1-1-1974

Clearness and distinctness in Descartes.

Stephen J. Herman
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_1

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_1/2181

This Open Access Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Doctoral Dissertations 1896 - February 2014 by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.
CLEARNESS AND DISTINCTNESS IN DESCARTES

A Dissertation Presented

By

Stephen J. Herman

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

November 1974

Philosophy
CLEARNESS AND DISTINCTNESS IN DESCARTES

A Dissertation

By

Stephen J. Herman

Approved as to style and content by:

Bruce A. Aune, Chairman of Committee

Garth R. Matthews, Member

Fred Feldman, Member

Robert G. Sleigh, Jr., Head
Department of Philosophy

November, 1974
Clearness and Distinctness in Descartes
(November 1974)

Stephen J. Herman, B.A., William Paterson University
M.A., University of Massachusetts
Directed by: Dr. Bruce A. Aune

ABSTRACT

Descartes' rule of evidence states that whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is true. In *Principia Mathematica*, Descartes offers his best explication of what he means by 'clear' and 'distinct'. He says that he "terms that clear which is present and apparent to an attentive mind" and then "the distinct contains within itself nothing but what is clear." But he does not tell us what he means by the defining expressions 'present', 'apparent', and 'attentive'. Two questions arise:

(1) What does Descartes mean by 'clear' and 'distinct'?
(2) How does Descartes ascertain which of his ideas are clear and distinct?

Before offering my own answers to these questions, I consider four contemporary viewpoints.

Alan Gewirth points out that for Descartes all ideas represent; they have what Gewirth calls a direct and an
interpretive content. In Gewirth's view, an idea is clear and distinct if and only if a certain relation holds between its direct and interpretive contents. To find out whether this relation obtains, one can use what Gewirth calls the method of difference.

Harry Frankfurt argues that Descartes must have intended his rule of evidence to guarantee the formal truth of propositions. Concentrating on the notion of clear and distinct perception that \( p \), Frankfurt offers an account that makes clear and distinct perception consist in a relation between \( p \) and an evidential basis for \( p \).

Anthony Kenny and E. J. Ashworth are critical of Descartes. Both think that Descartes is confused about clarity and distinctness, and both think that, once unraveled, Descartes' account makes his rule of evidence problematic.

Each of the above treatments of clarity and distinctness in Descartes is, I argue, seriously flawed. Because Gewirth makes clarity and distinctness consist in a relation between direct and interpretive contents, he cannot give us a satisfactory account of simple ideas. Frankfurt's account, on the other hand, hinges to a considerable extent on his arguments to show that Descartes would be guilty of "a grotesque apriorism" if he intends his rule of evidence to guarantee the material truth of clearly and distinctly perceived concepts. But Frankfurt's argument depends on a dubious interpretation.
of what Descartes says about materially false ideas. Kenny's and Ashworth's views are also problematic. They rely on a number of arguments to defend the claim that Descartes' account of clarity and distinctness is confused. But none of these arguments turns out to be convincing.

After arguing that each of the above treatments of clarity and distinctness is seriously flawed, I advance the view that there are two aspects of clarity and distinctness — analytical clarity and distinctness and representational clarity and distinctness. Ideas have analyses or contents; they also represent. The analytical contents of an idea are its entailments. A person A will have an analytically clear and distinct idea provided that A believes, for certain concepts his idea entails, that his idea contains those concepts. And A's idea will be representationally clear and distinct provided that his idea represents correctly. He can, in addition, find out whether his ideas are both analytically and representationally clear and distinct and, therefore, clear and distinct per se, by using two separate methods — the method of difference and the method of doubt respectively.

Having offered an account of clarity and distinctness in Descartes' behalf and having shown how Descartes can ascertain whether his ideas are clear and distinct, I offer an interpretation of Descartes' rule of evidence, and I show why Descartes would have thought his Rule to be true.
CONTENTS

CHAPTER

INTRODUCTION ...................................................... 1

I. GEWIRTH'S ACCOUNT OF CLEARNESS AND DISTINCTNESS .. 3

An Exposition of Gewirth's Account of Clearness and Distinctness ........ 3

Gassendi's criticism ............................................. 3

Gewirth's criticism of Descartes ............................... 4

Gewirth's goal .................................................... 6

Complexities in the perceptive act ............................ 7

The direct and interpretive contents of ideas ............... 8

Gewirth's example of sense perception ........................ 9

Gewirth's example of the ideas of thought and extension .... 11

Choosing an interpretive content .............................. 13

Varying the direct content .................................... 14

Gewirth's definitions of 'clarity' and 'distinctness' ........ 14

A problem with (D1) and (D2) .................................. 17

Gewirth's reply to his own criticism of Descartes ............ 18

A problem with Gewirth's account ............................. 18

The minimal requirement ....................................... 19

Increasing clear and distinct perception beyond the minimal requirement. .... 22
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A problem with Gewirth's account of minimal clearness and distinctness</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A revised definition</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Exposition of Gewirth's Account of How We Ascertain Clearness and Distinctness</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The method of difference</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What the method of difference actually accomplishes</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why the method of difference is useful</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The method Gewirth thinks Descartes used for ascertaining minimal clearness and distinctness</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gewirth's account of the principal ideas</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A psychological component in Descartes' criterion for ascertaining minimal clearness and distinctness</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticism</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gewirth's goals</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gewirth's defense of his distinction between direct and interpretive contents</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence to show that we do not need the distinction between direct and interpretive contents in order to use the method of difference effectively</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A rival account</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why Gewirth thinks the wax example supports his account</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How the wax example is explained on the (RI)</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A reply to the (RI) account of the wax example</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why the above reply raises new problems for Gewirth's account</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The failure of Gewirth's defense of (J1)</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A way to decide between the (RI) and Gewirth's account</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That Gewirth's account fails for simple ideas</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why Gewirth asserts (1) - (4)</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That the (RI) also fails to account for simple ideas</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why Gewirth's account fails for simple ideas</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

II. KENNY'S DISCUSSION OF DESCARTES' ACCOUNT OF CLEARNESS AND DISTINCTNESS | 62 |

Exposition of Kenny's Account of Clearness and Distinctness | 62 |

The three elements in Descartes' account | 64 |

Kenny's criticism of Descartes' account | 64 |

Inconsistencies Kenny finds in Descartes' answers to (Q1) | 64 |
Inconsistencies Kenny finds in Descartes' answers to (Q2) .......................... 66

Criticism of Kenny's Account of Clearness and Distinctness .......................... 68
Regarding (Q1) ........................................................................ 68
Regarding (Q2) ........................................................................ 71
Regarding Descartes' account of clearness and distinctness .......................... 72
The distinction between the pain and the perception of the pain .................. 72
The distinction between the perception of the pain and the judgement on the pain .......................... 75
Assessment of Kenny's definitions of 'clearness' and 'distinctness' ............ 77
Problems with generalizing Kenny's account of 'clarity' .................................. 78
Generalizing Kenny's account of distinctness ............................................. 80

Kenny's Discussion of Descartes' Method for Ascertaining Which of Our Ideas Are Clear and Distinct .......................... 80
Kenny's criticism of (i) ..................................................................... 81
Kenny's criticism of (ii) ..................................................................... 82
Kenny's criticism of (iii) ..................................................................... 85
Kenny's defense of his interpretation ......................................................... 86
### CHAPTER III.

**FRANKFURT'S DISCUSSION OF DESCARTES' ACCOUNT OF CLEARNESS AND DISTINCTNESS**  
- The Reduction of 'Clear and Distinct Conception' to 'Clear and Distinct Perception That'  
- Frankfurt's Analysis of 'Clear and Distinct Perception That'  
- Analysis of (D2) - (D4)  
- Degrees of Clear and Distinct Perception That  
- The Minimal Requirement for Clear and Distinct Perception  
- Criticism of Frankfurt's Account  
  - Criticism 1  
  - Criticism 2  
  - Criticism 3  

### CHAPTER IV.

**E. J. ASHWORTH'S ACCOUNT OF CLEARNESS AND DISTINCTNESS IN DESCARTES**  
- Two Meanings of 'Clarity'  
- Does Descartes' Analogy Support Ashworth's Interpretation  
- Why Ashworth Interprets Descartes' Analogy Uncharitably  
- More Arguments in Defense of Ashworth's Interpretation  
- The jaundiced man  
- Clear and distinct knowledge of pain and color
CHAPTER

Why Ashworth might have thought Principle LXVIII supports his interpretation .......................... 116
Severe pains .......................................................... 117
Ashworth's Account of 'Distinctness' .................................. 119
Ashworth's Jaundiced Man Criticism of Descartes' Account of Distinctness ................................. 120
Ashworth's Criticism of Descartes' Account of Completeness ...................................................... 121
Another Possible Equivocation on Descartes' Use of 'Distinctness' .............................................. 122
Ashworth's defense of (2) ................................................ 123
On other defenses of (2) .................................................. 125
Ashworth's Criticism of Descartes' Criteria for Good Grounds for Judgement ............................... 126
My Criticism of Ashworth's Account of Descartes' Usual Usage of 'Distinctness' ......................... 128
Ashworth's Criticism of Descartes' Rule .................................. 131
Clearness and Distinctness and Indubitability .................................. 133
An argument in defense of (1) ............................................ 135
Ashworth's criticism of Descartes' defense of his rule ............................................................. 135
Logical indubitability .................................................... 136
Psychological indubitability ............................................. 137
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethical indubitability</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashworth's argument against ethical indubitability</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment of Ashworth's critique</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

V. STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES

| Descartes' Definitions of 'Clearness' and 'Distinctness' | 146 |
| Descartes' Reply to Gassendi | 148 |
| Gewirth's analysis of Descartes' reply | 149 |
| How Gewirth's interpretation narrows the scope of our inquiry | 150 |
| Gewirth's interpretation of Gassendi's objection | 150 |
| A problem with Gewirth's interpretation of Descartes' reply | 152 |
| Another interpretation of Descartes' reply | 152 |
| The first criticism and Descartes' reply | 153 |
| The second criticism and Descartes' reply | 154 |
| The first reading of (Q3) | 155 |
| The second reading of (Q3) | 155 |
| The place where Descartes discarded his prejudices | 157 |
| The method found at the place where Descartes discarded his prejudices | 159 |
| The method of doubt and the second reading of (Q3) | 160 |
Assessment of the straightforward strategy for answering (Q2) .................................. 160

The Strategy We Will Adopt ................................................................. 161

VI. ANALYTICALLY CLEAR AND DISTINCT IDEAS .................................. 163

The Composite Ideas ................................................................. 163

On (Q2) ................................................................. 156

On (Q1) ................................................................. 166

Classifying the composite ideas .......................................................... 169

A second classification of ideas .......................................................... 170

Modal syntheses ................................................................. 172

Real syntheses ................................................................. 173

Syntheses of reason ................................................................. 175

Fictional versus Nonfictional Ideas .................................................. 176

The sources of fictional and nonfictional ideas .................................. 176

Descartes' method for ascertaining which ideas are fictional and which are ideas of true and immutable natures ................................................................. 177

Two senses of 'fictional idea' .......................................................... 179

Descartes' method for ascertaining the two types of fictional ideas .................................................. 186

Clarity and distinctness and the fictional and nonfictional ideas ........ 187

Analytical clearness and distinctness .................................................. 189
Analytical Clearness and Distinctness in Composite Ideas ........................................ 190
Descartes' method of analysis when applied to real composites ....................................... 190
The best proof that a real composite is fictional .......................................................... 192
The real composite idea of an embodied thinker ............................................................ 193
Perceiving real composite ideas with analytical clarity and distinctness .............................. 194
Descartes' method of analysis when applied to modal composites ..................................... 195
Descartes' method of analysis when applied to substance-mode composites ......................... 195
Descartes' method when applied to mode-mode composites .............................................. 196
Descartes' method when applied to composite ideas of reason .......................................... 197
Descartes' method when applied to substance-attribute composites ................................... 197
Descartes' method when applied to attribute-attribute composites .................................... 198
Descartes' method when applied to mode-attribute composites ....................................... 199
Nonfictional composite ideas ......................................................................................... 199
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nonfictional composite ideas</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collapsing the distinction between fictional and fictional ideas</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions Relating to Analytical Clearness and Distinctness</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytically clear ideas and analytically distinct ideas</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceiving with analytical clarity and distinctness</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimal Analytical Clearness and Distinctness</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate knowledge</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The minimal requirement for clarity</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimal analytical distinctness</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extending analytical clarity and distinctness beyond the minimal requirement</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions pertaining to analytical clearness and distinctness</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. REPRESENTATIONAL CLARITY AND DISTINCTNESS</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descartes' Classification of the Simple Ideas</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of Material for Error in the Simple Ideas</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A type of material for error that simple ideas cannot have</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One type of material for error in simple ideas</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material falsity in simple ideas</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material truth</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material truth and falsity as functions of representation</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material truth and falsity and Gewirth's account</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A clarification of our strategy</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why the method of doubt cannot be used to ascertain material falsity</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ascertaining those ideas regarding which we should withhold judgement</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An apparent problem with using the method of doubt to ascertain material truth</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Method of Doubt When Applied to Simple Ideas</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The wax example and material falsity in mixed and material simple ideas</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The method of doubt when applied to mixed simple ideas</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The method of doubt when applied to material simple ideas</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The method of doubt when applied to intellectual simples</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The method of doubt when applied to common simples</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### CHAPTER

Correcting the material falsity in ideas ........ 238
Material truth and falsity in composite ideas .... 238
Relationships between analytically clear and
distinct ideas and material truth ............ 239

#### Definitions Relating to Representational

- **Clearness and Distinctness** ............ 239
- Perceiving with representational clarity and
distinctness ................................. 241
- The minimal requirement for perceiving with
representational clarity and distinctness .... 242
- Gassendi's criticism and representational
clarity and distinctness ...................... 243

#### VIII. CLARITY AND DISTINCTNESS AND DESCARTES' RULE

- Definitions Relating to Clarity and Distinctness ........................ 246
- The minimum requirement .................... 247
- Extending clarity and distinctness beyond
the minimal requirement .................... 247
- **Descartes' Rule** .......................... 248
- Frankfurt's interpretation of Descartes' rule .... 250
- 'Two types of judgement' .................... 251
- **Descartes' Rule** .......................... 255

#### IX. CONCLUSION

- Gewirth .................................... 258
- Kenny ....................................... 259
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Premises in Kenny's argument to show that the perception of the pain</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is not distinct from the pain</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Premises in Kenny's argument to show that the perception of the pain</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is not distinct from the judgement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenny's account of clarity and distinctness</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenny's criticism of Descartes' Rule</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frankfurt</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why Frankfurt's account is itself susceptible to Kenny's criticism</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A reply to Kenny's criticism</td>
<td>266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General assessment of Frankfurt's account</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashworth</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashworth's criticism of Descartes' account of clarity and distinctness</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashworth's criticism of Descartes' Rule</td>
<td>272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gassendi</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remaining Challenges</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Descartes' notions of clarity and distinctness play a crucial role in his philosophy. His rule of evidence stated that whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is true. To make use of Descartes' Rule, we need to be able to ascertain whether our perceptions are clear and distinct. But we cannot successively choose perceptions that are clear and distinct unless we know what it is we are looking for. We need to know what Descartes means by 'clarity' and 'distinctness'. And once we know what he means, we can try to find out how to ascertain whether his perceptions are clear and distinct.

Descartes' definition of 'clarity' and 'distinctness' appears in Principia. But what he says here is very vague, and he makes little effort to elucidate his terms. Trying to explicate his views, Descartes leaves the reader to render for himself. In subsequent passages, I put this interpretation in my own words to elucidate what Descartes means by 'clarity' and 'distinctness'.

I will also be concerned with how Descartes ascertains whether he is perceiving an object and what we can infer from the reply to (one of the) our doubts on locutions. Descartes used locutions provided in his Meditations as a means to counter any doubts and inconsistencies; he does not use them. Nevertheless, in his subsequent works, he generally uses the locutions we have seen and can be interpreted. Only rarely,
the reader is left to his own devices.

The following dissertation consists of nine chapters. In the first four chapters I discuss the views of contemporary commentators who have considered the same questions that will occupy me. Their views help to define the scope and limit of the subject matter under consideration. In the fifth chapter, I develop a strategy for answering the questions I have raised, and in the sixth, seventh, and eighth chapters, I offer my account of clarity and distinctness and of how they are ascertained. In the ninth chapter I indicate what is required to fill in some gaps that remain.
CHAPTER 1

Gewirth's Account of Clearness and Distinctness

The following chapter in Alan Gewirth's well documented article "Clearness and Distinctness in Descartes" is divided into three parts -- an exposition of Gewirth's definitions of 'clearness' and 'distinctness', an exposition of his interpretation of how we ascertain whether an idea is clear and distinct, and a criticism of his views. In the first two parts I merely try to state Gewirth's interpretation clearly, I confine my critical remarks to the third part where I try to show that his interpretation is fundamentally confused. In making my reply, however, I do not wish to give the impression that Gewirth's article should be lightly dismissed. On the contrary, I believe Gewirth has made a significant contribution toward enhancing our understanding of what Descartes means when he discusses clear and distinct ideas and clear and distinct perception.

I. An Exposition of Gewirth's Account of Clearness and Distinctness

Gassendi's criticism. Gewirth opens his article by reminding us of a criticism Gassendi raises in his fifth...

1 Alan Gewirth, "Clearness and Distinctness in Descartes."

Objections. Gassendi accused Descartes of advancing a merely psychological criterion for acquiring knowledge (Gewirth, pp. 250-251). Gassendi observed that a person can be firmly convinced he is clearly and distinctly perceiving when in fact he is not. What Descartes needed and what Gassendi claimed he failed to provide is a method for distinguishing perception that is really clear and distinct from perception that is only apparently so.

Descartes responded that he had provided the required method and that in addition he had enumerated all the principal ideas and had distinguished the clear from the obscure and confused ones. He directed Gassendi to the place in the Meditations where all prejudices had been discarded (Gewirth, p. 251). Claiming that Gassendi's objection had been anticipated and amply treated, he desisted from further reply.

Gewirth's criticism of Descartes. Playing the devil's advocate, Gewirth points out that Descartes' definitions of 'clearness' and 'distinctness' are vague and open to various interpretations. Interpreted straightforwardly, these definitions are so weak that they make every idea clear and distinct (Gewirth, pp. 254-257).

Descartes tells us that an idea $x$ is clear if and only if the following three conditions are satisfied:

(i) $x$ is present to the mind,

(ii) $x$ is open to the mind, and

(iii) the mind is attending to $x$ (Gewirth, p. 255).
But according to Gewirth, Descartes also holds the following principles:

(P1) An idea is "all that which is in our mind when we conceive a thing in whatever manner we conceive it" (Gewirth, p. 256). 2

(P2) An idea is "all that which is immediately perceived by the mind" (Gewirth, p. 255). 3

(P1) seems to entail that every idea satisfies (i), and (P2) that every idea satisfies (iii). 4 (ii) fares no better, according to Gewirth. Continuing in his ostensibly critical role, he suggests that we adopt as a straightforward interpretation of (ii) the following:

(ii'): the mind is able to recognize x.

But (ii') seems to follow analytically from (ii). 5 Thus, every idea satisfies all three conditions and every idea is clear.

(Gewirth, p. 256).

But is every idea likewise distinct? Descartes says we perceive distinctly when and only when we perceive nothing but

2 Cited from Œuvres de Descartes, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: Leopold Cerf, 1897-1913), I, 45. Further references to the Adam and Tannery edition will be designated by the abbreviation "AT", followed by the volume and page number.


4 These entailments hold only if we accept the following premises: that what is "in" the mind is "present to" the mind and that the mind perceives an object only if the mind is attending to that object.

5 When we conceive a thing in a certain manner, we recognize
what is clear. Patently the mind perceives nothing but what it in fact perceives, and both (P1) and (P2) seem to insure that what the mind perceives when it perceives is nothing but an idea. But as every idea is clear, it follows that the mind perceives only what is clear and, therefore, only what is distinct (Gewirth, p. 237).

Gewirth's goal. Gewirth has now discussed two criticisms against Descartes. The first is the criticism he attributes to Gassendi; the second is the criticism he develops in his role as devil's advocate. Gassendi's criticism is directed against Descartes' criteria for ascertaining clearness and distinctness. On Gewirth's interpretation, Gassendi is accusing Descartes of providing a merely psychological criterion for distinguishing clear and distinct ideas from the obscure and confused ones. Gewirth's criticism is more fundamental. It questions whether the distinction Descartes draws between clear and distinct ideas, on one hand, and obscure and confused ideas, on the other, is a genuine one. Playing the devil's advocate, Gewirth argues that it follows from a straightforward reading of Descartes' definitions of "clearness" and "distinctness" that all ideas are clear and distinct.

Gewirth's aim is to vindicate Descartes. To do so, he must perform two tasks: he must show that the criticism he attributes to Gassendi can be met and that the criticism he it as a such and such. If I conceive of an object as a chair, I recognize that object as a chair.
himself suggests is actually unjustified.

Complexities in the perceptive act. Gewirth will argue that both Gassendi's and his own criticisms are unjustified for fundamentally the same reason. They both fail to take account of complexities in the idea and the perceptive act. According to Gewirth, clearness and distinctness "are neither intrinsic to the idea nor explicable in terms of a simple relation between idea and perceptive act" (Gewirth, p. 258). The same idea can be clear or obscure and distinct or confused depending on how it is perceived. The perceiving situation is a "viewing as" situation. What is distinctive about the "viewing as" situation is that the object of perception is complex; it has both direct and interpretative contents (Gewirth, p. 258).

Gewirth offers two illustrations of his point. According to Descartes, sense perceptions are clear and distinct when they are viewed as sensations or thoughts or as signifying what is helpful or harmful to the body, but the same sense perceptions are confused when they are viewed as representing external things existing outside the mind (Gewirth, p. 258). Likewise, our ideas of thought and extension are clear and distinct or obscure and confused depending on whether we view thought and extension as nodes or as substances (Gewirth, pp. 258-259).

Gewirth's interpretation of Descartes is an attempt to make sense of these examples. Although Descartes himself makes no explicit reference to the direct and the interpretive
contents of ideas, Gewirth maintains that we can make sense of Descartes' examples only if we attribute to him the view that clearness and distinctness consist in a relation between direct and interpretive contents (Gewirth, pp. 258, 264, 266, and 271). But what are the direct and interpretive contents of our ideas?

The direct and interpretive contents of ideas. Gewirth does not give us a clear account of the direct and interpretive contents of ideas, but I think we can construct an explication of his view. Those acts of perception that can be characterized as clear and distinct or obscure and confused are complex. They occur when one reflects on some content of his consciousness -- a sensation, a mental process, a concept, a thought. The act of reflection involves an act of interpretation. The interpreting relation is dyadic, holding between an interpretation and the thing interpreted. The interpretation given is the interpretive content; what is interpreted is the direct content.

Like the direct content, the interpretive content is a content of consciousness. When one interprets some content of his consciousness, he does so by formulating a proposition that predicated something of that content. The formulated proposition is comprised of a subject and a predicate concept. The interpretive content is the predicate concept and is, like the direct content, itself a content of consciousness.

Within the perceptive act we need to keep five elements
distinguished: the act of interpretation, the proposition produced as a result of this act, p's subject, p's subject concept, and p's predicate concept. All five elements are contents of consciousness. p's subject concept represents the direct content but is not the direct content it represents. The direct content is p's subject; the interpretive content p's predicate concept.

Keeping these distinctions in mind, we may now look at the examples Gewirth gives to illustrate his distinction between the direct and interpretive contents. He gives us two examples: sense perceptions and the ideas of thought and extension.

Gewirth's example of sense perception. When I am in pain and reflect on my pain, the pain I am feeling becomes direct content. The interpretive content is the interpretation I put on the direct content. Interpretations can vary depending on what the direct content is viewed as. If the direct content is viewed as a sensation, my idea of my pain is clear and distinct, but if I view the felt pain as in my foot or like something scratching in my foot, then my idea is confused.

But what is the idea that Gewirth thinks is clear and distinct or obscure and confused? We need to distinguish three senses of 'idea'. I will refer to an idea in the first sense as an idea₁, an idea in the second sense as an idea₂, and an idea in the third sense as an idea₃. An idea₁ is any aspect of consciousness. A pain I feel is such an idea₁. Idea₂ is
ideas as we ordinarily understand them. They are concepts properly so called. When I reflect on my pain and judge that my pain is a sensation, the subject concept of my judgement is an idea$_2$. It represents my pain, an idea$_1$, but it is not the pain it represents. The third sense of 'idea' is the one that takes account of Gewirth's view that ideas are complexes containing direct and interpretive contents. When I am in pain and judge that my pain is a sensation, I have before my mind a complex content of consciousness -- the pain I am feeling and the judgement I form about my pain. As a content of consciousness, this complex is itself an idea$_1$, and it contains ideas$_2$ -- the subject and predicate concepts of the judgement formed. But it is also an idea$_3$, for it is a special type of idea$_1$: it contains direct and interpretive contents.

In a primary sense, it is ideas$_3$ that are clear and distinct or obscure and confused. But in a derivative sense, we can also say that ideas$_1$ and ideas$_2$ are characterized by clearness and distinctness or obscurity and confusion. One's idea$_2$ -- his concept -- of his pain is clear and distinct just in case his idea$_3$ of his idea$_2$ of his pain is clear and distinct. One's idea$_1$ of his pain -- his felt pain -- is clear and distinct provided that his pain is the direct content of a clear and distinct idea$_3$ of his pain. Ordinarily, Descartes does not say he has a clear and distinct pain. Instead, he says he perceives his pain clearly and distinctly.

One might raise the following objection to the account
I am suggesting on Gewirth's behalf. Sometimes we make judgments about things that are not or can never be present contents of consciousness. I could make a judgment about a pain I remember I once had. The subject of the proposition I form would be that pain, but since the pain is not one I now feel, it is not a content of consciousness and cannot be the direct content of my idea. We get around this difficulty if we formulate our judgments carefully. What is before my mind is a memory of a pain, and my idea is clear and distinct if I judge that my remembrance represents a sensation. In this case the direct content of my idea is not my pain but my recollection of my pain, and the interpretive content is not Sensation but Representation Of A Sensation.

Gewirth's example of the ideas of thought and extension. Gewirth's example of the ideas of thought and extension creates further difficulties for his distinction between the direct and interpretive contents of ideas. Referring to a passage in Descartes, he says: "The ideas of the modes thought and extension ... 'can be clearly and distinctly understood if they be viewed not as substances, or things separated from other things, but only as modes of things ...'" (Gewirth, pp. 258-259). This passage blurs an important distinction. The pronoun "they" does not have a clear reference. It could refer to the ideas of thought and extension, or it could refer to thought and extension themselves. We have two possible interpretations:
(Interpretation I) We clearly and distinctly understand our ideas of thought and extension only if we view these ideas as modes of substance.

(Interpretation II) We clearly and distinctly understand our ideas of thought and extension only if we view thought and extension as modes of substance.

Gewirth does not help us to decide between Interpretations I and II, and I do not think we need to decide between them. They are compatible with each other and can be read in a way that makes them consistent with the account I am developing of Gewirth's views. Drawing on the distinction I made above, we can formulate two legitimate accounts in which the idea of extension can be said to be clearly and distinctly understood. On the first account one recognizes that what he is considering is his idea of extension qua idea, and he interprets his idea as a mode of spiritual substance. On the second account one recognizes that what he is considering is his idea of extension qua representation of extension. Being cautious, he does not interpret extension as a mode of material substance. Caution is required because what is interpreted for Gewirth is a direct content. And as I understand his view,

---

6 See pp. 9-10 above.

7 See pp. 8-9 above
the direct content is always a content of consciousness. The idea of extension is such a content, but extension itself is not: it is a mode of material substance.

Choosing an interpretative content. We can now return to the main point of Gewirth's statement regarding the ideas of thought and extension. Gewirth said, "The ideas of the modes of thought and extension . . . 'can be clearly and distinctly understood if they be viewed not as substances, or things separated from other things, but only as modes of things . . . .'" If the vague pronoun "they" refers to the ideas of thought and extension qua ideas, then Gewirth's point is that we correctly interpret these ideas if we view them as modes of spiritual substance, and we misinterpret them if we view them not as modes but as substances. If, on the other hand, 'they' refers to thought and extension, we can take Gewirth to mean that we correctly interpret our ideas of thought and extension when we view these ideas as representing modes, and we misinterpret these contents when we view them as representing substances. Whether the direct content referred to by the pronoun "they" is the idea of extension qua idea, or the idea of extension qua idea, interpretations put on the direct content can vary. If I adopt one interpretive content, my idea is clear and distinct; if I adopt another, it is obscure and confused.

---

3 Here we have an instance where it is an idea, that is said to be clear and distinct. But the clearness and distinctness of this idea depends on the clarity and distinctness of ideas, having as their direct contents ideas of thought and extension.
Varying the direct content. Besides being able to give different interpretations to a direct content, Gewirth thinks we can provide different direct contents for the same interpretation. Discussing Descartes' example of the idolater who undergoes conversion, Gewirth says that the direct content of the idolater's idea of God changes while what the direct content is viewed as, namely God, remains the same. It seems to me that Gewirth has something like the following in mind. A person A has an idea of a bearded old man who lives in the sky. A judges that his idea represents God. Then A undergoes spiritual enlightenment. Now he judges that his idea of an infinite spiritual substance represents God. The predicate concept -- the interpretive content -- of A's new belief is the same as the predicate concept of his old belief. The subjects of his beliefs -- the direct contents -- have changed, however. The clarity and distinctness of the idolater's idea depends on the direct content to which the idolater applies his interpretive content.

Gewirth's definitions of 'clarity' and 'distinctness'. Whether we are interpreting a direct content or supplying a new direct content for an interpretation we already have, the clarity and distinctness of our idea depends on whether some special relation between the direct and interpretive content holds. Gewirth tells us that this special relation is the relation of identity (Gewirth, p. 258). If the direct and interpretive content of an idea are identical, then the idea
is clear and distinct. But Gewirth's view cannot be right. The interpretive content is always a predicate concept, an idea in the second sense. Concepts are contents of consciousness, but not all contents of consciousness are concepts. Yet any content of consciousness can be a direct content. As an earlier example showed, a pain can be a direct content of an idea, but a pain is not a concept and can never be identical to the interpretive content, the predicate concept, that interprets it.

For Gewirth, an object of consciousness becomes a direct content when it is interpreted. It is interpreted when one formulates a proposition that predicates something of it. Taken together, the interpreted content of consciousness and the formulated proposition constitutes an idea of that content of consciousness. The interpretive content of this idea is p's predicate concept; the direct content p's subject. Since p's subject is not always a concept, Gewirth will have problems if he tries to establish an identity between p's subject and p's predicate concept.

Perhaps Gewirth is speaking loosely, however. He could have meant to establish an identity between the contents of p's predicate concept and the contents of p's subject concept, a concept representing the direct content. Gewirth may have failed to state clearly what he intended to say because his language obscures an important distinction. It is natural to suppose that the entities referred to by the terms 'direct
content' and 'interpretive content' belong to the same ontological order. But if I am interpreting Gewirth correctly, the direct and interpretive contents can belong to different ontological categories. The interpretive content is always a concept, an idea; the direct content is always a content of consciousness which may or may not be a concept. The proper counterpart to the interpretive content of an idea is not the direct content. It is, rather, the subject concept of the propositional component of the idea. This subject concept represents the direct content but is not the direct content it represents.

To help us to avoid equating the interpretive content of an idea with the direct content, I adopt the following convention: I will refer to the direct content of an idea by the lower case letters "direct content" and to the subject and predicate concepts of the propositional component of an idea by the capitalized terms 'Direct Content' and 'Interpretive Content' respectively. Using this convention, we arrive at the following clarification of Gewirth's definitions of 'clarity' and 'distinctness':

(D1) An idea $X$ is clear = $\text{df} \ X's$ Secondary Content contains everything contained in $X's$ Basic Content

(D2) An idea $X$ is distinct = $\text{df} \ X's$ Secondary Content contains only what is contained in $X's$ Basic Content

(D1) and (D2) introduce Gewirth's distinction between Basic
and Secondary Contents. In the interpretation I am giving of Gewirth's account, an idea is clear and distinct if and only if the contents of the Direct and Interpretive Contents are identical. This identity can be brought about by modifying the content of either the Direct or the Interpretive Content. The content modified is the Secondary Content; the content remaining constant is the Basic Content.

In the case of the idolater who undergoes conversion, the Interpretive Content was basic. What changed was the content contained in the Direct Content. Originally the idolater had an idea of a bearded old man who lives in the sky as the direct content of his idea of God. At this stage the Direct and the Interpretive Contents of the idolater's idea were very different, and the idolater's idea very obscure and confused. But when the idolater changed the Direct Content of his idea to the idea of an infinite spiritual substance, he narrowed the gap between the contents of the Direct and Interpretive Contents, and his idea became less obscure and confused.

A problem with (D1) and (D2). In Principle XLVI, Descartes tells us that whatever is distinct must also be clear. (D1) and (D2) violate this principle. The Secondary Content of my idea may contain only what is contained in the Basic Content, but not contain everything contained in the Basic Content.

I capitalize 'Basic Content' and 'Secondary Content' to indicate that the Basic and Secondary Contents are concepts, the subject and predicate concepts of the propositional component of an idea.

MR I, 237.
I see no way to get around this difficulty. To retain his account of clearness and distinctness, Gewirth will simply have to discount Descartes' remarks in Principle XLVI.

**Gewirth's reply to his own criticism of Descartes.** If correct, Gewirth's interpretation of clarity and distinctness effectively undermines his ostensible criticism of Descartes. This criticism was based on Gewirth's arguments to show that every idea is clearly perceived. Gewirth grants that every idea would be clear and distinct if conditions (i) - (iii) were jointly sufficient, but they are not. On Gewirth's interpretation a fourth condition must be added:

(iv) the contents of x's Basic and Secondary Contents are identical.

These contents need not be identical, however. Interpretations of the direct content can vary, or the direct content assigned an interpretation can be modified. Depending on the direct content selected for interpretation and the interpretation selected from available alternatives, ideas would or will not satisfy (iv). In his role as devil's advocate, Gewirth has argued that, on Descartes' definitions of 'clearness' and 'distinctness', every idea is clear and distinct. By adding (iv), however, Gewirth shows that the criticism he has raised is one Descartes can avoid (Gewirth, pp. 253-260).

**A problem with Gewirth's account.** Gewirth's reply to the criticism he gave in his role as devil's advocate hinges on the account he gives of clearness and distinctness. But as his
discussion of Descartes' example of pain reveals, (D1) and (D2) are problematic. Descartes holds that his idea of his pain is clear and distinct if he judges his pain to be a sensation. On the analysis I have given in Gewirth's behalf, Descartes' idea is clear and distinct only if the contents of the subject and predicate concepts of his judgement are identical. But it is plain that the contents of the concepts Pain and Sensation are not identical. Pain is a species of sensation, and it has features that do not belong to sensations generally. Presumably, an adequate idea representing pain would contain concepts representing those features that distinguish pain from other forms of sensation. So Pain and Sensation do not have identical contents.

Gewirth could reply that Descartes' example of pain is not a counterinstance to (D1) and (D2). (D1) and (D2) give a general account of clearness and distinctness. But when Descartes says his idea of pain is clear and distinct, he does not mean that his idea is perfectly clear and distinct. Instead, he means his idea is one that satisfies the minimal requirement for clearness and distinctness. But what is this minimal requirement?

The minimal requirement. (D1) and (D2) give us an account of clearness and distinctness as such. But Descartes holds to a distinction between complete and adequate knowledge. Ideas can have infinite analyses which God can carry out but which man as a result of his finitude cannot. Since one knows a thing adequately only if he knows all its properties, God
alone can have adequate knowledge (Gewirth, pp. 264-265).

Having such knowledge, God can, for every idea He has, ascertain whether that idea is clear and distinct. To find out, He only has to compare His analyses of the Basic and Secondary Contents.

Lacking the ability to perform such infinite analyses, human beings must ascertain their ideas to be clear and distinct in other ways. If I judge that my pain is my pain, then my idea of my pain is clear and distinct. To recognize it to be so, I do not have to perform an analysis, either infinite or finite. I recognize the Basic and Secondary Contents of my idea to be identical. Even though I do not know what these contents contain, I know that identical concepts have identical contents so that the Secondary Content of my idea contains all and only what is contained in the Basic Content. Without performing an analysis, I am able to recognize my idea of pain to be clear and distinct.

Although I can always play it safe when I interpret my ideas, the ideas that result from such safe interpretations are uninteresting. If I judge that my idea of God is my idea of God, I can be sure that my idea of God is clear and distinct, but such clear and distinct perception would scarcely satisfy Descartes. He would want to know whether his idea of God as an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and perfect being is clear and distinct. Since mere inspection does not show the Basic and Secondary Contents of this idea of God to be identical, Descartes will have to analyze these Contents to
see whether the Secondary Content includes all and only what is contained in the Basic Content. But in this case we can suppose that an infinite analysis will be required. And if such an analysis is needed, Descartes can never ascertain whether his idea of God is clear and distinct.

According to Gewirth, however, Descartes believes we can settle for something less than perfect clarity and distinctness. In science we encounter knowledge that meets what Gewirth calls the minimum requirement. Gewirth says:

In the context of science, where the concern is with the essences of things, the connection between the two contents must be necessary. The minimum requirement for an idea to be clear, then, is that whichever content be taken as basic, the other include what in the teachings is called the 'formal nature' (ratio formalis) of its object, and what in the Principles is called the object’s 'leading property, which constitutes its nature and essence' (Gewirth, p. 261).

Continuing, he says:

Similarly, the minimum requirement for an idea to be distinct is that nothing contradictory to the essence of its object be included in it; it is in this sense that Descartes defines a distinct idea as one which 'contains nothing other than what is clear' (Gewirth, p. 261).

Although these two passages are somewhat vague, I think the following is a fair interpretation of Gewirth's account of minimal clearness and distinctness: An idea of x will be scientifically or minimally clear and distinct if and only if the Secondary Content contains nothing contradictory to the essence of x, and, for every essential feature of x, the Secondary Content contains a concept representing that feature.¹¹

¹¹This interpretation is supported by the examples Gewirth
Increasing clear and distinct perception beyond the minimal requirement. Ideas that are minimally or scientifically clear and distinct can acquire greater clarity and distinctness. The clarity and distinctness of ideas can be increased because ideas possess explicit and implicit contents. When the ideas involved are not fictitious, they contain "a system of implications" of which the mind is initially unaware (Gewirth, pp. 265-266). But the mind can progressively uncover this system of implications, and, by so doing, increase the clearness and distinctness of its ideas.

Gewirth claims such increase would not be possible if ideas did not have both direct and interpretive contents (Gewirth, p. 266). He does not defend his claim, however. Instead he attempts to explain how the direct and the interpretive contents function in the process of increasing the clearness and distinctness of our ideas. He says:

The 'idea' which remains fixed and unchanged throughout the process in which properties previously unknown are discovered in 'it' is not merely the initial direct content, since this undergoes obvious increase, it is rather the interpretive content which, equated at the outset gives. See p. 251. I think Gewirth's definition could be put more succinctly, however: An idea of x is minimally clear and distinct provided that the following two conditions hold:

(i) for every essential feature of x, the Secondary Content contains a concept representing that feature, and

(ii) no concept contained in the Secondary Content represents a feature incompatible with an essential feature of x.

Notice that the definition of minimal clearness and distinctness also violates what Descartes says in Principle XLVI. See pp. 17-18 above.
with the direct content, is found to be necessarily connected with the 'new' properties, since these are found to be necessarily connected with the initial content, so that the mind interprets each succeeding property to be representative of the same object (Gewirth, p. 266).

This passage is problematic for two reasons: Gewirth seems to be falling victim to the confusion of thinking it is the Interpretive Content and the direct content that are identical at the outset, and he seems to be making the following conflicting claims:

(C1) The initial direct content remains fixed and unchanged throughout the process of amplification.

(C2) The initial direct content does not remain fixed and unchanged throughout the process of amplification (since it "undergoes obvious increase").

(C3) The interpretive content remains fixed and unchanged throughout the process of amplification.

(C4) The interpretive content does not remain fixed and unchanged throughout the process of amplification.

Gewirth seems to be asserting (C4) when he says "that the mind interprets each succeeding property to be representative of the same object." The interpretive content is, according to Gewirth, the mind's interpretation of the direct content. If the direct content undergoes increase and the added properties are interpreted as representing the same object, it appears that the interpretive content has been amplified to include

---

12 Emphasis mine.
the additional properties. The cited passage seems to contain two inconsistencies.

Perhaps we can give Gewirth's remarks a more plausible reading. Since Gewirth is trying to show us how we increase the clearness and distinctness of ideas that meet the minimal requirement, we can assume that the following conditions already obtain. There is an idea \( x \) that is minimally clear and distinct. This idea \( x \) has a direct content and a propositional component containing a Direct and an Interpretive Content. Although the direct content and the Interpretive Content are not "equated" in the sense that they are identical, they are equated in the sense that the conceptual contents of the Direct and Interpretive Contents overlap in a crucial area: both represent the essence of the direct content.

