

# Desgabets: Rationalist or Cartesian Empiricist?

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My interest in this project owes to curiosity about the comparison sometimes made between the “first” and “second” cognitive revolutions. The second revolution is the one that began in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and which continues today.<sup>1</sup> It is characterized by the replacement of prevailing frameworks (e.g., Behaviorism) for exploring memory, learning, language, and thinking, by new techniques and theories inspired by the metaphor of mind as an information processor, like a computer, that solves problems by applying logical transformations to internal symbols. At risk of oversimplifying a complex history, the more recent cognitive revolution represented a shift in philosophical attitudes back towards a *broadly* Rationalist outlook when it comes to understanding higher mental functions, i.e., one that de-emphasizes sensory experience, training, and individual history, in favour of innate mechanisms, not dependent on sense perception, and orientated towards the development of the species as a whole.<sup>2</sup> The source of this change can be traced to similar change in approaches to the mind in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Chomsky (2005) has urged continued study of this first cognitive revolution—especially the contributions of the Rationalists—so as to recover insights still useful to the second. Although I fear the sin of over-enthusiasm, I can at least agree that a re-examination of how we got where we are can sometimes lead in surprising new directions.

With these varying degrees of ambition in mind, I turn to examine a little-known philosopher from that earlier period, Robert Desgabets (1610-1678), who has idiosyncratic views on several areas of continuing interest, including the nature of representation, modality, and time. But I will restrict myself to a discussion of what he has to say about the role of sensation in the formation of ideas. Desgabets was a Cartesian and contemporary of Descartes, and commands attention for his seemingly unusual blending of Cartesianism and *empiricism*.<sup>3</sup>

Desgabets participated in important controversies of the day, including the question of atomism versus the infinite divisibility of matter,<sup>4</sup> and the nature of the

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<sup>1</sup> Some pinpoint its birthdate as September 11, 1956 and the conference held at MIT where seminal research in linguistics (Chomsky), psychology (Miller), and computing (Newell and Simon) were presented (see Gardner 1985, p.28).

<sup>2</sup> This is just the big picture. I don't deny the connectionist alternative, dynamical systems theory, and other emerging possibilities pulling things in the other direction.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Sup’ refers to Desgabets’ *Supplément à la philosophie de Monsieur Descartes*. ‘CdC’ refers to Desgabets’ *Critique de la Critique de la Recherche de la Vérité*. These are contained in Desgabets’ *Oeuvres philosophiques inédites* which I will refer to as ‘RD’.

<sup>4</sup> Easton (2006, p.2) reports that in a letter to Clerselier about Cordemoy, Desgabets complains about the tension between the Cartesian and anti-Cartesian elements of Cordemoy’s *Discerne-*

Eucharist.<sup>5</sup> His *Critique de la critique de la Recherche de la vérité* was an inapposite defense of Malebranche against Foucher, though not well received, most pointedly by Malebranche himself. Watson wryly observes that “it was as dangerous to defend Malebranche as to attack him.”<sup>6</sup> This incident led to the unfortunate epithet: “The disciple of Malebranche who understands nothing of Malebranche”<sup>7</sup> and goes some way in explaining Desgabets’ obscurity.

His *Supplément à la philosophie de M. Descartes*, unpublished in his lifetime, is a defense and elaboration of many key Cartesian themes, but also takes issue with a number of others including pure intellection, the existence of innate ideas, and the concept of objective reality.<sup>8</sup> This work also discusses intentionality<sup>9</sup> and Descartes’ doctrine of the eternal truths. The *Supplément* is most importantly a sustained examination of the nature of ideas, and in this chapter I will use it to address a dispute about Desgabets’ (alleged) empiricism.

