What, also, about innate ideas? Can we say that, for Descartes, their *dari* is *cogitari*?

(c) In a note to the first sentence about true and immutable natures in Meditation V, Kenny observes, "It is clearly of *res*, and not of *ideae*, that Descartes says *non tamen dici possum nihil esse*."⁹ But this, again, is not clear. In the First Replies, when he answers Caterus's objection that ideas do not require a cause, Descartes is insistent on the reality of ideas: "this mode of being (the objective being of ideas) is of course much less perfect than that possessed by things which exist outside the intellect but [...] *it is not therefore simply nothing (nihil)*" (my emphasis).¹⁰

(d) A fourth reason for asserting that ideas cannot be the bearers of true and immutable natures is offered by Ferdinand Alquié:

The "which" seems to refer to "things" and not to "ideas" for, if it were ideas, Descartes could not say that *they perhaps* have no existence outside thought. That would be, on the contrary, quite evident. Ideas cannot exist outside thought.¹¹

This suggestion, similar to Kenny's second reason, fails for the same reason. For Descartes it is not unequivocally and evidently true that ideas cannot exist outside thought.

(e) Defending Kenny's interpretation of the first sentence in Meditation V, Gregory Brown finds an additional reason in the second sentence.¹² The part of this sentence to which he refers is:

7. A. KENNY, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

8. AT VII, 8; CSM II, 7.

9. A. KENNY, *op. cit.*, p. 150 n.

10. AT VII, 103; CSM II, 75.

11. *Œuvres philosophiques de Descartes*, Paris, Garnier, 1967, vol. II, p. 470, n. 2.

12. G. BROWN, "Vera Entia: The Nature of Mathematical Objects in Descartes," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, XVIII (January 1980), p. 23.

when, for example I imagine a triangle, even if perhaps no such figure exists, or ever has existed anywhere outside my thought, there is still a determinate nature, or essence, or form of that figure which is immutable and eternal, and not invented by me or determined by my mind [...].

As Brown reads this passage, “it is clear that it is not the idea, but the triangular figure, which is said to possess the *essence déterminée*.” But this is not clear. “Of that figure” in the phrase “a determinate nature, or essence, or form of that figure” can be understood in two ways. It can be taken to mean “of the triangle that I have imagined” or it can be taken to mean, as Brown suggests, “of the triangle itself.” Now it can be argued that the triangle that has been imagined is an idea of a triangle, and so it is not ruled out here that what has the true and immutable nature is an idea. (This possibility is not apparent in Cottingham’s translation which reads, “there is still a determinate nature, or essence, or form of *the* triangle [...] [my emphasis]).¹³

To support the view that it is things and not ideas that are supposed to possess true and immutable natures, both Brown and Kenny go outside Meditation V and refer to passages in which Descartes says that true and immutable natures are the natures of things and implies that these things can be distinguished from the natures they are supposed to possess.¹⁴ According to Kenny, they are like Meinongian pure objects and, according to Brown, they are *vera entia* enjoying “possible existence.” Part of these interpretations — about the status of things possessing these natures — is certainly questionable. But I believe Kenny and Brown are right in finding in passages referred to the view that true and immutable nature are natures of things and finding a distinction between things and the natures they are supposed to possess.

Kenny tells us that his interpretation can be confirmed by a close reading of the *Second Replies* (AT VII, 162...) and the *Principles* (AT VII, 9-10...) My close reading of the specific passages referred to has not provided me with a confirmation of his interpretation. But, in the reformulations of the *a priori* proof in the *First Replies* as well as in the *Second Replies* (where Descartes does not make use of the term *idea*,¹⁵) the view taken seems to be that true and immutable natures are natures of things. In the *First Replies*, he writes :

My argument was [...] that which we clearly and distinctly understand to belong to the true and immutable nature, or essence, or form of something (*alicujus rei*) can be truly affirmed of that thing (*de ea re*). But once we have made a sufficiently careful investigation of what God is, we clearly and distinctly understand that existence belongs to his true and immutable nature. Hence we can now truly assert of God that he does exist.

