

THE FALSITY OF NON-JUDGMENTAL COGNITIONS

IN DESCARTES AND SUAREZ*

In his reply to Arnauld's objection concerning the notion of material falsity, Descartes mentions Suárez in connection with this notion and says:

since I have never spent very much time reading philosophical texts, my calling ideas which I take to provide subject-matter for error 'materially false' might have involved too great a departure from standard philosophical usage. This might, I say, have worried me, had I not found the word 'materially' used in an identical sense to my own in the first philosophical author I came across, namely, Suárez, in the *Metaphysical Disputations*, Part IX, Section 2, Number 4. (AT VII 235)¹

Here I shall argue that it would be a serious mistake to infer from this passage that the two notions of non-judgmental falsity found in Suárez--to wit, the notion of improper falsity (DM IX, 1, 21), and the notion of (quasi-) material falsity (DM IX, 2, 4)--are either identical or closely similar to Descartes' own notion of non-judgmental falsity (i.e., the notion of material falsity);² that Suárez' notions are weaker than Descartes' notion; and finally that, for the achievement of some of his most important theoretical purposes, Descartes needs the stronger notion of material falsity.

In particular and in connection with this last point, I will sketch an argument for the view that Descartes' project of advancing the cause of the upcoming Natural Philosophy requires that he adopts the strong notion of material falsity; that, for the upcoming science and its exciting

promise to flourish, he has to persuade an important part of the European intellectual community to adopt it and to reject some of the fundamental categories and views about the physical Universe they have held until now. To do this, Descartes needs to argue that the fundamental tenets and concepts of rival world-views are radically mistaken; i.e., that their tenets are false and, more importantly, that their concepts are inapplicable--and not merely that they happen to have no application. Thus, for example, Descartes tries to argue that the Aristotelian Scholastics' concepts of heaviness (*gravitas*) and of substantial form, as well as the Animist's concept of physical object, rest on a fundamental, categorical mistake--and are thus false. But for him to be able to assert that some concepts--i.e., non-judgmental cognitions³--are false, he has to construct a new notion of falsity that allows him to intelligibly assert that some of the concepts of rival theories are radically flawed, and hence ought to be rejected--as we shall see. Descartes is the first philosopher who realizes that the consolidation of the new science could happen only if the criticism of concepts were possible, and that this would be possible only if the traditional theory of representation could be modified in such a way that the falsity of ideas or concepts--in the sense of misrepresentation--made sense.

1. Suárez Concerning Non-Judgmental Falsity.

In this section, I examine Suárez' two notions of the falsity of certain cognitions which are distinct from, and more basic than, judgments, that is, cognitions which involve neither composition nor division (DM VIII, 4, 5; and DA V, 6, 7).⁶ In particular, Suárez uses 'simple cognition', 'simple apprehension,' and 'simple concept' interchangeably to refer to a cognitive act

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whose sole function is that of representing an object--an act belonging either to the sensitive or to the intellectual faculty, and which involves neither composition nor division (DM VIII, 3, 7; Ibid., VIII, 4, 6; and Ibid., IX, 1, 14 and 18). There are in Suárez other cognitions that are non-judgmental and yet are complex since they involve either composition or division (DM VIII, 4, 5). Complex non-judgmental cognitions shall be relevant when we present Suárez' notion of quasi-material falsity, where we explain in more detail such cognitions.

Now, concerning proper falsity, both Suárez and Descartes accept that this falsity applies only to judgments (DM IX, 1, 17-18, and AT VII 37 and 43). In fact, Suárez explicitly says that a non-judgmental cognition could be false (properly speaking) only if there could be a disagreement or disconformity between the cognition and the thing that is the object of the cognition (i.e., the object represented); but no such disagreement can occur because "it is necessary that what represents and what is represented conform to each other (necesse est repraesentans et repraesentatum habere inter se convenientiam)" (DM IX, 1, 14).⁴

To understand this Suarezian view we must remember that, in the Aristotelian Scholastic tradition--to which Suárez belongs--the hylomorphic theory of substance is inextricably intertwined with the theory of cognition and mental representation. Roughly, the view is that to be able to know, to think about, and to sense a certain thing, the very form of that thing must be found in the appropriate cognitive faculty. The forms, as they are in a certain faculty, are called species. Suárez, in particular, also structures his account of sensory and intellectual cognition around the notion of species. He says that the union of an object with a cognitive faculty--a union that is necessary for knowledge--is achieved by means of certain "intentional species (species intentionales)" (Suárez DA V, 1, 3). Generally, the principle productive of knowledge of

an object is "the faculty informed by the species" of the object (DA V, 4, 15).⁵

For the philosophers within this tradition, then, knowledge of an object is brought about by the information of a faculty by the species of that object. Hence the relationship between a cognitive act and its object is one of conformity. Suárez explicitly states this consequence: the act of simple non-judgmental cognition, he says, "cannot disagree with (diformis) a thing in so far as it is the object represented" by that act (DM IX, 1, 14), because if the thing in question is truly represented by the act, then "there will be a conformity (conformitas) between them" (Ibid.)⁶

I shall call the view that the object of a non-judgmental cognitive act must possess all--though not necessarily only--the properties that are depicted in the act, the principle of conformity. The acceptance of this principle by the Aristotelian Scholastics, I claim, is grounded on their account of cognition and representation in terms of the presence of forms, or species, in a cognitive faculty. And it is not hard to see that the acceptance of this principle leads naturally to the view that properly speaking, non-judgmental cognitions cannot be false.

Yet note that for Suárez there are two (improper) senses in which one can say that some non-judgmental cognitions are false. First, there is an improper falsity (falsitas improprie dicta) that applies to simple non-judgmental cognitions, and which is a "negation of agreement and conformity between a cognition and a thing which is not its object" (DM IX, 1, 21), that is, between that cognition and a thing which is not represented by the cognition. This improper falsity occurs in a cognition when there exists a resemblance between a thing which is not represented by the cognition and the object represented. In this case,

the thing [which is not represented] is somehow similar and proximate to the object

[represented] in a way that the thing appears to be represented in a manner distinct from what it is like in itself. (Ibid.)⁷

When this happens, the cognition itself is called 'improperly false' because it may offer "an occasion for error or deceit" (DM IX, 1, 16), and not because it mistakenly represents the object it represents. Let us remember that, for Suárez, any simple cognition must faithfully represent its object. It is for this reason that improper falsity is called 'falsity' only metaphorically (DM IX, 1, 22).