When we increase the clarity and distinctness of a minimally clear and distinct idea, we begin the process with the Direct and Interpretive Content used in making the idea minimally clear and distinct. We can refer to these Direct and Interpretive Contents as the initial Direct and Interpretive Contents.

Gewirth thinks concepts can have both explicit and implicit contents. The explicit contents are the contents one initially recognized to be contained in his idea. This explicit content may include what we can call essential concepts — concepts representing essential features of the object of our idea. The implicit contents of essential concepts are concepts
representing necessary features of that object. Gewirth mentions a person unschooled in geometry. This person may have an idea of a triangle as a three-sided figure (Gewirth, p. 265). The concept Trilaterality is both the explicit content and the essential concept of his idea. Analyzing his essential concept, the beginning geometrician realizes that Trilaterality entails the concept Triangularity. We can say that Triangularity was implicitly contained in Trilaterality. Having made an implicit content explicit, this person can add to the explicit content of his idea of a triangle a concept representing a necessary feature of triangles.

When the mind increases the clarity and distinctness of one of its ideas, it does so by analyzing essential concepts contained in the initial Direct Content of its idea. The contents of essential concepts are themselves concepts representing necessary features of the direct content. Once revealed, these contents of essential concepts can be added to what was previously recognized to be explicitly contained in the initial Direct Content. What results is an amplified initial Direct Content --- the subsequent Direct Content. Since the initial Interpretive Content is a content of an idea we are assuming to be minimally clear and distinct, this Interpretive Content contains all the essential concepts contained in the initial Direct Content. Amplified to include this new content, the initial Interpretive Content becomes the subsequent Interpretive Content.
Explicated in this way, Gewirth's passage is not inconsistent in the ways suggested. When Gewirth claims paradoxically that the initial direct and Interpretive content does and does not remain fixed, he is indicating in an enigmatic way that there are five factors under consideration. There is the direct content itself. Then there are the initial Direct and Interpretive Contents and the subsequent Direct and Interpretive Contents. In one sense the initial Direct and Interpretive Contents do remain fixed and unchanged throughout the process of amplification. They are, after all, precisely the explicit contents with which we began. In another sense, however, we can say that the initial Direct and Interpretive Contents have undergone an increase, for the subsequent Direct and Interpretive Contents are the initial Direct and Interpretive Contents increased to include concepts now recognized to have been implicitly contained in an essential concept. Since ideas representing necessary features of an object are not inconsistent with essential features of that object and since the concepts contained in essential concepts represent necessary features, our idea remains minimally clear and distinct as its clarity and distinctness is increased.

A problem with Gewirth's account of minimal clearness and distinctness. Although I have labored to give a fair reading of Gewirth's account, his account remains problematic.\(^\text{13}\)

\(^\text{13}\) I disregard intensional problems in Gewirth's formulation.
He holds an idea of $x$ to be minimally clear and distinct if and only if the following conditions are satisfied: every essential feature of $x$ is represented by a concept contained in the Secondary Content, and no concept contained in the Secondary Content contradicts an essential feature of $x$ (Gewirth, p. 261). This formulation guarantees that the Secondary Content will contain concepts representing $x$'s essential properties, but it does not guarantee that the Secondary Content will not contain concepts expressed by predicates that are false of $x$. There are an infinite array of predicates that are false of $x$ but consistent with the predicates denoting the essence of $x$. On Gewirth's account of minimal clearness and distinctness, one can have a minimally clear and distinct idea of $x$ even though the contents of his idea incorrectly represent $x$.

Clearly Gewirth's definition needs patching up.

A revised definition. Gewirth is talking about scientific knowledge and the advancement of science when he sets forth the minimum requirement and tells us how to increase the clarity and distinctness of minimally clear and distinct ideas (Gewirth, p. 261). In science, he says, "the concern is with the essences of things" (Gewirth, p. 261). Additionally, Gewirth contends that only those ideas that are not fictional contain a system of implications that deduction can reveal. As an example of such a nonfictional idea, he offers the idea of a triangle, which is for Descartes the idea of a true and immutable nature having a determinate nature or essence (Gewirth).
What mathematical demonstration is concerned to reveal is this nature or essence (Gewirth, p. 265). The contingent properties that this or that triangle may happen to possess are of no interest to the geometer. Since, for Descartes, geometry and mathematics provide the model for all disciplines properly classified as sciences, we would be in keeping with Descartes' views if we amended Gewirth's definition of minimal or scientific clearness and distinctness so that the Secondary Content contained no ideas representative of contingent properties. Accordingly, we can say that an idea of \( x \) is minimally clear and distinct just in case every concept contained in the Secondary Content represents a necessary feature of \( x \) and each essential feature of \( x \) is represented by a concept contained in the Secondary Content.  

II. AN EXPOSITION OF GEWIRTH'S ACCOUNT OF HOW WE ASCERTAIN CLEARNESS AND DISTINCTNESS

Having provided his clarification of Descartes' notion of clearness and distinctness, Gewirth moves on to discuss how we ascertain whether our ideas are clear and distinct. The main ingredient in the process he uses is the method of difference.

---

Alternatively we could say that the Secondary Content contains nothing expressed by predicates that falsely describe \( x \). While avoiding the criticism directed against Gewirth's explicit formulation, this alternative would allow part of the Secondary Content to represent contingent properties. Gewirth does not adopt this alternative, however. See Gewirth, pp.
The method of difference. Using the method of difference, we find out whether parts of ideas are necessarily or contingently connected. Gewirth uses Descartes' example of the idea of a winged horse to illustrate how the method of difference works (Gewirth, pp. 269-270). This idea contains the ideas of being winged and being a horse, ideas that can be shown by the method of difference, to be contingently connected. I can think of horses that are not winged and of winged things that are not horses.

Gewirth's discussion of Winged Horse suggests the following account of the method of difference. A person A ascertains by this method that an idea of x and an idea of y are contingently connected if and only if A recognizes that there is a possible world in which x exists apart from y or y exists apart from x. And a person A ascertains by the method of difference that an idea of x and an idea of y are necessarily connected if and only if A recognizes that there is no possible world in which x exists apart from y or y exists apart from x.

It is not difficult to see how we use the method of difference to find out whether ideas are contingently connected. A recognizes that there is a possible world in which y exists apart from y if A conceives of such a world. It is, on the other hand, not so easy to see how we use the method of differ-

ence to find out whether ideas are necessarily connected. A cannot inspect every possible world to see whether x exists apart from y in each. If such inspection were required, A could not ascertain by the method of difference that his idea of x is necessarily connected with his idea of y. But we can suppose that Gewirth thinks A does not have to inspect possible worlds in order to recognize that there is no possible world in which x exists apart from y. He could construct an argument to this effect instead.

What the method of difference actually accomplishes. Gewirth thinks the method of difference is important because it allows us to ascertain which of our ideas are fictional and which are ideas of true and immutable natures, and, by the same process, which of our definitions are nominal and which are essential. Having ascertained this much, we can easily complete the process of distinguishing the clear and distinct from the obscure and confused ideas. As Gewirth says:

The question of how the clearness and distinctness of ideas are to be ascertained is thus basically the same as the question of how the mind, within the methodological context of ideas and perceptive acts, can ascertain that its definitions of objects, which it employs as a basis for evaluating the clearness and distinctness of the equating of direct and interpretive contents, are real and not merely nominal or arbitrary (Gewirth, p. 267).

This passage contains the following claim:

(C) The process by which we ascertain whether our ideas are clear and distinct is "basically the same" as the process by which we determine whether our definitions
"are real" or essential. Since the method of difference is the method Gewirth believes Descartes uses to determine whether our definitions are real, (C) is equivalent to (C'):

(C') The process by which we ascertain whether our ideas are clear and distinct is "basically the same" as the method of difference.

Although "basically the same" as the method for ascertaining clearness and distinctness, the method of difference is not applicable to ideas. As a part of the overall method for ascertaining clearness and distinctness, however, the method of difference can be applied to the Direct and Interpretive Contents -- ideas2 -- of ideas3, and it can find out for us whether these ideas2 are fictional or whether they are ideas of true and immutable natures.

Why the method of difference is useful. To ascertain whether an idea3 of x is clear and distinct, we need to be able to find out whether every concept contained in the Secondary content of our idea3 represents a necessary feature of x and whether the Secondary Content contains, for every essential feature of x, a concept representing that feature. Although the method of difference is a method for distinguishing fictional ideas from ideas of true and immutable natures, Gewirth thinks the method of difference is the one we need, for the ideas of true and immutable natures are in his view the ideas that represent essences.
Speaking of ideas of true and immutable natures, he says:

If, then, the mind finds that it cannot deny the parts of ideas of one another and still be true to the meaning which each part directly presented to it, such ideas are representative of objects which are essential natures independent of the mind for their being what they are. The direct contents of these ideas are seen as a result of this 'method of difference' to represent the essence, or at least part of the essence, of the objects which they are interpreted as representing ... (Gewirth, p. 270).

Here Gewirth is telling us that all ideas of true and immutable natures represent essences. But are ideas of true and immutable natures the only ideas that represent essences, or are there some fictional ideas that also represent essential features?

Gewirth's discussion of the wax example and of the idolator's idea of God suggest that he believes there are no fictional essential concepts. Regarding the wax example, he says:

And only in virtue of such a reductive process [of eliminating as contents of our ideas parts representing contingent properties] is the resultant perceptive not clear (as attaining the essence of the object, in that the direct content which is actually representative of the essence of the object which it is interpreted as representing has been made 'present and open to the attending mind') and distinct (as excluding everything 'other than' what is essential). The wax is thus ascertained to consist essentially of extension and mobility, not of any peculiar colours, sounds, and tastes; hence, at the conclusion of the reductive process whereby the sense qualities are removed, Descartes writes that the perception of the wax 'can be either imperfect and confused, as it was before, or clear and distinct, as it is now, in so far as I attend less or more to the things of which it consists' (Gewirth, pp. 271-272).

Here Gewirth is saying that Descartes' original idea was obscure.

---

15 Emphasis mine.
and confused because it contained fictional ideas representing wax as having contingent properties like yellowness and hardness. At the end of the reductive process, the idea that emerges is still Descartes’ idea of wax, but it no longer contains fictional parts. What remains is the idea of a true and immutable nature, an idea having as its contents the ideas of mobility and extension. Jointly these ideas represent all and only the essence of wax so that Descartes' idea, when properly reduced, is clear and distinct. It seems, then, that when Descartes’ idea contained fictional ideas, it was obscure and confused. But when the method of difference was used to reduce what was fictional to an idea of a true and immutable nature, Descartes' idea of wax became clear and distinct.

The example of the idolater's idea of God is similar, but here Gewirth is more explicit. He says:

Not every idea which is interpreted to be representative of God is clear and distinct. The idea will have these qualities only if 'we do not put anything fictitious into it, but note those things alone which are really contained in it, and which we evidently perceive to pertain to the nature of the most perfect being' (Gewirth, p. 259).

Our idea of God is clear and distinct only if "we do not put anything fictitious into it." And we safeguard against putting fictitious content into our idea when we make sure that we include in that content ideas representing only "the nature of the most perfect being." Hence, an idea of God is clear and distinct only if its contents are not fictional.

Although the wax and God examples show that for Gewirth
some ideas are clear and distinct only if they contain no fictional ideas, these examples do not show that Gewirth believes all fictional ideas to represent contingent rather than essential properties. On the other hand if Gewirth believes there are fictional essential concepts, he neither states nor suggests that this is so. Although Gewirth gives numerous examples of ideas that are, or can be made, clear and distinct, he never gives us an instance of a clear and distinct idea whose contents are fictional. Aside from the ideas of wax and God, which remain obscure and confused so long as they contain fictional contents, Gewirth's examples of clear and distinct ideas are drawn exclusively from simple ideas and from ideas of true and immutable natures.

By themselves, the wax and God examples support but do not justify the conclusion that Gewirth believes the essential concepts to be the ideas of the true and immutable natures. On the other hand, I think it is safe to attribute this belief to Gewirth. For, if Gewirth does not equate the ideas of true and immutable natures with ideas representing essential natures, it is difficult to see why he thinks his method of difference can help us to ascertain which of our ideas are minimally clear and distinct.

The method Gewirth thinks Descartes used for ascertaining minimal clearness and distinctness. Having shown why Gewirth thinks the method of difference helps us to ascertain which of our concepts are essential, we can try to construct a
description of the overall method Gewirth thinks Descartes used to ascertain which of his ideas are clear and distinct.

Gewirth says:

The reduction [of complex ideas to their simple contents] attains this perceptual clearness and distinctness because it enables the mind, within the methodological context of ideas and perceptive acts, to 'distinguish that which pertains to the true and immutable essence of a thing, from that which is attributed to it only through a fiction of the understanding.'

The contents of a fictitious idea, such as that of a winged horse or of a triangle inscribed in a square, can be clearly and distinctly conceived in separation from one another, i.e. even if one part be explicitly denied of the other, each can still be fully conceived without in any way contradicting the significance which it presents to the mind. An idea will be representative of a true and immutable nature, then, if the connection of its contents is necessary, not contingent, so that they cannot be sundered by way of a 'real' distinction: 'although one can think of the one without giving any attention to the other, one cannot, however, deny it of that other when one thinks of both.' 'Those ideas which do not contain true and immutable natures, but only fictitious ones compounded by the understanding can be divided by that same understanding not only by abstraction, but by a clear and distinct operation so that those which the understanding cannot thus divide have undoubtedly not been compounded by itself.' If, then, the mind finds that it cannot deny the parts of ideas of one another and will be true to the meaning which each part directly presents to it, such ideas are representative of objects which are essential natures independent of the mind for being what they are. The direct contents of these ideas are seen, as a result of this 'method of difference', to represent the essence, or at least part of the essence, of the objects which they are interpreted as representing, so that the direct and interpretive contents are equal to one another (Gewirth, pp. 269-270).

It seems to me that Gewirth has something like the following in mind. A person acquires an idea $\exists x$ of $x$ when he predicates something of $x$. This person is saying in effect that something he recognized as having certain properties is or repre-
sents a such and such. The properties recognized to belong to $x$ constitute the direct content of his idea, of $x$. This idea contains both a Direct Content representing $x$ and an interpretation of $x$. The idea of $x$ will be clear and distinct if and only if the given interpretation fits the thing interpreted in the appropriate way. An interpretation that fits represents all the essential features and only necessary features of the thing interpreted. One gets the interpretation to fit in one of two ways: he can modify his interpretation or he can change what it is that he is interpreting.

To make the appropriate adjustments, one must carry out a reduction on either the Direct or the Interpretive Content. The content reduced is the Secondary Content. It is reduced in the sense that it is altered in a way that makes it representative of a true and immutable nature. To get the Secondary Content properly reduced, we use the method of difference. We take the properties represented by the explicit concepts contained in the Secondary Content, and we see whether we can conceive of the object of the Basic Content as existing without these properties. Properties that can be conceived as existing apart from the object of the Basic Content are contingent properties of that object; properties that cannot be so conceived are necessary features of that object and are represented by the essential concepts or concepts these entail. Having identified those concepts that represent necessary features, we can pare down the Secondary Content.
until it contains just those concepts.

We have a difficulty, however. Although we have ascertained that the Secondary Content of our idea of \( x \) contains only concepts representing necessary features, we have not ascertained whether every essential feature of \( x \) is represented by a concept the Secondary Content contains. Suppose I have an idea of \( x \) that includes explicitly in its Secondary Content concepts representing features \( F_1, F_2 \) and \( F_3 \) of \( x \). Using the method of difference, I find out that \( F_1 \) and \( F_2 \) are among \( x \)'s necessary features but that \( F_3 \) is contingent. In finding out this much, I have not ascertained whether \( F_1 \) and \( F_2 \) are essential features of \( x \), and I have not found out whether every essential feature of \( x \) is represented by a concept contained in my Secondary Content.

Gewirth seems to assume that every essential property of \( x \) is represented by a concept contained explicitly in the Secondary Content. This assumption reveals itself in Gewirth's language. He refers to the process by which the Secondary Content is adjusted as a process of reduction. Evidently he thinks the Secondary Content contains explicitly all the essential concepts and may contain in addition concepts representing contingent properties. For this reason, he thinks we make our ideas clear and distinct when we reduce the Secondary Content so that concepts representing contingent properties are eliminated. But can Gewirth assume that the Secondary Content contains all the essential concepts? Plainly he cannot.
If the Secondary Content of an idea of x always contains, for every essential feature of x, a concept representing that feature, then, on the revised definition of minimal clearness and distinctness, every idea of x is clear. But this is a conclusion Gewirth is anxious to avoid.

Although Gewirth does not address the difficulty I am raising, we can suggest a direction he might pursue. We could try to argue that it is the Basic rather than the Secondary Content that contains in its explicit contents all the essential concepts. I do not know how Gewirth would go about supporting such a claim, but if he could support it, he can ascertain clearness and distinctness in the following way. After having reduced the Secondary Content of his idea of x until it contains only concepts representing necessary features of x, he could carry out a similar reduction with respect to the Basic Content of his idea. Once this reduction is completed, he will have remaining as the explicit contents of the Basic Content only concepts representing necessary features of x. Among these will be all the essential concepts. Although Gewirth will not know which ones these are, he can find out. The reduced explicit contents consist of some concepts that are not entailed by any others that they do not entail. Having identified these, Gewirth can now compare the explicit contents of the reduced Basic and Secondary Contents. If the...

16 Using this formulation, we leave open the possibility that mutually entailed concepts represent essential features.
Secondary Content does not have all the essential concepts contained in the Basic Content, it is obscure. But if it contains them all, it is clear.

By applying the method of difference to the Secondary Content, we can find out whether our idea is distinct or confused, and by applying the same method to both the Basic and Secondary Content, we can find out whether our idea is clear or obscure.

Gewirth's account of the principal ideas. Gewirth thinks Descartes used his method of difference in the Meditations to arrive at clear and distinct ideas of God, the mind, and matter (Gewirth, p. 273). It is these ideas Gewirth thinks Descartes was referring to when he told Gassendi he had enumerated all the principal ideas and distinguished the clear and distinct from the obscure and confused ones (Gewirth, p. 273). Once the method of difference reveals the essential concepts contained in the principal ideas, we have standards of comparison that allow us to determine whether alternative definitions are real or nominal (Gewirth, pp. 272-273). In this way we can within the context of ideas and the perceptive act ascertain which of our ideas are clear and distinct.

A psychological component in Descartes' criterion for ascertaining minimal clearness and distinctness. There is a psychological or subjective aspect to Descartes' method of difference, however. In the case of fictional ideas, the mind has the ability to conceive of the parts of the idea as
representing things that could really exist separately. But the mind lacks this ability when it attempts conceptually to disjoin the parts of an idea of a true and immutable nature. Whenever the mind uses the method of difference to achieve such a disjunction, the logic of the idea constrains the mind to acknowledge that the parts it seeks to disjoin are inseparable. The method of difference is self-defeating in these cases. Every attempt to disjoin the parts of such an idea helps to convince the mind that these parts are necessarily connected. As Gewirth says:

The factor determining which ideas are representative of the essences of various objects, and hence clear and distinct, consists in that which the ideas themselves compel the mind to perceive after it has reduced them to their elements and tried to separate and combine them in various ways. There is, indeed, a psychological aspect of the method, also, as is shown, for example, in Descartes' description of intuition as 'a pure and attentive mind's conception, so facile and distinct that there remains no doubt concerning that which we understand.' But this facility and indubitableness are regarded by him as effects rather than as causes of clearness and distinctness in the logical and perceptual senses, as culminating the process whereby the mind recognizes the contents of ideas to be of such sort that it is unable to perceive them in any way other than the connection before it (Gewirth, p. 276).

Although the mind ascertains whether an idea is clear and distinct or obscure and confused by determining whether the parts of the idea can be disjoined by the mind, the ability or inabil-
ity of the mind to separate the parts depends upon how the parts are connected in fact. The mind's subjective or psychological state subsequent to its application of the method of difference depends at least in part on the logical features of the
idea under consideration. In short, Descartes' method for ascertaining which of our ideas are clear and distinct is not for Gewirth "divorced from all logical considerations" (Gewirth, p. 253).

III. CRITICISM

Gewirth’s goals. We now turn to a critical examination of Gewirth’s article. Gewirth has three fundamental goals— to elude his own criticism of Descartes, to answer Gassendi’s criticism on Descartes’ behalf, and to show how it is possible that obscure and confused ideas can be made clear and distinct. In Gewirth’s view, we can realize these three goals only if we subscribe to the thesis that ideas have direct and interpretive contents. But as I want to show, the distinction between direct and interpretive contents cannot accomplish as much as Gewirth supposes. Other distinctions need to be introduced. Gewirth did not get clear regarding these other distinctions, however, and as a result his interpretation fails to achieve the goals set for it.

Let us recall Gassendi’s criticism. Gassendi objected that Descartes had not provided a method for identifying which of our ideas are clear and distinct. As we noted earlier, Descartes’ reply was too cryptic to be convincing. Recognizing

---

17 See pp. 4-6 above.
18 See pp. 3-4 above.
19 See p. 4 above.
the need for an elaboration of Descartes' reply, Gewirth attempted on Descartes' behalf to show that Descartes had provided the requisite method.

Gewirth's defense of his distinction between direct and interpretive contents. A major contention in Gewirth's elaboration of Descartes' reply to Gassendi is the claim that we must attribute to Descartes the distinction between direct and interpretive contents. In defense of this view, Gewirth seems to offer two lines of justification:

(J1) Descartes' reply to Gassendi will succeed only if Descartes recognizes a distinction between direct and interpretive contents.

(J2) There is adequate textual evidence to support the claim that Descartes did draw a distinction between direct and interpretive contents.20

I do not intend to quarrel with (J2). The evidence that supports it does show that Descartes believes we have ideas on which we put interpretations. On the other hand, I do want to show that Gewirth has not given us satisfactory grounds for (J1).

(J1) implies that Descartes' reply to Gassendi will fail unless we attribute to Descartes a distinction between direct and interpretive contents. Gassendi claimed Descartes had no way to decide between conflicting claims of clear and distinct perception. Descartes replied that he had provided an adequate

20 See the discussion of how the same idea can be clear
method for distinguishing clear and distinct from obscure and confused ideas. Gewirth agrees that Descartes provided such a method, but he thinks that the method functions adequately only if Descartes makes use of a distinction between direct and interpretive contents. But is Gewirth right?

Evidence to show that we do not need the distinction between direct and interpretive contents in order to use the method of difference effectively. The method of difference functions primarily to distinguish essential from nominal definitions on the one hand and ideas of true and immutable natures from fictional ideas on the other.\(^{21}\) The latter ideas have contingently connected parts and are therefore not representative of the essences of things.\(^{22}\) Ideas of true and immutable natures, on the other hand, have necessarily connected contents and are representative of essential natures.\(^{23}\)

Gewirth cites the idea of a winged horse and a triangle inscribed in a square as examples of fictional ideas.\(^{24}\) We can ascertain that these ideas are fictional simply because we can really distinguish their parts. We can think of winged horses existing apart from horses and vice versa, and we can think of triangles that are not inscribed and of inscribed figures and distinct or obscure and confused depending on what it is "viewed as'', pp. 7-8 above.

\(^{21}\)See p. 30 above.

\(^{22}\)See p. 35 above

\(^{23}\)Ibid.

\(^{24}\)Ibid.
that are not triangles. Significantly, in these examples the disjoined parts are not the direct and the interpretive contents. They are rather the explicit contents of the idea.

In his discussion of how we extend clearness and distinctness beyond the minimum requirement, Gewirth says: "This variation in degree [of clearness and distinctness] reveals another distinction, in addition to that between direct and interpretive contents, required to give clearness and distinctness a normative basis. This other distinction is between the explicit and implicit contents of an idea" (Gewirth, p. 264). He goes on to point out that from a strictly psychological vantage point "an idea is precisely and exhaustively that content of which the mind is at any time aware..." (Gewirth, p. 265). This content is the explicit content, but an idea may contain an implicit content of which the mind is not presently cognizant. Gewirth cites Descartes' example of a person who is unlearned in geometry. This person thinks of a triangle as a three sided figure and does not realize that his idea contains implicitly contents that geometrical demonstration can reveal (Gewirth, p. 265).

When we applied the method of difference to determine whether the ideas of a winged horse and a triangle inscribed in a square were fictional, we simply took the contents in present awareness -- 'being winged', 'being a horse', 'being
a triangle', and 'being inscribed in a square' -- and determined whether we can think of the properties represented by these ideas as existing in separation from each other. The contents involved in this operation were the explicit contents, and an accurate description of how we determined that the ideas in question were fictional would make no reference to direct or interpretive contents.

Can the same point be made with respect to ideas of true and immutable natures? It would seem so. Consider again the idea of a triangle. If the person unschooled in geometry has the idea of a triangle as a three sided figure, his idea represents a true and immutable nature because the method of difference shows us that we cannot conceive of a triangle that is not three sided or of a three sided figure that is not a triangle (Gewirth, p. 270). In this instance the contents shown to be inseparable by the method of difference are once again the explicit contents -- 'being a triangle' and 'being a three sided figure,' and references to direct and interpretive contents seem eliminable.

Since we do not need to refer to direct and interpretive contents to describe adequately how we ascertain which of our ideas are fictional and which represent true and immutable natures, we may be able to devise an account of how we ascertain clearness and distinctness that does not require the distinction between direct and interpretive contents.

A rival account. Against Gewirth's account, we can now
offer a rival interpretation (RI). According to the RI, one's idea is clear and distinct just in case it is an idea of a true and immutable nature. One can ascertain whether his idea represents a true and immutable nature or essence by using the method of difference. But one can effectively use this method without relying on the distinction between direct and interpretive contents. Consequently, Gewirth's distinction seems unnecessary.

My point in putting forth the RI is not to show that the RI is the correct interpretation. It is, rather, to show that the RI is at least as good, and perhaps better, than Gewirth's interpretation so that (31) is false.

Why Gewirth thinks the wax example supports his account. Defending his interpretation of Descartes, Gewirth argues that Descartes' example of the wax requires a distinction between direct and interpretive contents. On Gewirth's interpretation of the example, various sensed qualities are represented in wax. As a result there is both a direct and an interpretive content. Descartes applies the method of difference to these contents to show that the wax can exist apart from all the secondary qualities taken to be contents of the wax. Gewirth says:

This "identity" of the wax throughout the changing of the direct content, which is greatly emphasized by Descartes,

---

25Gewirth misplaces a modifier here, and his statement is misleading as a result. What Descartes emphasizes is the identity of the wax despite the changes it undergoes. Descartes never alludes to the direct content of his idea.
can be understood only through the interpretive aspect of his doctrine of ideas. It is because the interpretive perception is held constant that the reductive process can be viewed in the methodological context, as going from accidental to essential attributes of the same object, and not from one set of ideas to another wholly unrelated thereto. The process consists, then, in gradually divesting the direct content interpreted as representing a certain object of the 'forms external' to that object, i.e. of those qualities with whose denial the object can still be conceived, so that there is no necessary connection between the object and those qualities. The end of the process comes when a direct content is attained which survives every reductive device, remaining so long as the object can be conceived, and without which the object can no longer be conceived. This direct content is hence necessarily connected with the interpretive content whereby the mind thinks of the object in question, and constitutes the essential definition of that object (Gewirth, p. 271).

How the wax example is explained on the (RI). Gewirth is mistaken here. Although we do need some distinction internal to ideas and the perceptive act if we are to explain how the wax can be conceived to be self-identical throughout the reductive process, the distinction we need does not have to be the distinction between direct and interpretive contents. Gewirth has already given us two additional distinctions. In his discussion of how we extend the clearness and distinctness of our ideas beyond the minimal requirement, Gewirth made use of the distinction between explicit and implicit contents and presupposed the distinction between initial and subsequent contents (Gewirth, pp. 264-266).

If we used these distinctions instead of the distinction between direct and interpretive contents, we could ascertain

26 Emphasis mine.
the clearness and distinctness of our idea of wax in the following way. We could say that our ideas of yellowness, hardness, fragrance, etc. constitute the initial content of our idea. This content might represent the essence of wax or it might not. We must use the method of difference to find out.

Taking each part of our idea in turn, we see whether we can conceive of the wax existing apart from the property represented by the constituent idea. If the represented property and the wax can exist apart, we know that the property in question is not part of the essence of wax, and we exclude the idea representing that property from the subsequent content. This process continues until we are left with a subsequent content that represents properties inseparable from wax. As a result, our subsequent idea represents the essence of wax and is clear and distinct, and we achieved this result without reference to direct or interpretive contents.

A reply to the (NI) account of the wax example. By way of reply, Gewirth might ask how we know it is still wax of which we are thinking when we divest the initial content of some of its parts. He might urge that we could not know that we are still thinking of wax throughout the reductive process unless we had another idea of wax -- the interpretive content -- which remains constant and acts as the standard against which we measure and adjust our initial idea -- the direct content.

Let us examine carefully the reply we have imagined Gewirth to offer. Initially at \( t_1 \) my idea of wax contains
constituent ideas $x_1, \ldots, x_{n-1}$. Let us say that at $t_2$ I arrive at a subsequent content $x_1, \ldots, x_{n-1}$, and I allege that this subsequent content better represents the essence of wax because an idea representing a contingent property previously believed to be part of the essence has been removed. I make this claim because I can eliminate $x_n$ and still conceive of the thing represented by $x_1, \ldots, x_{n-1}$ as existing or, as Descartes would say, as a complete thing.

Granting that $x_1, \ldots, x_{n-1}$ represents a complete thing, Gevirth could counter that if I did not know at the outset what wax was, I could not know that the complete thing represented by $x_1, \ldots, x_{n-1}$ is wax. Suppose, for example, that $x_n$ represents the property of mobility, an essential property of wax. When I remove $x_n$ from my original idea, the resulting idea $x_1, \ldots, x_{n-1}$ could still represent a complete thing, but the thing represented would not be wax. When we exchange one content representing a complete thing for another representing a complete thing, we have no way of knowing that the complete things represented by these two contents are identical. To know this, we must be able to ascertain that the difference between the two contents resulted only from a change of parts representing contingent properties. But we cannot know that only contingent features are involved unless we know the essence of the object represented. In going from $x_1, \ldots, x_n$ to $x_1, \ldots, x_{n-1}$ I must be able to determine that $x_n$ does or does not represent part of the essence. In short I need an interpretive content.
Why the above reply raises new problems for Gewirth's account. If taken seriously, this reply may perhaps be as damaging to Gewirth's interpretation as to the RI. Just how is the fixed interpretive content in the wax example supposed to function as the needed standard of comparison? Gewirth is vague on this point. He assures us that we need a fixed interpretive content, but he does not tell us what this content must contain.

It seems to me that we can make sense of what Gewirth is saying only if we suppose that the interpretive content contains the essence and that the contained essence is somehow revealed to the mind. Then by consulting the list of essential properties revealed to me by the interpretive content, I can discover whether $x_n$ represents an essential or a contingent property of wax. If $x_n$ appears on the list, $x_n$ represents part of the essence; if not, it represents a contingent property.27

But how do we come by the analysis of the interpretive content? There appear to be two possibilities. Either the essential definition is just there in the interpretive content and available when we reflect on it or the essential definition is ascertained by some process. If the first disjunct were correct, the interpretive contents of our ideas would be present and open to the mind. To ascertain essential definitions,

27I assume, of course, that $x_n$ is not an impossible idea like that of being a round square.
the mind would only have to attend to the interpretive content of its ideas.

On this view, we would not need the method of difference in order to ascertain essential definitions, and Gewirth's and Descartes' emphasis on the role of the method of difference in acquiring essential definitions would be pointless. Also, if direct introspection of an interpretive content suffices to reveal its essential definition, then Gassendi was justified when he criticized Descartes for failing to provide an effective procedure for deciding between two philosophers who disagree regarding an essential definition.

The only way around Gassendi's criticism is to fall back on the second possibility and to contend that we ascertain essential definitions contained in the interpretive content by applying some method to this content. If Gewirth adopts this alternative, he would have to specify what method he has in mind. It is either the method of difference itself or some other method. If it is some other method, he is obliged to tell us what the method is. If it is the method of difference, he is trapped in a circle. By hypothesis, we cannot reveal the essential definition contained in the interpretive content unless we use the method of difference. But in using the method of difference, we must, Gewirth tells us, have a fixed interpretive content. This fixed content, I have argued,²⁸ must represent the essence and must in some way reveal this

²⁸See p. 50 above.
essence to us. Consequently, the method of difference cannot reveal to us the essential definition contained in the interpretive content unless we already know the definition we are setting out to reveal.

Let me recapitulate. Against Gewirth's interpretation, I have offered a rival interpretation (RI), which did not require the distinction between direct and interpretive contents to give an account of clearness and distinctness. According to the RI, an idea is clear and distinct if and only if it is an idea of a true and immutable nature, and one can determine whether an idea is clear and distinct by using the method of difference to show that the explicit contents of the idea are necessarily connected. I noted that Gewirth could counter that one cannot show that the contents of an idea are necessarily connected unless there is a fixed interpretive content. I replied that such a fixed interpretive content would have to contain and reveal the essential definition of the thing in question. I then pointed out that there were only three possible ways to ascertain this essential definition: direct introspection, the method of difference, or some other method. The first approach left Descartes open to Gassendi's criticism, the second led Gewirth in a circle, and the third required Gewirth to show that there is a method besides the method of difference for determining essential definitions.

29 See pp. 45-46 above.
Nothing in Descartes or in Gewirth's interpretation of him suggests, however, that there is such a second method, and I conclude that Gewirth's interpretation fares no better than the RI in explaining how the wax could remain self-identical throughout the reductive process.

The failure of Gewirth's defense of (J1). Gewirth is faced with a dilemma here. In assessing various interpretations of clearness and distinctness in Descartes, he could be stringent and demand that a satisfactory interpretation explain how wax remains self-identical throughout the reductive process, or he could be lenient and not demand that interpretations explain so much. If he adopts the former stance, he will be forced to reject his own interpretation along with the RI, and he will have failed to defend Descartes against Gassendi's criticism. If, on the other hand, he adopts the latter alternative, he removes his objection against the RI, and his defense of (J1) collapses. Without introducing the distinction between direct and interpretive contents, the RI, it seems, can account for as much as one can hope to explain about clearness and distinctness in Descartes.

A way to decide between the (RI) and Gewirth's account. Gewirth need not accept these conclusions, however. While admitting that his interpretation explains no better than the RI how wax remains self-identical throughout the reductive

---

30 See pp. 48-49 above.
process, Gewirth could insist that his interpretation is the better one. We have not as yet tested the RI against the examples that Gewirth used to frame his own theory in the first place. If Gewirth's interpretation were, but the suggested alternative were not, able to account for these examples, Gewirth would have good grounds for retaining his own interpretation over against the RI.

That Gewirth's account fails for simple ideas. The reader will recall that Gewirth cited two examples, one regarding ideas of sensation, the other the ideas of thought and extension. In each case the idea was clear and distinct or obscure and confused depending on the interpretation selected.

According to Descartes, ideas of sensation and the ideas of thought and extension are simple ideas, and it turns out that simple ideas are problematic for Gewirth's interpretation. Speaking of simples, Gewirth says:

Unlike composite ideas, in which it is possible to discriminate from one another not only direct and interpretive contents, but also various parts of the direct content, the necessity of whose connection with one another in the idea is not self-evident, the simple natures cannot be misinterpreted, for it is impossible to discriminate in them a direct and an interpretive content. To think of these simples at all is to think of them completely, and hence clearly; similarly, their very simplicity makes it difficult for the mind to confuse them with, i.e. interpret them as, anything 'other' than themselves, so that they are perceived distinctly as well (Gewirth, pp. 268-269).

In this passage, Gewirth makes a number of dubious claims:

---

31 NR, Rules, pp. 41-42, and Princ., XLVIII, p. 238.
(1) The simple natures have no discriminable direct and interpretive content.
(2) The simple natures cannot be misinterpreted.
(3) Whenever one thinks of a simple nature, the simple idea representing that nature is clear.
(4) All simple ideas are distinct.

Each of these claims is false. Gewirth's own examples to show that ideas must have direct and interpretive contents are counterexamples to (2). But in the quoted passage, (1) entails (2) so that (1) is false as well. If I have not misunderstood what I take to be the very core of Gewirth's article, Gewirth holds to all the following. Not only can sensations be interpreted but they can have any number of interpretations. Furthermore, they can be misinterpreted and often are. Misinterpretations can occur because one is free to select any interpretation whatever, and the chosen interpretation need not contain all and only what is contained in the direct content or all and only the essence.32

Take pain as an example. When I represent pain as a sensation, my idea of pain is clear and distinct. But my idea need not be clear and distinct. If I represent pain as having an external cause like itself, my idea becomes obscure and confused.33 Like (1) and (2), (3) and (4) are false.

32See pp. 7-8 above.
33See pp. 9-11 above.
Gewirth himself recognized the falsity of (3) and (4) when in a footnote he admits that one can have both an obscure and confused perception of pain. He says, "When the direct content is the basis of evaluation (as in Descartes' example of the clear but confused perception of pain in Princ., I, 46), ideas are usually clear, but their distinctness may come into question" (Gewirth, p. 260).34

Why Gewirth asserts (1) - (4). Since Gewirth's assertion of (1) - (4) seems to run counter to fundamental tenets he is seeking to establish, why does he assert (1) - (4)? The answer seems to be this. If he does not treat simple ideas as special cases, he thinks his analysis fails. For Gewirth, clearness and distinctness consist in a relationship between direct and interpretive contents and are ascertained by a method that determines whether parts of an idea are necessarily or contingently connected. But apparently he regards the simple ideas as unanalyzable. Because in his view they have no parts, the method of difference is, strictly speaking, inapplicable to them. If this method is the only method available for ascertaining whether our ideas are clear and distinct, we could not determine which of our simple ideas are the clear and distinct ones. However, if (1) were true, Gewirth's problems would apparently be resolved. Gewirth could argue that (1) entails that the direct and interpretive contents of simple

34 Emphasis mine.
ideas are identical, so that all simple ideas are clear and distinct.

As we already noted earlier, however, (1) entails (2). Additionally, the conjunction of (1) with Gewirth's definition of clearness and distinctness entails (3) and (4). But as I have shown, (2), (3), and (4) contradict explicit claims Gewirth makes elsewhere in his article.

Gewirth's difficulties here derive from his insistence on a direct and an interpretive content. He insists on this distinction because he thinks that without it Descartes cannot defeat Gassendi's criticism. But the claim that all ideas have distinct direct and interpretive contents entails the view that all ideas are complex. The only way around this result is to allow that some ideas -- the simple ones -- have indistinguishable direct and interpretive contents. But this is to assert (1), and (2) - (4) follow.

That the (RI) also fails to account for simple ideas. To highlight the difficulties with Gewirth's interpretation, we have examined a rival interpretation, the RI. According to this interpretation, we gain nothing by introducing the distinction between direct and interpretive contents into our analysis of how we ascertain which of our ideas are clear and distinct. The method of difference by itself does as much as Gewirth's more elaborate procedure to distinguish the clear and distinct from the obscure and confused complex ideas. The question is, Can the method of difference succeed when
Gewirth's method fails? Can it effectively determine which of our simple ideas are clear and distinct?

Admittedly it cannot. However, once we are no longer constrained to seek for clearness and distinctness in a relation between the direct and the interpretive contents of simple and unanalyzable ideas, we are in a better position to provide a method for ascertaining which of our simple ideas are clear and distinct.

Why Gewirth's account fails for simple ideas. It is best to begin by getting back to some fundamentals in Descartes. One of Descartes' primary objectives is to give us a method for avoiding errors of judgement. Before prescribing a method for avoiding error, however, one should understand how errors arise. While Gewirth is correct when he points out that for Descartes all ideas represent something, it is not true that all errors result from misrepresentation. There are in fact two sources of error for Descartes -- misrepresentation and incorrect or insufficient analysis. Gewirth's interpretation runs afoul of simple ideas because he fails to recognize this distinction.

Ideas are the constituents of judgements. When the ideas used to form a judgement are incorrectly or insufficiently analyzed, a judgement containing them might well be false. But even if it were true that only complex ideas are susceptible to incorrect or insufficient analyses, so that all

35 In my view a simple idea can in a sense be incorrectly
simple ideas are what I call 'analytically clear and distinct', it would not follow that all these ideas are clear and distinct per se. Take my idea of pain. Even if this simple idea is analytically clear and distinct, it is what I call 'representationally confused' if, say, I represent its cause as external to my mind. To be clear and distinct, an idea must be both analytically and representationally clear and distinct.

What Gewirth has given us is a definition of representational clearness and distinctness and a method for ascertaining analytical clearness and distinctness. We also need, however, a definition of 'analytical clearness and distinctness' and a method for ascertaining representational clearness and distinctness. Gewirth fails to provide these because he formulates his interpretation on the basis of inadequate models.

To arrive at his definitions of 'clarity' and 'distinctness', he confines his attention to what Descartes says about simple ideas. When Descartes discusses the clarity and distinctness or obscurity and confusion in simple ideas, however, he is almost always referring to what I call representational clarity and distinctness. But Gewirth fails to distinguish between representational clarity and distinctness and clarity and distinctness per se. As a result he thought he was giving an account of the latter although he was really giving an account of the former.