Answering an objection to the reformulated argument in the *First Replies*, in the *Second Replies* Descartes stresses the distinction that he made between the nature or essence of a thing and the thing itself.

13. CSM II, 45.

14. A. KENNY, *op. cit.*, p. 151 ; G. BROWN, *art. cit.*, p. 24. For an interesting discussion of the status of things having true and immutable natures, see Tad M. SCHMALTZ, “Platonism and Descartes’s View of Immutable Essences,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 73 (1991), p. 129-170.

15. AT VII, 115-116 ; CSM II, 83. *Second Replies* : AT VII, 149-150 ; CSM II, 106-107.

In order to get the conclusion you (the objector) want, you should have stated the major premise as follows : “That which we clearly understand to belong to the nature of some thing can be truly asserted to belong to its nature” ; and if the premise is put like this, it contains nothing but a useless tautology. But my major premise was this : “That which we clearly and distinctly understand to belong to the nature of some thing can truly be asserted of that thing” [...]. Now the minor premise of my argument was : “yet it belong to the nature of God that he exists.” And from these two premises the evident conclusion to be drawn is the one which I drew ; “Therefore we can with truth affirm that existence belongs to God.” The correct conclusion is not, as you want to argue : “Therefore we can with truth affirm that existence belongs to the nature of God.”

Brown finds a similar distinction in a passage in the “Conversation with Burman” :

Everything in a chimera that can be clearly and distinctly conceived is a true entity. It is not fictitious since it has a true and immutable essence [...]. All demonstrations of mathematics deal with true entities and objects, and the complete and entire object of Mathematics and everything it deals with is a true and real entity. This entity has a true and real nature.¹⁶

Here, as Brown points out, it seems that true and immutable natures are natures of *vera entia* and that these entities are distinguished from the natures they are supposed to have.

It is important to note, however, that the passages Kenny and Brown cite date from after Meditation V and that the view they attribute to Descartes is not to be found in Meditation V. There is, moreover, some evidence that at the time Descartes did not hold that view. His *a priori* proof there, shorn of the comparison with mathematical demonstrations, is :

(1) If I can produce an idea of some thing (*alicujus rei*) from my mind, everything I perceive clearly and distinctly to belong to that thing (*ad illam rem*) really belongs to it. (2) I find in me the idea of God, or a supremely perfect being. (3) I perceive clearly and distinctly that existence pertains to this nature (*ad ejus naturam*). (4) Therefore, it is certain that existence pertains to God.¹⁷

For this argument to be valid, *natura* in (3) must mean the same as *res* in (1) and no distinction is made between thing and nature. Roughly speaking, the view Descartes seems to express here is, not that true and immutable natures are natures of things, but rather that they are things.¹⁸

II

Second question : which ideas, according to Descartes, exhibit true and immutable natures ? In terms of the classification of ideas in Meditation III,¹⁹ it seems to be ideas that Descartes deems innate, and only innate ideas, that exhibit these natures. There is an apparent parallel between Descartes’s discussion in the Fifth Meditation

16. G. BROWN, *art. cit.*, p. 24. In Cottingham’s translation, p. 23.

17. AT VII, 65-66 ; CSM II, 45.

18. Alquié has noted this difference between the statements of the proof (*op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 176 n.).

19. AT VII, 37-38 ; CSM II, 26.

and the earlier classification. In Meditation V, Descartes prefaces the sentences about true and immutable natures in this way :

The truth of these matters (about extension) is so open and so much in harmony with my nature, that on first discovering them it seems that I am not so much learning something new as remembering what I knew before ; or it seems like noticing for the first time things which were long present within me although I had never turned my mental gaze on them before.²⁰

The description of truth in this passage appears to correspond to the description of innate ideas in Meditation III, which “seem to derive simply from my own nature.” Immediately after the two sentences about true and immutable natures, he adds, “It would be beside the point to say that since I have from time to time seen bodies of triangular shape, the idea of the triangle may have come to me from external things by way of the sense organs.”²¹ Here it appears that ideas exhibiting true and immutable natures are contrasted with the adventitious ideas of Meditation III, which seem “to come from things which are located outside me [...]” And, when, in the intervening sentences, he says that these ideas are not “my invention,” he distinguishes them from the factitious ideas of Meditation III, which are “my own invention.”