On the other hand, there is a second notion of non-judgmental falsity in Suárez which he calls 'quasi-material falsity,' applicable to certain complex non-judgmental cognitions.

Concerning complex cognitions, Suárez says:

composition and division can be found, . . . in the apprehensive conception itself without a judgment. (DM IX, 2, 4).

A cognitive act of this kind consists in apprehending a "composition" or proposition without forming a judgment as to its truth or falsity. The cognition is complex because it consists in the apprehension of an item--a composition--which is already complex. In this case,

the understanding apprehends the composition and suspends judgment, . . . because it ignores whether the extremes [of the composition] in fact are united in reality in the same way as they are apprehended. (DM IX, 4, 5)

Additionally, falsity in these complex acts occurs when one entertains a false proposition without making a judgment as to its truth-value. Suárez's example is that of a person who, without asserting or denying, quotes: "The fool said in his heart: there is no God" (DM IX, 2, 4).

Falsity in this act, says Suárez, occurs "as if in a sign that, by itself, signifies falsity" (DM IX, 2, 4).

Note that Suárez is handling here two distinct notions of truth (or falsity); one that applies to mental acts and the other to linguistic items. Indeed, Suárez distinguishes (1) truth (or falsity) of cognition (veritas cognitionis) which, properly speaking, "occurs in the judgment, and any other intellectual act participates in such truth [or falsity] in so far as it participates in a judgment" (Ibid., VIII, 4, 5), from (2) truth (or falsity) of signification (veritas in significando) which applies to the verbal proposition and consists in "the immediate conformity [or disconformity] of the meaningful word to the thing signified" (DM VIII, 1, 3). Furthermore, for Suárez, the chief and most basic sense of 'truth' is the first, veritas cognitionis⁸--while the second sense, that of veritas in significando, appears to be, for Suárez, parasitic on the other one.⁹

I now turn to presenting and defending an interpretation of the notion of material falsity in Descartes.

2. Non-Judgmental Falsity in Descartes.

Descartes also has a notion of non-judgmental falsity; i.e., the notion of material falsity. In the third Meditation, where the notion appears for the first time, Descartes says:

although, . . . falsity in the strict sense, or formal falsity, can occur only in judgments, there is another kind of falsity, material falsity, which occurs in ideas, when they represent non-things as things (non rem tanquam rem repraesentant). (AT VII 43)

Here I shall defend an interpretation of material falsity in Descartes according to which an idea is materially false when it represents as possible (as a res or as something that is real) a putative

entity which cannot exist (a non res or something which lacks reality). I will argue that there are a number of reasons which, as a whole, constitute a strong argument in favor of my interpretation. Some of these reasons arise from a detailed analysis of Descartes' explicit assertions concerning the nature of ideas in general, and of false ideas in particular. Let us see.

All ideas, according to Descartes, are cognitive operations more basic than judgments; operations that do not presuppose any judgment and that, on the contrary, are necessary to issue judgments, since judgments always are about something.¹⁰ Furthermore, ideas are for Descartes those of our thoughts which "are like images of things (tanquam rerum imagines)" (AT VII 37). In some passages, Descartes drops the 'imagines' and says that "there can be no ideas which are not as it were of things (tanquam rerum)" (AT VII 44). The French version of this passage clearly explains what it means to say that an idea is tanquam rerum:

there cannot be any [idea] which does not appear to represent some thing (ne nous semble représenter quelque chose). (AT IX-1 34-35)

Thus, ideas are those of our thoughts which appear to represent some thing. A number of Cartesian scholars overlook the Latin 'tanquam' ('as if' or 'as it were') as well as the French 'semble' in the above passages.¹¹ For them, a Cartesian idea simply represents something and there is no distinction between what it represents and what it appears to represent. However, we shall see below that, in distinguishing between an idea's being tanquam rerum and its being rerum--i.e., between its appearing to represent a thing, and its actually representing it--Descartes is opening the door to the possibility of speaking intelligibly of the falsity of ideas, in the strong sense of 'falsity' which he needs. Indeed, the very characterization of material falsity in Descartes makes use of that distinction. To begin to appreciate this, let us examine now the Cartesian

concepts of judgment and of falsity.

Descartes distinguishes the falsity of judgments (i.e., formal or proper falsity) from the falsity of ideas (material falsity);¹² and, in the third Meditation, he asserts that, although properly or strictly speaking, ideas cannot be false (AT VII 37),¹³ a few pages later he goes on to add that there is an improper sense in which one can intelligibly say that some ideas are false:

For although, as I have noted before, falsity in the strict sense, or formal falsity, can occur only in judgements, there is another kind of falsity, material falsity, which occurs in ideas, when they represent non-things as things (non rem tanquam rem repraesentant). (AT VII 43)

Thus, concerning an idea--concerning, at least, a materially false idea--it makes sense to distinguish what the idea represents, from how it represents it; further, what a materially false idea represents does not coincide with how the idea represents it. Thus, prima facie material falsity in Descartes is a true form of misrepresentation.