Easton and Lennon are important recent sources for the view that he is a “Cartesian empiricist.” As Easton says, “heretically to some, he strongly rejected the rationalist epistemology which often dominates in Descartes, and argued that Descartes’ own principles favour a form of empiricism.”<sup>10</sup> According to Easton, Desgabets held that “all (true) knowledge depends on the senses, and hence on our perception of...sensible qualities and objects.”<sup>11</sup> He believed that “[t]he soul must always be in commerce with the senses, and...our thoughts depend on the corporeal traces in the brain [though they are not identical to brain processes].”<sup>12</sup> This is most evident from the fact that thoughts begin, end, endure for a finite time, and

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*ment du corps et de l’ame*. I haven’t seen the letter, but its content might be relevant to the topic of this paper.

<sup>5</sup> In the anonymously published *Considérations sur l’état présent de la controverse touchant le T. S. Sacrement de l’autel* Desgabets was the first to openly propose that the body of Christ is literally extended in the host. This led to a backlash against Cartesianism as this was thought to be incompatible with official Church Dogma.

<sup>6</sup> Watson 1987, p.256.

<sup>7</sup> Gueroult 1985, p.254. “Il me semble que ceux qui se mêlent de défendre ou de combattre les autres, doivent lire leurs Ouvrages avec quelque soin, afin d’en bien sçavoir les sentimens” (Malebranche quoted in Watson 1987, p.161).

<sup>8</sup> Though Desgabets accepted mind-body dualism, a substance-mode ontology, mind-body union, psycho-physical interaction, and the essential and contrasting natures of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. Against Descartes, he held that the human “reasonable soul” is a third simple substance that “emerges” from the more fundamental union of the mental and the physical.

<sup>9</sup> Desgabets argued that the nature of intentionality could be used to construct a proof of the external world; he contends that one cannot think of what does not exist—thinking consists in the forming of “simple conceptions” of immutable substances which are the essences of modal things (Cook 2002). His reasoning here seems to anticipate an implication of Meaning Externalism—if intentionality consists in a relation (e.g., causal) between a representation and its object, then the intentionality of thought defeats skepticism about the external world (cf. Seager 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Easton 2001, p.3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8.

are succeeded by new thoughts. For Desgabets, this implies that they depend on *motion*, for time is essentially a measure of change in parts of matter<sup>13</sup>—and, as noted by Easton, ideas about motion can only be imparted by the sense organs.<sup>14</sup> This also implies that there can't be “pure intellection” in the sense of thought entirely divorced from motion, since this would not permit any distinctions between the beginning, end, duration, and succession of thoughts.<sup>15</sup> This assessment of Desgabets' epistemology is echoed by many others, including Cousin, Bouillier, Rodis-Lewis, Ayers, and Lennon.<sup>16</sup> Schmaltz, with hesitation, and in a qualified way, also describes Desgabets as a Cartesian empiricist along the lines of Regius and Rohault.<sup>17</sup>

An interesting challenge to this long-standing agreement has recently been offered by Cook.<sup>18</sup> Cook's challenge takes up three aspects of Desgabets' thinking that have led others to conclude he is an empiricist: Desgabets attacks what other rationalists have said about pure intellection; he seems to endorse Locke's division of the mind into internal and external senses, stressing their central role in all forms of mental activity; and he endorses the empiricist doctrine that there is nothing in the mind save for what was previously in the senses. On this basis the case for his empiricism might seem highly plausible. However, Cook argues that, despite appearances, this evidence is superficial. Cook develops the alternative account that Desgabets' is not endorsing “concept empiricism,” that is, the view that all of our ideas are derived from experience (e.g., as contrasted with *knowledge* empiricism), but rather, a strong sort of dependence of the mental on the physical, situated within a broadly Cartesian, and especially Dualist, metaphysical framework. In short, Cook's point is that once we recognize Desgabets is only saying all ideas are *caused by* motions in the body and the brain, we can see he is not committing himself to any such claim that they are epistemologically reducible to, or derivable from, sense experience. As Cook says, a rationalist dualism can agree that all mental activity depends on brain processes.

