CHAPTER THREE

IDEAS, BEFORE AND AFTER DESCARTES

What John Locke called “the new way of ideas” governed philosophy for more than a century, years that were both fruitful and fateful in the history of philosophy. So central were “ideas” to the philosophy of this period that Arnauld and Nicole could write at the head of the first chapter of their widely adopted Logic: “Some words are so clear that they cannot be explained by others, for none are more clear or more simple. ‘Idea’ is such a word. All that can be done to avoid mistakes in using such a word is to indicate the incorrect interpretations of which it is susceptible.”¹ Now the Port Royal Logic was more than a “logic”; it was the first standard text of modern philosophical method. What was the concept intended by this “clear” and “simple” word? And in particular, we want to ask, what was the historical context in which this seemingly perspicuous term took hold? In other words, where did the “new way of ideas” come from?

Traditionally, the term in its authoritative modern sense is attributed to Descartes. Thus, for example, L.J. Beck wrote of Descartes’ usage: “It is notorious that Descartes’ use of the word ‘idea’ is peculiar to himself in that previously the term was used to describe the Ideas of Plato and had no current usage in the terminology of the Schools.”² And Descartes himself gives a similar impression, when he tells Hobbes: “I used the word ‘idea’ because it was the standard philosophical term used to refer to the forms of perception belonging to the divine mind, even though we recognize that God does not possess any corporeal imagination. And besides, there was not any more appropriate term at my

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¹ Arnauld 1964, p. 31.
disposal.” This remark certainly seems to confirm a reading like Beck’s. Descartes says he is borrowing a term used to refer to God’s ideas (the post-Augustinian heir of the Platonic or neo-Platonic “idea”), and (as he remarks elsewhere), using it more generally for “everything which is in our mind when we conceive something, no matter how we conceive it.”

**Ideas, in and before Descartes**

What we want to do here is to challenge the standard reading of this situation and, *a fortiori*, expand the Cartesian account. We want to ask how the term “idea” was used in the seventeenth century before Descartes and to consider in the light of this evidence both the possible sources for Descartes’ usage and the true originality in his conception.

First, then, was the term “idea” current in the seventeenth century and how was it used? Two rather different contexts must be distinguished. There was a novel usage in French and English literature which is quite unequivocal, and a more obscure and ambiguous complex of philosophical definitions.

In the literary usage, “idea” refers to images, usually derived from sense. This is clear from dictionaries of the period. Jean Nicot, for example, in his 1606 *Trésor de la langue française tant ancienne que moderne*, defines ideas as follows: “Ideas are imaginations that people construct in their thoughts: *Ideae, idearum*. These are also the images of things that are impressed on our soul. Platonists say that there are some eternal models and portraits of all things in God, which they call ideas.”

Modern dictionaries of this period also give the term its image-related sense. Thus Huguet’s dictionary of sixteenth century French gives image as the first meaning, with a passage from Rabelais (III, 10): “Puys nous demanda: Que vous semble de ceste imaige?—C’est (respondit Pantagruel) la ressemblance d’un pape ... Vous dicitez bien (dist Homenaz).

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3 AT VII, 181. CSM II, 127–128. We wish to restrict our discussion of idea in Descartes to this later conception; there is in Descartes an earlier conception of *corporeal ideas*. For a discussion of the earlier concept, see Michael and Michael 1989. See also Armogathe, “Sémanthès d’idée/idea chez Descartes,” in M. Fattori and M.L. Bianchi 1990, pp. 187–205, for the different senses of idée/idea in Descartes.

4 Though not everybody accepted Beck’s reading; see, for example, Urmson 1967, vol. IV, pp. 118–121.

5 AT III, 393; CSMK, 185.

6 Nicot 1606.