There is another set of key passages in Descartes which provide further support for my contention that Descartes makes a distinction between two different kinds of content in an idea--passages where he asserts that an idea may contain implicitly many perfections of which one is not immediately aware. For example, in the fifth Replies, he says:

Once the idea of the true God has been conceived, although we may detect additional perfections in him which we had not yet noticed, this does not mean that we have augmented the idea of God; we have simply made it more distinct and explicit (expressior), since, so long as we suppose that our original idea was a true one, it must have contained all these perfections. (AT VII 371; my emphasis)¹⁴

Furthermore, in the letter to Mersenne of June 16, 1641, Descartes says:

if from a constructed idea I were to infer what I explicitly (explicite) put into it when I was constructing it, I would obviously be begging the question; but it is not the same if I draw out from an innate idea something which was implicitly contained in it but which I did not at first notice in it (quidem in ea implicite continebatur, sed tamen prius in ipsa non advertebam). (AT III 383)

Additionally, in the case of obscure and confused ideas--some of which are false--one often cannot begin to tell what they represent. For example, an idea is called 'obscure and confused', Descartes says, "because it contains some element of which we are ignorant (aliquid continetur quod est ignotum)" (AT VII 147). And, in the third Meditation, he initially says that he thinks of sensible qualities so obscuredly and confusedly that he does "not know (ignorem) whether they are true or false, that is, whether the ideas I have of them are ideas of real things or of non-things" (AT VII 43).¹⁵

Yet a fourth passage which supports my interpretation of Cartesian ideas in general, and of false ideas in particular, is found in Descartes' response to Arnauld's objections concerning the notion of material falsity. The controversy between them arises in the third Meditation where, as we saw, Descartes characterizes materially false ideas as those which "represent non-things as things (non rem tanquam rem repraesentant)" (AT VII 43). Descartes gives the following example:

since there can be no ideas which are not as it were of things (tanquam rerum), if it is true that cold is nothing but the absence (privationem) of heat, the idea which represents it to me as something real and positive (tanquam reale quid & positivum) deserves to be

called false. (AT VII 44)

A false idea, thus, represents something unreal and negative--a non-thing¹⁶--as if it were real and positive--a thing.¹⁷ Among unreal things, Descartes finds privations (e.g., Stevie Wonder's blindness), negations (e.g., blindness in an angel), and impossibilities (e.g., a thinking triangle, a soul similar to a thin vapour, or a deceiving god).¹⁸ Non-things are opposed to real things; and substances as well as their positive properties and faculties (or 'perfections') are real (e.g., sight in humans).¹⁹

Furthermore, saying that a non-thing lacks reality, I suggest, means in Descartes, not only that that putative thing happens not to exist, but also that it cannot exist. For example, in the third Meditation, Descartes tells us that, at that moment, he does not yet know whether his ideas of sensible qualities "are the ideas of real things or of non-things (non rerum)" (AT VII 43); and in the French version of this passage, Descartes expands this statement to include an explanation of 'non-things':

I do not know . . . whether the ideas of those qualities of which we are aware are in fact the ideas of some real things, or whether they represent to me nothing but some chimerical beings which cannot exist (êtres chimériques qui ne peuvent exister). (AT IX-1 34; my translation and emphasis)

Elsewhere I have constructed a more detailed defence of this manner of understanding Cartesian non-things.²⁰ For our present purposes, however, it suffices that we examine Arnauld's objection to Descartes.

To Descartes' characterization of material falsity--and echoing Suárez--Arnauld objects that there is no idea which can be materially false because any idea must conform to the object it

represents.²¹ Descartes concedes this and, at the same time, draws a distinction between that to which the idea conforms and that to which it refers, and explicitly says:

I think we need to make a distinction. For it often happens in the case of obscure and confused ideas--and the ideas of heat and cold fall into this category--that an idea is referred to something other than that of which it is in fact (revera) the idea. (AT VII 233; my emphasis)

On the other hand, he adds, this cannot happen in the case of clear and distinct ideas. Of the clear and distinct idea of God, for example,

it cannot be said to refer to something with which it does not correspond (conformis)" (Ibid.)²²

Considering these two passages together, we get: (1) that to which the idea conforms is that of which the idea truly is, and (2) that to which the idea merely refers is that of which the idea appears to be.²³

To summarize, all of the aforementioned passages in Descartes clearly suggest the following points:

(1) Descartes is committed to rejecting the view that an idea has to be wholly cognitively transparent since (a) sometimes an idea contains things we do not immediately notice; (b) sometimes we cannot tell whether an idea represents a thing or a non-thing; and (c) sometimes it represents a non-thing as a thing (tanquam rem). In fact, I think that point (a) above underlies Descartes' assertion that not all clear and distinct ideas need be obvious, and his denial of the view that all ideas which appear to be clear and distinct are in fact clear and distinct.²⁴

(2) Descartes realizes that his account of the distinction between clear and distinct ideas, and materially false ideas, requires that he distinguish between what an idea presents in an explicit fashion--what it appears to represent--and what the idea contains implicitly.

With this picture in mind, we are now in a position to characterize a materially false idea as one which appears to a cognizer to represent (explicitly contains) a thing (an entity having formal reality), but which actually represents (implicitly contains) a non-thing (a putative entity lacking formal reality).

I must emphasize that, in my interpretation, the reason why an idea is materially false is not that it fails to represent--which is what Norman Wells, in some of his writings, says.²⁵ Indeed, I think there are compelling reasons to reject this interpretation; principally, that Descartes himself carefully characterizes materially false ideas as those which represent non-things as things, and not as those which do not represent. In contrast, in my interpretation, the reason why an idea is materially false is that it explicitly presents to us a putative entity as having a combination of properties which cannot be jointly instantiated--a fact which may not be apparent to the cognizer; and it is for this reason that what is immediately accessible to him may provide his intellect with erroneous subject matter, materia errandi, for judgment.²⁶

3. Non-Judgmental Falsity in Descartes and Suárez:

A Comparison.

In this section I will compare the Suarezian concepts of non-judgmental falsity with the concept of material falsity in Descartes. I will argue that the Cartesian concept is substantially different from--and stronger than--the other two concepts.

In section 1 we saw that Suárez has two concepts of non-judgmental falsity: improper and quasi-material falsity. The first occurs in a simple cognitive act--and relative to a thing which is not represented by that act--when there is a "certain similarity and proximity" between that thing and the object which is represented by the act (DM IX, 1, 21). In this case, the cognitive act is called 'false' because it can lead us to mistakenly judge that the thing that is not represented is the object represented, due to the similarity and proximity that exist between that thing and the object represented. Thus, properly speaking the cognitive act per se is not false since, by definition, it faithfully and truly represents its object.