Since the simple ideas are the models on which Gewirth analyzed. See below, pp. 165-169.
based his account of clarity and distinctness, it is not surprising that these ideas do not provide counterinstances to Gewirth's definitions. On the other hand, these ideas do become problematic when Gewirth applies his method for ascertaining clearness and distinctness to them. They are problematic because they differ in important respects from the models Gewirth used to arrive at his method for ascertaining clarity and distinctness. To illustrate the method of difference — a method of analysis, Descartes took as his examples ideas that are manifestly analyzable. He applies his method to complex fictional ideas and to complex ideas of true and immutable natures — ideas of a winged horse and a triangle inscribed in a square, on the one hand, and ideas of a triangle and wax, on the other. Focusing attention on Descartes' favorite examples of how we ascertain analytical clarity and distinctness, Gewirth made the mistake of thinking that the way in which such complex ideas are shown to be clear and distinct is the way in which all ideas are shown to be clear and distinct. He did not test his belief against the simple ideas, however. If he had, he would have realized he had made a serious mistake. On his view the method of difference shows all simple ideas to be clear and distinct, but Gewirth knew full well they can be obscure or confused if misrepresented.

Failing to distinguish analytical from representational clarity and distinctness, Gewirth tried to stretch the use of his method of difference. Although this method was designed
to ascertain which of our ideas are analytically clear and
distinct, Gewirth vaguely recognized its limitations and tried
to make it do double duty by adding onto the method a super-
fluous procedure for comparing direct and interpretive contents.
But this addition does not suffice to allow us to ascertain
whether our simple ideas are clear and distinct per se, and
Gewirth's attempt to vindicate Descartes from Gassendi's
criticism is, therefore, incomplete.

Although incomplete, his attempt has merit. He pointed
to a distinction that has been virtually ignored by subsequent
commentators on clarity and distinctness in Descartes. All
ideas are representations, and at least some ideas have analyses. Gewirth's definitions of 'clarity' and 'distinctness'
recognize the role of representation in making ideas clear
and distinct. And his discussion of how we ascertain clearness
and distinctness indicates the importance of the analysis of
an idea in making that idea clear and distinct. Although
Gewirth did not himself explicitly recognize the distinction
between analytical and representational clarity and distinct-
ness, he helped to make this distinction recognizable.
Chapter II

Kenny's Discussion of Descartes' Account of Clearness and Distinctness

The following chapter is divided into three sections. In the first two sections I consider Kenny's discussion of clearness and distinctness in Descartes. Section I is expository; I review Kenny's arguments to support his view that Descartes' account of clarity and distinctness is incoherent. In Section II, I criticize Kenny's arguments and try to show that Kenny has not demonstrated that Descartes is confused about clarity and distinctness.

Section III concerns Kenny's discussion of Descartes' method for ascertaining which ideas are clear and distinct. Kenny thinks Descartes is guilty of a circularity. But Kenny's arguments are, as I try to show, unconvincing.

I. Exposition of Kenny's Account of Clearness and Distinctness

At the end of his chapter "Ideas," Anthony Kenny considers Descartes' account of clearness and distinctness. There are two points to be made about the scope of Kenny's discussion.

---

First, what Kenny wants to ascertain is the exact nature of clearness and distinctness insofar as these are properties of "simple ideas such as sensations" (Kenny, p. 121). Instead of asking what Descartes means when he speaks of clearness and distinctness, Kenny is asking what it is for a simple idea to be clear and distinct. Second, Kenny argues that Descartes' "account" is incoherent (Kenny, p. 125), but the account Kenny has in mind encompasses more than Descartes' definition of clearness and distinctness.

Kenny says:

The fullest account of clarity and distinctness is given in the Principles:

The knowledge upon which a certain and incontroversial judgement can be formed, should not alone be clear but also distinct. I term that clear which is present and apparent to an attentive mind, in the same way as we assert that we see objects clearly when, being present to the regarding eye, they operate upon it with sufficient strength. But the distinct is that which is so precise and different from all other objects that it contains within itself nothing but what is clear. When, for instance, a severe pain is felt, the perception of this pain may be very clear, and yet for all that not distinct, because it is usually confused by the sufferers with the obscure judgement that they form upon its nature; assuming as they do that something exists in the pain affected, similar to the sensation of pain of which they alone are clearly conscious. (AT VIII, 21; BRI, 237)

We are told, however, that we may have a clear knowledge of our sensations if we take care to include in the judgements we form of them only that which we know to be precisely contained in our perception of them and of which we are intimately conscious. Thus, "there is no reason that we should be obliged to believe that the pain, for example, which we feel in our foot, is anything beyond our mind which exists in our foot." We can avoid error if we judge that there is something, of whose nature we are ignorant, that causes the sensation of pain in our minds (Kenny, pp. 121-122).
The three elements in Descartes' account. Focusing on Descartes' example of pain, Kenny says that "there seem here to be three separate elements in Descartes' account; the pain, the perception of the pain, and the judgement about the pain" (Kenny, p. 122). In Kenny's view Descartes seems to differentiate between pain and the perception of the pain when, in his account, he attributes the properties of clearness and distinctness to the perception but not to the pain. Likewise, Descartes seems to distinguish perception and judgement. Judgement involves an act of will; perception does not (Kenny, p. 122).

Kenny's criticism of Descartes' account. Although there do seem to be three separate elements in Descartes' account, Kenny argues that Descartes' account is confused because "the perception of pain . . . is not a genuine intermediary between the occurrence of pain and the judgement on pain" (Kenny, p. 125). To illustrate Descartes' confusion, Kenny examines Descartes' answers to two questions:

(Q1) Can pain occur without being clearly perceived (Kenny, p. 123)?

(Q2) Can clear and distinct perception occur without judgement (Kenny, p. 123)?

According to Kenny, Descartes' answers to these questions are inconsistent.

Inconsistencies Kenny finds in Descartes' answers to (Q1). Regarding (Q1), Kenny says:
On the one hand, he [Descartes] says that "when a man feels great pain, he has a very clear perception of pain"; on the other hand, he says that we have a clear perception of our sensations only if we carefully restrict our judgement about them and that "this is a condition most difficult to observe" (Kenny, p. 123).

In Kenny's view, Descartes seems to be guilty of an inconsistency here. On the one hand, Descartes is telling us that all severe pains are clearly perceived. On the other hand, Descartes' remarks about the relationship between our pains and judgements about our pains seem to suggest that we can have severe pains we do not clearly perceive. According to Kenny, Descartes holds that we perceive our pains clearly only if we carefully restrict our judgements about them. But Descartes tells us that it is very difficult to restrict our judgements in the appropriate way, and severe pains are not exceptional in this regard. Descartes himself tells us that people are apt to misjudge the origin of their pains. When such misjudgements occur, one's perception of his pain is obscure even though the pain he feels is severe.

According to Kenny, Descartes' answers to (Q1) are inconsistent here because there appear to be two elements in Descartes' account when in fact there is only one -- the occurring pain. Kenny puts his argument as follows:

There seem to be two elements in clarity; that the object of perception be manifest and that the perceiving faculty be attentive. In the case of sight, such a distinction is possible; in the case of pain, it is illusory. Descartes nowhere suggests what would be the difference between the unclear perception of a manifest pain and the clear perception of an obscure pain. Yet it must be possible
to make out such a difference if the distinction between the occurrence of a pain and the perception of a pain is a genuine one (Kenny, p. 124).

The pain can be manifest or not manifest; the perception of the pain attentive or inattentive. On the assumption that Descartes regards pain to be analogous to sight, our idea of pain is obscure if and only if one of the following three conditions hold:

(i) we instinctively perceive a manifest pain;
(ii) we attentively perceive a non-manifest pain;
(iii) we inattentively perceive a non-manifest pain.

According to Kenny, however, (i) and (ii) are not really different. Both are satisfied when our pain is mild and neither is satisfied when our pain is severe. It is the mildness or severity of our pain, then, that determines whether our idea of pain is clear.

By introducing the attentiveness of perception into his account of clearness and distinctness, Descartes added, Kenny believes, a superfluous element. If he had simply said that "I call that clear which is manifest," his answer to (Q1) would have been unequivocal. As Kenny puts the point, "To perceive a pain clearly simply is to have a severe pain" (Kenny, p. 124).

Inconsistencies Kenny finds in Descartes' answers to Q2. Let us now turn to Kenny's discussion of (Q2). Arguing that Descartes' comments on (Q2) are inconsistent, Kenny says:
On the one hand, we learn that "we are by nature so disposed to give our assent to things we clearly perceive, that we cannot possibly doubt of their truth" (AT VIII, 21; MR I, 236). Yet on the other hand, does not the whole procedure of methodic doubt suppose that one can withhold one's judgement even about what seems most clear (Kenny, pp. 123-124)?

The method of doubt is a method whereby one suspends judgement. We can suspend judgement because judgement is an act of a will that is free to affirm or deny what the understanding presents to it. Even though we have a clear perception, we can refrain from affirming that things are as we perceive them. In claiming that we cannot possibly doubt the truth of what we perceive, Descartes appears to be guilty of an inconsistency.

Here, again, the source of Descartes' confusion is, according to Kenny, to be found in his incoherent account of clearness and distinctness. Descartes thinks there are three separate elements when in fact there are just two. According to Kenny, perception is not a genuine intermediary between the pain and the judgement on the pain. As Kenny says:

To perceive a pain distinctly is simply to make the correct judgement about one's pain. It is to make the correct, cautious, judgement "what I feel is caused by I know not what," rather than the incorrect, rash judgement "what I feel is something in my foot." The difference between a distinct and a confused perception is explained precisely in terms of the nature of the accompanying judgement. When the perception of pain is not distinct, that is because it is "confused by the sufferers with the obscure judgement that they may form upon its nature" (AT III, 21; MR I, 239) (Kenny, pp. 124-125).

If Descartes had not confused the act with the object of perception, he would have given an unequivocal answer to (Q2).
Since to perceive a pain distinctly is to judge truly about one's pain; clear and distinct perception cannot occur without judgement.

On Kenny's interpretation, Descartes answers (Q1) and (Q2) inconsistently because his account of clearness and distinctness is incoherent. And his account is incoherent because he is confused about the distinction between the act and the object of perception. Once this confusion is eliminated, however, a coherent definition of clearness and distinctness can be attained. According to Kenny, an idea is clear just in case it is manifest, and it is distinct just in case judgements formed about it are true.

II. CRITICISM OF KENNY'S ACCOUNT OF CLEARNESS AND DISTINCTNESS

My response to Kenny's criticisms of Descartes' account of clearness and distinctness has three parts. I will try to show

(1) that Descartes' answers to (Q1) are consistent,
(2) that Descartes' answers to (Q2) are consistent, and
(3) that Kenny has failed to show that Descartes' account of clearness and distinctness is incoherent.

Regarding (Q1). According to Kenny, Descartes holds the following views with respect to (Q1):

(p) "When a man feels great pain, he has a very clear
perception of pain."²

(q) We have a clear perception of our sensations only if
we carefully restrict our judgement about them and
"this is a condition most difficult to observe."³
Together with other implicit premises,⁴ (q) is supposed to
entail not-(p).

In point of fact, Descartes asserts neither (p) nor (q).
(p) is Kenny's paraphrase of (p'):

(p') "When, for instance, a severe pain is felt, the per-
ception of this pain may be very clear. . . ."⁵

All Descartes is saying here is that it is possible that a
severe pain be clearly perceived. And for the sake of argu-
ment, he wants us to assume that there is such a clearly per-
ceived pain.

(q), on the other hand, is Kenny's paraphrase of a pas-
sage found in the Principles. This passage reads as follows:

There remain our sensations, affections, and appetites,
as to which we may likewise have a clear knowledge,
if we take care to include in the judgements we form of
them that only which we know to be precisely contained in
our perception of them, and of which we are intimately con-
scious. It is, however, most difficult to observe this
condition, in regard to the senses at least, because we,
everyone of us, have judged from our youth up that all
things of which we have been accustomed to have sensation
have had an existence outside our thoughts, and that they
have been entirely similar to the sensation, that is the
idea which we have formed of them.⁶

²See p. 65 above. ³Ibid. ⁴See p. 65 above.
⁵See p. 63 above. Emphasis mine.
On the basis of what Descartes says in this passage, I do not see how Kenny can justifiably attribute (q) to Descartes. (q) states a necessary condition for having clear perception. But in the above passage, Descartes states a sufficient condition for having clear knowledge.

Although Kenny has misinterpreted Descartes here, I think we can give a partial explanation for Kenny's confusion. I will refer to the passage cited above as passage 1, and the passage cited below as passage 2. Let us compare what Descartes says about clear knowledge in each of these passages.

In passage 1, we acquire clear knowledge as a result of restricting our judgements so that they assert nothing other than what we actually perceive. Here clear knowledge is acquired subsequent to judgement. In passage 2, however, the situation is reversed. Descartes says:

There are even a number of people who throughout all their lives perceive nothing so correctly as to be capable of judging it properly. For the knowledge upon which a certain and incontrovertible judgement can be formed should not alone be clear but also distinct.\(^7\)

Here Descartes refers to clear and distinct knowledge as the knowledge upon which certain and incontrovertible judgements are based so that the clear and distinct knowledge to which Descartes is referring in passage 2 antecedes judgement.

\(^7\) \textit{BR} I, p. 237. Kenny cites the second sentence of this passage. See p. 63 above.
There are two ways to interpret Descartes' remarks. We can assume that Descartes in passage 2 means by 'clear and distinct knowledge' 'correct perception', or we can regard clear and distinct knowledge as a fourth element to be introduced into Descartes' account of clearness and distinctness. Since Kenny says that "there seem to be three separate elements in Descartes' account" (Kenny, p. 122), we can surmise that Kenny took Descartes in passage 2 to be using the term 'clear and distinct knowledge' and 'correct perception' synonymously. And with justification Kenny probably assumed that Descartes' references to 'clear knowledge' in passages 1 and 2 were unequivocal. When closely read, however, these passages show that Descartes was using the term 'clear knowledge' in two different senses. In passage 1, 'clear knowledge' does not mean 'clear perception' as Kenny supposes.

Regarding (Q2). Descartes' allegedly inconsistent answers to (Q2) are as follows:

(r) "We are by nature so disposed to give our assent to things we clearly perceive, that we cannot possibly doubt of their truth." 3

(s) One can withhold one's judgement even about what seems most clear.

(r) is a direct quote from Descartes, and according to Kenny, Descartes' method of doubt presupposes (s). Jointly (r) and

---

3 See p. 65 above.
(s) are supposed to entail a contradiction.

(r) and (s) are not incompatible, however. (r) does not say that we cannot doubt the truth of what seems most clear. We can. It may seem to us that our pain is in our foot, but we can find good reasons for doubting even what seems most clear. On the other hand, we cannot doubt what we genuinely clearly and distinctly perceive. There is no inconsistency in claiming that we can doubt what seems most clear but cannot doubt what is clear.

Regarding Descartes' account of clearness and distinctness. Kenny's criticism of Descartes' account is in two parts. In the first part Kenny argues that the distinction between the pain and the perception of the pain is not genuine. In the second part, he argues that the distinction between the perception of the pain and the judgement on the pain is not genuine. I consider each part in turn.

The distinction between the pain and the perception of the pain. According to Kenny, there seem to be three separate elements in Descartes' account of clearness and distinctness: the sensation, the perception of the sensation, and the judgement on the sensation. But is there a genuine distinction between the sensation and the perception of the sensation? It seems as if there is. Sensations have properties perceptions

9 Although (r) is a direct quote from Descartes, (r) is taken out of context. It is plain from the context that Descartes is talking about clear and distinct, as opposed to clear, perception. Taken by itself, (r) is for Descartes a false proposition.
do not have, and perceptions have properties sensations lack. Sensations can be manifest or not manifest; perceptions attentive or inattentive.

As instances of sensations, pains seem problematic for Descartes' account, however. There seems to be no difference between the occurrence and the perception of a pain. Descartes could, of course, counter that the difference consists in this: the occurrent pain is manifest or not manifest; the perception of the pain attentive or inattentive. If this were Descartes' response, he would have to be able to show that there is a genuine distinction between an attentively perceived non-manifest pain and an inattentively perceived manifest pain. But, Kenny tells us, "Descartes nowhere suggests" what the difference would be (Kenny, p. 124).

Let us look at this criticism carefully. Kenny thinks that we can make no sense of the distinction between an attentively perceived non-manifest pain and an inattentively perceived manifest pain. But Descartes' failure to suggest what the distinction might be does not show that the distinction is not genuine. We might be able to make sense of the alleged distinction if we could make sense of what it could be.

---

10 In point of fact, Descartes may have given the explanation Kenny requires. Since Kenny does not know what Descartes means by 'manifest' and 'attentive' and since Descartes does not identify what predicates he takes to be synonymous with the terms 'manifest' and 'attentive', Descartes could have given the description Kenny required although Kenny was unable to recognize Descartes' account as an explication of relationships between manifestness and attentiveness.
is for perception to be attentive and for pain to be manifest. I think we know what we mean by 'attentive' as opposed to 'inattentive perception', and I think we can plausibly distinguish between a manifest pain and a non-manifest pain. We could, for example, regard a manifest pain as a severe pain and a non-manifest pain as a mild pain.31

Let us consider an example. I am watching a particularly exciting television show, and the identity of the killer is about to be revealed. At this very moment, however, I feel a mild pain somewhere in my chest, but I do not know exactly where. I am concerned because a friend my age has just died of a heart attack, and I want to be sure the pain in my chest is not symptomatic of a similar attack. As a result I divert my attention away from the television program, and I concentrate on my pain. It would seem appropriate to say that, in doing this, I am attentively perceiving a non-manifest pain.

Suppose, on the other hand, that the pain becomes acute. But now I recollect that I often have pains of this sort when I eat onions, and I remember that I had onions for dinner. These considerations remove my apprehension, and my eagerness to find out the identity of the killer returns. Absentmindedly rubbing my chest, I turn my attention back to the whodunit. In such a case, I think it would be appropriate to say that I am now inattentively perceiving a manifest pain.

31 Since Kenny is prepared to identify severe pain with the clear idea of pain and mild pain with the obscure idea of pain, I do not think he would find implausible the distinction I am drawing.
In presenting the above illustration, I am not claiming that Descartes uses the terms 'manifest' and 'attentive' in the way in which they are used in my examples. All I am trying to show is that there is a plausible way of making out the distinction between "the unclear perception of a manifest pain and the clear perception of an obscure pain" so that Kenny's suggestion that we cannot distinguish pain from the perception of pain is false.

The distinction between the perception of the pain and the judgement on the pain. To show that there is no genuine difference between the perception of the pain and the judgement on the pain, Kenny focuses on the passage where Descartes tells us that perception may be clear without being distinct. In this passage,12 Descartes claims that the perception of pain is not distinct because the judgement formed on the pain is mistaken. On the basis of this claim, Kenny concludes that "to perceive a pain distinctly is simply to make the correct cautious judgement 'what I feel is caused by I know not what'. . . ."13

The key passage to which Kenny alludes in his criticism is cited above on page 63 above. Kenny's way of citing this passage is misleading, however. It appears that the passage in question is one unbroken portion of the Principles.

12See p. 63 above.
13See p. 67 above.
Actually Kenny is citing two separate Principles, one immediately following the other. Each Principle in the Principles has a heading. The heading of Principle XLIV is "What a clear and distinct perception is." Here Descartes gives his definitions of 'clearness' and 'distinctness', but he does not mention his example of pain. This example is used in Principle XLVI. The heading of this Principle reads as follows: "It is shown from the example of pain that a perception may be clear without being distinct, but it cannot be distinct unless it is clear." This heading expresses plainly Descartes' intention. Having defined 'clearness' and 'distinctness' in the preceding Principle, Descartes is moving on to consider relations that hold between clarity and distinctness. He wants to "show" by means of the example of pain that one can have a clear but confused perception. To this end, Descartes offers an argument I reconstruct as follows:

(1) I clearly perceive a pain I am having. -- Premise
(2) I form a false judgement about the pain I am having. -- Premise

(3) I do not distinctly perceive the pain I am having. -- from (2)

(4) (1) and (3). -- from (1), (3)

(2) does not entail (3). Descartes needs the additional premise (k):

14 "PR. I, p. 237."
If I form a false judgement about what I perceive, 
then I do not distinctly perceive the thing about 
which I formed that judgement.

Kenny thinks (1) follows from (k):

(1) To perceive a pain distinctly is simply to judge that 
the pain has a cause.

But (k) is equivalent to (k'):

(k') If I distinctly perceive a thing about which I form 
a judgement, then I form a true judgement about what 
I perceive.

Plainly (k') does not entail (1). (k') states a necessary but 
not a sufficient condition for distinct perception. 15

Assessment of Kenny's definitions of 'clearness' and 
'distinctness'. Kenny holds that a pain is clear if and only 
if it is severe and distinct if and only if judgements about 
the pain are true. He arrives at these definitions because 
he thinks that perception is not a genuine intermediary between 
the pain and judgement about the pain. When we say we clearly 
and distinctly perceive a pain we are having, we are saying 
something about our pain and something about our judgement. 
But what features of pains and judgements could function as 
defining characteristics of clarity and distinctness? Since 
pains are severe or mild and judgements are true or false, 
it seems natural to think that clarity is a function of the

15 On this point, see the chapter on Frankfurt, p. 92 below.
severity of the pain and distinctness a function of the truth or falsity of judgement.

Although I have argued that Kenny's defence of his account of clearness and distinctness is unconvincing, I have not shown Kenny's definitions of 'clearness' and 'distinctness' to be defective. Kenny may have arrived at the right definitions for the wrong reasons. It is difficult to assess Kenny's definitions, however. He has not given us a general account of clearness and distinctness. At the outset Kenny said he would give an account of clearness and distinctness insofar as these are properties of "simple ideas such as sensation." But apparently he does not think he is giving us an account that can be generalized to cover complex ideas. Yet in a later chapter, Kenny treats his definition of 'distinctness' as if it is applicable to all ideas. Since Kenny thinks his account of distinctness is universalizable, we can surmise that he thinks it is his definition of 'clarity' that cannot be generalized.

Problems with generalizing Kenny's account of 'clarity'. Although Kenny does not claim that his account of clarity applies to complex ideas, he does claim to be giving us an account of clearness and distinctness that is applicable to "simple ideas such as sensations." Does he mean that he

\[16\] See p. 63 above.

\[17\] See Section III below.
thinks his account is applicable to all simple ideas? I think not. In what sense can we say that a simple idea of extension is severe or mild?

Perhaps Kenny means he is giving us an account of the clearness and distinctness of simple ideas of sensation. Again I think not. Regarding visual sensations, Kenny says, "There seem to be two elements in clarity; that the object of perception be manifest and that the perceiving faculty be attentive. In the case of sight, such a distinction is possible; in the case of pain, it is illusory." Because such a distinction cannot be made out in the case of pain, Kenny's account of what it is to be a clear and distinct idea of a pain does not make use of such a distinction. But in cases where such a distinction can be drawn, Kenny leaves open the possibility that another account of clearness and distinctness could be given. For all we know, Kenny may intend his account of clarity to cover not all simple ideas of sensation but only those for which the distinction between a manifest object and an attentive mind cannot be drawn.

In any event Kenny's definition of 'clarity' is highly circumscribed. At this point I do not want to say that Kenny's account is mistaken; it is simply incomplete. E. J. Ashworth's interpretation provides one way of completing Kenny's

---

18See p. 65 above.
account. Completed in this way, the account is easily criticized, however.

Generalizing Kenny's account of distinctness. As noted in the last subsection, Kenny does treat his account of distinctness as if it is applicable to all ideas. Although generalizable, this account leads in Kenny's view to a fatal difficulty for Descartes. If Kenny's account is right, Descartes cannot without circularity ascertain which of his ideas are distinct. As a result Kenny's account vindicates Gassendi.

Although Kenny's account may in the long run turn out to be right, a charitable approach to a reading of Descartes requires that we tentatively reject Kenny's account of distinctness and search for another that does not produce difficulties fatal for Descartes' philosophy.

III. KENNY'S DISCUSSION OF DESCARTES' METHOD
FOR ASCERTAINING WHICH OF OUR IDEAS ARE CLEAR AND DISTINCT

At the end of his chapter "Reason and Intuition," Kenny offers a brief discussion of Descartes' general rule that whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is true (Kenny, pp. 197-199). In this discussion Kenny argues that Descartes' general rule is inadequate. As Kenny says, "Apart from their truth, there seems to be no criterion by which genuinely

19 See Chapter IV below.
20 See the next section.
clear and distinct perceptions can be distinguished from apparently clear and distinct perceptions" (Kenny, p. 198).21 According to Kenny, Descartes is guilty of a circularity. On the one hand, Descartes tells us that what he clearly and distinctly perceives is true. On the other hand, he seems to be saying that he identifies his clear and distinct perceptions by ascertaining whether what he perceives is true (Kenny, p. 198).

To be fair to Descartes, Kenny considers what other criteria Descartes might have used in order to identify his clear and distinct perceptions. The possibilities Kenny considers are as follows:

(i) $S$ clearly and distinctly perceives $x$ if $S$ is convinced he clearly and distinctly perceives $x$ (Kenny, p. 198);
(ii) $S$ clearly and distinctly perceives $x$ if $x$ has some particular content $C$ (Kenny, p. 198), and
(iii) $S$ clearly and distinctly perceives $x$ if $S$'s perception of $x$ is produced in accordance with some particular method $M$ (Kenny, p. 198).

Let us examine Kenny's criticism of each of these possibilities.

Kenny's criticism of (i). Kenny says that clear and distinct perceptions "cannot be distinguished by the degree of conviction that they carry with them; men have died for the sake of ideas that they mistakenly believed to be clear and distinct (Kenny, p. 198)." In the Fifth Objections, Descartes replied that

---

21Emphasis mine. 22RR, II, 152.
the example of men willing to die for their beliefs "proves nothing," for "it can never be proved that they clearly and distinctly perceive what they pertenaciously affirm."23 Here Descartes is pointing out that his position is not the one Gassendi's objection attacks. Like Gassendi, Descartes thinks (i) is false.

Kenny's criticism of (ii). Turning to (ii), Kenny argues as follows:

They [clear and distinct perceptions] cannot be distinguished by their content, for though there are some topics so simple that no doubt is possible about them, there seems to be none about which no error is possible (MT VII, 476; HR II, 278) (Kenny, p. 198).

Let us look at this argument closely:

(1) It seems that, whatever the content of our perception, we can be mistaken about that content.

(2) We cannot identify our clear and distinct perceptions by their contents.

Plainly, (1) is not the premise Kenny wants. What Kenny needs is (1'):

(1') Whatever the content of our perception, we can be mistaken about that content.

According to Kenny, Descartes holds (1'). And since (1') is supposed to entail (2), which, in turn, is supposed to be inconsistent with (ii), Kenny contends that we should

23BR, II, 214.
not attribute (ii) to Descartes. Before abandoning (ii), however, we need to be sure that Kenny is right when he claims that Descartes held (1').

To show that Descartes did subscribe to (1'), Kenny adopts the following strategy. First he attempts to identify plausible candidates for perceptual contents about which we cannot be mistaken. These, he thinks, are the propositions Descartes regards as indubitable. Secondly, he tries to show that Descartes believes we can be mistaken regarding even these indubitanda. But if we can be mistaken regarding indubitanda, it would certainly seem that we can be in error regarding propositions we can doubt so that we can be mistaken about whatever proposition we perceive.

In support of his case, Kenny discusses a passage in the Seventh Objections where Descartes replies to Bourdin. Regarding this passage, Kenny says:

What is the status of the simplest truths of mathematics? Although "2 + 3 = 5" is here [the Third Meditation] presented as if it had the same first-order indubitability as "What's done cannot be undone,"24 in the First Medi-

---

24 Kenny distinguished two types of indubitability — first-order and second-order. Although Kenny does not draw his distinction precisely, we can define first- and second-order indubitability as follows:

(D1) p is first-order indubitable =df it is impossible that while attending to p, one doubts that p

(D2) p is second-order indubitable =df (i) it is impossible that while attending to q but not attending to q, one doubts that q, and q entails p

For Kenny's discussion of the distinction between first- and second-order doubt, see Kenny, pp. 163–164.
tation Descartes asks, "May not God make me go wrong whenever I add two and three?" -- and this may seem like a first-order doubt. In the Seventh Objections, Boudin told the story of a man who while half asleep heard the clock strike four and said, "The clock is going mad: it has struck one o'clock four times." Descartes said that this example "shows that a person adding two and three together can be deceived." (AT VII, 476; HR II, 278).

Once again, the passages are reconcilable if we remember that the impossibility of doubt is not the same thing as the impossibility of error. Descartes' view appears to be that if a man has added two and three together, he cannot be in any doubt about his answer, but his answer may be wrong for all that (Kenny, 180).

Kenny cites this passage to show that Descartes subscribed to (1'). But the passage does not show this much. The examples discussed are mathematical propositions. These propositions can be false even though a person cannot doubt them when attending to them. On the other hand, mathematical propositions are not second-order indubitable and are not the best candidates for being perceptual contents about which we cannot be mistaken. Presumably the best candidates would be propositions that are both first- and second-order indubitable. But are there any such propositions?

Kenny addresses this question when he asks himself:

"Are there any propositions at all that are exempt from second-order doubt?" (Kenny, p. 185). Typically the cogito is regarded as the paradigm of an indubitandum. But Kenny maintains that the cogito is not second-order indubitable (Kenny, p. 185). On the other hand, there are propositions that are second-order indubitable and are, as Kenny says, "never called into question in Descartes' system . . ." (Kenny, p. 185).25

25Emphasis mine.
These are the propositions "that express the mind's consciousness of its own thoughts and ideas. Thus, the premise "Cogito" and the presence of the idea of God are not challenged by the second-order doubt" (Kenny, pp. 185-186).

We have here Kenny's acknowledgement of a class of propositions that is both first- and second-order indubitable. The question that remains is this: Can the propositions belonging to this class be false? Descartes' reply to Bourdin in the Seventh Objections does not provide an answer, for the proposition under discussion there -- "2 + 3 = 5" -- is not second-order indubitable. On the other hand, Kenny cites no other passages in support of his claim that Descartes did not confuse the impossibility of doubt with the impossibility of error, so that for all we know, Descartes did not subscribe to (i) and did subscribe to (ii).

Kenny's criticism of (iii). Regarding (iii), Kenny argues as follows:

They [clear and distinct ideas] cannot be distinguished for certain by the method of producing them, for though the way to make one's ideas clear and distinct is "to give strenuous attention and study to them, and withdraw one's mind as far as possible from matters corporeal," yet there are some who, even after going through the Meditations a thousand times, will fail to clarify their most important ideas (AT, III, 430) (Kenny, p. 198).

Certainly there are those who will not clarify their ideas no matter how many times they have read the Meditations. But this is entirely beside the point. All Kenny's example shows:
us is that one can read without profit. It does not show that Descartes did not hold (iii).

**Kenny's defense of his interpretation.** After offering particular criticisms against (i), (ii), and (iii), Kenny argues in defense of his own view that Descartes distinguishes clear and distinct from obscure and confused perceptions by ascertaining whether they are true. Kenny says:

Time and time again Descartes rejects ideas that seem to bear all the internal marks of clarity and distinctness simply on the grounds that he does not consider them to be true. But if a man cannot tell whether his ideas are genuinely clear and distinct without knowing whether they are true, then he cannot hope to avoid error by using the method of restricting his judgement to what he clearly and distinctly perceives (Kenny, pp. 198-199).

Kenny's point here can be framed as a question: If Descartes really has a method \( M \), which functions in total independence of questions of truth, why does Descartes frequently ascertain whether his ideas are clear and distinct or obscure and confused by appealing to whether they or some corresponding proposition is true or false?

At this juncture, we are not in a position to give a definitive answer to Kenny's question, but we can give a plausible answer. \( M \) may involve a complicated procedure. To avoid circularity, Descartes must use this procedure initially. As a result, Descartes discovers that ideas \( I_1, \ldots, I_n \) are clear and distinct. Using his general principle that whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is true, he discovers that corresponding propositions \( p_1, \ldots, p_n \) are true. Suppose, then,
that Descartes wants to know whether his idea $I_{n+1}$ is clear and distinct. Descartes knows that if $I_{n+1}$ is clear and distinct, then $P_{n+1}$ is true. But suppose that Descartes realizes that $P_n$ entails that $\neg P_{n+1}$. Then Descartes knows by *modus tollens* that $I_{n+1}$ is obscure or confused. He does not need to employ $M$ in order to arrive at the same result although he could use $M$ if he chose to. Since $M$ is always available, Descartes does not need to ascertain that $P_{n+1}$ is false in order to determine that $I_{n+1}$ is obscure or confused. Even though it is true that Descartes frequently ascertains that his ideas are obscure or confused because he considers some corresponding proposition to be false, it does not follow that Descartes is guilty of a circularity.

Returning now to the main point of this section, we can see that Kenny's strategy has failed. To prove that Descartes was guilty of a circularity, Kenny attempted to show that Descartes could not have consistently held (i), (ii), or (iii). While Kenny is right about (i), he has failed to show that Descartes could not have held (ii) or (iii), so that for all we know, Descartes did identify his clear and distinct ideas independently of considerations of truth.
CHAPTER III

FRANKFURT'S DISCUSSION OF DESCARTES' ACCOUNT
OF CLEARNESS AND DISTINCTNESS

In 'Clear and Distinct Perception,' a chapter in Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen, Harry Frankfurt's main objective is to offer a satisfactory interpretation of Descartes' rule of evidence. As formulated, this rule is ambiguous; it is not clear what it is that Descartes thinks is true as a result of being clearly and distinctly perceived. Frankfurt will argue that it is clearly and distinctly perceived propositions that are true. To support his view, he will distinguish between clearly and distinctly conceiving and clearly and distinctly perceiving that such and such is the case, and he will define what he means by 'clearly and distinctly conceiving an idea' and 'clearly and distinctly perceiving that A.'

1. THE REDUCTION OF 'CLEAR AND DISTINCT CONCEPTION'

TO 'CLEAR AND DISTINCT PERCEPTION THAT'

Frankfurt begins his discussion by attempting to identify the constituents of clear and distinct perceptual acts. He notes that Descartes seems to recognize two objects of clear

---

and distinct perception -- ideas and propositions (Frankfurt, p. 128). But there are good reasons to suppose that Descartes is only speaking loosely, for if ideas as well as propositions are objects of clear and distinct perception, it appears that we cannot give a satisfactory interpretation of Descartes' rule of evidence (Frankfurt, pp. 128-130).

Descartes' Rule states that whatever we clearly and distinctly perceive is true. If concepts are among the sorts of things that are clearly and distinctly perceived, it follows that some concepts are true. But ordinarily we think that it is propositions rather than concepts that can be said to be true or false. As a result Descartes seems guilty of a linguistic confusion (Frankfurt, p. 129).

Arguing in Descartes' defense, however, Frankfurt points out that Descartes distinguishes between what he calls material and formal falsity.

For although I have pointed out that it is only in judgments that falsity, properly so-called, or formal falsity, can be found, still there surely is another kind of falsity in ideas ... material falsity ... when they represent what is not a thing as if it were a thing. . . . And . . . there can be no ideas that do not appear to be ideas of things. 2

According to Frankfurt, it makes perfectly good sense to predicate 'material truth' of both concepts and propositions. A proposition is materially true if it represents an existing state of affairs, and a concept materially true if it repre-

---

sents an existing object (Frankfurt, p. 129). We can, therefore, make good sense of Descartes' rule if we interpret his Rule as follows: whatever we clearly and distinctly perceive is materially true (Frankfurt, p. 129).

If we give Descartes' Rule this interpretation, however, Frankfurt thinks a new and more serious problem arises. I quote Frankfurt:

If clear and distinct concepts are materially true, then the existence of an object is inferable from the fact that a person has a clear and distinct conception of it. Descartes would be saddled, if this were actually his view, with the grotesque doctrine that all questions of existence can be decided by conceptual activity alone. It would be his belief that a person need only formulate a clear and distinct idea of some type of object in order to be certain that an object of that type exists.

According to this interpretation, then, Descartes is committed to an apriorism far more radical than St. Anselm's (Frankfurt, p. 130).

In Frankfurt's view, the rule that whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is materially true entails a "grotesque apriorism" which Descartes rejects in his discussion of matter in Meditation II. To be fair to Descartes, therefore, we should avoid interpreting his Rule as a guarantee of the material truth of clear and distinct perceptions.

Frankfurt thinks we can give a satisfactory interpretation once we realize that "having a clear and distinct concept is not, for Descartes, an altogether non-propositional affair" (Frankfurt, p. 131). Elaborating, Frankfurt says:

To have a clear and distinct concept of something is to perceive what characteristics necessarily belong to it. The doctrine that a clearly and distinctly conceived concept is true means only that the concept does actually
include the properties and relations perceived to be implicitly in it, and that anything that fits the concept necessarily has those properties and relations (Frankfurt, p. 131). 3

According to Frankfurt, clearly and distinctly conceiving X, where X is a concept, is a special case of clearly and distinctly perceiving that p:

(D1) A clearly and distinctly conceives X =df (y)(z)(if y exemplifies X and z is an essential property of X, then A clearly and distinctly perceives that z characterizes y)

As an example, consider the concept wax. Assume that the essence of wax is extension. According to (D1), I clearly and distinctly conceive Wax if and only if I clearly and distinctly perceive that all wax is extended.

But when I clearly and distinctly perceive that wax is extended, Descartes' Rule does not entitle me to infer, on the basis of my clear and distinct perception, that wax exists. What my Rule guarantees is the formal rather than the material truth of what I clearly and distinctly perceive. It guarantees that if there is any wax, it is extended. Descartes' Rule does not imply that whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is exemplified, and we do not have to saddle him with this sort of apriorism.

To vindicate Descartes from the charge of apriorism, Frankfurt effects a reduction. He reduces the problem of

---

3Emphasis mine.
analyzing 'clear and distinct perception' to the problem of analyzing 'clear and distinct perception that'. This reduction is justified. It allows us to avoid interpreting Descartes' Rule uncharitably. At the same time, Frankfurt's reduction is consistent with Descartes' claim that both concepts and propositions are objects of clear and distinct perception. There is a perfectly good sense in which one clearly and distinctly perceives concepts. This sense is elucidated in (D1) although at this stage (D1) is not very helpful. (D1) defines 'clear and distinct conception' in terms of 'clear and distinct perception that'. But this defining expression is itself vague. What Frankfurt must provide is a satisfactory account of what it is to perceive clearly and distinctly that such and such is the case.

II. FRANKFURT'S ANALYSIS OF 'CLEAR AND DISTINCT PERCEPTION THAT'

Frankfurt says we clearly and distinctly perceive that \( p \) if and only if we recognize that certain relations hold between \( p \) and an evidential basis for \( p \). An evidential basis for \( p \) removes all reasonable grounds for doubting that \( p \). Sometimes the evidential basis for \( p \) is another proposition \( q \) or some experience. Otherwise the evidential basis for \( p \) is \( p \) itself. In such cases \( p \) is said to be self-evident (Frankfurt, pp. 133-134).

When \( p \) is not self-evident, we need some external basis in virtue of which we recognize that \( p \) is indubitable. In
turn the evidential basis must itself be indubitable. If this basis is neither self-evident nor an experience, it must be verified by yet another evidential basis. But we cannot continue this process ad infinitum. At some point we must reach an evidential basis which suffices to establish its own indubitability. Self-evident propositions and experiences are such evidential bases. When one understands a self-evident proposition, one is in a position to recognize that it is indubitable. When one has an experience, one cannot doubt his experience, for experiences are not the sort of things one can doubt (Frankfurt, pp. 133-139).

We are now in a position to define Frankfurt's notion of an evidential basis:

(D2) \( e \) is an evidential basis for \( p \) if and only if one is in a position to clearly and distinctly perceive that \( p \) (Frankfurt, pp. 133-139).

On (D2), I cannot, while attending to a pain I am having, doubt that \( p \) -- that I am in pain. My pain constitutes an evidential basis for \( p \), and I am in a position to clearly and distinctly perceive that \( p \) (Frankfurt, pp. 135-136). I clearly perceive that \( p \) if and only if my pain is an evidential basis for \( p \).

\footnote{We allow the possibility that \( p \land \neg q \).}
and I recognize it to be so (Frankfurt, p. 136).

To distinctly perceive that \( p \), I must not confuse \( p \) with propositions whose indubitability is not established by my evidential basis. But, as Frankfurt says, "It is possible to recognize that something is certain without understanding exactly what it is that is certain . . . " (Frankfurt, p. 139). I might, for example, think that \( p \) is equivalent to \( q \) — "I have a pain in my leg," so that my evidential basis for \( p \) establishes the indubitability of \( q \) as well. As a result my clear perception becomes confused. \( q \) entails "I have a leg," a proposition I can reasonably doubt even while attending to my pain (Frankfurt, p. 136).