I admit to finding parts of this alternative interpretation subtle and persuasive. Cook shows how the case for Desgabets' alleged empiricism is muddled when metaphysical and epistemological aspects of his theorizing are conflated. Although I think Desgabets certainly was an empiricist of some sort, the demonstration of this needs to be sensitive to Cook's objections. So, allow me to consider the reasons against taking Desgabets to be a kind of empiricist more closely before turning to a defense of the traditional reading. It will be shown that the case for the empiricist reading is quite strong after all.

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<sup>13</sup> *RD*, p.299.

<sup>14</sup> See Part I, chapter 3 of the *Supplément*.

<sup>15</sup> Easton 2002, pp.205-206.

<sup>16</sup> Cousin 1945; Bouillier 1868; Rodis-Lewis 1993, p.423; Ayers 1998, pp.1029-30; Lennon 1993, p.210; Lennon 1998, p.353.

<sup>17</sup> Schmaltz 2002, p.16.

<sup>18</sup> Cook, forthcoming *JHP*.

I begin with Desgabets' endorsement of the empiricist slogan *Nihil est in intellectu quin prius fuerit in sensu* ("nothing is in the intellect except what was previously in the senses," hereafter the *Nihil* principle). According to Cook, in saying this, Desgabets does not agree that all ideas are formed or derived from sensory impressions, and even he accepts Arnauld's and Descartes' view that none of our ideas exist as they do in the senses.<sup>19</sup> Desgabets actually modifies the *Nihil* principle to read "from the senses" (*a sensu*) in order to underscore the causal necessity of the body while denying that our "thoughts are similar to what happens in our senses"<sup>20</sup> Desgabets introduces this change in response to Materialist "Libertines" and Cartesian Dualists who mistakenly assume that the *Nihil* principle implies mind and body are not distinct; in this, both camps confuse strong causal dependence with identity. This mistake follows from the supposition that whatever comes from the senses must resemble physical parts of the nervous system. Desgabets means to correct this error by showing us that ideas can depend on the "senses," here understood broadly as "brain processes," not perceptions, or even the sense organs specifically, despite the metaphysical separation of extended and non-extended substances:

This accords with the [Libertines] in recognizing that in all thought without exception there is something going on in the body, and it accords with the [Dualist Cartesians] in that it holds that the soul, which thinks dependently on the body, is not at all the body but that it is simply united to it.<sup>21</sup>

So, Cook is claiming that Desgabets only wishes to use the *Nihil* principle to make a point about the metaphysics of mind and body, and not the epistemic conditions for knowledge, or for having ideas. The change to "from the senses" supposedly makes the maxim "much less empiricist...since a non-empiricist can surely say that the body and the senses cause our thoughts."<sup>22</sup>

Even Descartes agrees to a limited dependence of the mental on the physical in that sense experience is "occasioned"—which I take to roughly mean causation where the cause does not resemble its effect—by motions of the body. Arnauld and Descartes seem to have it that sensory mental contents ("sensible qualities" or the qualia of modern parlance) are not derived from activity in the sense organs, but are somehow stored in the mind until the appropriate motion occasions their "release." The non-resemblance of our ideas to patterns in the nervous system is a crucial assumption. For if ideas do not resemble the things they represent, it seems to follow that their contents cannot be derived from sense experience or the external objects represented. Then there would appear to be no reason to assert that thoughts are fundamentally copies of sensations; and if that is so, then the contents of our ideas must somehow be already present in the mind—for the spe-

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<sup>19</sup> Cook forthcoming, pp.7,10.

<sup>20</sup> *Sup*, p.183, p1c3s1.

<sup>21</sup> *Sup*, pp.181-182.

<sup>22</sup> Cook forthcoming, p.14.

cific character of thought has to come from somewhere. Desgabets takes this line a step further by maintaining that all thought, including so-called “pure intellection,” is thusly occasioned by the body, but, of course, not derived or copied from brain processes.<sup>23</sup> Against Descartes, Desgabets insists that even the most “abstract speculations” imply “commerce with the senses.”<sup>24</sup> But Cook suggests Desgabets does not mean to reject Cartesian pure intellection for empiricist reasons.