We can see now that improper falsity in Suárez is neither identical nor remotely similar to Descartes' material falsity. First, because, as we have argued, material falsity occurs in an idea when it represents a non-thing as (tanquam) a thing (AT VII 43). The idea can lead us to error because it represents whatever it represents as if it were something different from what it is--and not because there is a third thing, not represented by the idea, which resembles the object represented, which is when improper falsity arises, according to Suárez. Furthermore, there is no resemblance whatsoever between a non-thing and a thing; on the contrary, we saw that there is a complete opposition between them: non-things lack reality and cannot exist; things are real and possible. Consequently, material falsity in Descartes is neither identical nor similar to Suarezian improper falsity.

Furthermore, Cartesian material falsity has no interesting similarity to Suárez' quasi-material falsity either. For one, quasi-material falsity occurs when one apprehends a false composition without asserting or denying it; i.e., without making any judgment concerning the truth or falsity of that composition. In this case, the apprehensive act is called 'false' only because

the apprehended composition is itself false. On the other hand, material falsity in Descartes could not consist merely in the apprehension of a composition that is contingently false. In fact, a materially false idea for Descartes is one which represents a non-thing as a thing; and, as we have argued, this means that the idea involves a more radical error, to wit, the error of representing the impossible as possible. Hence, the material falsity of ideas in Descartes is a true falsity, in contradistinction with Suárez' non-judgmental falsities.

Suárez' falsities, I say, are not true falsities. His quasi-material falsity, for example, consists in the apprehension of a false proposition. Period. It does not consist in the apprehension of a proposition that is false as if it were true--which is what it should consist in to be a true falsity.

Similarly, Suárez' improper falsity does not consist in the erroneous or unfaithful representation of an object--which is what it should be to be a genuine falsity. Improper falsity, as we saw, consists in the conjunction of three factors: (1) a cognitive act that represents an object, (2) the object represented, and (3) a thing that resembles the object represented but which lacks some of the properties contained in the cognitive act for which reason it is not represented by that act. In this case the accidental proximity of this third thing, wholly extraneous to the cognitive act, is the reason why the act is false, but only in a metaphorical sense. Thus, there is not the smallest reason to think that improper falsity could consist in the misrepresentation of an object.

Descartes' material falsity, on the other hand, does consist in an erroneous representation, and it arises when an idea represents as possible a putative entity which cannot exist but whose impossibility we have not noticed for a number of reasons: either because we are steeped in our

senses which can easily mislead us concerning the possibility or impossibility of things;²⁷ or else because we are intellectually careless and lazy. It may even be due to the fact that God created us with certain cognitive limitations. But whatever the reasons are why some of our ideas are materially false, the fundamental reason lies in the fact that we are imperfect since both our capacities are finite, and we do not always use them.²⁸

In contrast, in a recent paper, Norman Wells claims that there is no question that Descartes' Copernican point of departure has adopted Suárez's position on the presence of improper falsity on the intramental prejudgmental level that affords the occasion for and is the object of a false judgment.²⁹

Thus, for Wells, Descartes does adopt Suárez' notion of improper falsity yet does not adopt "the salutary linguistic therapy abroad in the late Scholastic tradition";³⁰ a therapy which consists in accepting that

To conceive something otherwise than it is only involves formal falsity when understood positively (positive) as a judgmental misrepresentation. Understood negatively (negative), however, wherein a prejudgmental simple concept is at issue, no misrepresentation is involved and no proper, formal falsity.³¹

Now, certainly, Descartes only partially accepts this 'therapy'; he accepts that the formal or proper falsity predicable of judgments is not an issue at the level of prejudgmental simple concepts or ideas. He has said that much in the third Meditation. What, I think, he would not accept, is Wells' suggestion that misrepresentation can occur only when a judgment is at issue.³²

On the other hand, in my interpretation, representation and misrepresentation are things

that only ideas can do, according to Descartes. Material falsity arises at the strictly prejudgmental level of ideas at which no judgment has yet been issued, when what is represented and how it is represented do not coincide. Indeed, we have seen that Descartes' notion of material falsity is not very similar to Suarez' improper falsity. The former is a true form of prejudgmental misrepresentation, while the latter is not.³³ That ideas can prejudgmentally misrepresent their objects is precisely Descartes' point of radical departure from Suárez and the late Scholastic tradition on cognitive representation.

So far, I have argued that the Cartesian notion of material falsity is importantly distinct from, and stronger than, each of the notions of non-judgmental falsity found in Suárez. In the next section I shall present the reasons why I think Descartes needs the stronger notion. In fact, my view is that to appreciate this need is essential to fully understand Descartes' notion of material falsity.

4. Why Descartes Needs Material Falsity.

In what follows, I will argue that Descartes actually needs the strong notion of material falsity. But, first, I will try to show that he cannot accomplish the aforementioned purposes had he only the notion of judgmental or formal falsity; then I will argue that he still cannot accomplish those purposes had he adopted only either one--or both--of the Suarezian concepts of non-judgmental falsity. Then I will show in a particular case how his strong notion of material falsity actually helps him to achieve some of these purposes.

We have seen that Descartes accepts that there are certain acts or cognitive operations, more basic than judgments, that consist in the apprehension or representation of objects--i.e.,

ideas. Accepting this thesis is accepting that ideas are independent of judgments in the sense that it is possible to have the idea of an object about which we have never issued any judgment, and also that it is not possible to issue a judgment about an object without having the idea of that object. Given this view, it is natural that Descartes also accepts that the material falsity of ideas is independent and distinct from the formal falsity of judgments.

Additionally, when we judge, says Descartes, we relate an idea to something different from the idea; and formal falsity occurs in a judgment when we relate the relevant idea with the wrong thing or things;³⁴ for example, when I judge that "the ideas that are in me resemble, or conform to, things that are located outside me" (AT VII 37) when, in fact, there is no resemblance between them.