To avoid making my clear perception confused, I must come to understand \( p \) fully. I fully understand \( p \) when, for all \( r \), if \( p \) entails \( r \), I understand that \( p \) entails \( r \). Having an exhaustive list of \( p \)'s entailments, I know exactly what it is that my experience of pain conclusively establishes. My clear perception that \( p \) is also distinct (Frankfurt, p. 136). Accordingly, we can formulate Frankfurt's definitions of clearness and distinctness as follows:

\( (D3) \) a clearly perceives that \( p =_{df} \) (B): \( a \) is an evidential basis for \( p \), and \( a \) recognizes that \( a \) is an evidential basis for \( p \) \) (Frankfurt, pp. 134 and 137)

\( (D4) \) a distinctly perceives that \( p =_{df} a \) clearly perceives that \( p \), and (e) \( \varepsilon \) if \( a \) clearly perceives that \( p \) on the
basis of $e$, then $\{a$ understands that $(\varphi) (e$ entails $\varphi$ if and only if $p$ entails $\varphi)\} \text{ and } (x) (if e entails x, then a understands that e entails x)$ (Frankfurt, p. 137)

III. ANALYSIS OF (D2) - (D4)

(D4) contains a peculiar usage of the term 'entails'. The variable '$e$' ranges over evidential bases. These bases are either propositions or experiences. One distinctly perceives that $p$ only if he understands that $p$ entails all and only what is entailed by his evidential basis for $p$. If his evidential basis is an experience, he must understand that $p$ entails all and only what is entailed by his experience. But it is propositions, not experiences, that have entailments. This difficulty is easily resolved, however. We need only substitute for 'entails' the words 'excludes all reasonable grounds for doubting'. This terminology already appears in (D2), and its usage there would allow us to say that experiences and propositions can exclude all reasonable grounds for doubting that $p$.

On Frankfurt's analysis, both 'clearness' and 'distinctness' are defined in terms of 'having a basis for excluding all reasonable grounds for doubting that $p$'. As Frankfurt says, "Clear and distinct perception is a matter of recognizing that there are no reasonable grounds on which a proposition can be doubted" (Frankfurt, p. 135). But what is involved in recognizing that there are no reasonable grounds for
doubting that \( p \). Something more than the subjective conviction is needed if Descartes is to avoid charges of psychologism.

Although Frankfurt does not provide an effective procedure for ascertaining when we have a basis that excludes all reasonable grounds for doubting that \( p \), his discussion of self-evident propositions suggests a direction we might pursue. Frankfurt says, "Even the clear and distinct perception of a self-evident proposition involves more than apprehending the proposition itself; it requires recognizing that no possible state of affairs is inconsistent with the proposition" (Frankfurt, p. 134). Frankfurt is speaking loosely here. Propositions are inconsistent with propositions and states of affairs incompatible with states of affairs. In speaking loosely of states of affairs, however, Frankfurt seems to be acknowledging that both experiences and propositions can be grounds for doubting that \( p \).

As far as propositions are concerned, we can state Frankfurt's view in the following way:

\[(D5) \quad q \text{ is a reasonable ground for doubting that } p = \text{df } \exists \] is consistent, and the conjunction of \( p \) and \( q \) entails a contradiction.

Experiences can also be reasonable grounds for doubting thatalthough the situation is slightly more complicated:

\[(D6) \quad \text{an experience } E \text{ is a reasonable ground for doubting that } p = \text{df } (E) \text{ (} q \text{ represents } E, \text{ and the conjunction} \]
of \( p \) and \( q \) entails a contradiction\(^5\)

Having (D5) and (D6), we are in a position to define what it is for a proposition or an experience to exclude all reasonable grounds for doubting that \( p \). In the case of propositions, we can say:

(D7) \( q \) excludes all reasonable grounds for doubting that

\[ p \equiv df \left( \neg \left( \exists r \right) \left[ (q \land r) \right] \right. \text{ is consistent, but } \left( p \land r \right) \text{ is inconsistent} \]

In the case of experiences, we can say:

(D8) An experience \( E \) excludes all reasonable grounds for doubting that \( p \equiv df \left( \neg \left( \exists r \right) \left[ (q \land r) \right] \right. \text{ is consistent, but } \left( p \land r \right) \text{ is inconsistent} \]

Combining (D7) and (D8), we can say that \( x \) -- an experience or a proposition -- excludes all reasonable grounds for doubting that \( p \) provided that there is no state of affairs or proposition compatible with \( x \), but incompatible with \( p \) or the state of affairs \( p \) represents.

IV. DEGREES OF CLEAR AND DISTINCT PERCEPTION THAT

Having set forth his definition of 'clearness' and 'distinctness', Frankfurt recognizes that his analysis is

\(^{5}\) In (D6), I use the term 'represents' loosely. Strictly speaking, propositions represent possible states of affairs, not experiences. But for every experience \( E \), there is a person \( A \), having \( E \). A's having \( E \) is a state of affairs, and there is a state of affairs corresponding to every experience. In (D6), "\( q \) represents \( E \)" means "there is a state of affairs \( S \) such that \( E \) corresponds to \( E \), and \( q \) represents \( S \). The same usage of 'represents' appears in (D8) below.
problematic in part. Frankfurt says Descartes holds to the view that both clarity and distinctness are matters of degree (Frankfurt, pp. 139-140). One can perceive that \( p \) more or less clearly, and one can perceive that \( p \) more or less distinctly. When we look at Frankfurt's definitions, however, we see that (D4) allows for degrees of distinctness but that (D3) does not allow for degrees of clarity.

Speaking loosely, we can say that (D4) implies that one distinctly perceives that \( p \) only if everything entailed by his evidential basis for \( p \) is understood by him to be entailed by his evidential basis for \( p \). Whatever my evidential basis \( \xi \) for \( p \), \( \xi \) entails an infinite set of propositions \( E = E_1, E_2, \ldots \). I distinctly perceive that \( p \) only if I understand that \( \xi \) entails \( p \), that \( \xi \) entails \( E_1 \), that \( \xi \) entails \( E_2 \), and so on ad infinitum. But as a finite being, I cannot understand this much (Frankfurt, p. 143). On the other hand, there are finite subsets of \( E \). Some of these subsets will have \( p \) as a member, and of these subsets, some will have more members than others. If \( K \) is the set having just \( p \) and \( E_1 \) as members, I can understand that \( \xi \) entails \( p \) and that \( \xi \) entails \( E_1 \). Then I understand this much, I perceive that \( p \) with a certain degree of distinctness.

The degree to which I distinctly perceive that \( p \) can vary, however. I can, for example, make my perception that \( p \) more distinct if I come to understand that \( \xi \) entails \( E_2 \) as well as \( p \) and \( E_1 \). As Frankfurt defines 'distinctness', we do
perceive more or less distinctly so that Descartes' view that distinctness is a matter of degree is preserved.

When we turn to Frankfurt's definition of clearness, however, we encounter difficulties. Although Descartes holds both clarity and distinctness to be a matter of degree, we cannot, on (D3), perceive that p more or less clearly. The evidential basis for p either does or does not exclude all reasonable grounds for doubting that p. Either my perception of p is perfectly clear or it is obscure. As a result, (D3) is inconsistent with Descartes' view that there are degrees of clarity.

To resolve this difficulty, Frankfurt argues that Descartes uses the term 'clearness' in two different senses. (D3) elucidates the first sense. In the second sense, a person clearly perceives that p when everything entailed by p is known by him to be entailed by g (Frankfurt, p. 141). But as we noted above, one can clearly perceive that p although he may not understand exactly what p entails. His evidential basis may justify his believing a proposition he does not fully understand. To fully understand p, one must have what Descartes calls adequate knowledge:

(D9) $S$ adequately knows that $p \equiv_d (q)$ (if p entails q, then $S$ knows that p entails q) (Frankfurt, pp. 141-143).

In this sense, a person's perception that p can be more or less clear depending on the extent to which p's entailments are

---

6See p. 94 above.
known by him to be entailed by p. In this second sense, clarity is, as Descartes maintains, a matter of degree.

V. THE MINIMAL REQUIREMENT FOR CLEAR AND DISTINCT PERCEPTION

Having shown that both clearness and distinctness are matters of degree, Frankfurt acknowledges another problem with his account. In the sense in which clearness is a matter of degree, one clearly perceives that p only if everything entailed by p is understood by him to be entailed by p. Similarly one distinctly perceives that p only if everything entailed by his evidential basis for p is understood by him to be entailed by that evidential basis. In both cases adequate knowledge is required. But adequate knowledge is a level of knowledge we cannot attain (Frankfurt, p. 143). Human beings always fall short of perfect clear and distinct perception and must settle for something less. But how much less?

What is needed is a minimum requirement for clear and distinct perception. We need to be able to ascertain those features of clear and distinct perception that suffice to allow Descartes' rule of evidence to apply without error (Frankfurt, p. 144). According to Frankfurt, one's perception is minimally clear if and only if one recognizes that his evidential basis removes all reasonable grounds for doubting that p. To have a minimally clear perception that p, one must clearly perceive that p in the sense in which clear perception is not a matter of degree (Frankfurt, p. 144).
Distinctness is always a matter of degree, however, and in Frankfurt's view, we cannot fix its minimal requirement. Frankfurt says:

The sensible response is that this problem admits of no general solution; it calls for an exercise of judgement in each case. The appropriate degree of distinctness will always be a function of the uses to which the proposition in question is to be put, and of the confusions concerning it that seem likely to be troublesome (Frankfurt, pp. 144-145).

VI. CRITICISM OF FRANKFURT'S ACCOUNT

Criticism 1. Frankfurt is right when he claims that we clearly and distinctly conceive only if we clearly and distinctly perceive that p, for some p. A close reading of Descartes supports this view, and textual support seems to me to be the best defense of an interpretation. Although no additional defense is needed, Frankfurt makes use of an argument I find unconvincing.

Frankfurt's argument can be summarized as follows: If we do not define 'clear and distinct conception' in terms of 'clear and distinct perception that', we are forced to interpret Descartes' Rule as a rule that guarantees the material truth of what is clearly and distinctly perceived. But if we give Descartes' Rule such an interpretation, we saddle him with an apriorism he probably did not hold. To be fair to Descartes, therefore, we need an analysis of clearness and distinctness that is consistent with the view that Descartes' Rule guarantees the formal truth of what is clearly and distinctly perceived.
Frankfurt's argument is unconvincing. According to Frankfurt, we would be treating Descartes uncharitably if we attributed to him the view that his Rule guarantees the material truth of what is clearly and distinctly perceived. At first glance, Frankfurt's point seems obvious. On Frankfurt's view, an idea is, by definition, materially true if and only if it is exemplified. This definition of 'material truth' is derived from a passage cited earlier.\(^7\) In this passage Descartes does not define 'material truth'. Rather he states a sufficient condition for an idea to be materially false. He says that ideas are materially false "when they represent what is not a thing as if it were a thing. . . ."

Although Descartes does not define 'material falsity' here, I will grant for the sake of argument that Descartes holds (D 10):

\[(D 10) \text{An idea } i \text{ is materially false } =_{df} i \text{ represents what is not a thing as if it were a thing}\]

Since it is natural to suppose that 'material falsity' and 'material truth' are contradictories, we can define a materially true idea as follows:

\[(D 11) \text{An idea } i \text{ is materially true } =_{df} i \text{ is not materially false}\]

(D 11) is ambiguous, however. Frankfurt thinks it means (D 11a):

\[\text{7 See p. 89 above.}\]
(D 11a) An idea \( i \) is materially true \( \Leftrightarrow \) \( df i \) represents what is a thing as if it were a thing.

If we adopt (D 11a) as the correct interpretation of (D 11) and if Descartes' Rule does guarantee the material truth of what is clearly and distinctly perceived, then his Rule seems to guarantee that the object of clear and distinct perception exists.

But (D 11) can also be interpreted as (D 11b):

(D 11b) An idea \( i \) is materially true \( \Leftrightarrow \) \( df i \) represents what is not a thing as if it were not a thing.

Both (D 11a) and (D 11b) have peculiarities. On both interpretations, 'material truth' and 'material falsity' are not contradictories. If we accept (D 11a), those ideas that represent what is not a thing as if it were not a thing are not materially true, and those ideas that represent what is a thing as if it were not a thing are not materially false. My ideas can misrepresent without being materially false and correctly represent without being materially true. On (D 11b), the material truth and falsity of concepts is not analogous to the formal truth and falsity of propositions. Since every concept representing what is a thing is neither true nor false, the law of excluded middle does not hold for concepts.

I do not know how to decide between (D 11a) and (D 11b), and I am not claiming that (D 11b) is right. My only point is that Frankfurt has not shown (D 11b) to be false. According to (D 11b), an idea is materially true just in case it
satisfies two conditions: it must represent what is not a thing and it must represent it as nonexistent. There is nothing in either of these conditions that implies that the object of a materially true idea exists. If, then, Descartes' Rule guarantees the material truth of clearly and distinctly perceived ideas, it does not follow that Descartes is committed to an apriorism.

Criticism 2. Gassendi claims Descartes failed to provide a method for ascertaining when we are clearly and distinctly perceiving. This problem emerges again when we look at Frankfurt's definitions of clearness and distinctness. To clearly and distinctly perceive that \( p \), we must recognize that an evidential basis for \( p \) excludes all reasonable grounds for doubting that \( p \). But how can we be sure that what we think we recognize to be an evidential basis for \( p \) really excludes all reasonable grounds for doubting that \( p \)? We need a decision procedure, but Frankfurt does not provide one.

Criticism 3. Like Gewirth, Frankfurt thinks clearness and distinctness are matters of degree. The best we can have is minimally clear and distinct perception. But on Frankfurt's interpretation, the minimal requirement for distinctness depends on what is appropriate under the circumstances. "It calls for an exercise of judgement in each case." For Frankfurt, there is no effective procedure for deciding which

\[^3\text{See p. 101 above.}\]
ceptions are minimally distinct. Without such a procedure, however, we can never be sure that we are perceiving with a degree of distinctness appropriate to the circumstances. As a result Frankfurt's interpretation makes Descartes vulnerable to Gassendi's criticism.

Frankfurt sets out to give an account of clearness and distinctness that permits a charitable interpretation of Descartes' Rule. But the net result is uncharitable. Frankfurt saves Descartes from apriorism by leaving him vulnerable to Gassendi's charges. A satisfactory and charitable account of clearness and distinctness still needs to be provided.
CHAPTER IV

E. J. ASHWORTH'S ACCOUNT OF CLEARNESS
AND DISTINCTNESS IN DESCARTES

E. J. Ashworth's article on clarity and distinctness in Descartes is basically critical. Ashworth thinks that Descartes equivocated on the terms 'clear' and 'distinct' and that his rule of evidence cannot be adequately defended. In Sections I through IV, I discuss and criticize Ashworth's arguments to show that Descartes equivocated on the term 'clear'. In sections V through X, I do the same thing with respect to Ashworth's discussion of distinctness. Finally in sections XI and XII, I consider Ashworth's criticism of Descartes' rule of evidence.

I. TWO MEANINGS OF 'CLARITY'

Ashworth thinks Descartes equivocates on the term 'clear'. Descartes believes that every idea is either clear or obscure. The class of ideas is not coextensive with the class of concepts; however. Any content of consciousness is for Descartes an idea (Ashworth, p. 92). As a result, both sensations and concepts are ideas, and both can be said to be clear or obscure. The...

---

question is: "When Descartes predicates 'clarity' of both concepts and sensations, is he using this word in the same sense?"

In defining 'clearness' Descartes draws an analogy between perception and eyesight (Ashworth, p. 96). Ashworth believes that this analogy shows a clear perception to be "some kind of immediate awareness about which we cannot be mistaken" (Ashworth, p. 96). But if we view clear perception in this way, problems arise. Since we are immediately aware of every concept we reflect upon, a simple act of reflection would enable us to perceive clearly any concept whatever (Ashworth, p. 97). ²

Although Descartes' analogy between perception and eyesight seems to support the conclusion that all ideas are clearly perceived, his discussion of fictional ideas supports the opposite conclusion. Descartes believes that fictional ideas can be clearly or obscurely perceived depending on whether they are understood or misunderstood. If we understand a fictional idea, we are able to give a "full definition" of a term expressing that idea (Ashworth, pp. 98-99). A full definition is an enumeration of terms denoting all and only essential properties of the object our concept represents (Ashworth, pp. 98-99). Experience shows us that we are at times unable to give full definitions. Since we have concepts we do not understand, we can obscurely perceive some ideas we reflect upon. Despite Descartes' analogy, we can avoid

²For a more comprehensive treatment of the same point, see the chapter on Gewirth, pp. 4-6 above.
saddling Descartes with the view that all ideas are clearly perceived if we take clarity to be a function of understanding.

Ashworth counters that we are trading one problem for another. In defending Descartes from the charge that all ideas are clearly perceived, we make him vulnerable to a charge of equivocation. 'Clarity' seems to have two different senses. There is the clarity of sensations and the clarity of concepts. Ashworth thinks that Descartes' analogy between clear perception and eyesight shows clear perception of a sense datum to be a matter of immediate awareness. Since I am immediately aware of all my sensations, I clearly perceive every sense datum I am having.

Clear perception of a concept involves more than immediate awareness, however. Analysis is required. I must analyze my idea into constituents representing all and only essential properties of the objects of my idea. But such analysis involves more than immediate awareness. When predicated of concepts, 'clarity' has one meaning; when predicated of sense data, it has another (Ashworth, pp. 98-99).

II. DOES DESCARTES' ANALOGY SUPPORT ASHWORTH'S INTERPRETATION?

If the clear perception of a sense datum were a matter of immediate awareness, Descartes would be guilty of using 'clarity' inconsistently. But the analogy between clear perception and eyesight allows for more charitable interpret-
ations. Descartes says:

I term that clear which is present and apparent to an attentive mind, in the same way as we assert that we see objects clearly when, being present to the regarding eye, they operate upon it with sufficient strength (Ashworth, p. 96).

Ashworth is right when he claims that we are immediately aware of our sensations. But in the above quotation Descartes does not compare a clearly perceived idea with a clearly perceived sensation. Instead, he compares a clearly perceived idea with a clearly perceived object -- the sort of thing that is presented to an eye but not to a mind. We are not tempted to think that we clearly perceive every object presented to our regarding eye. The object must "operate" upon the eye with "sufficient strength."

It is easy to imagine cases where the object of perception does not operate with sufficient strength upon the regarding eye. If I am driving on a foggy night and see something in the road before me, an object is present to my regarding eye. But, ordinarily, I would not be inclined to assert that I see that object clearly. In fact, if asked, I would deny that I see it clearly. After all, I cannot even make out enough features to tell whether what I am observing is a man, a woman, a deer, or a rock. Descartes' analogy does not support the conclusion that all ideas are clearly perceived.

Moreover, his analogy does not support the conclusion that clear perception is a matter of immediate awareness. Obscure perceptions can be made clear if the proper procedure
is followed. If I slowly approach the object in the road and turn on my parking lights, I may be able to identify what I see as a man. First I notice that the figure is human. Then I observe other features, and I am prepared to assert that what I see is a man. My assertion depends on a process of classification and inference. More than immediate awareness is involved.

Ashworth's interpretation of Descartes' analogy is uncharitable. If we accept Ashworth's interpretation, we saddle Descartes with an inconsistency. If clear perception is a matter of immediate awareness, then all ideas are clearly perceived -- a view Descartes expressly denies. We need not accept Ashworth's interpretation, however. The text admits a plausible and more charitable alternative, and in fairness to Descartes, we should adopt the most charitable interpretation available.

III. WHY ASHWORTH INTERPRETS DESCARTES' ANALOGY UNCHARITABLY

I think I can offer a reasonable guess as to why Ashworth gives an uncharitable reading of Descartes' analogy. Strictly speaking, Descartes never perceives external objects. The objects of perception are always mental entities -- surrogates for external objects. As a result, one might be led to think that the object seen clearly when present to the regarding eye is an object of consciousness, an object of
which we are immediately aware. But the object Descartes is referring to is an object that is present to a regarding eye, and objects of consciousness are not such objects. Objects of consciousness are present to a regarding mind, not to a regarding eye.

In the passage cited above, 3 Descartes is speaking loosely. He is, after all, drawing an analogy. Analogies are useful when they draw on something familiar to help one to understand something unfamiliar. In the above passage, Descartes uses the first person plural. He is talking to his reader and referring his reader to a familiar experience—the experience of asserting that an object is clearly seen. In unreflective moments Descartes himself has made such assertions, and he reviews with his reader the conditions under which such assertions are ordinarily made. There are three conditions.

(1) the eye is regarding;
(2) the object is present to the eye, and
(3) the object operates upon the eye with sufficient strength.

Presumably, these three conditions are analogous to the three conditions Descartes spells out in his definition of clarity: the regarding eye is analogous to the attentive mind; the object being present to the eye is analogous to the

3See p. 110 above.
object of consciousness being present in the mind, and the object operating upon the eye with sufficient strength is analogous to the object of consciousness being apparent to the mind. In the example I gave of driving on a foggy night, the object did not operate on my eye with sufficient strength; I could not make out its identifying features. It had these features all along, but they did not appear to me. Using Gewirth's terminology, we could say that the object was not "open" to my inspection. What I needed to do was to get a closer look ... to scrutinize the object more carefully.

Analogously, ideas have contents that are not always open to the mind's immediate inspection. Further scrutiny or analysis is needed. For an idea to be apparent to the mind, the mind may have to perform operations that reveal the contents of the idea. Immediate awareness is not enough.

Ashworth probably misinterpreted Descartes' analogy because he knew that Descartes believed that, strictly speaking, we never perceive physical objects. On the other hand, I do not think Ashworth would so readily have overlooked what Descartes actually said if independent considerations did not seem to him to support the view that clear perception is a matter of immediate awareness.

IV. MORE ARGUMENTS IN DEFENSE OF ASHWORTH'S INTERPRETATION

Ashworth's interpretation of Descartes' analogy entails
that all ideas are clearly perceived. Although I think I have argued convincingly that Descartes' analogy allows for a more charitable interpretation, Ashworth thinks that his view is supported by additional evidence which I have not, as yet, considered. Ashworth says:

Such an interpretation is easily supported, for Descartes speaks of the jaundiced man who sees snow clearly and distinctly as yellow, and he remarks, "We have a clear or distinct knowledge of pain, colour, and other things of the sort when we consider them simply as sensations or thoughts." He appeals to the example of severe pain to show how a perception may be clear without being distinct (Ashworth, p. 96).

Ashworth refers to three separate passages here. Let us consider each in turn.

The jaundiced man. There is a footnote error in Ashworth's article. The reader is referred to page forty-three of Haldane and Ross, volume II (Ashworth, p. 96). But there is no mention of a jaundiced man on this page. There is such a reference on the preceding page, however. I assume this is the passage to which Ashworth is referring.

The passage reads as follows:

It is indeed clear that no one possesses such (perfect) certainty in those cases where there is the very least confusion and obscurity in our perception; for this uncertainty, of whatever sort it be, is sufficient to make us doubt here. In matters perceived by sense alone, however, clearly, certainty does not exist, because we have often noted that error can occur in sensation, as in the instance of the thirst of the dropsical man, or when one who is jaundiced sees snow as yellow; for he sees it thus with no less clearness and distinctness than we see it as white. If, then, any certitude does exist, it remains that it must be found only in the clear perceptions of the
Although Descartes "sneaks in" the 'jaundiced man who sees snow clearly and distinctly as yellow," he is not saying that the jaundiced man's perception is clear and distinct. Rather, he is using the case of the jaundiced man to show us that we cannot trust our senses. What Descartes is saying is that the jaundiced man sees as clearly and distinctly as the normal person but that the normal person's sense perceptions are obscure and confused. Ashworth is mistaken. Descartes does not use the jaundiced man example to show that sensation is a model of clarity. On the contrary, his example shows that sensation is a model for obscure and confused perception.

Another consideration shows Ashworth's view of the jaundiced man to be wrong. It follows from Ashworth's interpretation that Descartes is implicitly denying his own rule of evidence. Ashworth's interpretation draws heavily upon Descartes' claim that the jaundiced man sees with no less clearness and distinctness than the normal person. This claim seems to imply that both the jaundiced man and the normal observer perceive clearly and distinctly. But if we adopt this interpretation of Descartes' remarks, we face the following difficulty. Although both the jaundiced man and the normal observer perceive clearly and distinctly, they hold contrary beliefs that cannot both be true. But Descartes' Rule assures us that whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived

---

4 AR, II, 42.
is true. Therefore, Descartes' Rule is false.

This difficulty is avoided once we realize that Descartes is not saying that sense perceptions are clear and distinct per se. Clearness and distinctness are matters of degree. The healthy person's perception has very little clearness and distinctness. In other words, it is very obscure and confused, and there is no reason to suppose that Descartes' Rule should apply to very obscure and confused perceptions.

Clear and distinct perceptions fall under Descartes' Rule when a minimum requirement is met. Only clear perceptions of the intellect meet this requirement. The jaundiced man example does not show us that sense perception is for Descartes a model for clarity. On the contrary, it is a model for perception that fails to meet the minimal requirement.

Clear and distinct knowledge of pain and color. To support the view that clear perception is a matter of immediate awareness about which we cannot be mistaken, Ashworth cited a second passage — a sentence from Principle LXVIII of the Principles: "We have a clear and distinct knowledge of pain, colour, and other things of the sort when we consider them simply as sensations or thoughts" (Ashworth, p. 96). I do not see how this passage supports Ashworth's view. The passage cites a sufficient condition for having clear and distinct knowledge. It cites neither a necessary nor a
sufficient condition for having clear and distinct perception. But even if we ignore the distinction between clear and distinct knowledge and clear and distinct perception, the passage does not entail any of Ashworth's claims. Descartes' point seems to be that our sense perceptions are clear and distinct or obscure and confused depending on what we "consider them as." By itself, my sense perception is neither clear nor obscure, distinct nor confused. Clarity and distinctness enter the picture only when we reflect upon our sensations and make judgements about them. Ashworth is mistaken. Clarity is not just a matter of immediate awareness.

Ashworth is also wrong when he claims we cannot be mistaken about our sensations. Principle LXVIII suggests we can. Instead of making the informed judgement that my pain is a sensation or thought, I could judge that my pain is in my foot. There is nothing in my immediate awareness of pain that forces me to judge correctly about my pain.

Why Ashworth might have thought Principle LXVIII supports his interpretation. Although the passage Ashworth cites does not support his interpretation, we can speculate as to why he thought it did. I suspect Ashworth thinks Descartes is

---

6 See my discussion, pp. 68-71 above.
7 See Gewirth on this point, pp. 7-8 above.
8 See Frankfurt on this point, pp. 90-91 above.
9 See Principle LXXI, BR 1, 249-250.
giving us a warning in the passage cited. He is warning us to confine our judgement to what we are immediately aware of. Since a pain is a sensation or thought, we are immediately aware of a sensation or thought whenever we are in pain. In judging that our pain is a sensation, we confine our judgement to what we are immediately aware of, and we avoid error. In some sense, clear and distinct perception appears to be a matter of immediate awareness. But in what sense?

The sense in which clarity is now a matter of immediate awareness is not the sense Ashworth wants, for clarity is now a matter of confining our judgement to contents of which we are immediately aware. Since we are not forced to restrain our judgement in this way, we can have perceptions about which we are mistaken. If Descartes is warning us to restrain our judgement in Principle LXVIII, his warning does not support Ashworth's account of clarity.

Severe pains. The last passage Ashworth cites in support of his interpretation comes from Principle XLVI. Here Descartes says: "When, for instance, a severe pain is felt, the perception of this pain may be very clear, and yet for all that not distinct..." Ashworth does not indicate why

10 We may be immediately aware of a sensation or thought without recognizing that it is a sensation or thought we are immediately aware of.

11 MS I, 237.
he believes this passage supports his view so, once again, we are forced to conjecture about Ashworth's reasoning.

Since Principle XLVI immediately follows Descartes' definition of clearness and distinctness, I suspect Ashworth takes Descartes to be elaborating on his analogy between clarity and sensation. It seems natural to interpret this elaboration in the following way: When I have a severe pain, my perception is clear; when I have a mild pain, my perception is obscure. Viewed in this way, clarity of sense perception seems to be a function of the intensity of sensation, and this intensity is part of our immediate awareness when we sense.

If the preceding interpretation of Principle XLVI is one Ashworth accepts, it does not go far enough. Although we now have a perfectly good sense in which clarity can be said to be a matter of immediate awareness, problems arise with two other theses Ashworth holds. These theses are (i) that we cannot be mistaken about what we clearly perceive and (ii) that all ideas are clear.

Descartes explicitly denies (i) in Principle XLVI itself. He says we can make false judgements about a clearly perceived severe pain. Whether our pain is severe or mild, we can make the mistake of thinking our pain is in our foot. Judgement about one's sensation is independent of the intensity of the sensation felt. If intensity of sensation determines clarity, then it appears that clarity is a matter of immediate awareness about which we can be mistaken.
Turning to Ashworth's second claim, we find that we do have unclear ideas. Sense perceptions can vary in intensity. Pain can be severe or mild. If intensity of sensation determines clarity, then a person having a mild pain is having an obscure perception, and Ashworth is wrong to claim that all ideas are clear.

I have tried to formulate an interpretation of Principle XLVI that would explain why Ashworth thinks this principle supports his view. In criticizing the interpretation presented, I may be criticizing a line of reasoning that is not Ashworth's. But since Ashworth does not tell us why he thinks Principle XLVI supports his view, this is the best I can do.

V. ASHWORTH'S ACCOUNT OF 'DISTINCTNESS'

Ashworth thinks Descartes' use of 'distinctness' is as vague and inconsistent as his use of 'clarity' (Ashworth, p. 99). "Usually, the predicate 'distinct' seems to suggest two things: that the idea in question is complete, and that we have an adequate basis for making some sort of judgement, though only the second applies to ideas of sensations" (Ashworth, p. 99). Here Ashworth is trying to elucidate Descartes' usual usage of 'distinctness'. But even Descartes' ordinary usage is inconsistent. When predicated of sensations, 'distinctness' has one meaning; when predicated of concepts, it has another.12 Every distinctly perceived sensation must satisfy two condi-

12 Throughout his article Ashworth speaks loosely about...
tions: it must be complete, and it must provide an adequate basis for judgement. A distinctly perceived concept must satisfy only one of these conditions, however: it must be complete.

VI. ASHWORTH'S JAUNDICED MAN CRITICISM OF DESCARTES' ACCOUNT OF DISTINCTNESS

Ashworth claims that there are other equivocations besides the one that appears in Descartes' ordinary use of 'distinctness'. To illustrate his point, Ashworth refers us to Descartes' jaundiced man. Ashworth thinks Descartes is telling us that the jaundiced man perceives distinctly. But the jaundiced man cannot be perceiving distinctly in the sense in which a distinct perception is one that provides an adequate basis for judgement, for the jaundiced man judges falsely on the basis of what he perceives. In predicating 'distinctness' of the jaundiced man's perception, Descartes appears to be departing from his ordinary usage. The jaundiced man perceives distinctly in the sense that he is able to distinguish the snow from the people walking in it (Ashworth, p. 99).

The objects of clear and distinct perception. When it is sensations that are clear and distinct, he sometimes says it is ideas of sensation or ideas as sensations that are clear and distinct. When it is concepts that are clear and distinct, he sometimes says it is ideas of concepts or ideas as concepts that are clear and distinct. See Ashworth, p. 100. Ashworth's confusion arises from his view that all objects of consciousness are ideas so that both sensations and concepts are ideas (see p. 100 above). On this analysis there are ideas as sensations and ideas as concepts. But we can drop the cumbersome "ideas as" locution and speak simply of clear and distinct sensations and clear and distinct concepts if we keep in mind that both sensations and concepts have contents.
If Descartes were in fact claiming that the jaundiced man perceives distinctly, then we would have to concede that Descartes is using 'distinctness' equivocally. But as I pointed out earlier, Descartes is not making such a claim. When properly understood, Descartes' point is this: the jaundiced man's sense perception is as confused as the normal person's. And this claim is certainly consistent with what Ashworth believes is Descartes' usual use of 'distinctness'.

VII. ASHWORTH'S CRITICISM OF DESCARTES' ACCOUNT OF COMPLETENESS

If Ashworth is giving a correct analysis of Descartes' typical use of 'distinctness', we cannot understand what Descartes means by 'distinctness' until we know what he means by 'completeness'. But Ashworth thinks Descartes' treatment of completeness is so confused that Descartes does not even know whether it is clear or distinct ideas that are complete (Ashworth, p. 100). To illustrate Descartes' confusion, Ashworth tries to show that Descartes believes there are some clear ideas that are complete. Ashworth argues as follows:

But other remarks suggest that it is clearness rather than distinctness that entails completeness for he [Descartes] claims that we can have a distinct understanding of duration, order, and number if we do not mingle with these ideas what belongs to the conception of substance. Presumably a complete idea, since it is of a complete object, would have to include the defining characteristics of substance (Ashworth, p. 100).

13 See pp. 114-116 above.
Ashworth's argument does not support the conclusion he wants. Instead of supporting the conclusion that some clear ideas are complete, it supports the conclusion that some distinct ideas are incomplete.

Descartes does believe there are complete clear ideas, however. Every distinct idea is for Descartes clear\( ^{14} \) so that there are at least as many complete clear ideas as there are distinct ideas. Because both clear ideas and distinct ideas can be complete, Ashworth thinks Descartes is confused about what it is that is complete. But there is no confusion in thinking that two types of ideas have a property in common.

A difficulty would arise if Descartes thought completeness was the defining characteristic of both clear ideas and distinct ideas, for then these two types of ideas would be indistinguishable. But there is nothing in Descartes' admission that there are clear complete ideas that suggests that completeness is the defining feature, or even a defining feature, of clear ideas.

VIII. ANOTHER POSSIBLE EQUIVOCATION ON DESCARTES' USE OF 'DISTINCTNESS'

Although Ashworth has not succeeded in showing Descartes to be confused about completeness, his argument resurrects the criticism that Descartes is guilty of an equivocation. If Descartes' ideas of duration, order, and number can be both

\( ^{14} \)HR I, 237.
distinct and incomplete, then Descartes is deviating from what is supposed to be his typical use of 'distinctness'. But are distinct ideas of duration, order, and number incomplete? Ashworth argues as follows:

(1) Someone, A, has a distinct idea of duration, order and number. -- Assumption

(2) A complete idea is an idea of a complete object. -- Premise\textsuperscript{15}

(3) An idea of duration, order, or number is not an idea of a complete object. -- Premise\textsuperscript{16}

(4) A's ideas of duration, order, and number are both distinct and incomplete. -- (1) - (3)

Ashworth develops this argument on the strength of Principle LV.\textsuperscript{17} In Principle LV Descartes tells us that one can have a distinct idea of duration, order, or number so that (1) is an assumption that can be discharged. (3) seems to be analytically true.\textsuperscript{18} So the only premise remaining open to question is (2).

\textit{Ashworth's defense of (2)}. Ashworth argues in defense of (2) in the following way:

\textsuperscript{15}See p. 122 above.

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17}BR I, 141.

\textsuperscript{18}In (3), 'number' is synonymous with its usage in the expression 'a number of x's'.
To have a complete idea of an object is to include within that idea all the defining characteristics of the object in question, or only those characteristics which cannot be denied of it without contradiction. If these are all included, then the object itself is viewed as complete for it can exist as an independent entity (Ashworth, p. 94). This argument does not support (2). Ashworth is defining what it is to be a complete idea of an object. But what Ashworth needs is a definition of what it is to be a complete idea.

Ashworth seems to give us the definition we need in a passage that refers to the one just cited. He says: "These remarks [on clarity] are reminiscent of the account he [Descartes] has already given of a complete idea as containing all, and presumably only, defining characteristics. . . ." (Ashworth, p. 98). We have a discrepancy here. In the first passage the term defined was 'being a complete idea of an object'. In the second passage the term defined is 'being a complete idea'. Yet the second passage is supposed to review for us what is said in the first passage. 19

We can resolve his discrepancy in one of two ways: either Ashworth is saying precisely what he intends to say in the second passage or he is speaking elliptically. If we adopt the second alternative, then the second passage reiterates Ashworth's definition of 'being a complete idea of an object', and we have a definition that is not germane to a defense of (2).

---

19 There are actually two discrepancies in the passages cited. The second passage qualifies Ashworth's original account of completeness.
If we adopt the first alternative, Ashworth is giving us a definition of 'being a complete idea' in the second passage, and the first passage simply instantiates this definition for objects. On this interpretation, we get the following definition of 'completeness':

(D) \( x \) is a complete idea =df \( x \) contains all and only defining features of what \( x \) represents

(D) does not support (2), however. (D) is consistent with the possibility that there are complete ideas that are not complete ideas of objects.

Our ideas of duration, order, and number are such ideas. Although complete, they are not complete ideas of objects. We know that the essential properties of substance — extension and thought — are not part of the essence of duration, order, or number. If we include Extension and Thought in our concepts of these attributes, we render our concepts incomplete. But if we exclude Extension and Thought and include all and only essential features of duration, order, and number, our ideas are complete. Yet these complete ideas are ideas of attributes rather than complete ideas of objects. If (D) is the definition Ashworth means to give us, then (2) is false.

On other defenses of (2). Perhaps Ashworth could develop another defense, but I do not think it would be profitable for him to do so. In conjunction with his definition of 'distinctness', (2) entails that there are no distinct ideas of properties. To be distinct, an idea must be complete. But (2)
entails that all ideas of properties are incomplete so that no ideas of properties are distinct. Yet Ashworth's own discussion of the ideas of duration, order, and number shows us that there are distinct ideas of properties. So either Ashworth's definition of 'distinctness' is wrong or (2) is false. Since (2) does not play a crucial role in Ashworth's overall interpretation, (2) is the claim he should abandon.

IX. ASHWORTH'S CRITICISM OF DESCARTES' CRITERIA FOR GOOD GROUNDS FOR JUDGEMENT

Ashworth thinks Descartes is confused about the conditions under which an idea provides good grounds for judgement. Descartes is alleged to shift his criteria for good grounds depending on whether the idea in question is a sensation or a concept. Although a sensation provides an adequate basis for judgement only if it is clear and distinct, Ashworth argues that the clearness and distinctness of a concept is neither necessary nor sufficient for providing such a basis. He says:

If a clear idea of a concept is a complete idea we already have good grounds for judgement; whereas if a distinct idea can be incomplete, we will not have sufficient grounds (Ashworth, p. 100).

We have two arguments here — one to show that clearness

---

20 Ashworth, p. 100. It is clear from what follows that Ashworth intends clearness and distinctness to be a necessary and sufficient condition for providing adequate grounds for judgement.
and distinctness is not necessary, the other to show that
clearness and distinctness is not sufficient, for providing
adequate grounds for judgement. Before criticizing these
arguments, I will try to give a fair presentation of each:

**ARGUMENT I**

(1) If there are clear complete concepts, then there
are ideas that are not clear and distinct but that
do provide good grounds for judgement.

(2) There are clear complete concepts.

(3) There are ideas that are not clear and distinct
but that do provide good grounds for judgement.

(1) is not the conditional Ashworth wants. (1) is false if,
as a matter of fact, there are clear complete ideas and every
such idea is distinct. What Ashworth wants is (1'):

(1') If there are concepts that are clear and complete but
confused, then there are ideas that are not clear and
distinct but that do provide good grounds for judg-
ment.

If we substitute (1') for (1), however, Argument I is invalid.
We need to amend (2) to (2') where (2') is the antecedent of
(1'). Now (3) follows.

**ARGUMENT II**

(4) If there are distinct incomplete ideas, then there
are clear and distinct ideas that do not provide
good grounds for judgement.
(5) There are distinct incomplete ideas.

(6) There are clear and distinct ideas that do not provide good grounds for judgement.

(4) is not the premise Ashworth wants. But since Descartes holds every distinct idea to be clear, we can let (4) pass.

I turn now to a criticism of Arguments I and II. The problematic premises are (2') and (5). Both are supposed to follow from Descartes' discussion of the ideas of duration, order, and number. Ashworth thinks Descartes' discussion shows on the one hand that there are distinct incomplete ideas and on the other hand that there are clear complete ideas that are confused. But as I argued in the last section, Ashworth has not presented a convincing case. And lacking such a case, he has not shown us that Arguments I and II are sound. For all we know, Descartes does not deviate from the view that all and only clear and distinct ideas provide adequate grounds for judgement.

X. MY CRITICISM OF ASHWORTH'S ACCOUNT OF DESCARTES' USUAL USAGE OF 'DISTINCTNESS'

After presenting his account of Descartes' usual usage of 'distinctness', Ashworth argues that this account creates problems for Descartes. In Sections VI through IX, I argued that, if correct, Ashworth's account does not produce the problems he thinks it does. Now I want to consider Ashworth's account itself.

This account is problematic. Ashworth maintains that
Descartes is guilty of an equivocation. When predicated of sensations, 'distinctness' has one meaning; when predicated of concepts it has another. Concepts are distinct if and only if they are complete; sensations if and only if they are complete and provide adequate grounds for judgement.

Ashworth gives us a partial defense of his account of distinctness. He cites two examples designed to show a distinct sensation to be an idea that provides adequate grounds for judgement, but he gives no defense whatever of his claim that a distinct concept need only be complete. In fact, a later passage suggests that a distinct concept has to be complete and provide adequate grounds for judgement. Defining a clear and distinct idea, Ashworth says:

A clear and distinct idea . . . must be both apparent to any reflecting mind and understood by any reflecting mind. It contains all and only what is essential for this understanding, and hence, it contains grounds for the making of judgements about the idea (Ashworth, p. 100).

Presumably the grounds contained are good grounds. And the good grounds are provided by the completeness of the idea. Since completeness is the defining feature of distinct concepts, it follows that every distinct concept provides adequate grounds for judgement.