This correspondence is made explicit in the letter to Mersenne referred to before :

I use the word “idea” to mean everything which can be in one thought, and distinguish three kinds. Some are adventitious, such as the idea we commonly have of the sun, others are constructed or made up, in which class we may put the idea which the astronomers construct of the sun by their reasoning, and others are innate, such as the idea of God, mind, body, triangle and in general all those which represent true, immutable and eternal essences.²²

The connection between ideas exhibiting true and immutable natures and innate ideas is made explicit here. The example of a constructed idea in the letter, *e.g.* the astronomers’ idea of the sun, differs markedly from the examples of factitious ideas in Meditation III, *i.e.* ideas of sirens, hippogryphs and the like. Yet it seems that the constructed idea in the letter, contrasted as it is with innate ideas, is not supposed to have a true and immutable nature and that only innate ideas do.

Indeed this is the view that Descartes must hold when he uses the notion of true and immutable natures to refute what he takes to be a very tempting objection to his *a priori* proof, *i.e.* that his proof is *petitio principii* or in other words that he is defining God into existence. Thus he argues in the letter :

If from a constructed idea I were to infer what I explicitly put into it when I was constructing it, I would obviously be begging the question ; but it is not the same if I draw out from an innate idea something which was implicitly contained in it but which I did not at first notice in it. Thus I can draw out from an idea of a triangle that its three angles equal two right angles, and from the idea of God that he exists, etc. So far from a begging of the

20. AT VII, 63-64 ; CSM II, 44.

21. AT VII, 64 ; CSM II, 45.

22. *Loc. cit.*

question, this method of demonstration is even according to Aristotle the most perfect of all, for in it the true definition of a thing occurs as the middle term.²³

In the First Replies, Descartes offers a similar account of a major difficulty we may have in accepting his proof :

[...] even if we observe clearly enough that existence belongs to the essence of God, we do not draw the conclusion that God exists, because we do not know whether his essence is immutable and true, or merely invented by us.²⁴

Now if, according to Descartes, it is possible for an idea exhibiting a true and immutable nature to be nonetheless constructed, this line of defence against the objection does not succeed. It may seem, moreover, that Descartes does not consistently take the stand that no invented idea has a true and immutable nature. Can he, for instance, maintain that the astronomers' idea of the sun does not contain a true and immutable nature ? Unlike the common idea of the sun, the astronomers' is presumably not confused but (at least in part) clear and distinct, and, if we attribute to Descartes the view that clear and distinct ideas exhibit true and immutable natures, he has on his hands a constructed idea exhibiting a true and immutable nature. In the passage cited from the "Conversation with Burman," Descartes seems to advocate just such a view :

Everything in a chimera that can be clearly and distinctly perceived is a true entity. It is not fictitious, since it has a true and immutable essence.²⁵

Accordingly, it seems that even the idea of a chimera, along with ideas of sirens and hippogryphs, would have true and immutable natures.

To maintain his position, Descartes needs to make a distinction between an idea as a whole and parts or elements of the idea and to hold that, though a part or element of an idea may represent a true and immutable nature, the idea as a whole need not. Accordingly, the clear and distinct elements in the astronomers' idea of the sun can be said to exhibit a true and immutable nature or natures while the idea of the sun (as a whole), which is constructed, does not. Similarly, Descartes can argue that, though elements of the idea of a chimera exhibit true and immutable natures, *i.e.* those elements which are clear and distinct and on which demonstrations can be based, the idea as a whole does not. Thus the principle is saved that no idea containing a true and immutable nature is constructed or invented.