Furthermore, judgments for Descartes are never about what we would nowadays call 'modal propositions'--i.e., propositions that involve a modal operator of metaphysical necessity or possibility. In fact, Descartes never uses the term 'judging' to refer to the cognitive acts that are relevant to modal propositions of this sort--and which he oftentimes calls 'immutable and eternal truths'³⁵--; rather, he uses 'perceiving', 'understanding' ('intellegere'), and 'apprehending', all which equally refer to the function of the intellect, that is, the function of the faculty of perception to which only ideas belong. Thus, one perceives--either clearly and distinctly, obscurely and confusedly, or falsely--that something is either possible or necessary, e.g., that it is necessary that God exists;³⁶ and on the basis of the perception one may judge either that this is or is not the case; in our example, one may judge that God in fact exists.³⁷ But the faculty of perception is not by itself sufficient for the issuing of a judgment.

What I am suggesting is, (1) that, for Descartes, knowledge of modal truths (e.g., 'It is

necessary that God exists') occurs only at the level of ideas, that is, at the level at which objects are apprehended or represented in terms of their essential properties (if any);³⁸ and (2) that knowledge of the truth of propositions that do not involve modal operators (e.g., 'God exists') results when we judge with truth that something in fact is the case.

If the above is correct, then showing that a judgment of the form 'A has property B' is false does not amount to showing that an AB cannot exist, i.e., that the idea of AB is materially false. Thus, showing that the judgment 'Unicorns exist' is false would not amount to showing that the idea of a unicorn is materially false--i.e., it would not amount to showing that a unicorn is a non-thing that cannot exist.

But Descartes wants to be in the position of asserting that there are certain ideas or concepts which are radically mistaken in the sense that they present as possible putative entities which are not possible--and not only in the sense that we would be mistaken if we judged that the objects represented by those ideas exist (e.g., if we judged that the substantial forms of things exist); indeed, in Descartes' metaphysics there are a number of entities which do not exist--e.g., an indefinitely large number of geometrical forms and figures--which nevertheless are perfectly possible entities whose ideas are clear and distinct³⁹--entities of which we can make false judgments--e.g., that they exist--a fact which does not imply that the ideas of such entities are materially false and thus ought to be expelled from the true philosophy of nature.

Moreover, we can appreciate that Descartes uses this strong argumentative strategy against his opponents--i.e., the strategy of attempting to show that some of the entities they postulate ultimately cannot exist and hence that the ideas of these entities are materially false--if we examine his treatment of the traditional idea of heaviness (gravitas)⁴⁰; that is, the idea of a

quality that certain bodies were thought to have in virtue of which they were carried towards their putative natural place which was the center of the Earth. According to Descartes, this idea is fundamentally mistaken because, although gravity in the idea was conceived of as a quality "which inhered in solid bodies" (AT VII 441), the idea was also "taken largely from the idea I had of mind" (AT VII 442). The idea, that is, involved the possibility that "gravity carried bodies towards the centre of the earth as if it had some knowledge of the centre within itself" (Ibid.) This idea of gravity is materially false, according to Descartes, because it is not possible that there exist something that is both a mode of extension and a mode of thought. In the case of the idea of gravity, it is materially false because it is not possible that there is a mode which, when possessed by a corporeal substance, enables this substance to know something. One could form such false ideas, Descartes says, when one does not have the clear and distinct ideas of corporeal substance and of thinking substance, which ideas must explicitly contain the notion of their real distinctness.⁴¹

Note that, although Descartes holds that the Scholastic-Aristotelian notion of substantial form suffers from the same malady that affects the notion of heaviness examined here, unfortunately he does not offer, for this notion, as detailed and clear an explanation of how such a notion proceeds from the confused mingling of the ideas of body and mind, as the explanation he offers in connection with the notion of heaviness.⁴²

But the point I want to emphasize here is that if Descartes had only the notion of the formal falsity of judgments, then he could not expel from his physical Universe the substantial forms of the Scholastics, the Ciceronian souls that are like thin vapours,⁴³ the occult qualities, the forces, or the vital impetus of some of his rivals.

What is more, had Descartes only either one of the Suarezian concepts of non-judgmental falsity--or both, for that matter--he still could not expel those entities from his physical World. Thus, consider first Suárez's concept of improper falsity. Imagine that Descartes adopted only this notion of non-judgmental falsity and said that what is wrong with, say, the notion of substantial form is that it is improperly false--i.e., that what is wrong with this notion is that there is some entity, not represented by the idea of substantial form, which closely resembles the object represented by the idea, in this case, a substantial form. Yet, notice that none of these assertions implies that substantial forms--or their clones--cannot, or even do not, exist. In other words, there is no implication that we ought to get rid of the notion of substantial form because something is intrinsically wrong with it.

Secondly, consider Suárez's notion of quasi-material falsity. Again, were Descartes to adopt it, and say that the problem with the idea of substantial form was that it is quasi-materially false because the proposition 'substantial forms exist' is false, then he would have to say, as well, that the ideas of those geometrical figures which do not exist are quasi-materially false since the propositions asserting that those figures exist are false. And if an idea's being quasi-materially false was sufficient reason to get rid of the putative entities it represents--sufficient to expel them from the True View of Things--then we would also have to get rid of those perfectly genuine geometrical figures and shapes--a most unCartesian result!

5. Conclusions.

I have argued that, for purposes central to his project of consolidating the upcoming philosophy of nature, Descartes needs to coin a concept of non-judgmental falsity, stronger than

the corresponding Suarezian concepts; a novel concept that permits him to banish, once and for all, certain forms of conceiving the Physical World which compete with the true, clear and distinct, Mechanistic conception.

NOTES

1. I shall be using the following abbreviations of the editions of the works of Descartes and other authors:

AT--Oeuvres de Descartes. Edited by Ch. Adam and P. Tannery. 12 vols. Paris: Cerf, 1897-1913; reprint, Paris: Vrin, 1957-58.

Suárez DA--Francisco Suárez. Comentarios a los libros de Aristóteles sobre el alma. Edición bilingüe y traducción por Carlos Baciero y Luis Baciero. Edición crítica por Salvador Castellote. 4 vols. Madrid: Editorial Labor, 1981.