Ashworth could reply that providing adequate grounds for judgement is a necessary condition for, but not a defining characteristic of, the distinctness of concepts. So the
distinction between distinct concepts and distinct sensations remains. Such a reply seems perfectly reasonable, but the same reply can be made to Ashworth's claim that providing adequate grounds for judgement is a defining feature of distinct sensations.

Ashworth defends his claim as follows:

My ideas of the earth, sky, and stars are not distinct, because the bare ideas give me no basis for judging whether the earth and sky exist, or whether they are like my sensations. Again, a severe pain is perceived clearly but not distinctly because I confuse the perception of the pain with my judgement about its nature, i.e. I tend to think that the pain has a location and a physical cause, although this may not be justifiable (Ashworth, p. 89).

Ashworth's remarks here do not support the claim that providing adequate grounds for judgement is a defining characteristic of distinct sensations. What Ashworth says is consistent with an interpretation that holds completeness to be the defining feature of distinct ideas. On this interpretation, every distinct idea is, by definition, complete. And every complete idea provides adequate grounds for judgement. Consequently, every distinct sensation provides adequate grounds for judgement even though providing such grounds is not a defining characteristic of distinctness.

In criticizing Ashworth, I am not arguing that Descartes avoided equivocating on his ordinary usage of 'distinctness'. I am only pointing out that Ashworth has not demonstrated that Descartes did equivocate. To prove that Descartes is guilty of an equivocation, Ashworth needed to substantiate the
following two claims:

(i) Providing adequate grounds for judgement is a defining feature of distinct sensations.

(ii) Providing adequate grounds for judgement is not a defining feature of distinct concepts.

Ashworth substantiates neither of these claims, however. For all we know, Descartes is not guilty of the equivocation of which Ashworth accuses him.

XI. ASHWORTH'S CRITICISM OF DESCARTES' RULE

To utilize Descartes' Rule, we need to be able to identify our clear and distinct ideas. Ashworth thinks Descartes separated his clear and distinct from his obscure and confused ideas by ascertaining whether he was deceived by judgements based on these ideas. If one is deceived, then one's idea is not clear and distinct (Ashworth, pp. 101-102). Like Kenny, Ashworth thinks this approach is illegitimate. If Descartes is identifying his clear and distinct ideas by ascertaining whether judgements based on them are true, then Descartes is arguing in a circle. To know by his rule whether a judgement based on an idea is true, one must ascertain whether that idea is clear and distinct. But to know whether an idea is clear and distinct, one must ascertain whether the judgement based on that idea is true (Ashworth, pp. 101-102).

Descartes would not be guilty of the circularity of which he is accused if his criterion for identifying his clear and

21See also my discussion of Kenny, pp. 80-81 and 86.
distinct ideas is not the criterion Ashworth and Kenny claim it to be. Speaking to this point, Ashworth says, "Descartes avoided the pitfall of introducing yet further criteria which would distinguish clear and distinct ideas from those seemingly so . . ." (Ashworth, p. 101). Ashworth appears to be making two claims here: (i) Descartes did not introduce further criteria, and (ii) if he had introduced further criteria, he would have confronted a pitfall.

Ashworth's first claim seems to contradict what Descartes says in his reply to Gassendi. Descartes said that in the Meditations he provided an adequate method for identifying his clear and distinct ideas.22 Ashworth does not try to refute Descartes' claim by arguing that no such method appears in the Meditations. Instead, he tells us that Descartes would face a pitfall if he introduced further criteria — without, however, telling us just what pitfall he has in mind.

I imagine Ashworth thinks Descartes would be guilty of an infinite regress if he identified his clear and distinct ideas by ascertaining whether they have some property \( \theta \), for then Descartes would have to introduce yet another criterion to identify those ideas that are \( \theta \). If a regress is the pitfall Ashworth has in mind, Ashworth might be right. But at this juncture we are not in a position to tell. First we

22Köhr XI, 214.
must find out whether Descartes did in the Meditations provide a method for identifying his clear and distinct ideas. If he did, we can then decide whether his method leads him into a vicious regress.

XII. CLEARNESS AND DISTINCTNESS AND INDUBITABILITY

Before rejecting Descartes' Rule altogether, Ashworth examines what he claims is Descartes' best defense of his rule of evidence. This defense can be put as follows:

(1) Whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is indubitable.

(2) Whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is true

(Ashworth, p. 102).

Ashworth announces that Descartes asserted (1) (Ashworth, p. 102), but Ashworth does not support his claim with references to text. Without references to guide us, we can only speculate as to why Ashworth thought Descartes held (1).

An argument in defense of (1). Ashworth may have had the following considerations in mind. In Meditations III, Descartes writes:

Do I not then likewise know what is requisite to render me certain of a truth? Certainly in this first knowledge there is nothing that assures me of its truth, excepting the clear and distinct perception of that which I state, which would not indeed suffice to assure me that what I say is true, if it could ever happen that a thing which I conceived so clearly and distinctly could be false; and accordingly it seems to me that already I can establish as a general rule that all things which I perceive very clearly and distinctly are true.  

"Hob 1, 158."
The point of this passage is not what it might seem. Descartes is not saying he has established his rule of evidence. He has arrived at a point in his meditations where he has uncovered his indubitandum. Observing that this proposition is one he clearly and distinctly perceives, he says that "it seems to him" he can establish his Rule on the basis of this clear and distinct perception alone. But he resists doing what merely "seems to him" to be legitimate. Instead he turns to an examination of counterexamples that might be raised against his Rule.

He begins his next paragraph as follows:

At the same time I have before received and admitted many things to be certain and manifest, which I yet afterwards recognized as being dubious. What then were these things? At first glance Descartes' remarks here seem to be off the point. His Rule states that whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is true; it does not state that whatever is very certain and manifest is indubitable.

Descartes' examples are not irrelevant, however. It is not enough that Descartes' Rule be true; Descartes must be certain of its truth. To acquire the assurances he wants, Descartes must canvass all those perceptions that could possibly be construed as clear and distinct. Perceptions of what seems very certain and manifest would surely be among these. Regarding such perceptions, Descartes must perform two tasks: he must ascertain whether the perceptions in question are really clear and distinct, and he must ascertain whether

---

24 HR 1, 168.
what is perceived is really false.

To perform the first task, Descartes needs adequate criteria by which to identify his clear and distinct perceptions. At this juncture we are not in a position to say whether he has such criteria. To perform the second task, Descartes cannot make use of his rule of evidence, for it is this rule he is trying to establish. To ascertain whether what he perceives is false, Descartes must utilize his method of doubt -- the only other method available to him at this point in the Meditations. But this method involves withholding belief from any proposition open to rational doubt. For this reason, Descartes' defense of his rule involves his showing that we cannot rationally doubt propositions we clearly and distinctly perceive. But a proposition that is not open to rational doubt is indubitable so that Descartes will defend his rule of evidence by showing that whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is indubitable.

Ashworth is right. Descartes did hold the thesis that whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is indubitable, and he did use this thesis to justify his rule of evidence.

Ashworth's criticism of Descartes' defense of his rule. Ashworth and I agree that Descartes defended his rule of evidence with the following argument:

(1) Whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive is indubitable.

(2) Whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive is true.
But is this argument good? Ashworth thinks it is not.

Ashworth begins his criticism by pointing out that (1) is vague. The predicate 'indubitable' admits of three different senses — a logical, a psychological, and an ethical sense. But regardless of the sense we give 'indubitable', Descartes' defense of (2) is problematic.

Logical indubitability. "p is logically indubitable" means "It is logically impossible to doubt that p" (Ashworth, p. 102). Ashworth will use 'logical impossibility' in a wide sense. It is logically impossible to doubt that p provided that not-p either entails a contradiction or is self-defeating (Ashworth, p. 102). By 'self-defeating', he means a proposition which is falsified whenever it is affirmed. "I do not exist" is such a proposition.25

If we define 'indubitability' in terms of 'logical indubitability', then we have a straightforward logical criterion for ascertaining whether a proposition p is indubitable. We simply determine whether not-p entails a contradiction or is self-defeating. But is this logical criterion also a sufficient condition for ascertaining whether p is true?

Ashworth answers as follows: "We cannot use a logical criterion to pick out the paradigm case of certain truth that Descartes was searching for" (Ashworth, p. 103). The eternal

---

truths are propositions that should be picked out as true by an adequate criterion for identifying true propositions. But the eternal truths are contingent upon God's will so that they are not, strictly speaking, analytic (Ashworth, pp. 102-103). They do not satisfy the logical criterion for indubitability and cannot be ascertained to be true if the logical criterion is the only criterion available. Something other than a purely logical criterion is required.

**Psychological indubitability.** "p is psychologically indubitable" means "it is psychologically impossible to doubt that p" (Ashworth, p. 103). Ashworth notes that Descartes does speak as if he believes he is incapable of doubting what he clearly and distinctly perceives. Paraphrasing two passages from Descartes, Ashworth says:

> It is not possible for me to withhold assent from what is clearly understood, he [Descartes] writes. We cannot refrain from accepting our clear and distinct ideas as true; or bring ourselves to deny any mathematical truths (Ashworth, p. 103).

If Descartes has psychological indubitability in mind, Ashworth offers three arguments to show that Descartes' defense of (2) is unsound. One of these arguments is convincing. It runs as follows. Since the atheist can be skeptical about what he clearly and distinctly perceives, clear and distinct perception is not a sufficient condition for psychological indubitability. Belief in God's veracity is needed. But since one can lack the required faith, one can be in genuine doubt about the truth of what he perceives clearly and distinctly.
If (1) is a rule of psychological indubitability, Descartes' own remarks about the atheist falsify (1).

**Ethical indubitability.** "p is ethically indubitable" means "p ought not to be doubted" (Ashworth, p. 104), and "p ought not to be doubted" means that "p contains within itself no grounds for doubt, and one has adequate evidence for p" (Ashworth, p. 104). But Ashworth thinks that for Descartes "the notion of adequate evidence collapses into the notion of containing no grounds for doubt" (Ashworth, p. 104). On this view, (1) is equivalent to "Whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived contains no grounds for doubt."

Ashworth's argument against ethical indubitability. A proposition containing no grounds for doubt is "self-supporting" (Ashworth, p. 104). A self-supporting judgement is an analytic truth. It is a judgement whose subject concept is a complete idea. An idea is complete provided that the person having that idea understands what it is that belongs to the essence of the object of that idea. When one formulates such a self-supporting judgement, the subject concept -- a complete idea -- is before his mind, and he knows by analysis alone that the predicate concept represents part of the essence of the subject. There is nothing in the judgement itself that could give this person any reason to doubt his judgement. As Ashworth says, "Any grounds for attacking a judgement about the [complete] idea must then be external to it . . ." (Ashworth, p. 104).

---

26 Ashworth offers a second criticism of ethical indubitability that I will not discuss. See Ashworth, p. 105.
But if there are external grounds for doubting a self-supporting judgement $p$, then $p$ seems to be a proposition we ought to doubt. Even though $p$ is self-supporting, it is not ethically indubitable.

Replying, Ashworth points to a passage from one of Descartes' letters to Regius. Here Descartes indicates that a self-supporting judgement is "supported by such strong reasons that no stronger can ever be found to attack it" (Ashworth, p. 104). On Ashworth's interpretation of this passage, Descartes thinks that a self-supporting judgement ought not to be doubted because it cannot be justifiably doubted. To justifiably doubt that $p$, one must balance one's reasons for and against $p$ and find that the evidence against $p$ outweighs the evidence for it.

Ashworth distinguishes two types of evidence — internal evidence and external evidence. Internal evidence for or against $p$ is gained by analyzing $p$'s contents. If $p$ is self-supporting, $p$ is analytically true, and the internal evidence for $p$ is very strong. Any evidence one has against $p$ must be external. The evil genius hypothesis would be such evidence. But whatever the external evidence against $p$, Descartes' letter to Regius suggests that the internal evidence for $p$ will outweigh the external evidence against it.

If Ashworth is correctly interpreting what Descartes says to Regius, (1) boils down to the view that whatever we clearly and distinctly perceive is supported by such strong
reasons that no stronger can ever be found to attack it. This interpretation of (1) is inconsistent with what Descartes says about the atheist, however. The atheist clearly and distinctly perceives mathematical truths. These truths are self-supporting, but the atheist has an external reason strong enough to justify his doubting his self-supporting belief. The atheist clearly and distinctly perceives what is ethically dubitable. Once again, Descartes' remarks about the atheist falsify (1).

Assessment of Ashworth's critique. Ashworth argues that Descartes cannot defend his Rule by appealing to the indubitability of what is clearly and distinctly perceived. "I is indubitable" is vague. Ashworth considers three interpretations, but each interpretation is problematic. So Ashworth concludes that (1) is problematic.

If Descartes meant by (1) any of the interpretations Ashworth discusses, I would not quarrel with Ashworth's conclusion. But I think a fourth interpretation of (1) is available. In his discussion of logical indubitability, Ashworth points out that Descartes believes God to have the power to make eternal truths false (Ashworth, pp. 102-103). But Descartes does not think that God's power provides a reason for doubting those propositions whose denial is self-defeating. Ashworth thinks that there is something about the logic of first person assertions like "I exist" that makes them immune to doubt (Ashworth, p. 102). Whenever I doubt that I exist, I am forced to admit that I do exist, for I
must exist in order to doubt my existence. But Descartes' own procedure for proving that he exists does not consist simply in seeing whether he can successfully deny his existence. Instead, Descartes examines the evil genius hypothesis, and he asks himself whether he could be deceived into believing that he exists when he really does not. He concludes that the evil genius hypothesis does not provide a rational ground for doubting one's own existence, and there are no other good reasons one could adduce. "I exist" is rationally indubitable.

'Rational indubitability' may be what Descartes means by 'indubitability'. p is rationally indubitable provided that one cannot conceive a world in which p is false. Once again, the eternal truths seem problematic. I clearly and distinctly perceive such truths, yet it appears there is a possible world in which they are false -- the world in which God wills to deceive me.

But is the world in which God deceives me a possible world? When Descartes questioned his existence, he did not simply conjure up the evil genius hypothesis and coalesce in the conclusion that "I exist" is false. Instead he tested the evil genius hypothesis by seeing whether there is a possible world in which Descartes does not exist but in which the evil genius deceives Descartes into believing that he does. Descartes concludes that there is no such possible world and that his own existence cannot be doubted.27

27Rational indubitability is not identical with ethical
Following Descartes' procedure for ascertaining the rational indubitability of "I exist," we can ascertain whether God's omnipotence provides a good reason for doubting the eternal truths or any truths clearly and distinctly perceived. We need to consider whether there is a possible world in which the following conditions obtain: a person A clearly and distinctly perceives that p and believes p true, but A is deceived because God has willed p false. If these conditions obtain, it is also true in this world that God has deceived A so that God is a deceiver. But is the world in which God is a deceiver a possible world? If not, my reason for doubting clearly and distinctly perceived propositions is idle. And if there are no better reasons that can be produced, then there are no good reasons for doubting Descartes' Rule, and his Rule is rationally indubitable.

On my view Descartes defended his rule of evidence by showing there are no good reasons for doubting his Rule. Descartes' own words support my interpretation. In a lengthy paragraph in the Third Meditation, Descartes outlines his strategy for proving that what he clearly and distinctly perceives is true. I quote this paragraph in its entirety:

"But when I took anything very simple and easy in the sphere of arithmetic or geometry into consideration, e.g. that indubitability. Descartes does not decide that "I exist" is indubitable because the evil genius hypothesis has merit but is not strong enough to outweigh the evidence "I exist" presents in its own behalf. On the contrary, the evil genius hypothesis has no merit at all!"
two and three together made five, and other things of the sort, were not these present to my mind so clearly as to enable me to affirm that they were true? Certainly if I judged that since such matters could be doubted, this would not have been so for any other reason than that it came into my mind that perhaps a God might have endowed me with such a nature that I may have been deceived even concerning things which seemed to me most manifest. But every time this preconceived opinion of the sovereign power of a God presents itself to my thought, I am constrained to confess that it is easy to Him, if He wishes it, to cause me to err, even in matters in which I believe myself to have the best evidence. And, on the other hand, always when I direct my attention to things which I believe myself to perceive very clearly, I am so persuaded of their truth that I let myself break out into words such as these: Let who will deceive me, He can never cause me to be nothing while I think that I am, or some day cause it to be true to say that I have never been, it being true now to say that I am, or that two and three make more or less than five, or any such thing in which I see a manifest contradiction. And, certainly, since I have no reason to believe that there is a God who is a deceiver, and as I have not as yet satisfied myself that there is a God at all, the reason for doubt which depends on this opinion alone is very slight, and so to speak metaphysical. But in order to be able altogether to remove it, I must inquire whether there is a God as soon as the occasion presents itself; and if I find that there is a God, I must also inquire whether He may be a deceiver; for without a knowledge of these two truths I do not see that I can ever be certain of anything. 28

In this passage Descartes is saying he will remove a metaphysical doubt from propositions that are apparently logically, psychologically, and ethically indubitable. Among the propositions subject to a metaphysical doubt are logically indubitable judgements. These are truths whose denial Descartes sees to be "a manifest contradiction". These logically indubitable truths are also psychologically indubitable.

28 PL I, 158-159. Emphasis mine.
Descartes cannot seriously doubt them. Whenever he thinks of these propositions while entertaining his metaphysical doubt against them, he "breaks out into words" to the effect that even God does not have the power to cause such truths to be false. Finally, the propositions in question are ethically indubitable. The metaphysical doubt Descartes entertains is "slight". But a slight doubt could scarcely be strong enough to outweigh the internal reasons favoring logical truths. Yet Descartes feels that he cannot be certain of anything until he removes even this slight doubt.

But how does Descartes remove this doubt? He shows that the world in which God deceives Descartes about what Descartes clearly and distinctly perceives is not a possible world. The God Descartes proves to exist is one "who possesses all those supreme perfections of which our mind may indeed have some idea . . . , who is liable to no errors or defect [and who has none of all those marks which denote imperfection]." 29 Continuing, Descartes says that it follows from God's perfection "that He cannot be a deceiver, since the light of nature teaches us that fraud and deception proceed from some defect." 30 The world in which God is a deceiver is impossible, and God's omnipotence does not provide a rational ground for doubting clearly and distinctly perceived propositions.

29. IB I, 171.
30. Ibid.
Ashworth argued that no matter what sense we give to (1), (1) is either false or inconsistent with other claims Descartes holds. But if we take (1) to mean that whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is rationally indubitable, Ashworth's objections to (1) disappear. God's power is unproblematic, and the example of the atheist is ineffectual. What the atheist clearly and distinctly perceives is rationally indubitable although the atheist is not in a position to show that metaphysical doubts brought against clearly and distinctly perceived propositions are not good reasons for doubting.
CHAPTER V

STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES

This thesis aims at answering two questions:

(Q1) What did Descartes mean by 'clearness' and 'distinctness'?

(Q2) How does Descartes ascertain whether ideas are clear and distinct or obscure and confused?

In the first four chapters I examined other commentators' answers to these questions. I have argued that each commentator's answers are unsatisfactory. Now I want to offer my own answers to these questions. But before suggesting answers, I think it is best that we map out a plan of attack. A straightforward approach suggests itself. Find the places where Descartes addresses (Q1) and (Q2) and explicate what he says. Let us see whether this straightforward approach can succeed.

I. DESCARTES' DEFINITIONS OF 'CLEARNESS' AND 'DISTINCTNESS'

Descartes' explicit definitions of 'clearness' and 'distinctness' appear in Principle XLV. In this Principle we are told that the distinct "contains within itself nothing but what is clear" and that the clear is that "which is present and apparent to an attentive mind." But what do the predicates

\[\text{HR I. 237.}\]
'being present to a mind', 'being apparent', and 'being attentive' mean? Here we encounter serious difficulties. Descartes never defines these key terms. Lacking such definitions, we are forced to search for Descartes' meaning by examining his use of the terms in question. Unfortunately, these terms are not part of his ordinary vocabulary. They rarely appear in his writing, and they never appear in a way that illuminates Descartes' meaning in his definition of 'clearness' and 'distinctness'.

To clarify Descartes' meaning, we could try another approach. In Principle XIV Descartes draws an analogy between clear perception and eyesight. We can examine this analogy to see whether it can help us clarify Descartes' definition.

When we examine Descartes' analogy, however, we find it is not helpful. Kenny and Ashworth criticize Descartes' analogy because it makes use of distinctions that make sense for sight but not for pains. Although I have argued against this line of criticism, I agree that Descartes' analogy is not helpful. Interpreted straightforwardly, it makes Descartes vulnerable to the criticism Gewirth raised: all ideas seem to be clear.

---

2 See p. 64 and pp. 107-112
3 See pp. 68-71 and 108-110 above.
4 See pp. 4-6 above.
We can avoid Gewirth's criticism if we do not define 'being present', 'being apparent', and 'being attentive' in the way Gewirth's criticism requires. But how will we know what definitions are correct? Since Descartes does not help us to define his terms, I think it would be natural to do just what Gewirth did. First, we look at how Descartes actually uses the term 'clarity' elsewhere in his writing, and then we try to formulate a definition of 'clarity' on this basis. Once we have arrived at this definition, we can go back to Descartes' explicit definition of 'clearness' and 'distinctness' and juggle the meanings of the predicates he uses. In this way we can make Descartes' explicit definition equivalent to the definition we formulated on the basis of Descartes' actual usage.

If we adopt this approach, however, we are abandoning the strategy with which we began -- namely, that of using Principle XLV to elucidate Descartes' definitions of 'clarity' and 'distinctness'. Descartes' explicit definitions are hopelessly vague, and his analogy is not helpful. So instead of using his analogy to elucidate his meaning of 'clarity', we define 'clarity' on the basis of its usage and then use the definition arrived at to clarify Descartes' analogy.

XI. DESCARTES' REPLY TO GASSENDI

We turn now to the second question we have raised: "How does Descartes ascertain which of his ideas are clear and
distinct? To answer (Q2), we want to explore a strategy that involves a search for a passage in which Descartes expressly takes up (Q2). The most promising passage is one Gewirth locates and discusses: it is Descartes' reply to Gassendi. Gewirth translates this reply as follows:

And as for what you then add, that the concern must be not so much with the truth of the rule as with a method to discern whether or not we are deceived when we think that we clearly perceive something, I do not deny this; but I contend that this very thing has been accurately set forth by me in its place, where I first discarded all prejudices, and then enumerated all the principal ideas and distinguished those which were clear from the obscure and confused.

Gewirth's analysis of Descartes' reply. Gewirth's commentary is short and raises more questions than it explains. He says, "Descartes is here referring, of course, to the procedure followed in the first three Meditations." Gewirth's comment is perplexing. It implies that there is one and only one procedure followed in the first three Meditations and that Descartes is referring to it. Yet Gewirth knows full well that there is more than one procedure followed within the first three Meditations. Descartes uses the method of doubt in Meditation I and the method of difference in Meditation II.

To make sense of Gewirth's comment, we need to interpret

6 Ibid. Emphasis mine.
7 Hp 1, 144-149.
8 Hp 1, 150-157.
him differently. When he says that Descartes is in his reply referring "to the procedure followed in the first three Meditations," Gewirth means Descartes is referring to the procedure followed throughout, not within, the first three Meditations. But the method of difference is not this procedure, since the method of difference is not used anywhere in Meditation I. The only procedure that can qualify as a procedure used throughout the first three Meditations is a composite of several processes Descartes mentions to Gassendi -- the discarding of all prejudices, the enumerating of all the principal ideas, and the identifying of those that are clear and distinct.

Now Gewirth's interpretation narrows the scope of our inquiry. If we have interpreted him correctly, Gewirth thinks Descartes is referring Gassendi to the process of discarding all prejudices, enumerating the chief ideas, and identifying those that are clear and distinct. But this process is not the procedure for which we are looking. We want the method Descartes used "to discern whether or not we are deceived when we think we clearly perceive something." Although Gewirth has not given us this method, he has narrowed the scope of our inquiry. Descartes tells us that the method we want is to be found at the place where he carries out the process that Gewirth says occurs throughout Meditations I to III.

Gewirth's interpretation of Gassendi's objection.

9HP. I, 144-149.
Gewirth thinks Gassendi criticized Descartes for advancing a psychological criterion for ascertaining what is true. Gewirth presents Gassendi's criticism in the following way:

In the Fifth Objections Gassendi writes: "Why are there so many and so varied opinions among men? Each one thinks that he perceives clearly and distinctly the opinion which he defends. And lest you say that many are either being partisan or pretending, I want you to notice that there are those who even face death for the sake of the opinions which they hold, even though they see others facing it for the sake of the opposite opinions." Hence, Gassendi concludes, Descartes' main concern should have been to "compound a method which should direct us and teach us when we are deceived and when not deceived in thinking that we clearly and distinctly perceive something." 10

Since we know that Gewirth thinks Gassendi is "in a general sense" accusing Descartes of having a merely psychological criterion for ascertaining what is true, we can construct a reasonable interpretation of how Gewirth reads Gassendi's criticism.

Gewirth thinks Gassendi's objection contains two parts. In the first part Gassendi points out that people are willing to die for what they think they clearly and distinctly perceive. Their willingness to die shows they are subjectively convinced they are clearly and distinctly perceiving. But people have been known to die for false beliefs. To ascertain whether perceptions are clear and distinct, Descartes needs a method that does not rely on subjective conviction. It is this method Gassendi thinks Descartes failed to provide.

Having charged Descartes with failing to provide an

10 Gewirth, pp. 250-251.
adequate method for ascertaining clearness and distinctness, Gassendi moves on to the second part of his objection. Here he "concludes" that "Descartes' main concern should have been to propound [such] a method..." If Gewirth is right, Gassendi is asking Descartes to answer (Q2).

A problem with Gewirth's interpretation of Descartes' reply. Gewirth does not seem to entertain the possibility that his interpretation of Gassendi's objection might differ from Descartes'. Gewirth thinks that Gassendi asked (Q2) and that Descartes gave Gassendi what he asked for.

If Gewirth is right, the strategy we have adopted for answering (Q2) succeeds in the sense that it leads us to the method of difference. This method does seem to qualify as a method for ascertaining clearness and distinctness. On the other hand, if the method of difference is Descartes' answer to (Q2), his answer raises new problems. In Chapter I, I pointed out that the method of difference does not allow us to ascertain which of our simple ideas are clear and distinct.11 So if the method of difference is the method by which Descartes ascertains clearness and distinctness, Descartes has not provided the adequate method Gassendi requested, and Gassendi's criticism stands up.

Another interpretation of Descartes' reply. If we adopt Gewirth's interpretation of Descartes' reply, Descartes

---

11 See pp. 54-56 above.
answers (Q2), but his answer is not satisfactory. Another interpretation of Descartes' reply is available, however. On this interpretation Descartes' reply to Gassendi seems to follow the structure Gewirth finds in Gassendi's objection. Initially, Descartes replies to the first part of Gassendi's criticism. He says that Gassendi's point about people willing to face death for their beliefs "proves nothing" "because it can never be proved that they clearly and distinctly perceive what they pertinaciously affirm." Descartes then proceeds to the second part of his reply. He says:

I do not question what you next say, viz. that it is not so much a question of taking pains to establish the truth of the rule, as of finding a method for deciding whether we err or not when we think that we perceive something clearly. But I contend that this has been carefully attended to in its proper place where I first laid aside all prejudices, and afterwards enumerated all the chief ideas, distinguishing the clear from the obscure and confused.

It is plain that Descartes is not replying to one criticism having two parts, as Gewirth supposes. What we have here are two separate replies to what Descartes takes to be two separate criticisms. Let us look at each reply in turn.

The first criticism and Descartes' reply. Descartes' reply to Gassendi suggests that Descartes did not read between the lines. Gassendi pointed out that people are willing to die for beliefs they think they clearly and distinctly perceive.

---

12 ibid. 11, 214.
13 Ibid. Emphasis mine.
We can all agree that what Gassendi says is true, but what conclusion are we to draw from his comment? Descartes took him to be suggesting that sincere personal conviction in one's belief is evidence that one is perceiving clearly and distinctly. Replying precisely to the criticism he thought Gassendi was making, Descartes simply denied that "pertinacious affirmation" is a criterion for clear and distinct perception.

Gassendi may have actually meant more than Descartes realized. Gewirth thinks Gassendi was pointing out that we must fall back on subjective conviction unless Descartes gives us adequate criteria for ascertaining clearness and distinctness. But in fairness to Descartes, Gassendi does not say explicitly what Gewirth interprets him to mean.

The second criticism and Descartes' reply. If I am right, Descartes did not interpret Gassendi's objection as Gewirth does. Gewirth thinks Gassendi's objection has two parts: the first part charges Descartes with psychologism, and the second part is a "conclusion" telling Descartes what he must do to avoid the criticism raised in the first part. For Descartes, however, the second part of Gassendi's objection is not merely a continuation of the first part. It is, rather, a different criticism and requires a separate reply.

But what is the second criticism Descartes thinks Gassendi is raising? Gassendi asked for a method "to discern whether or not we are deceived when we think that we clearly
perceive something." Gassendi's objection is ambiguous and can be read in two ways. To exhibit its ambiguity, I put Gassendi's objection as a question:

(Q3) How can a person be sure he is not mistaken when he thinks he is clearly and distinctly perceiving?

The first reading of (Q3). The first reading of (Q3) is the reading Gewirth ascribes to Descartes. If, as Gewirth argues, Descartes is referring Gassendi to the method of difference, then we can surmise that Descartes took Gassendi to be wondering whether a person who believes he is clearly and distinctly perceiving can support his belief with something more than his own subjective conviction. Descartes' reply is straightforward: such a person can use the method of difference.

The second reading of (Q3). If we adopt the second reading of (Q3), Gassendi is not suggesting that Descartes' method for ascertaining clearness and distinctness falls back on subjective conviction. Granting that Descartes has a method that does not rely on subjective conviction, Gassendi is wondering how Descartes can be sure he is not deceived when he uses whatever method he does have. After all, the evil genius can deceive him. He can make Descartes believe an inadequate method to be adequate.

If Descartes gave Gassendi's objection the second reading of (Q3), it would make no sense for Descartes to refer

14 Emphasis mine.
Gassendi to the method of difference since this method is itself vulnerable to Gassendi's criticism. If, as Gewirth supposes, the method of difference is Descartes' method for ascertaining clearness and distinctness, Gassendi could on the second reading of (Q3) put the following question to Descartes: How can you be sure you are not deceived when you believe the method of difference to be adequate?"

Assuming Descartes did give Gassendi's objection the second reading, we can make sense of Descartes' reply only if we suppose that Descartes is referring Gassendi not to the method of difference but to some other method. But what is this other method to which Descartes referred Gassendi?

To answer this question, let us return, once again, to Descartes' reply. He says:

I do not question what you next say, viz. that it is not so much a question of taking pains to establish the truth of the rule, as of finding a method for deciding whether we err or not when we think that we clearly perceive something." But I contend that this has been carefully attended to in its proper place where I first laid aside all prejudices, and afterwards enumerated all the chief ideas, distinguishing the clear from the obscure and confused.15

Descartes agrees that he must answer (Q3). His answer consists in his referring Gassendi to a method found at a place in the "Meditations" -- the place where Descartes "first laid aside all prejudices, and afterwards enumerated all the chief ideas, distinguishing the clear from the obscure and confused."

15 Mr. 11, 214.
Descartes mentions three distinct operations here. Does he mean, as Gewirth supposes, that the method Gassendi requires is to be found at the place where all three operations are performed? Or does he mean that the method Gassendi requires is to be found where Descartes "first laid aside all prejudices"? If the second interpretation is correct, the operations of enumerating the chief ideas and distinguishing the clear from the obscure and confused came after Descartes laid out the method for which we are looking. To find this method, we must look at the place where Descartes discarded his prejudices.

The place where Descartes discarded his prejudices. When Descartes says he enumerated all the principal ideas and distinguished those which are clear from the obscure or confused, Gewirth thinks Descartes means he set forth the real definitions of 'God', 'mind', and 'matter', and distinguished these real definitions from those that are merely nominal.\(^{16}\) Descartes' distinction between real and nominal definitions of 'God' occurs in Meditation III,\(^ {17}\) and his distinction between real and nominal definitions of 'mind' and 'matter' appears in Meditation II.\(^ {18}\) Since Gewirth acknowledges that

16 Gewirth, p. 273.
17 PR I, 165-171.
18 pr I, 151-154. These distinctions are discussed after Meditation III as well, but we are here concerned with just those discussions that occur in the first three Meditations.
Descartes discards his prejudices before he enumerates the chief ideas and distinguishes the clear from the obscure or confused, Gewirth has helped to narrow our search for the place where Descartes discards his prejudices. We need to look at Meditation I and that portion of Meditation II that precedes Descartes' discussions of the nature of mind and matter.

In the relevant portions of Meditation II, Descartes simply reviews the skeptical arguments he has raised in Meditation I. Apparently, Meditation I is the place where Descartes first discarded his prejudices, and it is to Meditation I that Descartes referred Gassendi. At the outset of Meditation I, Descartes says, "I shall at last seriously and freely address myself to the general upheaval of all my former opinions." 19 In the same vein, he says, "I was convinced that I must once for all seriously undertake to rid myself of all the opinions which I had formerly accepted." 20 Among Descartes' former opinions are his prejudices -- those opinions he held without rational justification. 21 If Descartes rids himself of all his former opinions in Meditation I, then he rids himself of all his prejudices as well.

In Gewirth's view Descartes' discussion of matter is his discussion of wax. See Gewirth, pp. 270-271.


20. Ibid.

21. I leave open the possibility that Descartes' prejudices are coextensive with his former opinions.
Descartes' Synopsis of Meditation I also suggests that it is the first Meditation for which we are looking. This synopsis appears in the Synopsis Of The Six Following Meditations, which precedes the six Meditations themselves. The Synopsis is divided into six parts, each part summarizing one of the six Meditations. In short, Descartes is telling us in each section of his Synopsis what he has done in the corresponding Meditation. The entirety of Descartes' synopsis on Meditation I is as follows:

In the first Meditation I set forth the reasons for which we may, generally speaking, doubt about all things and especially about material things, at least as we have no other foundations for the sciences than those which we have hitherto possessed. But although the utility of a doubt which is so general does not at first appear, it is at the same time very great. inasmuch as it delivers us from every kind of prejudice, and sets out for us a very simple way by which the mind may detach itself from the senses; and finally it makes it impossible for us ever to doubt those things which we have once discovered to be true.

Here Descartes says he will "doubt about all things" and that such a doubt is useful because "it delivers us from every kind of prejudice." Apparently, Descartes plans in Meditation I to apply his method of doubt to all his former opinions and, by so doing, to rid himself of all his prejudices. On the second reading of (Q3), Meditation I seems to be the place to which Descartes referred Gassendi.

The method found at the place where Descartes discarded

27 Ht. I, 140.
his prejudices. When we review the first Meditation, we find that Descartes never makes use of the method of difference there. The method of difference is first used in Meditation II. In Meditation I, Descartes uses one and only one method -- the method of doubt. 23

The method of doubt and the second reading of (Q3). On the second reading of (Q3), Gassendi is wondering how Descartes can be sure he is not deceived when he thinks that his method for ascertaining clearness and distinctness is adequate. Descartes' answer is straightforward: "Use the method doubt." 24 But the method of doubt is not the method for which we are looking. We want Descartes' method for ascertaining which of his ideas are clear and distinct. If the second reading is right, Descartes did not give us this method. Instead, he gave us a method for discerning whether we can be deceived when we use his method for ascertaining clearness and distinctness, whatever that method might be.

Assessment of the straightforward strategy for answering (Q2). We have pursued a strategy that had us search for a passage in which Descartes takes up (Q2). 25 The only passage that seems promising is Descartes' reply to Gassendi. This

---

23 NC I, 145-149.

24 Presumably Descartes would argue that we would have to regard God as a deceiver if the method He has given us is inadequate. But we cannot rationally doubt God's veracity. See our discussion, p. 142 above.

25 See pp. 147-150 above.
reply has two equally plausible interpretations, however. On one reading Descartes is referring Gassendi to the method of difference, on the second reading, to the method of doubt. If the method of difference turned out to be an adequate method for ascertaining clearness and distinctness, we would have good reason to accept Gewirth's interpretation. But the method of difference fails for simple ideas. If we are to avoid the conclusion that Descartes did not have an adequate method for ascertaining clearness and distinctness, we need to reject the first reading and adopt the second. But the second reading leads us to the method of doubt, and this method is not the one Descartes uses in Meditations II and III when he distinguishes the clear principal ideas from those that are obscure or confused. As a result the strategy we adopted leads to a dead end. To find out what method Descartes uses to ascertain clearness and distinctness, we will have to develop a different strategy.

III. THE STRATEGY WE WILL ADOPT

Since Descartes' definition of 'clearness' and 'distinctness' is vague and since his reply to Gassendi does not explicitly identify Descartes' method for ascertaining clearness and distinctness, I think the best approach available to us is to delve into the corpus of Descartes' work and to see how he actually uses the terms 'clear' and 'distinct' and how he actually goes about distinguishing his clear and distinct
from his obscure and confused ideas. To guide our inquiry, I suggest we use a classification Descartes provides. Descartes divides ideas into two types. Taking each type in turn, we can try to identify the features of the clear and distinct and obscure and confused ideas falling under that type. At the same time we can try to identify the method or methods by which Descartes ascertains whether his ideas are clear and distinct.
CHAPTER VI

ANALYTICALLY CLEAR AND DISTINCT IDEAS

My main objective in the following three chapters is to give an interpretation of Descartes' account of clarity and distinctness and to exhibit his method for ascertaining which ideas are clear and distinct. I will argue that there are two different aspects of clarity and distinctness. I call these aspects 'analytical clarity and distinctness' and 'representational clarity and distinctness'. Although the terminology is mine, the distinction to which I am pointing is, I believe, in Descartes.

In this chapter I will try to elucidate the notion of analytical clarity and distinctness and to set forth Descartes' method for ascertaining which ideas are analytically clear and distinct. To achieve these ends, I will give considerable attention to what Descartes says about the composite ideas, for his remarks on these ideas provide what I regard as the best basis for formulating an account of analytical clarity and distinctness. In section II, I attempt to elucidate what Descartes means by a 'fictional idea'. Section II is needed because there is an important connection between an idea's being fictional and its being analytically obscure or confused.

1. THE COMPOSITE IDEAS

I will pursue a strategy like one Descartes undertakes
in the *Meditations*. This strategy seems to me to be characteristically Cartesian. At the outset of the First Meditation, Descartes says he will doubt all his former opinions. But he recognizes that he cannot doubt each and every opinion he formerly held, for there are so many that he could never apply his method of doubt to each. Instead, he groups judgments into types. There are particular sense beliefs, beliefs pertaining to "corporeal nature in general," and mathematical propositions. Against each of these types, Descartes raises at least one metaphysical doubt. By raising these doubts, he hopes to show that all his former opinions falling under the enumerated types are dubitable.

To find out which ideas are clear and distinct and which obscure and confused, I want to try to adapt Descartes' method for telling which of his former opinions are dubitable. Since Descartes cannot assess each of his former beliefs separately, he groups them and considers them as a class. Similarly, although we cannot survey every idea separately, we can survey types of ideas to see whether they have clarity and distinct-

---

1 HR I, 144.
2 Ibid., p. 145.
3 Ibid., pp. 145-146.
4 Ibid., pp. 146-147.
5 Ibid., p. 147.
ness or obscurity and confusion as generic features. I think Descartes himself adopted such a procedure. This much is clear at any rate. He does give us a classification of ideas into types and subtypes. Using Descartes' classification, we can proceed systematically from one type to another. If Descartes also proceeded systematically in this way, we can expect to find him telling us, for each type of idea, whether ideas falling under that type are clear and distinct.

Descartes divides all ideas into simple ideas and complex or composite ideas. He thinks composite ideas are composites of simple ideas. The composite idea of an inscribed triangle contains the ideas of being inscribed and being a triangle. The idea of a triangle is itself a composite idea, for it is analyzable into the idea of being a three-sided figure. Although the idea of being three-sided may in turn be analyzable, the idea Figure is not analyzable in the same sense. It is a simple idea, and all composite ideas have such simples as their atomic elements.

Descartes' distinction between the simple and composite ideas raises two questions:

(1) What is a simple idea?
(2) What is the containment relation that holds between a composite idea and the simple elements it contains?

---

6 ibid., p. 40 and pp. 43-44.
7 ibid., pp. 41-44.
I take up (Q2) first.

On (Q2). Although Descartes does not expressly clarify the part-whole relation holding between a content and the idea containing it, he frequently speaks about the contents of ideas. In a typical passage he says:

But if I think of the triangle or the square . . . , then certainly whatever I recognize as being contained in the idea of a triangle, as that its angles are equal to right, etc., I shall truly affirm of the triangle; and similarly I shall affirm of the square whatever I find in the idea of it. For though I can think of the triangle, though stripping from it the equality of its angles to two right, yet I cannot deny that attribute of it by any clear and distinct mental operation, i.e. when I myself rightly understand what I say.