There is in fact much agreement with Descartes about pure intellection:<sup>25</sup> first, that there is such a faculty, and second, that it differs subjectively from imagination in that it does not involve forming a mental image of a material object (though curiously, Cook concedes that for Desgabets “sense perception is sometimes imagination and sometimes pure intellection”<sup>26</sup>). Schmaltz also takes the point that pure intellection includes sensations such as pleasure and pain to render Desgabets at least *empiricish*.<sup>27</sup>

According to Cook, what Desgabets really objects to in Descartes’ view is just the claim that pure intellection can occur independently of the brain, and that it is properly pursued through the method of doubt.<sup>28</sup> Cook observes that these objections are compatible with rationalism. For Desgabets “species traced in the brain” are causes of all thoughts, including those obtained in pure intellection—but these brain states are not images, nor do they resemble mental contents.<sup>29</sup> The rejection of the method of doubt is likewise not in virtue of a special role for the senses, but because of Desgabets’ belief that what he calls “simple conceivability” implies actuality. Pure intellection is contrasted with mental imagery where neural causal antecedents do resemble what he calls “sensible objects.”

As for the distinction between internal and external senses, Cook insists that although Desgabets accepts it, for him the so-called internal senses consist in brain processes (“species traced in the brain”) in a very general sense, not necessarily related to experience or perception specifically.<sup>30</sup> It is important to note that the sense organs themselves are often referred to as the “external” senses by Desgabets; the “interior senses” are brain processes that serve as causes of inwardly oriented ideas, especially, I contend, feelings and interior perceptions.<sup>31</sup> Cook maintains that Desgabets only adapts empiricist jargon to a different purpose—when he says that all ideas depend on the “senses” it is only to emphasize the very close nature of the mind-body union. Still, I wonder. It seems like he could make

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<sup>23</sup> Cook forthcoming, p.17.

<sup>24</sup> *Sup*, p.181.

<sup>25</sup> Cook forthcoming, p.17.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Schmaltz 2002, p.16. Cf. *RD* 5, p.192, *CdC*, pp.91-104.

<sup>28</sup> Cook forthcoming, p.17.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18.

<sup>30</sup> Cook forthcoming, p.11, *CdC*, pp.111-112, 129; *Sup*, pp.181, 186-187.

<sup>31</sup> p1c3s3.

do without employing so much empiricist-sounding talk. Knowing that this might encourage people to misread him, why bother? But as I say, Cook's crucial point is that he means to include brain processes *apart from activity of the sense organs* when he speaks of the "senses" (i.e., in his version of *Nihil*) and, especially, the "internal senses." Although he might seem to be talking like an empiricist (e.g., Locke), he is only stressing the dependence of our ideas on brain processes, and not claiming that our ideas are sensory in nature. For example, when he criticizes Descartes' rejection of the *Nihil* principle, it is on the grounds that Descartes denies the "reciprocal commerce" with the internal senses.<sup>32</sup> This goes against the commonsense observation that sleep, bad health, age, and sensory impairment all influence the character of one's thoughts.<sup>33</sup>

Cook acknowledges some apparent inconsistencies with his interpretation. There is a reference to Desgabets' suggestion that the internal senses might be somehow parasitic on the external senses.<sup>34</sup> If this was strictly true, then it seems sense organ activity is given a privileged place in the formation of ideas after all. Cook admits that Desgabets isn't always clear about whether it is the body, the brain, or just the external sense organs that our ideas depend upon: "when Desgabets says that all our ideas come from the senses he sometimes means the external senses," though he adds that Desgabets usually stresses both.<sup>35</sup>

Easton's observation that all thoughts depend on motion might strengthen this objection. Ideas about motion can only be imparted by the *external* senses; but then it seems that something intrinsic to the character of our thoughts (i.e., that they begin and end, and so on) depends on the operations of the sense organs. Then again, this isn't the same as saying that ideas are *wholly* derived from sense perception—this seems only to be true of certain aspects of thoughts (e.g., their divisibility).