Suárez DM--Francisco Suárez. Disputaciones metafísicas. Edición bilingüe y traducción por S. Rábade Romeo, S. Caballero Sánchez, y A. Puigcerver Zanón. 7 vols. Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1960.

Aquinas DA--Thomas Aquinas. In Aristotelis librum De Anima commentarium. Edited by A. M. Pirotta. Fourth edition. Turin: Marietti, 1959.

I will be translating the passages of Suárez's works here quoted. When available, and unless otherwise indicated, I will use the translations found in the following editions:

The Philosophical Writings of Descartes. Vols. I-III. Translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 1991.

2. However, as will become clear, I do not mean to deny that Suárez and Descartes agree on the following points: (1) that there is a (secondary or improper) sense in which we can say, of certain non-judgmental cognitions (ideas, in Descartes) that they are false, and (2) that saying that a non-judgmental cognition is false implies that the cognition provides erroneous subject-matter (materia errandi) for judgment.

3. By 'non-judgmental cognition' I mean a cognitive act or operation, more basic than judgments, whose sole function is that of representing an object. Ideas in Descartes are non-judgmental cognitions; thus, while any judgment presupposes the existence of at least one idea, ideas represent objects and do not presuppose judgments (see AT VIII-1 17-18).

4. Note that Aquinas agrees with Suarez that simple non-judgmental cognitions cannot be false. Aquinas says that "the intellect's proper object is indeed the essence of things" (DA III, lect. 8, sec. 717), and later on adds that this "object is a simple one, and therefore, as bearing on this object, the act of the understanding is neither true nor false" (Ibid., lect. 11, sec. 760). Indeed, "just as sight is infallible with respect to its proper object, so is the intellect with respect to essence" (Ibid., sec. 762). However, Paul Hoffmam ("Descartes on Misrepresentation," Journal of the History of Philosophy 34 (1996), 366-69) thinks that both Aquinas and other Seventeenth-Century Scholastic philosophers--such as Ruvio--allow for the possibility of the falsity of sensory cognition. As Hoffman tells it, however, it appears to me that what these Scholastics are talking about is the sense of non-judgmental 'falsity' which Suárez later calls 'improper falsity' which, as we shall see, is not a true falsity and is completely different from Descartes' material falsity.

5. Concerning sensation, for example, Aquinas says that "it must be maintained in general, as true of all the senses without exception, that the senses receive forms (specierum) without matter" (Aquinas DA II, lect. 24, sec. 551). The species found in a sense-organ are called sensible species (Ibid., III, lect. 2, sec. 590), and those found in the intellect, intelligible species (Ibid., lect. 8, sec. 718). When intelligible species are understood, they become "the form of the intellectual power" (Ibid., sec. 692).

6. See also DM IX, 1, 21; and *Ibid.*, IX, 1, 15.

7. See also Suarez DM IX, 1, 16-22.

8. See DM VIII, 8, 9.

9. See *Ibid.*, VIII, 8, 2.

10. Ideas belong to the faculty of perception which is different from the faculty of assent or will to which judgments belong. See AT VII 376-77, AT VIII-1 17 and 21.

11. Beysade asserts that "the questions to be raised concerning sensations are, first, are they ideas or not and, second, if they are ideas, what are they of?." See her "Descartes on Material Falsity," in Phillip Cummins and G. Zoeller (eds.), *Minds, Ideas and Objects*, (Atascadero: Ridgeview Publishing Company, 1992), 6. If I am right, however, the second question one ought to ask concerning sensations rather is: if they are ideas, of what do they appear to be?, and the third question is: of what are they, actually? In one of his earlier writings, Norman Wells also denies that the second and third questions are distinct in Descartes. Thus, in his "Material Falsity in Descartes, Arnauld, and Suárez," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 22 (1984): 25-50, he says that the "contemporary tendency to interpret the tanquam in Descartes' phrase tanquam rerum imagines, . . . to mean 'as it were', 'like', or 'as if' fails to do adequate justice to Descartes' doctrine on idea taken formaliter." *Ibid.*, 28 n. 20. Hence, for Wells, ideas proprie are all of things (rerum). However, as we shall see, Descartes realizes that the precise articulation of the notions of material falsity and of obscurity requires that one draw a distinction between what an idea appears to represent (tanquam rerum), and what it actually represents (rerum). Besides, see the French version of 'tanquam rerum imagines', authorized by Descartes: "Entre mes penseés, quelques-unes sont comme des images des choses." AT IX-1 29, (my emphasis). There is also the use of 'tanquam' at AT VII 43; and, at AT IX-1 34-35, Descartes says: "Il n'y en peut avoir aucune [idée] qui ne nous semble représenter quelque chose" (my emphasis), as an explanation of the Latin phrase: "nullae ideae nisi tanquam rerum esse possunt." AT VII 44.

12. In the fourth Meditation, in Principles, as well as in the Passions, Descartes asserts that judgments are acts of the will, and classifies our mental faculties into two general categories: "perception, or the operation of the intellect, and volition, or the operation of the will" (AT VIII-1 17). Judgments--assertions or denials--are acts of the will, although "to make a judgement, the intellect is of course required since, in the case of something which we do not in any way perceive, there is no judgement we can make. But the will is also required so that, once something is perceived in some manner, our assent may then be given" (AT VIII-1 18). Thus, judgments are among those thoughts which include 'more than the likeness of a thing' (AT VII 37), since judgments presuppose that we have an idea--i.e., perceive an object. See also AT VIII-1 21 and AT XI 342-48.

13. Before making any assertion or denial--i.e., any judgment--about an object, and having only an idea of that object, it cannot be (properly) said that I have made any mistake concerning that object, since I have not as yet made up my mind about it (AT VII 37).

14. On implicit content, see also AT III 383, AT VII 147, and AT VIII-1 24. Some authors have taken seriously (as I think one should) Descartes' assertion that our ideas have an implicit content; e.g., Robert McRae, "Descartes' Definition of Thought," in *Cartesian Studies*, ed. by R. J. Butler (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), 67-68; and Alan Gewirth, "Clearness and Distinctness in Descartes," *Philosophy* 18 (1943), 27-29.