Unfortunately for Descartes, he does not always take this line of defence. In the First Replies, he gives an example of an idea that he takes to be invented and yet he says it contains a true and immutable nature. The damage is done in the following passage :

(Invented) ideas can always be split up by [...] the intellect, not simply by an abstraction but by a clear and distinct intellectual operation, so that any which the intellect cannot split up in this way were clearly not put together by the intellect. When, for example, I think of a winged horse, or an actually existing lion, or a triangle inscribed in a square, I readily

23. *Loc. cit.*

24. AT VII, 116 ; CSM II, 83.

25. *Loc. cit.*

understand that I am also able to think of a horse without wings, or a lion which does not exist, or a triangle apart from a square, and hence that these things do not have true and immutable natures. But if I think of a triangle or a square [...], then whatever I apprehend as being contained in the idea of the triangle [...], I can with truth assert of the triangle. And the same applies to the square with respect to whatever I apprehend as being contained in the idea of the square. For even if I can understand what a triangle is if I abstract the fact that its three angles are equal to two right angles, I cannot deny that this property applies to the triangle by a clear and distinct mental operation — that is, while at the same time understanding what I mean by my denial. Moreover, if I consider a triangle inscribed in a square, with a view not to attributing to the square properties that belong to the triangle or attributing to the triangle properties that belong to the square, but with a view to examining only the properties which arise out of the conjunction of the two, then *the nature of the composite will be just as true and immutable* (my emphasis) as the nature of the triangle alone or the square alone. And hence it will be quite in order to maintain that the square is not less than double the area of the triangle inscribed within it, and to affirm other similar properties that belong to the nature of this composite figure.²⁶

At the beginning of this passage, Descartes tells us that the idea of a triangle inscribed in a square, like the idea of a winged horse and an actually existing lion, can be split up by a clear and distinct operation and thus is constructed. Yet at the end of the passage, he avers that this very idea has a true and immutable nature and implies that the properties of the composite whole, *e.g.* that the area of the square is not less than double that of the triangle inscribed in it, cannot be ascribed to the parts. So the distinction of an idea as a whole and its parts cannot save Descartes from the admission that an idea having a true and immutable nature is none the less constructed.

To some commentators, it has seemed that Descartes contradicts himself in this passage both avowing and denying that the composite triangle-inscribed-in-a-square has a true and immutable nature. Since the error is supposed to occur within the compass of three sentences, others, moved perhaps by a principle of charity, have suggested alternative readings of the troublesome sentence at the beginning of the passage, *i.e.* :

When, for example, I think of a winged horse, or an actually existing lion, or a triangle inscribed in a square, I readily understand that I am also able to think of a horse without wings, or a lion which does not exist, or a triangle apart from a square, and hence that these things do not have true and immutable natures.

For the troublesome aspect of this sentence, Walter Edelberg suggests the following reading :

(Descartes) intends [...] the weaker claim that, if upon reflection you find that you can think of a thing that is F but not G, the evidence that you have considered does not warrant the conclusion that the idea has a true and immutable nature, or is innate.²⁷

A more plausible reading seems to me to be (in Edelberg's phraseology) :

Reflecting on the fact that we can think of a thing which is F but not G, we have reason to suppose that the idea does not contain a true and immutable nature.²⁸

26. AT VII, 117-118 ; CSM II, 83-84.

27. "The Fifth Mediation," *The Philosophical Review* (October 1990), p. 512.

On neither interpretation does Descartes commit himself to the view that the idea of a triangle inscribed in a square does not have a true and immutable nature. Whether Descartes can be exonerated of the charge of vacillation and contradiction in either of the ways suggested seems to me to be doubtful. But, whether or not he contradicts himself in this passage, he maintains unequivocally that the idea of a triangle inscribed in a square is constructed and yet that it has a true and immutable nature, and this admission wrecks his defence against the objection that his idea of God is constructed. For, if the idea of a triangle inscribed in a square is factitious, why not, then, the idea of God ?

III

Third question : what, according to Descartes, is the criterion of an idea having a true and immutable nature : In the second sentence about true and immutable natures in Meditation V, Descartes indicates what that criterion is :

When, for example, I imagine a triangle, even if perhaps no such figure exists, or has ever existed, anywhere outside my thought, there is still a determinate nature, or essence, or form of that figure which is immutable and eternal, and not invented by me or dependent on my mind. This is clear from the fact that various properties can be demonstrated of that triangle [...], and since these properties are ones which I now clearly recognize whether I want to or not, even if I never thought of them at all when I previously imagined the triangle, it follows that they cannot have been invented by me.²⁹

Margaret Wilson calls the criterion that can be elicited from this passage “the criterion of unforeseen and unwilled consequences.”³⁰ She reformulates it as follows :

A true and immutable nature has implications which I did not *foresee* [...] and which I am *not free to separate from it* once I notice them — which are not in any sense *dependent* on my will.