Descartes' view seems plain. The contents of the idea Triangle are those concepts that represent necessary features of triangles. We can say that an idea's contents are its entailments. An idea $Y$ is contained in an idea $X$ provided that $X$ entails $Y$.\(^{10}\)

On (Q1). Descartes is, I believe, confused about simple ideas. Sometimes he talks as if simple ideas have no parts. He writes:

It is evident that we are in error if we judge that any of these simple ideas is not completely known by us. For otherwise it could not be said to be simple, but must be complex — a compound of that which is present in our perception of it, and that of which we think we are ignorant.

---

3 Descartes means "equal to two right angles."

3 HR II, 22.

10 In what follows, 'entails' will be an undefined term meaning something other than 'strictly implies'. For an explanation, see footnote 13.
Here Descartes seems to be saying that we cannot sensibly speak of simple ideas as having parts.

Yet in the paragraph immediately following the above quotation, he says:

Figure is conjoined with extension, motion with duration of time, and so on, because it is impossible to conceive of a figure that has no extension, nor of a motion that has no duration.12

His remarks here imply that the idea Figure entails the idea Extension and that the idea Motion entails the idea Duration, yet Figure and Motion are for Descartes simple ideas. And since the parts of an idea are its entailments, it follows from views Descartes holds that simple ideas do have parts.13 Descartes appears guilty of an inconsistency. On the one hand, he thinks that simple ideas have no parts; on the other hand, it follows from the view he holds that they do have parts.

Although Descartes sometimes lapses into language that

---

11HR I, 42.

12Ibid.

13Descartes need not recognize in simple ideas all the parts we might think them to contain. The simple idea Figure entails the disjunctive idea of being a figure or being red, but Descartes can consistently deny the latter idea to be contained in the former. For Descartes, the entailment relation is not that of strict implication. His method for recognizing necessary connections is what he calls 'intuition'. "Intuition," he tells us, "is the undoubting conception of an unclouded and attentive mind, and springs from the light of reason alone." See HR II, 7. I do not propose to elucidate what Descartes means by "intuition". What I do want to point out is that Descartes could on the basis of intuition deny that the idea Figure entails the idea of being a figure or being red.
suggests he believes simple ideas to be unanalyzable, his considered opinion is, I believe, plain. In his explicit definition of a simple idea, Descartes says:

Here we shall treat of things only in our understanding's awareness of them, and shall call those only simple, the cognition of which is so clear and so distinct that they cannot be analyzed into others more distinctly known.\textsuperscript{14} Descartes does not say that a simple idea cannot be analyzed. Instead, he suggests that such an idea can be analyzed but not in a way that will make it more clearly and distinctly known than it already is.

Giving us an example of such an analysis, he says one could define 'figure' as 'the limit of extension'. The person offering such a definition thinks the idea Figure has an analysis and contains among its parts the ideas Limit and Extension.\textsuperscript{15} Descartes responds that the idea Limit is less clearly and distinctly known than the idea it is meant to clarify.\textsuperscript{16} He does not say that Figure has no analysis and no parts. His explicit definition of 'simple idea' and his elucidation of it are consistent with his view that the idea Figure contains the idea Extension as one of its contents.

Although Descartes sometimes speaks as if he thinks simple ideas are unanalyzable, I think we would be interpreting him uncharitably if we accepted this view as his considered opinion. On the interpretation I will adopt, both the complex and the simple ideas have parts in the sense that they both

\textsuperscript{14}ibid., p. 40-41. \textsuperscript{15}ibid., p. 41. \textsuperscript{16}ibid.
have entailments. There is in Descartes' view a significant difference between these two types of idea, however. He believes we cannot profitably define the predicates expressing simple ideas. Satisfactory definitions are an aid to understanding because they define what is less understood in terms of what is more understood. But in the case of simple ideas, Descartes thinks that among the defining expressions will be terms that are no better understood than the predicates they are meant to clarify. We can, on the other hand, profitably define terms expressing complex ideas. Complex ideas have parts -- simple ideas among them -- which are better understood than the complex ideas containing them.17

Classifying the composite ideas. Having answered (Q1) and (Q2), we are in a position to classify composite ideas. I concentrate on the composite ideas here because Descartes' discussions of them give us the best material for developing an account of analytical clarity and distinctness, and it is this account that I want to develop first.

Descartes divides ideas into three types for us. Ideas falling under a certain type can be combined with other ideas falling under that type or with ideas falling under some other type. Once combined in this way, these composites can be

---

17In another sense, however, we can, I believe, legitimately say that simple ideas can be better understood than they are. The person who knows that Figure entails Extension seems to me to understand the idea Figure better than the person who does not recognize this entailment to hold.
further combined so that the possible combinations are endless. All these syntheses will be reducible to a few basic combinations, however. In turn these combinations will be reducible to the simple ideas of which they are composed.

A second classification of ideas. Besides being simple or complex, every idea is for Descartes an idea of a mode, an attribute, or a substance. This second way of classifying ideas is misleading, however. Descartes actually recognizes ideas of individual modes and types of mode, of individual attributes and types of attribute, of individual substances, types of substance, and of substance itself. For our purpose, however, we can refer to ideas of individual modes and ideas of types of mode as ideas of modes, to ideas of individual attributes and ideas of types of attribute as ideas of attributes, and to ideas of individual substances, types of substance, and substance itself as ideas of substance. In blurring these important distinctions, I do not think we are raising unnecessary difficulties for the analysis I want to give. On the other hand, this analysis is greatly simplified if we blur these distinctions as I suggest.

---

13 See MR 1, 239-246.

16 We do need to exercise some caution, however. Extension is an attribute of matter, but my extension is not an attribute of me. My idea of my extension is an idea of an individual mode.

20 We could complicate Descartes' classification of ideas, but nothing of substance will change. Our aim is to show that we can ascertain which composite ideas have contents with which they are necessarily connected. To achieve this
Descartes is a conceptualist. Universals do not exist as mind independent entities.\textsuperscript{21} We can have universal ideas, however. Our ideas of substance and of types of substance would be such ideas.\textsuperscript{22} Really existing substances are individual things.\textsuperscript{23} These things have modes. A mode is a property,\textsuperscript{24} and there are two types of them — attributes and modes proper. An attribute is a necessary feature of a substance;\textsuperscript{25} a mode proper, a contingent feature. Being red headed is a contingent feature of a human being: it is a mode proper. But being rational is a necessary feature — an attribute.\textsuperscript{26}

When we combine our ideas of modes, attributes, and substance in various ways, we get various types of synthesis. These in turn fall into three general classifications. Borrow—

aim, we do not have to ascertain for each idea whether that idea and its contents are necessarily connected. What we need to show is that Descartes' method for finding out is an effective procedure applicable to any kind of composite idea. Using Descartes' classification of ideas into three types, we can show that his method applies to three sorts of composite idea and, by extension, to all composite ideas.

\textsuperscript{21}HR I, 242.
\textsuperscript{22}Ibid., pp. 242-243.
\textsuperscript{23}HP II, 101.
\textsuperscript{24}HR I, 241.
\textsuperscript{25}Ibid., pp. 240-242.
\textsuperscript{26}In what follows I will use the term 'mode' to mean 'mode proper'. Although Descartes recognizes that he uses 'mode' equivocally, he admits that he is not always careful about his usage. See HR I, 245. We will be careful, however. For, if we confuse the two senses of 'mode', we will not be able to distinguish modal syntheses from syntheses of reason. See HR I, 244-245.
ing from Descartes' terminology, I will refer to various types of synthesis as modal syntheses, syntheses of reason, and real syntheses. These types of synthesis can in turn be subdivided. I discuss each type and subtype separately.

**Modal syntheses.** Modal syntheses are syntheses that combine an idea of a mode with an idea of the substance of which it is a mode or with an idea of another property of the same substance. There are three types of modal synthesis: substance-mode syntheses, mode-mode syntheses, and attribute-mode syntheses.

1. **Substance-mode syntheses** combine an idea of a substance with an idea of a mode of that substance. Typical of such combinations are the ideas of a moving body, a recollecting mind, and a hungry lion. Bodies, minds, and lions are substances, and moving, recollecting, and being hungry are, respectively, modes of them.

2. **Mode-mode syntheses** combine ideas of different modes of the same substance. My ideas of running swiftly and recollecting clearly are such ideas. Running and being swift are modes of an antelope; recollecting and being clear, of a mind. When I combine ideas of modes of the same substance,

---

27Ibid. 1, 244.
28Ibid.
29My idea of a red object will be a composite idea of reason falling under the mode-attribute subtype. See below, p. 176.
I get a mode-mode synthesis.  

(3) Attribute-mode syntheses are not explicitly discussed by Descartes, but we can suppose he would have acknowledged such a synthesis. I form an attribute-mode synthesis when I add to my idea of an attribute an idea representing a contingent feature of that attribute. Although thinking is the essence of spiritual substance, how I think is a contingent matter. I can think logically or illogically so that being logical is a mode of an attribute, and the idea Thinking Logically is an attribute-mode composite.

Real syntheses. Descartes recognizes three types of real synthesis: substance-substance syntheses, mode of substance\_1-substance\_2 syntheses, and mode of substance\_1-mode of substance\_2 syntheses.

(1) Substance-substance syntheses combine ideas of two or more substances to form ideas of things like a winged horse or an embodied thinker. Since 'winged' and 'embodied' are adjectives, it may not be clear how the substance-substance synthesis differs from a substance-mode synthesis such as the idea of a brown horse. Since we take adjectives to denote

30HR I, 244-245.

31When Descartes says, "The real is properly found between two or more substances," I imagine he means two or more non-identical substances. But if this is his view, then we need a type of composite idea that joins together ideas of the same substance. Some of the joined together ideas will be necessarily connected; others not. I could take my idea of a centaur and join it to my idea of a creature that is
properties, we would be inclined to think that the terms 'winged', 'embodied', and 'brown' express ideas of modes. But Descartes does not group composite ideas according to the linguistic function of the terms expressing them or the logical function of the idea itself. He classifies composites according to the ontological status of the objects of the ideas joined together to form the composite. To form his idea of a winged horse, Descartes takes his idea of wings and joins it to his idea of a horse. Since wings can exist independently of things that are winged, wings are for Descartes substances, and the idea they exemplify is an idea of a substance.

(2) Mode of Substance\textsubscript{1}—Substance\textsubscript{2} syntheses conjoin the idea of a mode of one substance with the idea of another substance. I have such a composite idea when I conceive of myself having the shape of a beer barrel. The shape of a beer barrel is a mode of a substance. If I think of myself having such a shape, I think of myself -- one substance -- as having the mode of another substance -- a beer barrel.

(3) Mode of Substance\textsubscript{1}—Mode of Substance\textsubscript{2} syntheses join half man and half horse. As a result I get the idea of a creature that is both a centaur and half man and half horse. But since a centaur is, by definition, a creature that is half man and half horse, my ideas are necessarily connected.

My ideas of Venus and the evening star, on the other hand, join together contingently connected ideas of the same object. The latter composite should be included as a type of real synthesis; the former composite as a type of idea of reason. I do not include these explicitly, however.

\textsuperscript{32}Ibid., PP. 244-245.
an idea of a mode of one substance with an idea of a mode of another substance as when I form the idea of a fruit having an apple's shape and a pear's color. 

Although Descartes does not mention other categories of real synthesis, he should include at least two more types:

(4) **Attribute of substance\_1-substance\_2** syntheses combine an idea of an attribute of one substance with an idea of another substance not having that attribute. If rationality is part of man's essence, then the idea of a rational dog is an attribute of substance\_1-substance\_2 composite.

(5) **Attribute of substance\_1-attribute of substance\_2** syntheses join ideas of attributes belonging to different substances. With this type of synthesis, only one attribute represented by the joined ideas can be a necessary feature of both substance\_1 and substance\_2. The idea of a rational omnipotent man is such a composite, for it combines the idea of an essential feature of man with the idea of an essential feature of God.

**Syntheses of reason.** Descartes recognizes two syntheses of reason: substance-attribute syntheses and attribute-attribute syntheses. To these I add a third --- the mode-attribute synthesis.

(1) **Substance-attribute syntheses** combine an idea of a
substance with an idea of an attribute of that substance. 34
The idea of an enduring body is such an idea.

(2) **Attribute-attribute syntheses** combine ideas of two or
more attributes of the same substance. 35 The idea of enduring
extended material substance illustrates the attribute-attribute
synthesis because duration and extension are both necessary
features of matter.

(3) **Mode-attribute syntheses** combine an idea of a mode with
an idea of an attribute of that mode. My idea of something
that is red and non-black qualifies as such an idea if we
regard being non-black as a necessary feature of the contingent
property, being red.

II. **FICTIONAL VERSUS NONFICTIONAL IDEAS**

Having sketched Descartes’ classification of composite
ideas into types and subtypes, we want to ascertain whether
there are any types that have clarity and distinctness as
generic features. As a first step toward this end, we want
to distinguish between fictional and nonfictional ideas, and
we want to find out whether there are any types of composite
ideas that are nonfictional.

The sources of fictional and nonfictional ideas. Compo-
site ideas result from the synthesis of other ideas. Minds
have the ability to produce such syntheses themselves. A

---

34 Ibid., p. 245.
35 Ibid.
person can take any two ideas and combine them into a composite idea. One forms such an idea when he takes the ideas of being inscribed and being a triangle and puts them together to make the idea of an inscribed triangle. When one puts ideas together in this way, the synthesis that results is what Descartes calls a fictional idea. I imagine that Descartes calls such composites fictional because the synthesizing capability of the understanding is the source of what we would ordinarily call imagination. Using our ability to combine, we can create all sorts of composite ideas. Some of these will be ideas of mythical things — winged horses, centaurs, satyrs, and the like. Others will be ideas of really existing things — embodied thinkers, tall people, etc. The term 'fictional idea' can be misleading. Fictional composites need not be fictive: they can be exemplified.

Besides these fictional ideas, Descartes thinks people have composite ideas their minds did not themselves create such as the idea of a triangle. These ideas have an external source, perhaps God. Whatever the source, these ideas are not mind-produced. They come into the mind already synthesized. Descartes refers to them as ideas of true and immutable natures.

Descartes' method for ascertaining which ideas are fictional and which are ideas of true and immutable natures. In the First Reply, Descartes tells us that fictional ideas can, but that ideas of true and immutable natures cannot, be
analyzed by "a clear and distinct mental operation." He says:

We must observe that those ideas which do not contain a true and immutable nature, but only a fictitious one due to a mental synthesis, can be by that same mind analyzed, not merely by abstraction (or restriction of the thought) but by a clear and distinct mental operation; hence it will be clear that those things which the understanding cannot so analyse have not been put together by it. For example, when I think of a winged horse, or of a lion actually existing, or of a triangle inscribed in a square, I easily understand that I can on the contrary think of a horse without wings, of a lion as not existing and of a triangle apart from a square, and so forth, and that hence these things have no true and immutable nature. But if I think of the triangle or the square ..., then certainly whatever I recognise as being contained in the idea of the triangle, as that its angles are equal to right, etc., I shall truly affirm of the triangle; and similarly I shall affirm of the square whatever I find in the idea of it. For though I think of the triangle, though stripping from it the equality of its angles to two right, yet I cannot deny that attribute of it by any clear and distinct mental operation, i.e. when I myself rightly understand what I say. Besides, if I think of a triangle inscribed in a square, not meaning to ascribe to the square that which belongs to the triangle alone, or to assign to the triangle the properties of the square, but for the purpose only of examining that which arises from the conjunction of the two, the nature of that composite will be not less true and immutable than that of the square or triangle alone. ...

The clear and distinct operation Descartes has in mind is his method for ascertaining what he calls a real distinction. This method allows us to find out whether certain parts of a composite idea are necessarily connected. Taking a composite

---

36HR II, 20.
37See footnote 8.
38HR II, 20-21.
39See below, pp. 190-192.
40Throughout I will speak loosely. I will say that two
idea, we see whether we can conceive of a possible state of affairs in which features represented by certain parts of our idea can exist in separation from each other. If we can conceive of such a state of affairs, the concepts representing these features are contingently connected. They could by the will of God be made to really exist separately. If, on the other hand, we cannot conceive of such a state of affairs, the represented parts are necessarily connected.

Two senses of 'fictional idea'. Commenting on the passage cited above, Gewirth distinguishes the fictional ideas from the ideas of true and immutable natures in a way that suggests there are no ideas that are fictional and contain a true and immutable nature. Although Descartes does not explicitly say that the fictional ideas and the ideas of true and immutable natures are mutually exclusive, I will with some

ideas $\bar{X}$ and $\bar{Y}$ are necessarily connected with each other or entail each other if and only if it is necessary, for any $\bar{Z}$, that $\bar{Z}$ is an instance of $\bar{X}$ if and only if $\bar{Z}$ is an instance of $\bar{Y}$. And I will say that an idea $X$ is necessarily connected with or entails an idea $Y$ provided that it is necessary, for any $\bar{Z}$, that $\bar{Z}$ is an instance of $X$ only if $\bar{Z}$ is an instance of $Y$.

This way of elucidating the notion of necessary connections between concepts is somewhat odd. Usually we would say that two ideas $\bar{X}$ and $\bar{Y}$ are necessarily connected if and only if $X$ is necessarily connected with $Y$ or $Y$ is necessarily connected with $X$. I avoid this formulation because it does not tell us in which direction the entailment goes, and for our purposes direction is almost always important.

41. HR I, 190.

42. Gewirth, p. 270.
reservation adopt what I take to be Gewirth's reading of Descartes' remarks. Speaking loosely, I will say that a non-fictional idea is one that is not fictional, and I will take the terms 'nonfictional idea' and 'idea of a true and immutable nature' to be coextensive.

Looking back at the passage cited, however, we can see that the interpretation I accept needs qualification. Descartes seems to be contradicting himself. At the beginning of the passage, he says:

(i) "When I think of a ... triangle inscribed in a square, I easily understand that I can on the contrary think ... of a triangle apart from a square, ... and that hence these things have [this thing has] no true and immutable nature."

But at the end of the same passage, he seems to contradict (i). He says:

(ii) "If I think of a triangle inscribed in a square ... for the purpose only of examining that which arises from the conjunction of the two, the nature of that composite will be not less true and immutable than that of the square or triangle alone. ... ."

Descartes seems to be saying that some ideas do and do not contain true and immutable natures.

A close examination of Descartes' remarks reveals that he is not contradicting himself. He is using the terms 'fic-
tional idea' and 'idea of a true and immutable nature' equivocally. I do not know whether Descartes was aware that he was equivocating, but his words at the beginning of the passage we are discussing do not rule out the possibility that he was aware. He starts the passage with a discussion of "those ideas which do not contain a true and immutable nature, but only a fictitious one due to a mental synthesis." He leaves open the possibility that there is a sense in which an idea can contain a true and immutable nature and be fictional, although he is not discussing such an idea at this stage. Later he does discuss such an idea, however — his idea of a triangle inscribed in a square. This idea is fictional in the sense that the ideas joined together to form it are not necessarily connected with each other. I call ideas that are fictional in this sense 'fictional\(_1\)'. Ideas can be fictional in another sense, however; they can be fictional\(_2\). Descartes' idea of a triangle inscribed in a square is both fictional\(_1\) and nonfictional\(_2\); it contains a true and immutable nature in the second sense.

To help make the distinctions I want to draw, I will differentiate between three types of conceptual contents. When I join two ideas together to form a composite idea, the ideas joined together are conceptual contents of the composite formed. I will call these contents 'the primary contents' of the composite. In my composite idea of a triangle inscribed in a square, the primary contents are the ideas of being
inscribed in a square and being a triangle.

The composite idea formed as a result of joining the primary contents together has a content it entails. I call this content the secondary content. My idea of a triangle inscribed in a square contains in its secondary content all the concepts entailed by the primary contents and more. Since the concept of having angles equal to two right represents a necessary feature of triangles and, therefore, of triangles inscribed in squares, this concept is part of the secondary content of my idea. But this content also contains ideas not contained in the primary contents themselves. The geometer uncovers the secondary content when he demonstrates what is true of triangles inscribed in squares. Although what is necessarily true of triangles and necessarily true of things inscribed in squares is also necessarily true of triangles inscribed in this way, what is necessarily true of these inscribed triangles may be untrue of uninscribed triangles and figures inscribed in squares generally. Strictly speaking, it is the secondary content that is the content of a composite idea. Besides the primary and secondary contents, there is what I call a 'tertiary content'. For Descartes, ideas are mind-dependent entities. There are no ideas that are not ideas of a thinker. The tertiary content is what the thinker believes his idea to entail. This content may include concepts that are not part of the secondary content. The thinker may believe the secondary content of his idea to contain
concepts it really does not contain -- concepts representing contingent or necessarily false properties of the object of his idea. If I think that my idea of a triangle inscribed in a square contains the concepts of being red or having angles equal to 190 degrees, then the tertiary content of my idea contains concepts not contained in the secondary content.

In composite fictional ideas, the primary contents are not necessarily connected with each other. The difficulty with such ideas is that the person having them may not realize that their contents represent particulars that are really distinct. Failing to realize that the represented particulars are not necessarily connected, he may make the mistake of thinking that what is true of the one particular is true of the other. He may, for example, ascribe to the square what belongs to triangles alone and to triangles what belongs to squares alone. Speaking in a characteristically Cartesian way, we can say that composite fictional ideas provide material for error.

Fictional ideas in the second sense also provide material

---

43 For an idea to be fictional, only one of the ideas joined to form the composite needs to be contingently connected with the other. They do not have to be contingently connected with each other. In the case of my ideas of an inscribed triangle and a winged horse, however, the primary contents happen to be contingently connected with each other, i.e. neither concept entails the other.

44 In the Fourth Reply Descartes says, "Certain ideas are materially false, i.e. according to my interpretation, that they supply the judgement with material for error." HR II, 165. Elsewhere Descartes uses the term 'material falsity' more restrictively, however. See HR I, 164.
for error. An idea $X$ will be fictional $2$ if and only if $X$ is inconsistent, or $X$ is contingently connected with some idea belonging to $X$'s tertiary content. Descartes' fictional idea $1$ of an inscribed triangle is nonfictional $2$ because this idea entails all the tertiary contents it contains. Necessarily connected with its tertiary content, Descartes' idea can be said to be an idea of a true and immutable nature.

Not everyone's idea of an inscribed triangle is an idea of a true and immutable nature in the second sense, however. In Principle LIV Descartes tells us that we can put fictional content into our idea of God. $^{45}$ We make our idea fictional when we include in this idea contents which do not pertain "to the nature of an absolutely perfect Being." $^{46}$ There seems to be no reason why we cannot in the very same way put fictional content into any idea we have regardless of whether that idea is fictional or nonfictional in the first sense. Whether our idea is fictional $1$ or nonfictional $1$, we make our idea fictional $2$ when we include among its tertiary contents ideas it does not entail. If my idea of an inscribed triangle contains in its tertiary contents ideas representing contingent features of inscribed triangles, then my idea is fictional $2$. But if this same idea contains in its tertiary content only necessary features of inscribed triangles, then my idea is nonfictional $2$, and it is an idea of a true and immutable nature in the second sense.

$^{45}$ BR I, 241. $^{46}$ Ibid.
Looking back at the passage cited above,\textsuperscript{47} we can see that Descartes is misleading us. Speaking first of his idea of an inscribed triangle, he tells us that this idea does not contain a true and immutable nature. Speaking next of his idea of a triangle, he suggests that this idea does contain such a nature. Juxtaposing his remarks in this way, Descartes gives the impression that he is contrasting these two ideas and that he means for us to apply the term "true and immutable nature" univocally to both.

The impression Descartes conveys is, I think, a misimpression. Although Descartes' remarks suggest that his idea of an inscribed triangle is fictional\textsubscript{1} and that his idea of a triangle is nonfictional\textsubscript{2}, his remarks do not imply that his former idea is fictional\textsubscript{2} and that his latter idea is nonfictional\textsubscript{1}. What Descartes says is consistent with the following two claims:

1. There are fictional\textsubscript{1} ideas that can be nonfictional\textsubscript{2}.
2. There are nonfictional\textsubscript{2} ideas that can be fictional\textsubscript{1}.

Descartes' idea of a triangle inscribed in a square is a good example of an idea that is both fictional\textsubscript{1} and nonfictional\textsubscript{2}. Although its primary contents are not necessarily connected with each other, its tertiary contents include only concepts representing necessary features of triangles inscribed in

\textsuperscript{47}See pp. 159-160 above.
squares.48

(2) highlights some difficulties with Descartes' view of composite ideas. I am not sure whether Descartes thinks his idea of a triangle has no primary content or whether he thinks 'triangle' is a name expressing the idea of a three-sided figure so that the ideas of being three-sided and being figured constitute the primary content of his idea.

I am inclined to adopt the latter view because I think that he would want to say that his idea of an inscribed triangle was fictional, even if he renamed it, say, a 'scri-triangle'. But if I am interpreting Descartes correctly, we can easily give an example to show that (2) is true. Although Descartes' idea of a triangle is nonfictional, it is fictional. His idea of a triangle contains as its primary contents the ideas of being figured and being three-sided. But we can easily conceive of figures that are not three-sided so that the primary contents of Descartes' composite idea are not necessarily connected with each other.49 Like Descartes' ideas of a winged horse and an inscribed triangle, Descartes' idea of a triangle is fictional.

Descartes' method for ascertaining the two types of fictional ideas. It is important to realize that Descartes is using the same method to ascertaint whether ideas are

48 I assume that Descartes, the geometer, includes, in the tertiary content of his idea, only concepts his idea entails.

49 Although the idea of being three-sided entails the idea of being figured, the entailment does not run the other way.
fictional in the first and second sense. What changes are
the ideas to which Descartes applies his method. When he
applies his method to the primary contents of a composite idea,
he finds out whether this composite is fictional or an idea
of a true and immutable nature in the first sense. To find out
whether this same idea is fictional\textsubscript{1} or nonfictional\textsubscript{2}, he
applies the same method to see whether his idea is not neces-
sarily connected with any of its tertiary contents.

Regardless of whether Descartes is trying to ascertain
if a composite idea is fictional\textsubscript{1} or fictional\textsubscript{2}, his fund-
amental task is the same: he must ascertain whether certain
ideas are necessarily or contingently connected. The method
Descartes uses to reveal such connections is his method for
ascertaining what he calls real distinctions. This method
does double duty therefore: it identifies both fictional
composites\textsubscript{1} and fictional composites\textsubscript{2}.

Clarity and distinctness and the fictional and nonfic-
tional ideas. Descartes' remarks in Principle LIV suggest that
we would be mistaken if we adopted the view that a composite
idea is clear and distinct if and only if it is nonfictional.

He says:

We can also have a clear and distinct idea of an uncreated
and independent thinking substance, that is to say, of God,
provided that we do not suppose that this idea represents
to us all that is exhibited in God, and that we do not
mingle anything fictitious with it, but simply attend to
what is evidently contained in the notion, and which we
are aware pertains to the nature of an absolutely perfect
Descartes' language here is cumbersome, and it raises two difficulties for our understanding when it is that a composite idea is clear and distinct.

The first difficulty arises because Descartes may seem to be stating at least a sufficient condition for having a clear and distinct idea. But on closer inspection, it is plain that he is not giving us this much. Instead, he is stating a sufficient and perhaps a necessary condition for being able to have a clear and distinct idea. Descartes' remarks do not rule out the possibility that we can have nonfictional ideas that are obscure or confused. Since the method of difference can show us only that our ideas are nonfictional, this method may not accomplish as much as we might hope. For all we know, it cannot by itself tell us which of our composite ideas are clear and distinct.

The second difficulty with the above quotation arises because we have no way of telling whether ideas which have fictitious content mingled with them are fictional₁, fictional₂, either fictional₁ or fictional₂, or both fictional₁ and fictional₂. This difficulty is not serious, however. In what follows, it will become evident that we can drop the distinction between ideas that are fictional₁ and fictional₂. Then we will be able to say that an idea is clear and distinct only if it is nonfictional₂. For now, however, we can hold on to

---

this distinction and say that an idea which is either fictional\textsubscript{1} or fictional\textsubscript{2} provides material for error.

**Analytical clearness and distinctness.** A nonfictional idea contains no material for error. It is nonfictional only if it is necessarily connected with each idea contained in its tertiary content and only if its primary contents are necessarily connected with each other. In some ideas the requisite necessary connections will hold, in others not. The determining factors are the analysis of the idea and the analysis we give it -- the primary, secondary, and tertiary contents. If the primary contents are not necessarily connected with each other\textsuperscript{51} or if the tertiary content is not a subset of the secondary content, then the idea is fictional and obscure or confused.

I call this mode of obscurity or confusion 'analytical obscurity or confusion'. This name seems appropriate because it is the analysis of the idea -- the parts it has and the parts we believe it to have -- that determines whether the idea is analytically obscure or confused or what I call 'analytically clear and distinct'.\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{51} It is not clear whether simple ideas have primary contents. Descartes does not tell us how simple ideas originate in our minds. On my interpretation simple ideas have parts, but it does not follow that these ideas are produced as a result of a mind joining other ideas together. For the purpose of this paper, I will adopt the view that simple ideas have no primary contents. Lacking such contents, they cannot be fictional\textsubscript{1}, and I will stipulate them all to be nonfictional\textsubscript{1}.

\textsuperscript{52} Analytically clear and distinct ideas need not be clear
III. ANALYTICAL CLEARNESS AND DISTINCTNESS
IN COMPOSITE IDEAS

Following the strategy we have outlined, we will now want to find out whether there are any types of composite ideas that are nonfictional and analytically clear and distinct. Since our strategy conforms to one Descartes himself adopts, we can follow his discussion of the various types of composite idea as he applies his method for ascertaining a real distinction to each. In order, I discuss the real composites, the modal composites, and the composites of reason.

Descartes' method of analysis when applied to real composites. When Descartes applies his method of analysis to a real composite, he finds that the ideas joined together are, as he says, really distinct. Two ideas are really distinct if we can conceive of the objects of these ideas existing separately.\(^{53}\) We can think of objects existing separately that are not separated in fact, however. But Descartes tells us that such objects are really distinct because whatever we can conceive to exist separately, God can really separate.\(^{54}\)

Descartes' method for showing ideas to be really distinct is not to be confused with the method for forming what Descartes calls "an intellectual abstraction". He says:

\(^{53}\)HR I, 243-244, and HR II, 32 and 59.

\(^{54}\)HR I, 190.
A real distinction cannot be inferred from the fact that one thing is conceived apart from another by means of the abstracting action of the mind when it conceives a thing inadequately, but only from the fact that each of them is comprehended apart from the other in a complete manner, or as a complete thing."

The ideas joined together in a real composite are intellectually abstracted when one diverts his attention away from one of the ideas and concentrates it on the other. By so doing, one can intellectually abstract ideas that are not really distinct. If he confuses his ability to abstract ideas with his ability to make real distinctions, he is liable to think that what he can conceive separately is actually separable. He might think that figures can actually exist apart from the substances of which they are figures. But he would be mistaken.

One avoids such mistakes if he uses Descartes' method of analysis correctly. Used correctly, this method shows him that his substance-substance idea of a winged horse is really distinct because he can think of winged objects that are not horses and of horses that are not winged. Mode of substance₁-substance₂ ideas and mode of substance₁-mode of substance₂ ideas are also shown by Descartes' method of analysis to be really distinct. I can conceive of myself to be shaped differently from a beer barrel, and I can think of beer barrel shaped things that are not me. Similarly, I can think of things shaped like apples that are not pear colored and of pear colored

---

\[5\text{MR II, 97. See also MR I, 22.}\]
things that are not shaped like apples. Applying the same method to attribute of substance$_1$-substance$_2$ syntheses and to attribute of substance$_1$-attribute of substance$_2$ composites, I can show that these ideas also join together ideas that are really distinct.

Using the method for ascertaining a real distinction, we show that every subtype of the real composite ideas is fictional$_1$. Depending on the analysis we give of the ideas in question, these ideas may be fictional$_2$ as well. But they need not be.

The best proof that a real composite idea is fictional$_1$. When I show I can conceive of the objects of ideas as existing separately, I have provided what we can call a minimal proof of a real distinction. The minimal proof is not the best proof, however. As Descartes tells us, "There is no better proof of the distinctness of the two things than if, when we study each separately, we find nothing in the one that does not differ from what we find in the other." Examples Descartes uses suggest that he is giving the term 'in' here a technical sense.

This technical sense appears in Principle LVI. Here Descartes says: But when we consider substance as modified or diversified by them [modes], I avail myself of the word mode; and when from the disposition or variation it can be named as of such and such a kind, we shall use the word qualities [to designate the different modes which cause it to be so termed]; and finally when we more generally consider that these modes or qualities are in

---

56 Husserl II, 102.
substances we term them *attributes*. Ordinarily, we say that properties belonging to an object are "in" that object. But in the above quotation, Descartes uses the term 'in' more restrictively. Contingent properties — modes and qualities — are not in the substance they modify. Since Descartes reserves the term 'in' in this sense for attributes — necessary features of the object modified — we can take Descartes to be using 'in' to mean "in the nature or essence of."

If Descartes means by 'in' "in the nature or essence of" when he discusses the best proof of a real distinction, then he is telling us that there is no better proof of the distinctness of two things than if, when we study each separately, we find nothing in the essence of the one that does not differ from what we find in the essence of the other.

The real composite idea of an embodied thinker. Descartes uses the best proof possible to show that his ideas of mind and body are really distinct. He says:

I understand in a complete manner what body is [that is to say I conceive of a body as a complete thing], merely by thinking that it is extended, has figure, can move, etc., and by denying of it everything which belongs to the nature of mind. Conversely also I understand that mind is complete which doubts, knows, wishes, etc., although I deny that anything belongs to it which is contained in the idea of body. 58

Here Descartes gives the best proof possible that mind and


58 HR II, 22-23.
body are really distinct. Whatever belongs to the essence of mind does not belong to the essence of body and vice versa. Since the composite idea formed by joining together really distinct ideas is fictional, Descartes' idea of an embodied thinker is fictional as well.

 Recognizing that this idea is fictional, Descartes is in a position to avoid errors of judgement he might otherwise have made. He will not attribute to the mind what he believes to be true of the body and vice versa. When he experiences a pain -- a mode of thought, he will not judge the pain to be in his body because, as a mode of thought, it is in his mind. He can, however, ascribe essential features of mind and essential features of body to a person -- a union of mind and body. A person is extended and does think.

 Perceiving real composite ideas with analytical clarity and distinctness. Although all real composite ideas are fictional, we can perceive them clearly and distinctly if we are cautious. We must use Descartes' method for ascertaining a real distinction and adjust the tertiary content of our idea until our idea is nonfictional. Using the content of our nonfictional idea, we can restrict our judgement in such a way that we cannot err. If I am a geometer whose idea of an inscribed triangle is nonfictional, then I include in the tertiary content of my idea only concepts representing necessary features. I appropriately restrict my judgement when I predicate these features of inscribed triangles. I fail to
restrict my judgement if I predicate of triangles or of inscribed figures necessary features of inscribed triangles or if I predicate of inscribed triangles features not represented by a concept contained in the tertiary content of my nonfictional idea. Descartes would say that we must train our will -- our faculty of affirmation and denial -- to act in accordance with our understanding.

In this chapter we are reviewing what Descartes says about the composite ideas in the hope that his remarks will shed light on that aspect of clarity and distinctness that I call analytical clarity and distinctness. So far we have examined the real composite ideas, and we have learned this much. Although all real composite ideas are fictional, we can adjust their tertiary contents so as to make them nonfictional.

Descartes' method of analysis when applied to modal composites. Having completed my discussion of the real composite ideas, I proceed to an examination of modal composite ideas. Here our analysis must become more complicated. Descartes was able to use one method to show that all his real composite ideas were fictional. When he considers the modal composites, however, he modifies his method to fit the subtype under consideration. Let us examine each subtype separately.

Descartes' method of analysis when applied to substance-mode composites. Although Descartes thinks his method for ascertaining a real distinction does not show substance-mode composites to be fictional, he thinks a modification of this
method achieves this end. We can call this modified method Descartes' procedure for ascertaining a quasi-real distinction. A composite idea is quasi-really distinct provided that one of its primary contents is necessarily connected with the other but not vice versa. Substance-mode composites are quasi-really distinct. Although I cannot conceive of a mode existing apart from its substance, I can conceive of the substance existing without its mode.59 My ideas of a substance and its modes are contingently connected, and like all such ideas are fictional.

Descartes' method when applied to mode-mode composites. Since Descartes does not explicitly recognize the attribute-mode composite, we will have to speculate about what account he would give of such an idea. I imagine he would think modes of attributes cannot be conceived as existing apart from the attributes they modify. He would, no doubt, think I was talking nonsense if I said, "I am conceiving a state of affairs in which logically exists apart from a thinker who is thinking logically." On the other hand, I can think of a state of affairs where thinking goes on that is not logical. Although attribute-mode composites are not really distinct, they are quasi-really distinct. Like the other two types of modal synthesis, the attribute-mode composite is fictional.

59

MR X, 244.
Descartes' method when applied to composite ideas of reason. Although both the real and modal composites are fictional, Descartes thinks the ideas of reason are nonfictional. We were able to show the real and modal composites to be fictional because we could in each case show that ideas joined together to form the composite were contingently connected. With ideas of reason, however, Descartes thinks the primary contents are always necessarily connected with each other. They are neither really nor quasi-really distinct. As Descartes says:

This distinction [of reason] is made manifest from the fact that we cannot have a clear and distinct idea of such a substance if we exclude from it such an attribute; or we cannot have a clear idea of the one of the two attributes if we separate from it the other. For example, because there is no substance which does not cease to exist when it ceases to endure, duration is only distinct from substance by thought; and all the modes of thinking which we consider as though they existed in the objects, differ only in thought both from the objects of which they are the thought and from each other in a common object.  

Let us apply Descartes' remarks here to each type of idea of reason.

Descartes' method when applied to substance-attribute composites. Descartes tells us that we cannot conceive of a possible state of affairs in which an attribute and its substance exist in separation. Like any property, an attribute cannot for Descartes exist apart from the substance it modifies. In turn the substance modified cannot exist without the attribute modifying it. Since attributes are necessary

---

60Enum., p. 245.
features of the substances they modify, these substances cease to exist as the substances they are, when any attribute of them is removed. In Descartes' view substances and their attributes are not separable by either a real or a quasi-real distinction.

Descartes' method when applied to attribute-attribute composites. Descartes thinks that two attributes $A_1$ and $A_2$ of a substance $S$ cannot be separated by a real or a quasi-real distinction. Although $A_1$ and $A_2$ can be conceived to be attributes of different substances that exist apart, $A_1$ of $S$ and $A_2$ of $S$ cannot. To think of $A_2$ of $S$ as existing apart from $A_1$ of $S$, I must think of $A_2$ as modifying something other than $S$. But, then, it is not $A_2$ of $S$ I conceive as existing apart from $A_1$ of $S$.

Descartes' analysis here can be questioned. If I am thinking of my extension and my duration, I can certainly think of myself having my extension and a different duration and vice versa. Perhaps these individual properties are just modes of me, however. But as a material body, I do have the attributes of being extended and having duration. Yet I can easily conceive of myself as unextended and enduring -- a soul that thinks. But Descartes could reply that the attribute of having duration is not an attribute of the self I took to be me. Initially, the substance modified was I as a material body. Now the substance modified is I as an immaterial sub-

stance.
If Descartes' argument is sound, attribute-attribute composites have primary contents that are necessarily connected with each other. Like the substance-attribute composite, they are nonfictional.

Descartes' method when applied to mode-attribute composites. If being non-black is a necessary feature of the color red, then the idea of a red non-black thing is a mode-attribute composite. The primary contents of such composites cannot be separated by a real or quasi-real distinction. If I think of a red thing which is not non-black, then it is a black rather than a red thing I am thinking of. Like the substance-attribute and the attribute-attribute syntheses, the mode-attribute syntheses are nonfictional.

Nonfictional composite ideas. Composite ideas of reason are epistemically preferential. Because real and modal composites have contingently connected primary contents, these composites are fictional and provide material for error. When judging about the objects of these ideas, we must, Descartes believes, be especially careful. With composite ideas of reason, we can be less cautious, however. Since the primary contents of these ideas are necessarily connected, these ideas are nonfictional. Descartes thinks their primary contents do not give us material for error.

Nonfictional composite ideas. Although Descartes believes the primary contents of ideas of reason to provide no material for error, composites of reason can contain other
contents that provide such material. We can include fictitious concepts in the tertiary content of our ideas. In this respect composite ideas of reason are no better than real and modal composites. There is only one way to assure ourselves that our composite ideas are nonfictional. We must painstakingly apply Descartes' methods for ascertaining real and quasi-real distinctions to each idea contained in the tertiary content. Whenever we find our idea to be contingently connected with any of its tertiary contents, we must remove these. Carrying out the process of reduction Gewirth mentions, we end up with a composite idea that is necessarily connected with each idea included in its tertiary content.

When the idea reduced in this way is a composite of reason, the idea is analytically clear and distinct. It does not contain within itself material for error. If I restrict my judgements about the object of my composite idea and predicate of this object only properties represented in the tertiary content of my idea, I will never make a mistake, for the represented properties are necessary features of this object.

Collapsing the distinction between fictional and fictional ideas. Although Descartes thinks the composites of reason are epistemically preferential, I think he is mistaken. He thinks real and modal composites provide material for error that composites of reason cannot provide. Because the primary contents of real and modal composites are contingently connected, we are in danger of predicating of the object of one
primary content what is true of the object of another. But this danger is eliminated if we take exactly the steps required to avoid misjudgements about the objects of composite ideas of reason.