15. Notice that later in the same Meditation Descartes will assert something stronger concerning the idea of cold: not merely that we ignore whether it represents something real or unreal, but also that it "represents something unreal (nihil reale mihi exhibere)" (AT VII 46); and, in the fourth Replies, he will say that the ideas of both heat and cold "represent

nothing real (*nihil reale exhibere*)" (AT VII 234; my translation).

16. There are, I think, conceptual antecedents in the Aristotelian-Scholastic tradition corresponding to the Cartesian notion of a non-thing. For example, for Suárez an entity of reason, or *entia rationis*, "has in itself no reality (*entitatem*)" (DM LIV, 1, 6). The concept of an entity of reason has nothing in common with the concept of a real entity, *entia realis*, which should not, strictly speaking, be called an 'entity' (see *Ibid.*, 1, 9). Hence, entities of reason (like Cartesian non-things) cannot exist. Note that all *impossible beings* (e.g., a chimera or an irrational man (*Ibid.*, 4, 10; and DM XXX, 16, 14)) are, strictly speaking, entities of reason for Suárez. For a conceptually delicate treatment of the concept of an entity of reason in Suárez, see John P. Doyle, "Suárez on Beings of Reason and Truth (1)," *Vivarium* 25 (1987), 53-60 and 69-75.

17. That a thing exists and that it is (formally) real are not equivalent, according to Descartes (although the latter implies the former.) For one, whereas reality is a matter of degrees, existence is not. Formal or actual reality is the degree of perfection an actually existing thing has in virtue of its form or essence. See AT VII 47, where actual or formal being (*esse actuali sive formali*) is contrasted with "merely potential being"; and in AT VII 102-103, "the sun itself existing in the intellect" (or objectively existing) is contrasted with the sun "formally existing, as it does in the heavens." Care must be taken not to confuse the formal reality of something--e.g., this body, or my mind, or a particular idea--with an idea taken formally. The *formal reality* of any one of my ideas is the degree of perfection that the idea has as an actually existing thing. As such, it is only a modification of my mind, and it is less perfect than any other existing substance. On the other hand, the *idea taken formally* (see AT VII 232) is the idea considered in so far as it represents a thing which may or may not exist.

18. For Descartes, non-things are unreal (AT VII 43, AT IX-1 34), and among unreal things, he finds privations, negations, and impossibilities (i.e., putative entities whose concepts are self-contradictory). See, e.g., AT VII 190-91: "it does not follow that this defect [i.e., error] is something real, any more than blindness is something real (*realem*)"; AT VII 428: "the form of deception is non-being (*non ens*)." For impossibilities, see, e.g., AT VII 138: "when you talk of an 'utterly perfect corporeal being', . . . you are uttering a contradiction."

19. See AT VII 165: "There are various degrees of reality or being (*realitatis sive entitatis*): a substance has more reality than an accident or mode."

20. See my "Transparency and Falsity in Descartes' Theory of Ideas," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 7 (1999): 349-372. For other passages which also suggest this reading of 'non-things', see the French version of the passage at AT VII 44, where Descartes says that materially false ideas "represent what is not as if it were some thing (*ce qui n'est rien comme si c'etoit quelque chose*)" (AT IX-1 34); and that where he adds that false ideas "represent things which are not (*representent des choses qui ne sont point*)" (AT IX-1 35).

21. See AT VII 206-208.

22. Remark on the use of *conformis* in this passage in connection with its use in Suárez's theory of mental representation, briefly examined in section 1.

23. A more detailed examination of these passages in the fourth *Objections and Replies*, and a complete defence of the manner in which I read them, is found in my "Transparency and Falsity in Descartes' Theory of Ideas," where I examine in detail all of the passages in Descartes which support the view that understanding the Cartesian notions of material falsity and of clarity and distinctness requires that one takes seriously and literally those passages where he makes a distinction between what an idea actually represents and what it appears to represent. I also argue that, for Descartes, our sensory ideas of sensible qualities are materially false *in the sense* that they represent, as genuine things, some putative entities which in fact cannot exist. I further defend this interpretation against the charge that it

presumably draws a veil of illusion over the objects represented by our ideas.

24. See, e.g., AT VII 68: "Some of the things I clearly and distinctly perceive are obvious to everyone, while others are discovered only by those who look more closely and investigate more carefully." See also AT VII 462, where he says that there is a "proper distinction between what is clearly and distinctly perceived and what merely seems or appears to be."

25. See Norman Wells, "Material Falsity," 37. In my view, representing is not something an idea can fail to do since the formal content of any idea--the idea taken formally--is constituted by the consistent and infallible application of our faculty of perception. Of course, a materially false idea is a limiting case: taken materially, the idea seemingly represents a putative entity in terms of properties which cannot be jointly instantiated; and the idea actually represents a non-thing--a cluster empty of properties, so to speak. Note that, in a more recent paper, Wells accepts that there is a distinction in Descartes between what is conceived and the way it is conceived. See his "Suárez on Material Falsity," in Meeting of the Minds: The Relations between Medieval and Classical Modern European Philosophy, Acts of the International Colloquium held at Boston College, June 14-16, 1996, organized by the Société Internationale pour l'Étude de la Philosophie Médiévale, edited by Stephen F. Brown (Brepols, 1998/9), p. 18.

26. For the connection between materially false ideas and their providing materia errandi for judgment, see AT VII 233-34.