In summary, Cook addresses three issues concerning Desgabets' alleged empiricism: there is his endorsement of the *Nihil* principle, his emphasis on the internal and external senses, and his re-evaluation of the faculty of pure intellection. Cook argues that each of these provide weak support for an empiricist interpretation. He claims Desgabets' use of *Nihil* principle is in a metaphysical, not epistemic, sense; he is only pointing out that mind-body dualism is compatible with a very strong causal dependence of the mental on the physical. Likewise, although the non-physical mind metaphysically depends on the "senses," he just means it depends on "brain processes" in general. This is, of course, compatible with the rationalist denial that the contents of our ideas or knowledge are somehow copied or otherwise derived from sense *experience*. Finally, pure intellection also causally depends on physical brain functions, contrary to standard Cartesian theorizing, but this is not to reduce it to a species of perception either.

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<sup>32</sup> *Sup*, p.181.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.184-185.

<sup>34</sup> Cook forthcoming, p.27, n.30.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8. See *CdC*, pp.127-128.

I agree with Cook that some may have conflated the dependence of ideas on physical causes in the nervous system with concept empiricism. For example, Schmaltz says Desgabets is a kind of empiricist insofar as he denies that there is a *body*-independent pure intellect.<sup>36</sup> Easton says this as well when she describes him as holding that “[n]o ideas are innate since all ideas come from the senses in that they depend on the movement of our sensory organs for their formation.”<sup>37</sup> Easton also makes a similar claim in her Stanford Encyclopedia entry where she writes that “our ideas...depend upon the operation of the senses.” Easton and Lennon also jump from the claim that all thought (even “rapture, contemplation, and ecstasy”) depends on the body, to the conclusion that Desgabets must be rejecting any distinction between ideas and sensations.<sup>38</sup> This criticism should be nuanced, however. These other authors are assuming he means ideas are *both* caused by physical processes, and constructed out of sense experience. Though correct, this will take a bit of work to fully demonstrate.

Before moving on, keep in mind that even if Cook’s criticisms are cogent, this does not establish that Desgabets was a rationalist. It is one thing to say that the case for empiricism is not cogent, and another to say that the case for rationalism is. After all, an empiricist can also agree that our thoughts depend on the brain and do not literally “resemble” our sensations, say, in terms of their substantive nature, but perhaps also in terms of the manner in which they bear content.<sup>39</sup> Still it seems possible that some of Desgabets’ metaphysical positions have been mistaken for support for empiricism. Although Desgabets cautions against falling into obscurity—he confesses to finding Descartes’ argumentative style opaque—the presentation of his own position is not a model of clarity.<sup>40</sup> Even so, I do not regard Desgabets as only making metaphysical claims about the causal role of the body. He is taking a stand on the nature and origin of our ideas, and, I contend, there is a definite empiricist flavor present. This isn’t to say Cook is completely wrong either, and much of his analysis can be subsumed under an empiricist reading.

So, does he think some form of experience is basic in the formation of ideas? Cook has not shown us the answer is no; indeed, it is otherwise. A more characteristic account of his view is where he says that reasoning “deprived of any *experience*” *cannot* form ideas of things; this is akin to a canvass “ceasing to be a canvass,” representing nothing.<sup>41</sup> I will expand on this theme in two ways: First by showing that Desgabets believes sense experience, not just motions of the body or

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<sup>36</sup> Schmaltz 2002, p.181.

<sup>37</sup> Easton 2002, pp.205-206.

<sup>38</sup> Easton and Lennon 1992, p.24.

<sup>39</sup> E.g., empiricists and rationalists alike can agree that, unfortunately, the word “beer” is not very beer-like. Cf. Easton and Lennon 1992, p.24.