First we reduce these ideas so that they are necessarily connected with every concept in their tertiary content. Reduced in this way, our ideas become nonfictional. Since we can carry out the same reduction for real and modal composites, we can make these nonfictional as well. Secondly, we must restrain our judgement by predicating of the object of our composite idea only features represented by concepts contained in the adjusted tertiary contents. But we can exercise the same restraint when we judge about real and modal composites. Restraining our judgement in this way, we automatically avoid the errors Descartes traces to fictional ideas.

These ideas are dangerous because the unwary thinker will attribute to an object represented by one primary content what is true of an object represented by another. But if we restrict our judgement by predicating of the object of our composite idea only features represented by concepts contained in the adjusted tertiary content, we cannot make such a mistake. The judgement we form will always have our composite idea as its subject concept and a concept belonging to the tertiary content as its predicate concept. Since the subject concept is necessarily connected with all its tertiary contents, it is necessarily connected with the predicate concept, and the
entire judgement is necessarily true. The same steps required
to neutralize the material for error in fictional ideas\(\text{2}\)
neutralizes the material for error in fictional ideas\(\text{1}\).

Since we safeguard ourselves from the errors Descartes
traces to fictional ideas\(\text{1}\) when we protect ourselves against
mistakes arising from ideas that are fictional\(\text{2}\), there seems
to be little point in retaining the distinction between these
two types of fictional idea. Dropping this distinction, I
will say that an idea is fictional just in case it is fictional\(\text{2}\).

In this sense all types of composite idea are on an equal
footing. Depending on whether we add fictitious material into
our tertiary contents, our ideas will or will not represent
true and immutable natures. Those that represent such natures
are nonfictional; those that do not are fictional.

IV. DEFINITIONS RELATING TO ANALYTICAL
CLEARNESS AND DISTINCTNESS

We examined the various kinds of composite idea in the
hope that we would find a type or subtype that is nonfictional
and analytically clear and distinct. Although we failed in
this respect, we found out how we can reduce fictional ideas
so as to make them nonfictional. Now we can begin the task
of defining our terms.

(D1) An idea \(\text{X}\) is necessarily connected with an idea \(\text{Y}\)
\[ \frac{\text{X}}{\text{Y}} \]
it is necessary, for any \(\text{Z}\), that \(\text{Z}\) is an instance
of \(\text{X}\) only if \(\text{Y}\) is an instance of \(\text{Z}\).
(D2) An idea \( X \) is contingently connected with an idea \( Y \) \( =_{df} \) \( X \) is consistent, and \( X \) is not necessarily connected with \( Y \).

(D3) Two ideas \( X \) and \( Y \) are really distinct \( =_{df} \) \( X \) is not necessarily connected with \( Y \), and \( Y \) is not necessarily connected with \( X \).

(D4) Two ideas \( X \) and \( Y \) are quasi-really distinct \( =_{df} \) either \( X \) is necessarily connected with \( Y \) and \( Y \) is not necessarily connected with \( X \), or \( X \) is not necessarily connected with \( Y \) and \( Y \) is necessarily connected with \( X \).

(D5) An idea \( X \) is fictional \( =_{df} \) \( X \) is inconsistent, or \( X \) is not necessarily connected with at least one idea contained in its tertiary content.

(D6) An idea \( X \) is nonfictional \( =_{df} \) \( X \) is consistent, and \( (Y)_{(if \ Y \ is \ a \ concept \ contained \ in \ X's \ tertiary \ content, \ then \ X \ is \ necessarily \ connected \ with \ Y)} \)

(D7) An idea \( I \) is analytically clear and distinct \( =_{df} \) \( I \) is nonfictional, and \( (x)(F)_{(if \ x \ exemplifies \ I \ and \ x \ has \ F \ necessarily, \ then \ F \ is \ part \ of \ I's \ tertiary \ content)} \)

On (D7) Descartes' idea of a triangle is analytically clear and distinct if and only if the tertiary content of Descartes' idea includes, for every necessary feature of triangles, a concept representing that feature and nothing but concepts representing such features.
Besides having analytically clear and distinct ideas of universals like triangles, we can have analytically clear and distinct ideas of individual things. My idea of myself is analytically clear and distinct provided that, for every necessary feature of me, the tertiary content of my idea contains a concept representing that feature and only concepts representing such features.

Analytically clear ideas and analytically distinct ideas. Having arrived at (D7), we have a convenient way of distinguishing an analytically clear idea from an analytically distinct idea. Descartes tells us that the distinct contains nothing but what is clear and that whatever is distinct is clear. 61 Although we cannot be sure whether Descartes is talking about analytical clearness and distinctness here, let us assume that his remarks are applicable. If this assumption is correct, I think we can modify some theories Gewirth develops.

(D8) An idea I is analytically clear = def (x)(P)(if x exemplifies I and x has P necessarily, then P is part of I's tertiary content) 62,63

(D9) An idea X is analytically distinct = def X is nonfictional

61 HR II, 237.

62 Compare with Gewirth's analysis, p. 18 above.

63 I do not include as a condition that I must be consistent. Since an inconsistent idea cannot be exemplified, the antecedent of the definiens will never be satisfied.
Putting (D8) and (D9) together, we get (D7): an idea $X$ is analytically clear and distinct if and only if $X$'s tertiary content contains all and only concepts $X$ entails.

Although an analytically distinct idea does contain nothing but what is clear, we encounter difficulties with what appears to be Descartes' belief that distinctness entails clarity. But we can avoid this difficulty in one of two ways. We could change (D9) to (D9'):

\[(D9') \text{ An idea } X \text{ is analytically distinct if and only if } X \text{ is nonfictional and } X \text{ is analytically clear.} \]

But now (D9') is equivalent to (D7), and an idea is analytically clear and distinct just in case it is analytically distinct. Although this result may seem odd, it is in keeping with Descartes' view that what is distinct is clear, for it follows from this view that every distinct idea is clear and distinct. But if we do not want to modify (D7) and (D9) in the way suggested, there is an alternative. Later in this chapter I will discuss a second aspect of clarity and distinctness. I call this aspect "representational clarity and distinctness". In Principle XLVI Descartes tells us that distinctness entails clarity, but he does not tell us why he thinks this entailment holds. It might turn out that distinct ideas are clear because all distinct ideas are representationally distinct, and representational distinctness entails representational clarity. If we adopt this view, then we avoid having to introduce cumbersome revisions of (D7) and (D9). For the
sake of simplicity, I think it best to avoid these revisions.

**Perceiving with analytical clearness and distinctness.**

Having defined 'analytical clarity' and 'analytical distinctness', we can see that one who has an analytically clear or an analytically distinct idea may fail to perceive it to be so. His idea might, for example, be nonfictional since he includes in its tertiary contents only concepts representing necessary features of the object of his idea. But he might not recognize, for each concept included in the tertiary content of his idea, that his idea entails that concept. He may fail to have an analytically distinct perception he is in a position to have.

We can now define the expressions 'perceiving with analytical clarity' and 'perceiving with analytical distinctness':

**(D10)** A person $A$ perceives his idea $I$ with analytical clarity $=_{df} I$ is analytically clear, and $(x)(F)$

(if $x$ exemplifies $I$ and $x$ has $F$ necessarily, then $A$ recognizes that $x$ has $F$ necessarily and that $F$ is represented by a concept included in $I$'s tertiary content)

**(D11)** A person $A$ perceives his idea $X$ with analytical distinctness $=_{df} X$ is analytically distinct, and for every idea contained in $X$'s tertiary content, $A$ recognizes that $X$ is necessarily connected with that idea
V. MINIMAL ANALYTICAL CLEARNESS AND DISTINCTNESS

To acquire an analytically clear and distinct idea $X$, I must include in $X$'s tertiary content all the concepts contained in $X$'s secondary content, and only such concepts. But the concepts $X$'s secondary content includes may, for all I know, be greater in number than the concepts contained in the tertiary content of my idea. I may have an analytically clear and distinct idea but be unable to know with certainty that I do. Recognizing this difficulty, Descartes thinks we can get by with less than analytically clear and distinct ideas and analytically clear and distinct perception. What we need to satisfy is what Gewirth calls a minimal requirement.

_**Adequate knowledge.**_ In the Fourth Replies, Descartes tells Arnauld that we know an object adequately only if we know "all the properties which exist in the thing known." I take Descartes to be using 'in' here in the technical sense elucidated above. Our knowledge is adequate only if the tertiary contents contain explicitly all the essential concepts and all the concepts these entail. Although the explicit tertiary contents will contain all the essential concepts, the concepts these entail may be infinite in number so that I can never be in a position to know whether the secondary contents of my idea exceed the tertiary contents. I may perceive a

---

64 HR II, 97.
65 See pp. 192-193 above.
composite idea adequately but be unable to know with certainty that my perception is adequate.

The minimal requirement for clarity. Although we may not be able to know with certainty whether we are perceiving adequately, Descartes tells us that "an adequate knowledge is not required."\textsuperscript{66} We can settle for something less -- a knowledge that is complete and not inadequate.\textsuperscript{67} Intuitively, what we are after are concepts that will provide us with no material for error when we make judgements about the objects of these concepts. I safeguard myself against error when I adjust the tertiary content of my idea so as to make this content complete and not inadequate.

Descartes' account of completeness is vague. He tells us that "by a complete thing I mean forms or attributes which suffice to let me recognize that it is a substance."\textsuperscript{68} But he qualifies his account by saying that incomplete entities -- properties -- can also be completely known.\textsuperscript{69} Here Descartes is speaking about complete and incomplete entities, but I will extend his remarks so that we can talk about complete and incomplete concepts. Although I am not sure what Descartes means by 'completeness', I will adopt an interpretation Gewirth

\textsuperscript{66} GR XI, 97.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., pp. 97-98.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., p. 98.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
suggests: an idea is complete just in case its tertiary content contains explicitly all its essential concepts. 70

In this sense all ideas are, as I understand Descartes, complete. Replying to Gassendi, Descartes says:

In attacking my statement, that nothing can be added, nothing taken away from the idea of God, you appear not to have attended to that common saying among Philosophers — that the essence of things are indivisible. For the idea represents the essence of the thing, and if something is added to it or subtracted from it, it is forthwith the idea of something else; it is thus that... all false Gods are portrayed by people who do not conceive the true God aright. But after the idea of the true God is once conceived, although new perfections can be detected in it which had not been previously noticed, this does not cause any increase in the idea but merely renders it more distinct and explicit. . . .

Here Descartes tells us that our ideas "represent the essence of things." If we take away from or add to the concepts representing essential features, our idea becomes a representation of something else. 72

But are the essential concepts of the idea contained in the tertiary content, as I believe? Descartes' remarks suggest that they are. In the above passage, he seems to

---

70 Gewirth, pp. 260-262. I distinguish essential concepts of an idea X from concepts that are entailed by but do not entail the essential concepts. See p. 2 above. X is necessarily connected with its essential concepts and with the concepts these entail. But to be complete, X does not have to contain all these concepts in its tertiary contents. Only the essential concepts must be contained.

71 HR II, 220.

72 Without changing what our idea is a representation of, we can, of course, add concepts the essential concepts entail.
be distinguishing between the explicit and implicit contents of ideas. "After the idea of the true God is once conceived," we can detect in our idea perfections that were "not previously noticed" and that do "not cause any increase in the idea."

We conceive the true God when we conceive Him explicitly as an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and infinite being. If I conceive Him otherwise, it is not God my idea represents. But once I do conceive God correctly, I can detect in Him perfections -- necessary features -- I did not notice before. I discover that the essential concepts contained in the tertiary content of my idea entail other concepts. These concepts, which represent necessary features of God, are then added to but do not increase the tertiary content of my idea because these newly discovered concepts were implicitly contained all along.

On my interpretation of the above passage, all ideas are complete: they all contain their essential concepts as part of their tertiary content. But this content may contain more besides. It may also contain contents entailed by the essential concepts and contents representing features that are not necessarily connected with the object of my idea. Recognizing that I may have included fictional content among the tertiary contents, I may try to improve my understanding by eliminating any such content. But if I use the wrong method, I could confuse a fictional content either with an essential concept or
with an idea an essential concept entails.

To see whether an idea is or is not necessarily connected with a concept contained in its tertiary content, I must use Descartes' method for ascertaining real or quasi-real distinctions. I fail to use his method when I intellectually abstract necessarily connected ideas. Intellectual abstractions are dangerous because I am liable to think that ideas separable in thought represent objects separable in fact. And if, as a result of intellectually abstracting, I judge a nonfictional content of my idea to be fictional, then, in Descartes' view, I render my complete knowledge inadequate. To have a complete knowledge that is not inadequate, I must have an idea that contains in its tertiary content all the essential concepts and only concepts these entail, and I must recognize, for each such concept, that my idea is necessarily connected with that concept.

Using the above analysis of Descartes' distinction between complete and adequate knowledge we arrive at the following definitions:

(D1.2) An idea $X$ is minimally analytically clear $\equiv$ if $X$ is consistent, and $X$'s tertiary content contains all $X$'s essential concepts

(D1.3) A person $A$ perceives an idea $X$ with minimal analytical

\footnote{For a discussion of intellectual abstractions see p. 175 above.}

\footnote{HR II, 97-98.}
clarity = $\text{df } X \text{ is minimally analytically clear}, \text{ and}$

(Y) (if $Y$ is contained in $X$'s tertiary content and $X$ is necessarily connected with $Y$, then A recognizes that $X$ is necessarily connected with $Y$)

Although all ideas are minimally analytically clear, not all ideas are perceived with minimal analytical clarity.

Minimal analytical distinctness. Although all ideas contain all their essential concepts in their tertiary content, this content may contain more. It may contain both fictional content and content the essential concepts entail. If fictional content is included, an idea contains material for error. A minimally analytically distinct idea excludes such material, however.

(D14) An idea $X$ is minimally analytically distinct = $\text{df } X$ is consistent, and $X$ is necessarily connected with every concept contained in its tertiary content

Combining (D12) and (D14), we arrive at the view that an idea $X$ is minimally analytically clear and distinct provided that $X$ is consistent, and $X$'s tertiary content contains all its essential concepts and only concepts $X$ entails.

Minimally analytically distinct ideas need not be perceived with minimal analytical distinctness, however.

(D15) A person $A$ perceives an idea $X$ with minimal analytical distinctness = $\text{df } X$ is minimally analytically distinct, and for every concept contained in $X$'s tertiary content, $A$ recognizes that $X$ is necessarily connected
with that concept

A perception that is minimally analytically distinct is also minimally analytically clear.

Extending analytical clarity and distinctness beyond the minimal requirement. Once I have a minimally analytically clear and distinct idea, I can increase its clarity and distinctness beyond the minimum. I must be cautious, however. If I add to the tertiary content of my idea concepts my idea does not entail, I render my idea analytically confused. If, on the other hand, I use Descartes' method to ascertain concepts necessarily connected with my composite idea and I add these to the tertiary content, my idea remains nonfictional and minimally analytically clear and distinct.

Conclusions pertaining to analytical clearness and distinctness. I have two chief goals in this dissertation: (i) to see whether a satisfactory account of clarity and distinctness can be devised, and (ii) to see whether Descartes gives us an adequate method by which these features can be ascertained. Half this goal has now been achieved. Earlier I pointed out that there are two types of clarity and distinctness. I have completed my examination of the type I call 'analytical clarity and distinctness'. The definitions presented give us the account I have been looking for. I arrived at this account by following Descartes' investigation of the composite ideas he had classified into types and subtypes. Speaking loosely, we can say that the analytically clear and
distinct ideas are those having tertiary contents containing all and only concepts with which our ideas are necessarily connected and that the minimally analytically clear and distinct ideas are those having tertiary contents containing all the essential concepts and only concepts these entail.

To find out whether ideas are minimally analytically clear and distinct, Descartes uses his method for ascertaining real and quasi-real distinctions. This method is an introspective method of analysis that is applied to ideas and their contents. Those ideas whose objects our minds are unable to conceive as existing apart are, Descartes thinks, necessarily connected; those that can be conceived as existing apart are not necessarily connected.

Descartes uses his method for ascertaining real and quasi-real distinctions in the Meditations, and it is to this method that he referred Gassendi. Is Descartes guilty of psychologism in using this method, however? His method certainly does contain a psychological element. What we are unable to conceive as existing apart may in fact be able to exist apart. On the other hand, Descartes' method is not psychological in the sense that it is arbitrary. The inability of the mind to conceive the objects of certain ideas as existing separately depends at least in part on the contents of the ideas under consideration. Logical relations holding between
the contents of ideas are a determining factor in whether the mind is or is not able to disjoin the ideas it has.\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{75}On this point, see Gewirth, pp. 276-277.
CHAPTER VII

REPRESENTATIONAL CLARITY AND DISTINCTNESS

Although we have succeeded in defining what we mean when we say an idea is 'analytically clear and distinct', there is another type of clarity and distinctness we must now consider -- representational clarity and distinctness. To develop an account of this mode of clarity and distinctness, I will first consider Descartes' notion of material falsity, a key notion in his discussion of clear and distinct ideas. To elucidate what Descartes means by material falsity and to assist me in developing an account of representational clarity and distinctness, I will focus on what Descartes says about simple ideas. I concentrate on the simple ideas because Descartes' discussions of them provide the best material for developing the account I want to give of representational clarity and distinctness.

I. DESCARTES' CLASSIFICATION OF THE SIMPLE IDEAS

Descartes' best discussions of the simple ideas occur in passages in the Rules and the Principles. In these passages Descartes distinguishes five types of simple idea: material, intellectual, common, mixed, and privative and negative.¹ Let us see how Descartes describes each type:

¹See I, 238 and 41-42.
(1) **Material simple ideas** are simple ideas that represent properties belonging to material substance alone. As examples Descartes cites the ideas of figure, extension, and motion.\(^2\)

(2) **Intellectual simple ideas** are simple ideas that represent properties belonging to spiritual substance alone. My ideas of perception, volition, knowing, and willing are such ideas.\(^3\)

(3) **Common simple ideas** are simple ideas representing properties that belong to both material and spiritual substance. Our ideas of existence, unity, and duration are such ideas.\(^4\)

(4) **Mixed simple ideas** are simple ideas that represent properties belonging to embodied spirits but not to material bodies and spiritual substances taken separately. Among these mixed simple ideas are our ideas of emotions like anger, joy, and sadness, and our ideas of sensations like pain, color.

---

\(^2\) *Ibid.* One can think of counterinstances to Descartes' claim that extension and motion are properties of only material substance. Time is extended and light is in motion. I do not know how Descartes would reply to these criticisms, but I think it is plausible that he would claim that light is material and that 'extension' is used equivocally when predicated of time. By 'extension' he means "magnitude or extension in length, breadth, and depth." *HR I*, 238.

\(^3\) *HR I*, 238 and 41-42.

\(^4\) *Ibid.*, p. 41. In the Rules Descartes includes among the common simples a class of propositions he calls the common notions. See *HR I*, 41-42. In the *Principles*, however, the common notions are no longer included. See *HR I*, 238-239. Following his account in the *Principles*, I exclude the common notions from the list of simple ideas.
odor, and taste. 5

(5) **Negative or privative simple ideas** do not comprise a distinct category of simple idea. All ideas have their corresponding negative or privative ideas. If the term 'X' expresses my idea X, then 'not-X' expresses the negative or privative idea corresponding to X. 6 For Descartes the negations or privations of simple ideas are themselves simple ideas. When such an idea is properly classified, it belongs to the same type as the idea of which it is a negation. Strictly speaking, Descartes recognizes four, not five, general categories of simple idea.

II. TYPES OF MATERIAL FOR ERROR

IN THE SIMPLE IDEAS

On the interpretation I am developing, there are three types of material for error, but simple ideas can have only two of these.

A type of material for error that simple ideas cannot have. Although on my interpretation of Descartes simple ideas are analyzable 7 and can be incorrectly analyzed, Descartes thinks these ideas are epistemically preferential. In the Rules he tells us they are "known per se and are wholly free from falsity." 8 He is speaking loosely here, however. The context


7 See pp. 166-169 above.

8 HR I, 42.
of his remarks makes plain the sense in which he thinks simple ideas are wholly free from falsity. In the Rules he proposes to contrast the simple ideas with the ideas compounded out of them. Although the simple ideas are "known per se and are wholly free from falsity," "the union of these things one with another is either necessary or contingent." Apparently, simple ideas are wholly free from falsity in the sense that they are all nonfictional.

One type of material for error in simple ideas. Although all simple ideas are nonfictional, they are not free of every sort of material for error: they can be fictional if we include in their tertiary contents concepts they do not entail.

Material falsity in simple ideas. But even analytically clear and distinct simple ideas can contain material for error. For Descartes all ideas represent. "There cannot," he says, "be any ideas which do not appear to represent some things. . . ." But what represents can misrepresent so that, qua representations, ideas can be a source of error. They can be representationally obscure or confused.

Descartes calls ideas that contain representational material for error 'materially false'. Contrasting formal with material falsity, he says, "For although I have before remarked that it is only in judgements that falsity, properly speaking,

---

9 Thid.
10 See footnote 51 in Chapter VI above.
11 HR I, 164.
or formal falsity, can be met with, a certain material falsity may nevertheless be found in ideas, i.e. when they represent what is nothing as though it were something. 12 Explicating this passage, Harry Frankfurt takes Descartes to mean that an idea is materially false if it represents something that does not actually exist. My idea of a winged horse is such a materially false idea. 13

Descartes' comment on material falsity is ambiguous. It is not clear whether Descartes means to be stating a sufficient or a necessary and sufficient condition for an idea to be materially false. If he is merely stating a sufficient condition, he is not giving us the full account of material falsity that we need. Unfortunately, Descartes does not elaborate on his account, and we can only speculate.

We want to distinguish questions pertaining to analytical clarity and distinctness from questions pertaining to the existence of the objects of our ideas. For any idea, except our idea of God, we cannot by simply perceiving with analytical clarity and distinctness ascertain whether our idea represents anything that exists. If we perceive with analytical clarity and distinctness, we can be sure that, if the object of our idea exists, it has, as necessary features, the properties the contents of our idea represent. What we do not know is whether our ideas represent anything that exists, and if they

12 Ibid.
13 Frankfurt, p. 129.
do, whether they represent them accurately. In Descartes' view we need to find out whether our ideas are materially true or materially false. But what is material falsity?

As a first guess, we can try attributing to Descartes the view that a materially false idea is one that provides material for error because it represents a particular that does not exist or because it represents a particular as existing in a manner in which it does not. If pains really exist and I am in pain, then my idea of my pain is not materially false because what my idea represents exists. But if I form the idea of my pain as existing in my foot, then my idea is materially false, not because it represents a particular that does not exist, but because it represents a particular as existing in a way it does not.

On the strength of these considerations, we could define 'a materially false idea' as follows:

(D16a) A person A has a materially false idea \( I \) if

\[
(\exists x) ( \text{A takes } I \text{ to represent } x \text{ but } x \text{ does not exist, or} \\
(\exists F) ( \text{A takes } I \text{ to represent } x \text{ as having } F \text{ but } x \text{ does not have } F ) )
\]

\[14\] This is not an assumption Descartes would grant. Pain may be the absence of pleasure.

\[15\] In (D16a) and (D16b), we make use of Descartes' notion of representation. This notion raises difficulties because ideas can represent objects that do not exist. In effect we want to be able to make sense of the following assertion: "There exists an object my idea \( X \) represents and this object does not exist." This apparently paradoxical formulation appears in one disjunct of (D16a). We deny the existence of an
Against (D16a), we can pose the following alternative:

(D16b) A person \(A\) has a materially false idea \(\mathfrak{f} =_{df} (Ef)\)

\((Ef) (A \text{ takes } \mathfrak{f} \text{ to represent } x \text{ as having } \mathfrak{F} \text{ but } x \text{ does not have } \mathfrak{F})\)

(D16a) and (D16b) differ in the following respect. On (D16a) I can have a materially false idea that represents correctly. If I have an idea of a centaur that I take to represent something that does not actually exist, my idea represents correctly but is materially false nonetheless. (D16a) makes every unexemplified idea materially false. On (D16b), however, my idea of a centaur is not materially false.\(^{16}\) Although my idea represents an object that does not exist in the actual world, my idea represents its object as not existing.

---

\(^{16}\)To highlight the difference between (D16a) and (D16b), I assume that centaurs do not exist. As it turns out, Descartes thinks this assumption is one I cannot discharge.
its object in this way, my idea represents correctly and is not materially false.

**Material truth.** We want to be able to adopt the following definition of 'material truth':

(D17) An idea \( X \) is materially true \( =_{df} \) \( X \) is not materially false.

To understand what we mean by 'material truth', we need to decide between (D16a) and (D16b). Descartes gives us a little help here, and I will be somewhat arbitrary. I will take (D16b) to be the correct definition for two reasons: it opens the possibility that one can have a materially true idea of an imaginary object, and it avoids a difficulty Frankfurt raises.

Intuitively, I think it is reasonable to say that my idea of Macbeth's dagger is less obscure and confused than Macbeth's idea of it. Although Macbeth views his idea as representing something that does exist, I view his idea as representing something that does not exist. But whether I adopt (D16a) or (D16b), it turns out that I have as good reasons to suspect my own idea of being materially false as I have reason to suspect Macbeth's. (D16a) and (D16b) lead to the same conclusion but for different reasons.

On (D16a), it comes as no surprise that my idea is materially false, for I have good reason to believe that Macbeth's dagger is a figment of Shakespeare's imagination. If I adopt (D16b), much more careful thought is required. Taking my idea of Macbeth's dagger to represent something that does not exist,
I believe my idea to represent correctly. I could be mistaken, however, and I have good reason to think I might be. If the evil genius desires to deceive me, he can make Macbeth and his dagger exist. In my view (D16b) allows a more subtle and, I think, more Cartesian analysis of ideas of imaginary things.

There is a second reason for adopting (D16b). Frankfurt argues that Descartes is committed to a grotesque apriorism if his rule of evidence entails that clearly and distinctly perceived concepts are materially true. Descartes would, Frankfurt believes, be saddled with the view "that a person need only formulate a clear and distinct idea of some type of object in order to be certain that an object of that type exists." 17 Although (D16a) leaves Descartes open to this criticism, (D16b) does not. On (D16b), I can have materially true ideas of particulars that do not exist.

Material truth and falsity as functions of representation.

When we discussed analytical clarity and distinctness, we were able to say that ideas can be analytically clear and distinct even though the person having these ideas does not recognize them to be so. Although the ideas are always modes of thought and do not exist apart from the thinker having them, there is a perfectly good sense in which we can say that analytical clarity and distinctness are properties of ideas.

Similarly, we can say that ideas are materially true or

17See p. 90 above.
false. Although all ideas are representations and do not exist apart from the person having them, this person may not know whether his ideas represent correctly or incorrectly. His ideas will be either materially true or materially false, but he will not know which.

In acknowledging that there is a good sense in which we can say that ideas are materially true or false, we do not want to ignore the role of the thinker in making his ideas one or the other. It is the thinker who interprets his ideas and constitutes them to be the representations they are. On this score, Gewirth is right. Viewed in one way, ideas are materially false; viewed in another, they are materially true. If I take my idea of pain to represent a particular existing in my foot, my idea is materially false. If, on the other hand, I take my idea to represent a sensation or thought, it is materially true.

Material truth and falsity and Gewirth's account. We are now in a position to give a fair assessment of Gewirth's account. Gewirth was right when he realized that clarity and distinctness is a function of how we interpret our ideas. All ideas represent, and all ideas have what Gewirth calls an interpretive content. They also have, Gewirth believes, a

18 See pp. 7-8 above.
19 Ibid.
20 See pp. 8-9 above.
direct content. On my view this direct content is the analysis of the idea -- what the idea contains implicitly and explicitly.

Gewirth thinks that clarity and distinctness is a function of the relation between direct and interpretive contents. He is mistaken. Although there are two distinguishable contents in ideas, clarity and distinctness does not consist in a relation between the two. Rather, these two types of contents give rise to two separate aspects of clarity and distinctness: (i) that aspect that pertains to the analysis of the idea and concerns analytical clarity and distinctness and (ii) that aspect that pertains to the interpretive contents of ideas and concerns representational clarity and distinctness. On my account an idea is clear and distinct if and only if it is both analytically and representationally clear and distinct.

A clarification of our strategy. One issue we have been considering can now be resolved. I inquired as to whether Descartes recognizes any types of simple idea every instance of which is materially true. My answer is that he recognizes no such types among those he lists in his classification. Ideas falling under each category can be materially false depending on how we view them. But now we have another problem. We want to avoid those interpretations that make our ideas mater-

21 Ibid.
22 See pp. 7-8 above.
ially false, and we want to adopt only those interpretations that make them materially true. But how can we tell which are the right interpretations to adopt? Descartes recommends the method of doubt.

Why the method of doubt cannot be used to ascertain material falsity. Using the method of doubt, we cannot ascertain whether our ideas are materially false. When I apply the method of doubt to my ideas, I try to conceive of a reason for doubting that my idea represents correctly. Employing the method of doubt against my idea of Macbeth's dagger, I find that I have good reason to doubt the adequacy of my interpretation. The evil genius might have made Macbeth's dagger exist so that, for all I know, my idea of Macbeth's dagger misrepresents and is materially false. On the other hand, I have not shown my idea to be materially false. Although I have a reason to suspect that my idea misrepresents, my suspicion is, for all I know, unfounded.

Ascertaining those ideas regarding which we should withhold judgement. Although the method of doubt does not show me that my idea of Macbeth's dagger is materially false, it does show me how I can avoid errors of judgement due to the material falsity of ideas. Recognizing that I have a reason to doubt the existence of Macbeth's dagger, I can withhold judgement from any proposition that I recognize either to entail that his dagger exists or to entail that it does not exist. Re-
stricting my judgement in this way, I protect myself from error.

An apparent problem with using the method of doubt to ascertain material truth. Although the method of doubt cannot tell us which of our ideas are as a matter of fact materially false, Descartes thinks we can use this method to identify some materially true ideas. An idea is materially true provided that it does not misrepresent. To show that our idea does not misrepresent, we cannot consult the world directly to see if it is as we represented it. But we can use the method of doubt to find out whether there are any good reasons for suspecting that our idea misrepresents. And if we find out that there are none, then Descartes thinks we know with certainty that our idea is materially true.²³

But can the method of doubt really show us that there are no good reasons for doubting that our idea represents correctly? At first glance it seems that the method of doubt cannot do this much. To use this method, it appears that I must canvass possible reasons for doubting, and I must see if any of these are good reasons. After a diligent but unsuccessful effort to conceive a good reason for doubting, I might conclude that there are no such reasons. But I could be mistaken. There could always be a good reason I have overlooked. Regardless of how careful I am in searching for reasons for doubting, I cannot know with certainty that I have canvassed

²³Here we encounter Descartes' view that what is indubitable is true and can be known with certainty to be so. See HR I, 158-159 and HR II, 41.
all the possibilities. If I can use the method of doubt effecti

effctively only if I can be sure I have not overlooked any pos-
sible reasons for doubting, then I cannot use the method of
doubt to identify my materially true ideas.

Although Descartes was never faced with the above argu-
ment, he would, I believe, have disputed its soundness if it
had been brought to his attention. He could have replied that
we can identify materially true ideas without canvassing all
the possible reasons for doubting that we have represented
correctly. What we need to be able to construct is an argu-
ment showing that any doubt we could adduce must be a bad
reason for doubting. Since Descartes never was confronted
with the criticism I am imagining him to refute, he gives no
explicit illustrations of the kind of argument we are looking
for. But his cogito argument and his proof of God's existence
in the Fifth Meditations seem to me to indicate a line of rea-
soning he could adopt. 24

Taking his idea of himself to represent an existing

thing, 25 he could have argued in the following way. Either he is
interpreting correctly or he is not. If he is interpr

24 The literature on the cogito argument and the ontolog-
ical proof is very extensive and the interpretations of them
numerous. It is not my intention to offer a new interpretation
of these passages here. I merely use what Descartes says in
them to illustrate the sort of arguments Descartes could have
constructed if he had wanted to show his ideas of himself and
God to be materially true.

25 I assume that Descartes is representing himself only
as an existing thing here.
ing correctly, then he does exist. If he is misinterpreting, then he is deceived, and he exists. He does not have to canvas every doubt one could adduce in order to gain the assurance he needs. Whatever doubt he could bring forward, if it is a good reason for doubting, then he is deceived, and he exists. So there are no good reasons for doubting. He has a materially true idea of himself, and he can use the method of doubt to ascertain his idea to be materially true.

In this respect Descartes' idea of himself is not unique. Descartes also thinks his idea of God represents something that exists. Could he be misinterpreting his idea, however? He could argue as follows. His idea of God contains the idea of having all perfections. And existence is a perfection. So God has existence as one of his attributes. These considerations would, I believe, suffice to satisfy Descartes that he cannot be mistaken when he takes his idea of God to represent an existing thing. His idea of God is, he could hold, materially true.

Although Descartes did not explicitly offer arguments to

\[26\text{HR I, 180-183.}\]

\[27\text{I do not know how Descartes would respond to the argument that he could not be mistaken if he represented his idea of the perfect island as existing. He might argue that the idea of a perfect island is analytically confused because its secondary content contains everything its primary contents entail. The primary contents are the concepts of being perfect and being an island. But islands are necessarily imperfect so that the secondary contents of Descartes' composite contain contradictory concepts. The idea of a perfect island is analytically confused.}\]
show his ideas of himself and God to be materially true, he certainly believed they were. But these are not the only materially true ideas Descartes believed himself to have. Let us apply Descartes' method of doubt to the various types of simple ideas to see what interpretations make them materially true and what interpretations warrant our withholding judgement regarding the objects of these ideas.

IV. THE METHOD OF DOUBT WHEN APPLIED TO SIMPLE IDEAS

The wax example and material falsity in mixed and material simple ideas. Our next task is to apply the method of doubt to interpretations of the various types of simple idea. In his wax example Descartes applies his method of analysis to the concepts his composite idea of wax contains explicitly. Descartes' aim is to distinguish between those concepts that represent necessary features of matter from those that do not.

Descartes applies the heat to the wax so that he can show that there is a possible state of affairs in which properties he ascribes to wax are not necessary features of it.28 Proceeding in this way, Descartes is able to identify general necessary features of matter -- extension, figure, number, place, duration, etc.29 Although the physicist who studies

——

28HR I, 154.

29Ibid., p. 146.
these features is studying properties "that are very simple and general," Descartes thinks physics is not as reliable a science as mathematics. Mathematicians, he tells us, "only treat of things that are very simple and very general, without taking great trouble to ascertain whether they actually exist or not..." The physicist, on the other hand, believes the properties he studies to exist. He thinks physics gives him a description of the material world. But the method of analysis that identifies for us necessary features of matter cannot tell us whether the material world exists.

What it can tell us is whether properties are necessary or contingent features of matter if matter exists. Telling us this much, the method of analysis allows us to anticipate what will happen when we apply the method of doubt to the mixed and material simple ideas. If these ideas represent contingent properties and I take these ideas to represent existing particulars, then even if I assume that the external world exists, I will be able to devise good reasons for doubting that my ideas correctly represent. On the other hand, I will not be able to conceive such doubts when the properties represented as existing are necessary features of material substance.

30 Ibid., p. 147.
31 Ibid.
The method of doubt when applied to mixed simple ideas. Descartes thinks that most of us believe our ideas of sensation to represent particulars that really exist, that exist in material substance, and that resemble the ideas representing them. Interpreted in this way, our ideas are, for all we know, materially false on three counts. As the example of heat and cold showed, we cannot be sure that our mixed simple ideas are not privatives representing nothing that really exists.

But even if our ideas of sensation represent existing particulars, our ideas might still be materially false. As Descartes' example of pain shows, we could be mistaken if we think our pain is located in our body. Amputees have been known to claim that they feel pain in their foot even though they have no foot for their pain to be in.

Descartes can also be deceived if he thinks his idea of pain represents a particular that resembles his idea. Descartes has some plausible theories about the physiology of perception. Sense perceptions may result from complex changes in a nervous system that acts not only as a transmitter but also as a transformer of external stimuli. Since the stimuli are transformed, it is perfectly reasonable to suppose that the causes of our ideas of sensation do not resemble the

---

32 I confine my discussion to simple ideas of sensation, but it will be evident that among the rational doubts applicable to ideas of sensation are doubts applicable to mixed simple ideas generally.

33 Hr I, 189.
ideas they cause. As Descartes says, the wise man will "never assert that the object has passed complete and without any alteration from the external world to his senses, and from his senses to his imagination."\(^34\)

If the wise man does not take his simple ideas of sensation to resemble the particulars they represent, how does the wise man interpret his ideas of sensation? He will, Descartes says, view these ideas as representations of sensations or thoughts. And what is true of his idea of pain is true of ideas of mixed simples generally. Descartes writes:

But in order that we may here distinguish that which is clear from that which is obscure we ought to observe that we have a clear and distinct knowledge of pain, colour, and other things of the sort when we regard them simply as sensations or thoughts. But when we desire to judge of such matters as existing outside of our mind, we can in no wise conceive what sort of things they are.\(^35\)

Descartes' point is that our mixed simple ideas represent correctly if we view them as representing our sensations or thoughts.

**The method of doubt when applied to material simple ideas.**

The material simple ideas are those that represent properties belonging to material substance alone. Among these are Descartes' ideas of primary qualities -- extension, figure, motion, place, duration, number, etc. If we take these ideas to represent properties existing in external material substance, are

\(^{34}\)Ibid., p. 44.

\(^{35}\)Ibid., p. 248.
our ideas materially true or materially false?

In Descartes' considered opinion, these ideas are materially true. Although I can conceive of reasons for thinking the external world does not exist, I cannot conceive of good reasons. The dream and evil genius hypotheses are in Descartes' view inconsistent with other beliefs Descartes thinks he has no good reason to doubt: that God exists and that He is no deceiver. Descartes puts the point as follows:

And the whole strength of the argument which I have made use of to prove the existence of God consists in this, that I recognise that it is not possible that my nature should be what it is, and indeed that I should have in myself the idea of a God, if God did not veritabaly exist -- a God, I say, whose idea is in me, i.e. who possesses all those supreme perfections of which our mind may indeed have some idea but without understanding them all, who is liable to no errors or defect [and who has none of all those marks which denote imperfection]. From this it is manifest that He cannot be a deceiver, since the light of nature teaches us that fraud and deception necessarily proceed from some defect.  

Applying these considerations to the dream hypothesis, Descartes says, "And I ought to set aside all doubts of these past days as hyperbolical and ridiculous, particularly that very uncommon uncertainty respecting sleep, which I could not distinguish from the waking state." Continuing, he says, "Because God is in no wise a deceiver, it follows that I am not deceived in this."

And if Descartes is not deceived, the physicist is not

---

36 ibid., pp. 170-171.
37 ibid., pp. 198-199.
deceived either. To the extent that his ideas represent necessary features of matter as existing, the physicist's ideas are materially true. He could make his ideas materially false, however. If he thinks that his ideas represent properties belonging to a mode of substance that has no first cause, then his idea is materially false, for God exists and created the material world.

The method of doubt when applied to intellectual simples. Intellectual simples represent properties pertaining to thinking substance alone. Among these simple ideas are my ideas of imagination, willing, feeling, sensation, and the like. If I take these ideas to represent properties that belong to thinking substance, I represent correctly. Descartes thinks we cannot conceive of a possible state of affairs where willing goes on without there being a thinking substance which is doing the willing. Willing is, Descartes believes, a mode of thought, and for Descartes there is no good reason to hold that thinking can go on unless there is a thinker.

One can, of course, misinterpret his intellectual simple ideas and make them materially false. If he thinks that he is essentially a body, then he will believe that thinking in its various forms is a mode of material substance. Commonly,

——

38 Ibid., p. 249.

people talk as if they believe it is their brain that thinks and remembers. If they think that their idea of remembering represents a mode of a brain, then in Descartes' view their idea is materially false.

The method of doubt when applied to common simples. Descartes does not say a great deal about the common simples that will help our analysis. He does mention his ideas of duration, order, and number — attributes that are common to both material and spiritual substances. And he suggests that our ideas would be materially false if we viewed them as representing a substance rather than a mode. 40

Perhaps Descartes does not say a lot about his ideas of common simples because we can easily infer what he believes from what he has already said about material and intellectual simples. To the extent that his ideas represent necessary features of both spiritual and corporeal substance, 41 his ideas are materially true if he takes them to represent existing properties belonging to either spiritual or material substance. Since Descartes thinks he has no good reason to doubt that he exists as a thinking thing 42 and since we have already shown that he believes he cannot with good reason doubt that matter exists, he has no good reason to doubt that necessary features

40 HR I, 241.

41 He can use his method of analysis to find out.

42 HR I, 151-152.
of both spiritual and corporeal substance exist. When he represents such features as existing, he represents correctly.

Correcting the material falsity in ideas. The review we have given of material truth and falsity in simple ideas was not meant to be complete or penetrating. It was simply meant to show that no type of simple idea is epistemically preferential to any other type. Although Descartes thinks the mixed simples are especially troublesome because we have prejudices that induce us to misinterpret them, these difficulties are not inherent in mixed simple ideas. Our prejudices result from a faulty education which fails to provide us with an adequate method for distinguishing what pertains to mind from what pertains to body. But Descartes thinks these prejudices of youth can be corrected if one uses the method of doubt and avoids giving his ideas interpretations he has the slightest good reason to suspect.