27. See AT VIII-1 34, where Descartes says that "we cannot find any intelligible resemblance between the colour which we suppose to be in objects and that which we experience in our sensation." (my emphasis). See also AT VII 441-43. In her Descartes, 114, Margaret Wilson agrees that, according to Descartes, our ideas of sensible qualities lack objective reality--i.e., are materially false--in the sense that they "fail to exhibit to us any possibly existent quality in an intelligible manner." However, in his "Descartes on Misrepresentation," 361, Paul Hoffman denies that Descartes would ever hold that "as a matter of fact sensory ideas lack objective reality"--that is, he denies that sensory ideas are, for Descartes, materially false. However, look at the following passages: first, the one where Descartes says that it cannot be said that the clear and distinct idea of God "is perhaps materially false . . . which is what I observed [noticed, animadverti] just a moment ago in the case of the ideas of heat and cold (caloris & frigoris)." Also, see AT VII 233-34: "Confused ideas which are made up at will by the mind, . . . do not provide as much scope for error as the confused ideas arriving from the senses, such as the ideas of heat and cold (if it is true, as I have said (ut dixi), that these ideas do not represent anything real (nihil reale exhibere)"). Notice that, in this passage, the 1904 printing of the seventh volume of the AT edition says "caloris & frigoris" (heat and cold); while a more recent reprint, e.g., the one made in 1983, changes this to "coloris & frigoris" (color and cold) without any explanation, which leads me to consider the latter as a typographical error. This is confirmed by the French translation of this passage, authorized by Descartes: "les idées du froid & de la chaleur . . . ne représentent rien de réel." AT IX-1 181.

28. In the third Meditation Descartes says that if his ideas of sensible qualities "are false, that is, represent non things, I know by the natural light that they arise from nothing--that is, they are in me only because of a deficiency and lack of perfection in my nature" (AT VII 44). On the contrary, clear and distinct ideas arise when we use our faculty of perception: "it is through a real faculty of the mind that it perceives two things, one apart from the other, as complete things; and . . . it is through a lack of the same faculty that the mind apprehends these two things merely in a confused manner, as a single thing" (AT III 434). Since the perception of a thing as a complete thing includes the clear and distinct perception or idea of that thing (AT VII 220-27), it follows that the possession and use of our faculty of perception are necessary for the formation of clear and distinct ideas. In this connection see also AT VIII-1 16.

29. Norman Wells, "Suárez on Material Falsity," 12.

30. Ibid., 16.

31. Ibid., 17.

32. Wells argues that the mistake involved in the materially false idea of cold is "to refer judgmentally the adventitious idea of cold to a positive intramental reality." Ibid., 24. Yet, I am surprised by Wells' use of 'referring' as a judgmental function in Descartes. Where Descartes uses this term--in his reply to Arnauld (AT VII 233)--there is no indication whatsoever that Descartes is talking about judgments or the judgmental level. In fact, there are indications that, in using the term 'referring' Descartes is talking about a function of an idea taken materialiter, the idea insofar as it appears to represent some thing--i.e., the idea in so far as it is an idea (recall the third Meditation's characterization of an idea as that which 'appears to represent some thing'). There is not the slightest hint that judgments are somehow involved as yet.

33. See note 2 above.

34. Thus, in the letter to Gibieuf, January 19, 1642, Descartes says: "I am certain that I can have no knowledge of what is outside me except by means of the ideas I have within me; and so I take great care not to relate (raporter) my judgements immediately to things, and not to attribute to things anything positive which I do not first perceive in the [clear and distinct] ideas of them." (AT III 474; my emphasis).

35. See, e.g., what Descartes says to Gassendi concerning these eternal truths: "you cannot deny that many truths can be demonstrated of these essences [i.e., the essences we know clearly and distinctly]; and since they are always the same, it is right to call them immutable and eternal."

36. AT VII 116-17: "in no case is necessary existence contained [in the clear and distinct idea of anything], except in the case of the idea of God. Those who carefully attend to this difference between the idea of God and every other idea will undoubtedly perceive that even though our understanding of other things always involves understanding them (intelligimus) as if they were existing things, it does not follow that they exist, but merely that they are capable of existing" (my emphasis).

37. Thus, concerning the so-called 'ontological argument' that initially appeared in the Fifth Meditation, Descartes explains to Caterus: "My argument . . . was as follows: "That which we clearly and distinctly understand (intelligimus) to belong to the true and immutable nature, or essence, or form of something, can truly be asserted (cum veritate affirmari) of that thing. But once we have made a sufficiently careful investigation of what God is, we clearly and distinctly understand (intelligimus) that existence belongs to his true and immutable nature. Hence we can now truly assert [i.e., judge] of God that he does exist"" (AT VII 115-16). Note the use of 'intellegere' in connection with the knowledge of something's essence (in this case, God)--i.e., in connection with knowledge of those properties that are necessary or essential to God. Also notice that one understands (not: judges) that some attribute does or does not belong to the essence of a thing, and asserts (i.e., judges, (not: understands)) that a thing having that attribute exists (or does not exist).

38. I defend this view in greater detail in my "Descartes: Ideas and the Mark of the Mental" Philosophiegeschichte und logische Analyse (forthcoming), and in "Ideas Innatas, esencias y verdades eternas en Descartes," Revista latinoamericana de filosofía, 23 (1997): 274-93.

39. See, e.g., AT VII 64-65; and AT VII 381: "although the world could undoubtedly contain figures such as those the geometers study, I nonetheless maintain that there are no such figures in our environment except perhaps ones so small that they cannot in any way impinge on our senses." See also note 25.

40. Descartes' criticism of some Aristotelian-Scholastic notions often accompanies a criticism of the sensory ideas of sensible qualities (e.g., of heat or cold, color, texture, etc.) for similar reasons. For the passages where Descartes criticizes the ideas of sensible qualities at the same time as the traditional notions of substantial form and of heaviness, see AT III 420-21, AT III 667, AT III 693, AT V 222, and AT VII 442-43.

41. For example, the clear and distinct idea of body must include, says Descartes, the notion that it is essentially an extended, non-thinking thing. See AT VII 78.

42. Another important role which the notion of material falsity plays in Descartes' philosophy is that of correcting our commonsensical views concerning the possibility--i.e., the genuineness as entities--of the sensible qualities that are presented to us in our sensory ideas. Unfortunately, due to limitations of space I cannot detain myself here to argue for this point. For this defence, see my "Transparency and Falsity in Descartes' Theory of Ideas."

43. The soul conceived "like a wind or fire or ether, which permeated my more solid parts" (AT VII 26).