With certain specifications, it seems to me that this is indeed Descartes’s criterion and that Wilson hits the nail on the head. But she goes on (1) to claim that the criterion is too weak to do the job expected of it, that is, of distinguishing ideas which Descartes thinks have true and immutable natures from others that are constructed. And (2) she finds a different criterion in the First Replies — the “criterion of unanalyzability” — that she thinks is needed to do the job.

Both of these claims seem to me to be erroneous. (1) Is the criterion for an idea having a true and immutable nature too weak ? To show that it is, Wilson constructs an ostensible counter-example, that is, of an idea that is evidently constructed and yet she thinks satisfies the criterion :

28. See my “La Réponse de Descartes à Caterus” in *Descartes : Méditer et Répondre*, edited by J.-M. Beyssade and J.-L. Marion, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1994, p. 258. (English translation : “On Descartes’s Reply to Caterus,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, LXVII, 4, p. 420.)

29. *Loc. cit.*

30. M. WILSON, *Descartes*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, p. 172.

Suppose I define the term “Onk” as meaning “the first non-terrestrial life-form to be discovered by man.” It is possible this concept will have implications I did not at first perceive in it, but cannot, on reflection, deny of it? It seems so. For in defining “Onk” I may very well not have reflected on the question of what are the necessary conditions for something’s being a life-form. But having done so, I see that reproduction and ability to assimilate nourishment are necessary conditions; hence that “Onk has reproductive potential” and “Onk assimilates nourishment” are necessary truths — *velim, nolim*, as Descartes might say. But does “Onk” pick out a true and immutable nature? If it does, some (at least) of Descartes’s examples of factitious ideas would too. For just as I can say that Onk is a life-form without having reflected on all the implications of something’s being a life-form, so I can, for example, speak of a hippogriff as part-horse without having reflected on certain implications of the predicate “part-horse.”³¹

Now, in the alleged counter-example, the unforeseen and unwilled consequences — reproduction and ability to assimilate nourishment — are clearly consequences of a part of the idea of “Onk,” defined as “the first non-terrestrial *life-form* to be discovered by man” (my emphasis), and, given the distinction mentioned earlier between an idea as a whole and a part or element of the idea, it does not follow from the criterion that the idea of Onk — the idea as a whole has a true and immutable nature. Wilson also mentions an example given by Caterus,³² *e.g.* of an actually existing lion, and she suggests that this idea would also satisfy the criterion. Presumably she had in mind “implications” of being a lion, such as being a life-form, having reproductive potential, etc. Again, however, these would be consequences of what Descartes would regard as part of the idea — the other part being actually existing — and it would not follow that the idea as a whole has a true and immutable nature.

In Meditation V Descartes does not make the distinction I have imputed to him between an idea as whole and a part of the idea. But then he was not writing a treatise for analytically oriented philosophers, and this point would perhaps have seemed to him to be too obvious. If, however, we were to recast the Meditation V criterion inserting this specification, it can be stated as follows: “The idea of X exhibits a true and immutable nature if, and only if, regarding X, there are unforeseen and necessary consequences and these consequences are not consequences of a part or parts of the idea of X.” With this specification, the criterion is not prey to Wilsonian counter-examples — though the reformulation would hardly satisfy analytically oriented philosophers. What, for instance, is to count as a “consequence” of an idea? And what indeed is a “part” of an idea?