Material truth and falsity in composite ideas. Inherently, the composite idea of a winged horse is not any more materially false than an idea of a triangle. If I view my idea of a winged horse as representing an existing object, my idea is materially false, but if I view it simply as representing a substance, then my idea is materially true.

43 HR I, 237 and 247.
44 See Part I of the Discourse. HR I, 21-87. See also HR I, 144-145.
45 In the same way that Descartes applied his method of
Similarly, my idea of a triangle would be materially false if I interpreted my idea to represent a triangle existing in material substance. Every particle of matter is extended in three directions, but the lines making up the sides of triangles have no width.

Relationships between analytically clear and distinct ideas and material truth. There is no necessary connection between analytical clarity and distinctness and material truth, on the one hand, or between analytical confusion and material falsity, on the other. An analytically clear and distinct idea can be materially false. Simple ideas are good illustrations we have already discussed. But analytically clear and distinct composite ideas can also be materially false as the example I just gave of my idea of a triangle shows.

Similarly, analytically obscure and confused ideas can be materially true. I could include in the explicit content of my idea of wax ideas representing contingent properties. Although analytically confused, my idea is materially true if I take it to represent a material substance.

VII. DEFINITIONS RELATING TO REPRESENTATIONAL CLEARNESS AND DISTINCTNESS

analysis to his idea of wax, he can apply his method to his idea of a winged horse. He will as a result identify necessary features of winged horses. Among the necessary features will, of course, be necessary features of matter.

46 I do not take my idea to represent an existing material substance, however.
When we attempt to define what we mean by a 'representationally clear and distinct idea', we encounter difficulties. Descartes uses the terms 'clarity' and 'distinctness' and 'obscurity' and 'confusion' in contexts where it is plain he is talking about what we have referred to as 'material truth' and 'material falsity'. Yet I can discern no effort on his part to distinguish between those ideas that are representationally clear or obscure, on the one hand, and those that are representationally distinct or confused, on the other. And there seem to be no clear patterns to his usage that would indicate how he draws the relevant distinctions. We could draw these distinctions arbitrarily, but I see no point in being unduly conjectural. Descartes' Rule tells us that what is clearly and distinctly perceived is true. Even if we cannot make out the distinction between representational clarity and representational distinctness, we have accomplished a great deal if we can identify the representationally clear and distinct ideas.

Having defined 'a materially true idea', I define 'representationally clear and distinct idea' as follows:

(D18) A person $A$ has a representationally clear and distinct idea $X \iff X$ is materially true

An idea that is not representationally clear and distinct will

47 See MR I, 237 and 241.
48 See (D17) above, p. 223
be representationally obscure or confused. We will not know which, but we will know it is one or the other or both. For the purpose of utilizing Descartes' Rule, however, we may have all the information we need.

Perceiving with representational clarity and distinctness. A person who has a representationally clear and distinct idea may not perceive it with representational clarity and distinctness:

(D19) A person $A$ perceives an idea $X$ with representational clarity and distinctness $= \frac{df}{X}$ is representationally clear and distinct, and $A$ recognizes that there is no good reason for doubting that $X$ represents correctly.

In the same way that a person cannot perceive his idea with analytical clarity and distinctness if his idea contains an infinite analysis, a person may be unable to perceive with representational clarity and distinctness a materially true idea he has. He may be unable to prove that there are no good reasons for doubting that his idea represents correctly. The proof required may be so long or so complicated that only God can supply the demonstration.

For our purpose, however, we do not need to perceive with representational clarity and distinctness. What we need are perceptions that insulate us from the representational material for error in ideas. We need perception that we can
call 'minimally representationally clear and distinct'.

The minimal requirement for perceiving with representational clarity and distinctness. If I believe that I am unable to show that an idea I have is materially true, I insulate myself from error if I refrain from judging that my idea is as I represented it. I withhold my judgement in this way because I recognize that, for all I know, my idea misrepresents. I could be mistaken, of course, and if I am, I miss out on the opportunity to make some true judgements I would otherwise be prepared to assent to. But one of Descartes' aims is to protect us against making any false judgements. And when we perceive with both minimal analytical and representational clarity and distinctness, we are in a position to avoid making such judgements.

I define 'perceiving with minimal representational clarity and distinctness' as follows:

(D20) A person $A$ perceives an idea $I$ with minimal representational clarity and distinctness $\equiv$ if $A$ perceives $I$ with representational clarity and distinctness, or (Ex) (Ep) [$A$ takes $I$ to represent $x$ as having $F$, but $A$ recognizes that he does not know whether there is a good reason for doubting that $x$ is $F$, and $A$ withholds judgement as to whether $x$ is or is not $F$]
on (D20) we can perceive with minimal representational clarity and distinctness ideas that are representationally obscure
or confused. If Macbeth's idea of his dagger is materially false, Macbeth can still perceive his idea with minimal representational clarity and distinctness if he appropriately withholds his judgement.

Gassendi's criticism and representational clarity and distinctness. Having given an account of representational clarity and distinctness, we can turn our attention to Gassendi's criticisms. Plainly, Descartes did give Gassendi a method -- the method of doubt -- for distinguishing representationally clear and distinct from representationally obscure and confused ideas. Admittedly, this procedure is not mechanical. It requires thought and may be employed with varying degrees of success. But even where the method fails to reveal whether our ideas are materially true or false, we are enjoined against falling back on subjective conviction. On the contrary, we should withhold judgement and settle for perception that is minimally representationally clear and distinct.

Although we avoid errors of judgement if we use the method of doubt correctly, this method has a psychological component. People can differ about what constitutes a good reason for doubting. Descartes thinks his idea of matter represents something that exists. He thinks God would be a deceiver if it turned out that Descartes was misinterpreting his idea. This consideration suffices to convince Descartes that he can conceive of no good reason for doubting that he is representing
his idea correctly. But another person might argue that our errors should not be attributed to God. This person, an idealist, might claim that God in His goodness did not create the material world, and He gave us adequate mental capacity to discern that He did not. If we misrepresent our idea and think that the external world exists, we are at fault, not God.

Descartes adopts this sort of strategy himself in his discussion of error in Meditation IV. If I make a mistake the fault is mine, not God's. God has given me a will that can judge before the mind fully understands. 49 Descartes thinks we encounter this difficulty when we believe that our idea of heat represents a property of material bodies. But someone else could counter that our idea of heat is correctly interpreted. We have a very strong inclination to believe our idea represents correctly. God allows this strong inclination to be in us, and He would be a deceiver if as a matter of fact our idea misrepresents.

If Gassendi accused Descartes of psychologism, he is in a sense right. Although each individual has a method that allows him to decide whether to regard his ideas as materially true or false, the same method used by someone else could yield different conclusions. Since the method of doubt is the only method Descartes gives us for ascertaining representational

49 NB I, 171-179.
clarity and distinctness and since an idea is clear and distinct only if it is representationally clear and distinct, we have completed one of the major tasks of this dissertation. We set out to determine whether Descartes could be vindicated from the charge of psychologism. He cannot.
CHAPTER VIII

CLARITY AND DISTINCTNESS AND DESCARTES’ RULE

This chapter has two sections. In section I, I define the terms 'clear idea' and 'distinct idea'. In section II, I make use of my overall account to give an interpretation of Descartes' Rule and to explain the sense in which his Rule can be said to be true.

1. DEFINITIONS RELATING TO CLARITY AND DISTINCTNESS

The second major task of this dissertation concerns our effort to clarify what Descartes means by 'clear' and 'distinct'. Because Descartes' definitions were hopelessly vague, we pursued a strategy of examining how Descartes actually uses these terms. Although the strategy we adopted has led us to the distinction between analytical and representational clearness and distinctness, it does not accomplish as much as we might hope. Since we are not able to draw a distinction between representational clarity and representational distinctness, we will not be able to distinguish between clarity and distinctness per se. We can, however, elucidate what it is for an idea to be clear and distinct.

\[ (D21) \text{An idea } x \text{ is clear and distinct } = \text{df } x \text{ is analytically and representationally clear and distinct} \]

Having (D21), we can define 'perceiving an idea with clarity
and distinctness' as follows:

(D22) A person A perceives an idea X with clarity and distinctness =_df A perceives X with both analytical and representational clarity and distinctness

The minimum requirement. Since the analysis of analytically clear and distinct ideas can be infinite, we introduced a minimum requirement that would allow us to ascertain which of our ideas are minimally analytically clear and distinct. We required that ideas contain explicitly all the essential concepts and only concepts these entail. Similarly, when we considered representationally clear and distinct ideas, we introduced the notion of perceiving with minimal representational clarity and distinctness. Putting the minimal requirements together, we arrive at an account of what it is to perceive with minimal clarity and distinctness:

(D23) A person A perceives an idea X with minimal clarity and distinctness =_df A perceives X with minimal analytical clarity and distinctness, and A perceives X with minimal representational clarity and distinctness

Extending clarity and distinctness beyond the minimal requirement. We have already discussed how we can increase analytical clarity and distinctness beyond the minimal requirement. There is a sense in which we can also increase the

---

1See p. 213 above.
representational clarity and distinctness of our ideas. Representational clarity and distinctness can vary in degree. One can take his idea X to represent something that exists, to represent something that exists in corporeal substance, to represent something having a corporeal substance as its cause, and so on. Assuming that X is being interpreted correctly, it seems reasonable to say that as one adds new interpretive content to his idea, he increases its representational clarity and distinctness.²

Since we can increase the representational clarity and distinctness of our ideas, I think we can say that person A increases the clarity and distinctness of his perception of an idea X beyond the minimal requirement provided that A perceives X with minimal analytical and representational clarity and distinctness, and either A adds to X's explicit tertiary content concepts X entails or A adds to X's interpretive contents and A continues to perceive X with minimal representational clarity and distinctness.

II. DESCARTES' RULE

We have now completed our account of clarity and distinct-

²Or this point Descartes' definition of 'being distinct' is suggestive. He says, "But the distinct is that which is so precise and different from all other objects that it contains within itself nothing but what is clear." See HR I, 237. Descartes' remarks suggest that we increase the distinctness of our idea as we increase its interpretive content. His remarks also suggest that a representationally clear idea has as its interpretive content a subset of the interpretive con-
ness, and we can turn our attention to the use Descartes makes of clear and distinct ideas. He tells us that whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is true. But what is it that Descartes thinks is true when clearly and distinctly perceived? Narrowing the scope of this question for us, Frankfurt asks: Is it ideas or propositions that Descartes thinks are true?

If he thinks it is ideas that are true, he is using 'true' in an unusual sense. Frankfurt considers the possibility that Descartes means by 'true' 'materially true'. He rejects this interpretation because he thinks it saddles Descartes with a "grotesque apriorism". On the analysis I have given of material truth, Frankfurt is rejecting a bad interpretation of Descartes' Rule for the wrong reason. We can have unexemplified materially true ideas.

Although Frankfurt's argument is unsound, the conclusion he draws is correct. Descartes' Rule is not meant to tell us that whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is materially true in the sense in which we have defined a 'materially true idea'. Since ideas are clear and distinct only if they

tent of a representationally distinct idea. But we have no clue as to what the content of a representationally clear idea is.

3See pp. 83-90 above.
4See p. 90 above.
5See p. 223 above.
are representationally clear and distinct and since ideas are representationally clear and distinct if and only if they are materially true, Descartes' Rule, if it is a Rule about material truth, is pointless. To use Descartes' Rule, we need to find out which of our ideas are clear and distinct, but to find out whether our ideas are clear and distinct, we have to ascertain whether they are materially true.

Frankfurt's interpretation of Descartes' Rule. Frankfurt thinks that Descartes' Rule guarantees the formal truth of propositions. He holds this view because he thinks that one has a clear and distinct idea of something only if, for every necessary feature of that thing, he clearly and distinctly perceives that that thing has that property. We clearly and distinctly perceive an idea only if we clearly and distinctly perceive some proposition about that idea.

On my view Frankfurt is with minor variation giving us an account of analytically clear perception. But the point he is making is correct, nevertheless. I perceive an idea X with analytical clarity and distinctness only if, for every concept included in X's tertiary content, I clearly and distinctly perceive that X entails that concept. To perceive an idea X with analytical clarity and distinctness, I must clearly

6 See pp. 90-91 above.
7 See p. 206 above.
and distinctly perceive that $p$, where $p$ is some proposition about $X$. But now a new question arises: What is involved in clearly and distinctly perceiving that $p$?

**Two types of judgement.** There are two types of judgement Descartes recognizes. A judgement proper results from an act of will. One affirms or denies that $p$. $p$ can be apprehended without being affirmed or denied, however. Descartes distinguishes what he calls inner cognition from the judgemental faculty. I cite below one passage from the *Rules* and one from the *Replies*. In the passage in the *Rules*, Descartes is talking about knowing simple ideas by acquaintance. But the reader will recall that in the *Rules* Descartes counts what he calls the common notions -- propositions -- among his simple ideas.  

Regarding these ideas, he says:

> We assert that all these simple natures are known per se and are wholly free from falsity. It will be easy to show this, provided we distinguish that faculty of our understanding by which it has intuitive awareness of things and knows them, from that by which it judges making use of affirmation and denial.  

**In the Replies** he says:

> No one can be sure that he knows or that he exists, unless he knows what thought is and what existence. Not that this requires a cognition formed by reflection or one acquired by demonstration. . . . it is altogether enough for one to know it by means of that internal cognition which always precedes reflective knowledge, and which, when the object is thought and existence is innate in all men. . . .

---

8*HR I*, 41-42


10*HR II*, 241. Emphasis mine. This distinction between
In these two passages Descartes recognizes two types of knowledge. Through his inner cognition a person can know that \( p \) before he affirms that \( p \) so that the proposition \( p \) can be present in the mind before the will affirms or denies it. We can say that a proposition \( p \) can be perceived before judgement is passed on it.

Making this distinction, we can talk about clearly and distinctly perceived propositions and clearly and distinctly perceived judgements. In the Rules Descartes tells us to "reduce involved and obscure propositions step by step to those that are simpler, and then starting with the intuitive apprehension of all those that are absolutely simple, attempt to ascend to the knowledge of all others by precisely similar steps."\(^{11}\) For the purposes of the analysis I want to give, I will suppose that a molecular proposition is clearly and dis-

In French, for example, 'savoir' means 'to know that such and such is the case' while 'connaitre' means 'to know by acquaintance'. Descartes recognizes this distinction in his most extended passage regarding simples. Throughout that passage Descartes reserves for appropriate forms of 'connaitre' what Maldane and Ross translate variously as 'cognition', 'apprehend', 'know', 'discerned', 'knowledge', 'known per se', and 'intuitive awareness'. When, on the other hand, Descartes refers to judgemental knowledge and judgemental knowing, he uses forms of the infinitive 'savoir'. For his use of 'connaitre', compare Rules, pp. 40-42 with Rene Descartes Les Regles Pour la Direction De L'Esprit in Oeuvres et Lettres (Librarie Callinard, 1952), pp. 50-52, and for his use of 'savoir' compare his headings regarding both his knowledge of the external world and the relation of mind and body in the Principles, pp. 254-255 with Rene Descartes, Les Principes De La Philosophie in Oeuvres et Lettres, pp. 611-612.

\(^{11}\) HR I, 14.
tinctly perceived if and only if the simple propositions
to which it can be reduced, or propositions recognized to be
equivalent to them, are clearly and distinctly perceived.

I do not know which propositions Descartes takes to be
absolutely simple, however. In Principle X, he refers to the
cogito as a proposition and says it "is the first and most
certain which presents itself to those who philosophise in
orderly fashion."12 But he goes on to indicate that there
are "notions of the simplest kind" which must be known before
philosophising can begin.13 Descartes uses the term 'notions'
to refer to both ideas and propositions, however.14 Of the
examples he gives, only one -- "In order to think we must be"
-- is clearly a proposition. But I do not know why Descartes
considers this proposition to be perfectly simple, and I do
not know what others he might also consider to be so. Yet
without such information it is difficult to give a perfectly
satisfactory account of what it is to perceive that p clearly
and distinctly.

To offer what is at least a plausible account, I need
to make some assumptions. I assume that Descartes believed
there are simple propositions or equivalents of them that
have a subject-predicate form. This assumption seems to me

12HR I, 222.
13Ibid.
14Ibid., pp. 41-42.
to be plausible, and it suffices to give us a partial account of clearly and distinctly perceiving that \( p \). If in addition I assume that all simple propositions are equivalent to propositions having a subject-predicate form, I can give the complete account we want. The view that all propositions are reducible to subject-predicate propositions has a long tradition in the history of philosophy and is in Russell's view particularly important for substance ontologists like Descartes. 15 Descartes may not have held this view, however, and I am not attributing it to him. On the other hand, for our purposes it will be easiest if we suppose that he did. But if in point of fact he did not, then the account I give is incomplete and needs to be augmented.

Where \( p \) is a simple proposition of subject-predicate form, I arrive at the following:

(D24) A person \( A \) clearly and distinctly perceives that
\[
\text{if } A \text{ perceives } p \text{'s subject concept clearly and distinctly, and } A \text{ recognizes that } p \text{'s predicate concept is contained in either the tertiary or the interpretive content of } p \text{'s subject concept.} \]


16 Since \( A \) can never ascertain with certainty whether he is clearly and distinctly perceiving \( p \)'s subject concept, we need to add a definition for 'perceiving that \( p \) with minimal clarity and distinctness'. I omit this definition, however.
(D25) A person A clearly and distinctly judges that $P = \text{df} A$ clearly and distinctly perceives that $P$, and A affirms or denies $P$ on the basis of his clear and distinct perception that $P$. \(^{(17)}\)

Having (D24) and (D25), we can define what we mean when we say a person knows that $P$.

(D26) A person A knows that $P = \text{df} A$ clearly and distinctly judges that $P$.

Since Descartes would hold that A knows that $P$ only if $P$ is true, we can now give an account of Descartes' Rule.

Descartes' Rule. Strictly speaking, it is propositions that are true or false. They are true or false regardless of whether they are affirmed or denied. Either what they state to be the case is the case or it is not. In the language we are using, a proposition that is not a judgment will still be true or false.

Every clearly and distinctly perceived proposition is true, however. Given assumptions I have made, I clearly and distinctly perceive that $P$ if and only if I clearly and distinctly perceive $P$'s subject concept, and I recognize that $P$'s subject concept contains $P$'s predicate concept in either its tertiary or its interpretive content. If $P$'s predicate concept is contained in the tertiary content of $P$'s subject concept, $P$ is true because it predicates of the object of $P$'s

\(^{(17)}\text{Ibid.}\)
subject concept a necessary feature of that object. If \( p \)'s
predicate concept is contained in the interpretive content
of \( p \)'s subject concept, then \( p \) is true because there is no
good reason to doubt that \( p \)'s subject concept represents cor-
rectly. Every clearly and distinctly perceived proposition
is formally true.

But when Descartes states his Rule, he does not say that
every clearly and distinctly perceived proposition is formally
ture. Instead, he says that whatever is clearly and distinctly
perceived is true.\(^{18}\) As Frankfurt points out both concepts
and propositions are clearly and distinctly perceived. Does
Descartes' Rule mean that both concepts and propositions are
tue?

At the very least it is meant to establish the truth
of propositions. Descartes may have put his Rule loosely;
however, because of the close relationship between perceiving
a concept clearly and distinctly and perceiving a proposition
clearly and distinctly. A clearly and distinctly perceived
concept provides no material for error. We have adopted a
strict sense of 'material truth'. But if we admit a loose
sense, we can also say that Descartes' Rule guarantees the
material truth of clearly and distinctly perceived ideas.
In this sense a materially true idea is one that provides no
material for error. This sense appears in the Fourth Replies

\(^{18}\) HR I, 158.
where Descartes mentions 'material falsity'. Here he says, "Certain ideas are false materially, i.e. according to my interpretation, that they supply the judgment with material for error."\(^{19}\) Besides ideas that are representationally clear and distinct and materially true proper, ideas that are analytically clear and distinct provide no material for error. They are, in this loose sense, materially true so that we can say that every clearly and distinctly perceived idea is materially true.

Using this loose sense of 'material truth', we can interpret Descartes' Rule as follows: Every clearly and distinctly perceived proposition is formally true, and every clearly and distinctly perceived concept is materially true.

\(^{19}\)HR II, 105.
CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSION

I will now review the ground we have covered and pull together any loose ends that remain.

I. GEWIRTH

Gewirth sets out to defend Descartes against Gassendi and against a criticism he himself raises in his role as devil's advocate. \(^1\) To defend Descartes, Gewirth makes use of a distinction between direct and interpretive contents. Although the article in which Gewirth observed that Descartes recognizes two types of contents in ideas first appeared in 1943, Gewirth's observation has been virtually ignored.

In part commentators have ignored Gewirth's distinction because of the use he makes of it. Thinking he can vindicate Descartes only if he makes clarity and distinctness consist in a relation between direct and interpretive contents, Gewirth developed a cumbersome and false interpretation. As I showed in my critical remarks in Chapter I, Gewirth's account fails for simple ideas. Basically, his account fails because it relies on the method of difference to tell us whether our ideas represent correctly or incorrectly. Applying the method of

---

\(^1\) See above, pp. 6-7.
difference to simple ideas, Gewirth draws the conclusion that all simple ideas are clear and distinct. But he himself gives several examples of simple ideas that are obscure or confused so that his account is inconsistent.

To account for simple ideas, we were forced to abandon Gewirth's approach and view clarity and distinctness, not as a relation between direct and interpretive contents, but as the product of correct analysis and interpretation.

II. KENNY

Kenny argued that Descartes' account of clearness and distinctness is incoherent. Although there seem to be three separate elements in the perceptual situation -- the pain, the perception of the pain, and the judgement about it, Kenny thinks there are really only two -- the pain and the judgement. In my chapter on Kenny, I criticized particular arguments Kenny raised to show that the perception is not a genuine intermediary between the pain and the judgment, and I will not cover the same ground twice. In the light of the interpretation I have given, however, there are some additional points to be made.

Premises in Kenny's argument to show that the perception

---

2 See p. 64 above.
3 See pp. 64-68 above.
4 For my criticism, see Chapter II, Section II.
of the pain is not distinct from the pain. Kenny thinks Descartes is inconsistent because he holds the following:

(1) "When a man feels great pain, he has a very clear perception of pain."

(2) We have a very clear perception of pains only if we restrict our judgement about them and that "this is a condition most difficult to observe."^5

On the analysis I have given, there is no contradiction here. In (1), Descartes is saying that we perceive our simple idea of pain with analytical clarity and distinctness. In (2), he is saying that we perceive our idea of pain clearly only if we interpret it correctly.

Premises in Kenny's argument to show that the perception of the pain is not distinct from the judgement. Criticizing the distinction between the perception of pain and the judgement about it, Kenny says:

On the one hand, we learn that 'we are by nature so disposed to give our assent to things we clearly perceive, that we cannot possibly doubt their truth'.^6 Yet, on the other hand, does not the whole procedure of methodic doubt suppose that one can withhold one's judgement even about what seems most clear.^7

One can certainly withhold one's judgement in the sense that one can turn his attention away from a proposition he has

---

^5See p. 65 above.

^6Cited from AT VIII, 21; BR I, 236.

^7See p. 67 above.
clearly and distinctly perceived. But he cannot doubt it, for in doubting it, it is before his mind and if, while it is before his mind, he clearly and distinctly perceives that proposition, he recognizes that its predicate concept is contained in either the tertiary or the interpretive content of the subject concept. He recognizes that his proposition is true.

**Kenny's account of clarity and distinctness.** Believing he has argued convincingly that the perception of the pain is not a genuine intermediary between the pain and the judgement, Kenny gives the following account of clarity and distinctness: an idea is clear just in case it is manifest and distinct just in case judgements formed about it are true.

If we keep in mind that Kenny intended to give us an account of clarity and distinctness for just simple ideas, his account is in a sense innocuous. On my interpretation Kenny is not giving us an account of clarity and distinctness per se. Instead, he is giving us an account of analytical clarity and representational distinctness. Every simple idea is analytically clear because it is itself contained in its tertiary content.

Regarding distinctness, however, Kenny says an idea is distinct just in case judgements formed about it are true. In a loose way he is talking about the representational

---

8 See p. 63 above.
distinctness of an idea. Our simple ideas are distinct if and only if they are materially true, i.e. if and only if they are correctly interpreted. Kenny's account of clarity pertains to analytical clarity; his account of distinctness, to representational distinctness. Failing to distinguish these two aspects of ideas, Kenny gives us an interpretation that is incomplete and confused.

Kenny's criticism of Descartes' Rule. Kenny accuses Descartes of arguing in a circle. On the one hand, Descartes tells us that what he clearly and distinctly perceives is true. On the other hand, he seems to be saying that he identifies his clear and distinct perceptions by ascertaining whether what he perceives is true. 9

 Strictly speaking, there is no circularity here. If I clearly and distinctly perceive that \( p \), then \( p \) is true. On my view I clearly and distinctly perceive that \( p \) only if I clearly and distinctly perceive \( p \)'s subject concept. But to clearly and distinctly perceive \( p \)'s subject concept, I need to make true judgements about that concept. I have to judge that \( q \), where \( q \) is not identical with \( p \). 10 So I do not have to ascertain that \( p \) is true before I can clearly and distinctly perceive that \( p \). There is no circularity.

---

9 See pp. 80-81. Ashworth makes the same criticism. See p. 131 above.

10 Since \( q \) is about \( p \)'s subject concept and not about \( p \)'s subject, \( q \) cannot be identical to \( p \).
Although Descartes is not guilty of arguing in a circle, we could try to amend Kenny's criticism so that Descartes is caught in a vicious regress. If I have to know that $q$ is true before I can clearly and distinctly perceive that $p$, then I also have to clearly and distinctly perceive that $q$. But, then, I need to judge truly about $q$'s subject concept, and so on ad infinitum. Let us look at this argument in more concrete terms. Suppose $p$ is "All bachelors are unmarried." To clearly and distinctly perceive that $p$, I must clearly and distinctly perceive the concept Bachelors. My explicit content consists of the concepts Unmarried and Men. I use the method of analysis to ascertain whether my concept Bachelors is necessarily connected with its contents. Using this method, I ask myself whether there is a possible state of affairs involving a bachelor who is married or not male. I see there cannot be such a state of affairs, and I judge that $q$: "$p$'s subject concept is necessarily connected with its explicit content." But is $q$ true?

To find out if $q$ is true, I must clearly and distinctly perceive that $q$. I clearly and distinctly perceive that $q$ only if I clearly and distinctly perceive $q$'s subject concept. Now I must recognize that $r$: "My concept of the concept Bachelors is necessarily connected with the concept of being necessarily connected with the concepts Unmarried and Men." But to find out whether $r$ is true, I must perceive that $r$ clearly and distinctly, and the regress is underway.
We embark on this regress because we assume that the only way to perceive a proposition to be true is to clearly and distinctly perceive it. But Descartes' Rule states a sufficient, not a necessary, condition for ascertaining that a proposition is true. Stating his Rule in this way, Descartes leaves open the possibility that there are other avenues, besides clear and distinct perception, for ascertaining what is true.\footnote{This point has obvious relevance when one considers the traditional Cartesian circle.} Frankfurt explores this possibility when he discusses the evidential bases in virtue of which one clearly and distinctly perceives. Among the evidential bases Frankfurt recognizes are self-evident propositions. But if there are such propositions, their truth is manifest, and we do not need to clearly and distinctly perceive them in order to ascertain that they are true.

\textbf{III. FRANKFURT}

I have already disputed Frankfurt's discussion of material falsity and his narrow interpretation of Descartes' Rule.\footnote{For Frankfurt's interpretation, see Chapter III, section I above. For my interpretation of Descartes' Rule, see above pp. 255-257.} What I want to do now is concentrate on his account of clear and distinct perception that such and such is the case.

\textbf{Why Frankfurt's account is itself susceptible to Kenny's criticism.} Frankfurt tells us that we clearly and distinctly
conceive a concept if and only if we clearly and distinctly perceive that \( q \), some proposition about our concept.\(^{13}\) We can now see that Frankfurt and I are using 'clear and distinct perception that' in different senses: When I talk about clearly and distinctly perceiving that \( p \), I am talking about a proposition based on a clear and distinct conception of \( p \)'s subject concept. When Frankfurt talks about clearly and distinctly perceiving that \( q \), he is talking about clearly and distinctly perceiving a proposition on which a clear and distinct conception of a concept can be based.

In his view we ascertian a proposition \( q \) to be true if and only if we recognize that certain relations hold between \( q \) and an evidential basis for \( q \). \( q \) has an evidential basis \( e \) provided that \( e \) excludes all reasonable grounds for doubting that \( q \), and \( e \) is self-evident or entailed by a proposition that is self-evident, or \( e \) is an experience.\(^{14}\)

But what are the relations that must hold between a proposition and its evidential basis? Frankfurt specifies these relations in his definitions of 'clear and distinct perception that'.\(^{15}\) A person \( A \) clearly and distinctly perceives that \( q \) only if he recognizes that, for some \( e \),

\[
(i) \ e \text{ is an evidential basis for } q, \text{ and}
\]

\[13\) See pp. 90-91 above.\]
\[14\) See pp. 92-93 above.\]
\[15\) See pp. 94-95 above.\]
(ii) $\varphi$ entails $\pi$ if and only if $\pi$ contains $\varphi$.\(^{16}\)

But how does $A$ know that (i) and (ii) are true? On Frankfurt's account he must clearly and distinctly perceive them. But to clearly and distinctly perceive that (i), he must recognize that $(E_{e \downarrow})_e$ is an evidential basis for (i). Again he needs to ascertain that this proposition is true so he must clearly and distinctly perceive it as well. To clearly and distinctly perceive this proposition, he must recognize that there is an evidential basis for it, and we are embarked on an infinite regress once more.

A reply to Kenny's criticism. Although Frankfurt's definitions of 'clarity' and 'distinctness' make Descartes susceptible to Kenny's criticism, his notion of an evidential basis suggests a route we might pursue. An evidential basis is either self-evident, entailed by a proposition that is self-evident, or an experience. There is nothing in Frankfurt's formulation to suggest that a proposition cannot be its own evidential basis. To clearly and distinctly perceive that $p$, I must on my view clearly and distinctly perceive $p$'s subject concept. In turn I must be able to ascertain that some proposition $q$ about $p$'s subject concept is true. If I must clearly and distinctly perceive that $q$ in order to ascertain that $p$ is true, then I am embarked on an infinite regress.

\(^{16}\)There are further conditions Frankfurt specifies that I do not enumerate here.
But if \( q \) is self-evident and its truth is manifest to me when I consider \( q \), I do not need to clearly and distinctly perceive it to ascertain its truth, and the infinite regress is averted. But is \( q \) self-evident?

When I clearly and distinctly perceive that \( p \) where \( p \) is "All bachelors are married," I clearly and distinctly conceive the concept Bachelors, and I recognize that it includes and is necessarily connected with the concept Unmarried. I am making two judgements:

\( (q) \) The concept Bachelors is necessarily connected with the concept Unmarried.

\( (r) \) The concept Unmarried is contained in the concept Bachelors.

In judging that \( (q) \) and that \( (r) \), am I judging truly?

If, to find out, I must clearly and distinctly perceive that \( q \) and that \( r \), I take the first step in a regress. But I do not need to clearly and distinctly perceive these propositions to recognize that they are true. They are self-evident. Every idea I have has an explicit content that constitutes it to be the idea it is. If the explicit content of my idea Bachelors is Unmarried Men, \( r \) is self-evident. It is equivalent to the judgement that "The concept Unmarried is contained in the concept "Unmarried Men," and I cannot deny \( r \) while I understand what it is I am denying.

\( q \) is also self-evident. It is equivalent to the following: "The concept Unmarried Men is necessarily connected with
the concept Unmarried." If I understand that \( q \), and I under-
stand what it means for one concept to be necessarily connected
with another, then I cannot sensibly deny \( q \), for if I did,
I would be affirming that there is a possible state of affairs
in which what is unmarried is married. Like \( r \), \( q \) is self-evi-
dent.

So far, I have shown that we can clearly and distinctly
perceive that \( p \) without having to clearly and distinctly per-
ceive that \( q \), some proposition about \( p \)'s subject concept.
But in the example I used, \( p \) was an analytic truth. What if
\( p \) is a contingent truth?

Let \( p \) be "I exist." We assume that I clearly and dis-
inctly perceive that \( p \). This assumption implies that I per-
ceive the concept \( I \) with analytical clarity and distinctness.
But since this concept is simple, it follows that I include
in its tertiary content only the idea itself. Consequently,
the concept Existence is not part of my analysis.\(^{17}\) This con-
cept is included in the interpretive content of my idea, how-
ever. But is my interpretation of my idea right? Is my idea
materially true and representationally clear and distinct?

To perceive my idea with representationonal clarity and
distinctness, I must recognize that \( q \):

\[(q) \text{ My idea correctly represents.} \]

\(^{17}\) For Descartes, 'existence' is a predicate. He ranks
his idea of existence among the common simple ideas, ideas
that represent properties of both material and spiritual
substance. HR I, 41.
But is q true? And do I have to clearly and distinctly perceive it in order to assure myself that it is? On Frankfurt's view, a clear and distinct perception is not required. If I understand q, I cannot doubt its truth because if I doubt it, I do exist and q is true. The denial of q is self-defeating, and q is self-evident. To find out that q is true, I consider q itself, and I do not need to clearly and distinctly perceive that q or some other proposition about q. There is no regress.

**General assessment of Frankfurt's account.** My account differs from Frankfurt's in important respects. Frankfurt deemphasizes the role of clear and distinct conception because he recognizes that we clearly and distinctly conceive concepts only if we perceive propositions about these concepts to be true. Concentrating on the notion of clearly and distinctly perceiving that such and such is the case, Frankfurt makes clear and distinct perception that p consist in a relation between p and an evidential basis for p. Although he does not rule out the possibility that p is its own evidential basis, p's evidential basis will typically be something other than p. On my account clear and distinct perception that p is quite a different matter. The relations that must hold are not between p and its evidential basis but between components of p, its subject and predicate concepts.

I cannot say that my interpretation is right and
Frankfurt's is wrong. In Chapter III I pointed out that Frankfurt's interpretation leaves Descartes vulnerable to Gassendi's criticism. My account does little better, however. It does, of course, avert the infinite regress we have been discussing. 

But beyond these considerations, I think my account is more true to the spirit of Descartes' writing. Descartes thinks we understand the complex in terms of the simple. Propositions are complexes, and I understand them if I understand the parts making them up. It seems to me characteristically Cartesian to think that I clearly and distinctly perceive that p only if I clearly and distinctly perceive parts of p.

But Frankfurt's account reverses Descartes' usual approach. In Frankfurt's view I clearly and distinctly conceive a concept only if I clearly and distinctly perceive a proposition about it. And I clearly and distinctly perceive a proposition by seeing whether certain relations hold between it and an evidential basis for it. Evidential bases are propositions or experiences. They are not concepts, and I do not have to clearly and distinctly conceive in order to clearly and distinctly perceive that p. On Frankfurt's account one wonders why Descartes mentions clear and distinct ideas at all.

Yet the clarity and distinctness of ideas occupies Descartes much more than the clarity and distinctness of

\[18\] See pp. 104-105 above.
propositions or judgements. On my account Descartes' interest in ideas is manifest. Ideas are either simple or reducible to simples, and when we understand these, we are then in a position to clearly and distinctly judge. Not before.

IV. ASHWORTH

Ashworth's criticism of Descartes' account of clarity and distinctness. Ashworth thinks Descartes confuses sensations and concepts. As a result of this confusion, Descartes, Ashworth believes, equivocates on his usage of 'clarity' and 'distinctness'. When predicated of sensations, 'clarity' and 'distinctness' have one sense; when predicated of concepts, another. 19 Clear perception of a sensation is in Ashworth's view "some kind of immediate awareness" 20 -- a function of the intensity of sensation. 21 A concept, on the other hand, is clearly perceived only if we can give a full definition of a term expressing that concept. 22 Considering 'distinctness', Ashworth contends that Descartes holds a concept to be distinct only if it is complete, 23 and it is complete only if it contains all and only concepts representing defining characteristics of the object of our idea. 24 A sensation, on the other

---

19 See pp. 106-108 above.
20 Ibid., p. 107.
21 Ibid., p. 113.
22 Ibid., p. 107.
23 Ibid., pp. 119-120.
24 Ibid., p. 124.
hand, is distinct only if it is complete and provides adequate grounds for judgement.  25

In my view Ashworth makes too much of Descartes' confusion between sensations and concepts. I am not denying that Descartes is guilty of this confusion. What I am denying is that he equivocated on his use of 'clarity' and 'distinctness' as a result.

Ashworth supports his view by arguing that Descartes' account of obscure and confused sensation differs from his account of obscure and confused fictional ideas.  26 Although I would not put the matter quite in this way, Ashworth's point is in a sense right. But he draws the wrong conclusion from his observation. Emphasizing Descartes' confusion between sensations and concepts, Ashworth fails to see that Descartes treats ideas of sensation differently from fictional ideas because the former are simple and the latter complex. Had Ashworth seen that the crucial distinction was between simple and complex ideas rather than between sensations and concepts, he would have been in a position to develop the interpretation I have given, and he would have better understood the facts he thinks require explanation.

Ashworth's criticism of Descartes' Rule. Besides accusing Descartes of the circularity which Kenny

\[25\text{Ibid., pp. 119-120.}\]

\[26\text{Ibid., p. 107.}\]
discusses, Ashworth also argues that Descartes has no way to justify his rule of evidence. The interpretation I have given provides such a justification, however. Once we understand what Descartes' Rule asserts, we cannot reasonably doubt that his Rule is true. A clearly and distinctly perceived proposition $p$ is one that has a subject concept that is analytically clear and distinct and materially true and that includes in either its tertiary or its interpretive content $p$'s predicate concept. If $p$'s predicate concept is in the tertiary content of $p$'s subject concept, then $p$ is analytically true. If $p$'s predicate concept is in the interpretive content of $p$'s subject concept, then $p$'s predicate concept is included in an idea that correctly represents. In either case $p$ is true.

V. GASSENDI

Gassendi asked Descartes for a method for ascertaining when we are clearly and distinctly perceiving. Descartes responded that he had provided the method Gassendi required "in its place, where I first discarded all prejudices, and then enumerated all the principal ideas and distinguished those which were clear from the obscure and confused." In Chapter V, I examined two interpretations of Descartes' reply.

---

27 A criticism I have just discussed.
28 See p. 149 above.
One is Gewirth's. He thinks that the place to which Descartes is referring Gassendi is the first three Meditations and that the method Descartes has in mind is the method of difference. But this method is never used or mentioned in the First Meditation.

If the method of difference sufficed to distinguish the clear and distinct from the obscure and confused ideas, we would not quibble with Gewirth over whether Descartes was referring to the Second and Third Meditations or to the first three. But the method of difference is not adequate; it cannot tell us whether simple ideas are clear and distinct, and there are substantial reasons for questioning Gewirth's account.

Against Gewirth's account, we posed an alternative interpretation of Descartes' reply to Gassendi. This interpretation is consistent with Descartes' remarks. On this interpretation Descartes is referring Gassendi to Meditation I, but the only method mentioned or used in this Meditation is the method of doubt. This method is also problematic, however. Descartes does clarify his ideas of God and matter in Meditations II and III, but the method he uses is the method of difference, not the method of doubt.

Whether we adopted Gewirth's interpretation or the rival account of Descartes' reply, we encountered difficulties. Retreating from this dilemma, we adopted a strategy that had
us examine the corpus of Descartes' work. The result of this effort is Chapters VI, VII, and VIII, where I gave my account of Descartes' notions of clarity and distinctness and how we ascertained them. But having offered this account, we can now give what I believe is the correct interpretation of Descartes' reply to Gassendi.

Gewirth was right. Descartes is referring Gassendi to the first three Meditations and to the method of difference, or, what I have called, 'the method of analysis'. But Descartes is also referring Gassendi to the method of doubt, the method used in Meditation I. Descartes' method for ascertaining clarity and distinctness is a combination of both methods. An idea is clear and distinct if and only if it is analytically and representationally clear and distinct. To find out if it is analytically clear and distinct, we use the method of analysis. To find out if it is representationally clear and distinct, we use the method of doubt.

VI. REMAINING CHALLENGES

In Principle XLV, Descartes defines 'clarity' and 'distinctness'. The key defining expressions he uses are 'being present', 'being apparent', and 'being attentive'. Although I have offered an account of clarity and distinctness that adheres closely to what Descartes says about clarity and distinctness throughout the corpus of his writing, I am
no closer to being able to offer a coherent interpretation of what Descartes says in Principle XLV. One obstacle in the way of providing such an interpretation is my incomplete account of representational clarity and distinctness. I was unable to distinguish representational clarity from representational distinctness and representational obscurity from representational confusion. If such an account could be provided, we might have at our disposal all the elements needed to give a coherent reading to Principle XLV. But the problem of providing such a reading is one I am not now able to resolve, and I defer the problem for future consideration.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Hartland-Swann, John. "Descartes's 'Simple Natures'," *Philosophy, XXII* (July, 1947), 139 - 152.