(2) Wilson finds a different criterion in sentences cited earlier from the First Replies:

[...] we must notice a point about ideas which do not contain true and immutable natures but merely ones which are invented and put together by the intellect. Such ideas can always be split up by the same intellect, not simply by an abstraction but by a clear and distinct intellectual operation, so that ideas which the intellect cannot split up in this way were clearly not put together by the intellect. When for example I think of a winged horse, or a lion actually existing, or a triangle inscribed in a square, I easily understand that I can

31. *Ibid.*, p. 171.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

also on the contrary think of a horse without wings, or a lion as not existing, or a triangle apart from a square, and so forth, and that hence these things have no true and immutable natures. But if I think of the triangle or the square [...], then certainly whatever I recognize as being contained in the idea of the triangle, as that its angles are equal to two right angles, etc., I shall with truth affirm of the triangle ; and (I shall affirm) of the square whatsoever I find in the idea of the square ; for even though I can understand a triangle, abstracting from the fact that its three angles are equal to two right, yet I cannot deny that of it by any clear and distinct mental operation [...].³³

Wilson formulates the “criterion of unanalysability” she finds here as follows : “An idea contains a true and immutable nature if, and only if, it cannot be analyzed into parts ‘not merely by abstraction but by a clear and distinct mental operation’.”³⁴

But should we say that, in these sentences, Descartes is proposing a *criterion* for an idea having a true and immutable nature ? If by “criterion” is meant, roughly, a way of settling the question of whether or not something is X, it is clear that this cannot be what he thinks he is doing, for, in what follows the lines Wilson quotes, he raises the question whether the composite triangle-inscribed-in-a-square has a true and immutable nature and concludes, apparently using the criterion of unforeseen and unwilled consequences, that it does. It seems highly implausible to attribute to him the view that a certain question has been settled when he proceeds immediately to reopen the question.

Wilson inadvertently suggests a second reason for denying that, in this passage, Descartes is proposing a criterion for having a true and immutable nature when she argues that the supposed criterion is too strong. It is too strong, she says, because it would remove from the realm of ideas exhibiting true and immutable natures Descartes’s favored example of an idea having such a nature, to wit, the idea of a triangle :

If I can think of a lion without existence, cannot (she asks) I not equally well think of a figure with angles but not a *triangle* ? The notion of an existing lion, and that of a triangle seem to be equally analyzable.³⁵

It does indeed seem clear that, for Descartes, the idea of a triangle can be split into parts by a clear and distinct mental operation. As he says in Rule XII :

Knowledge of a triangle involves knowledge also of the angle, the line, the number three, shape, extension etc. [...] The nature of a triangle is composed of these other natures [...] and they are better known than the triangle.³⁶

Wilson is certainly right in asserting that the supposed criterion of unanalysability would exclude even simple geometric figures. But this fairly obvious and unwelcome consequence seems to me to be a very good reason for denying that Descartes does propose the criterion she attributes to him.

33. *Loc. cit.*

34. M. WILSON, *op. cit.*, p. 173-174.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

36. AT X, 46 ; CSM I, 46.

But, if Descartes is not stating a criterion of an idea having a true and immutable nature in the passage in the First Replies, just what is he doing? The following seems to me to be a more plausible reading of the passage. In this passage, he does indeed propose a criterion but not a criterion of an idea having a true and immutable nature. Rather, he proposes a criterion for an idea being constructed. Contrasting the idea of a triangle inscribed in a square with the idea of a triangle having angles equal to two right angles, he maintains that the former but not the latter can be split up by a clear and distinct operation and he takes this to show that the former is constructed, the latter not. Working on the assumption that a constructed idea cannot contain properties we have not put into it, he infers that the idea of a triangle inscribed in a square lacks a true and immutable nature. But then, reflecting on this idea, he observes that it does have unforeseen and unwilled consequences and he is forced to jettison the assumption on which his previous inference was based, namely that a constructed idea cannot have unforeseen and unwilled consequences.

On this reading of the passage, Descartes's vacillation with regard to whether the idea of a triangle inscribed in a square has a true and immutable nature is due, not to his having dual criteria for an idea having a true and immutable nature, but to ambivalence with regard to the proposition that a constructed idea can have unforeseen and unwilled consequences. At first he takes the stance that a constructed idea, being put together by us, cannot have unforeseen and unwilled consequences. At the end of the passage, he observes that a constructed idea — a mathematical construction — does have unforeseen and unwilled consequences and implies that a constructed idea can have a true and immutable nature. It is perhaps worth noting in conclusion that he thereby undermines one line of defence against the *petitio* objection and that, in what follows, he defends his *a priori* proof in a radically different way. But that is another story.