<sup>40</sup> His discussion of the dependence of all thought on the *body* (*du corps*) in a letter to Malebranche (September 1674) also strikes me as ambiguous in the same way.

<sup>41</sup> p2C9s3, my emphasis.

the sense organs, has a foundational role in the production of ideas and knowledge. Second, I will show he thinks there are no examples of ideas that fail to be derivable from sense experience. Although for the most part I will restrict things to a discussion of knowledge empiricism, it is worth mentioning that Desgabets exhibits several other typical symptoms of empiricism. His emphasis on sense experience as a way of combating Descartes' skepticism is similar to other early empiricisms (e.g., Locke's). The mind, especially the understanding, is taken to be a passive faculty until un-interpreted, incorrigible, sense data is received. Even operations of the "pure" understanding are wholly subsumed under internal sensory experience. But the place to start is with his most fundamental principle, his indubitable foundation of all truth.

Desgabets' suggestion for what is known best and most fundamentally is that what he calls a "simple conception," the "first operation of the mind," is always true<sup>42</sup>—this is offered as a bona fide infallible criterion of knowledge, superior to Descartes' suggestion of clarity and distinctness. Elsewhere, Cook calls this Desgabets' Representation Principle, which again says that a simple conception always has a real and existing object, meaning that it is impossible to think of what does not exist, and it is enough to prove something exists that one can think of it.<sup>43</sup> This is used to show why conceiving of God, or the external world, for instance, suffices to prove they exist. This principle is also highly counter-intuitive,<sup>44</sup> and as noted by Cook, Desgabets displays some ingenuity in defending the position that the Representation Principle is not just true, but indubitably so.<sup>45</sup> But my purpose here is only to evaluate its significance to his empiricism.

Simple conceptions are also key to understanding the role of sensory experience in Desgabets' epistemology. They are epistemically basic, and serve as foundations for our knowledge about the external world, God, the self, universals, the infinite, and so on. Taken in themselves they cannot lead to error or illusion.<sup>46</sup> Unlike Cook, I contend he also took them to be *perceptual* events—Desgabets sometimes even refers to them as perceptions, as in "our perceptions or simple conceptions...supposes the relation of each perception with its object."<sup>47</sup> This is the decisive point: he thought they were conscious experiences, either of sensible qualities (e.g., colours, tastes, odors, sounds, etc...<sup>48</sup>), or of "primary" features of the external world (quantity, shape, etc...). Both kinds of simple conceptions are

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<sup>42</sup> p1C1s4; p2c4s3.

<sup>43</sup> Cook 2002.

<sup>44</sup> Desgabets can be thought of as trying to address a traditional puzzler in the philosophy of language about meaning and fictional things. Desgabets appears to embrace a radical solution typically attributed to Anselm and Meinong, namely, that there is a kind of existence possessed by non-existent things (see Lycan, 2000, p.14).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p.199.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Cook 2002, p.193.

<sup>47</sup> E.g., p1c2s4.

<sup>48</sup> p1c1s1.



contrasted with “precipitous judgements”—the significance of the latter being reminiscent of Descartes’ account of error in the *Meditations*: error results from acts of will that go beyond what is known to be indubitably true. Desgabets seems to share the general structure of Descartes’ foundationalism, but he replaces *a priori* clear and distinct ideas with these basic conscious percepts—I am proposing he subscribes to something like a sense data theory where the simple conceptions or perceptions give rise to self-justified beliefs. Allow me to fill in some details.

It is clear from p1c1s2 that by “perceptions” he means sense-experiences. He also calls these “sentiments” or “sensible qualities,” the “thoughts and passions” of the soul: “It is thus the soul that knows itself always by the senses, or rather it is man in his whole being, and by consequent it should be said that our perceptions and the soul itself are of sensible things and the proper object of our senses, although it is spoken of otherwise.” Here, and elsewhere, Desgabets contrasts his own view with Descartes’ opinion that *perceptions* are epistemically peripheral:

[F]or after having given admirable lessons to everyone, with respect to the nature of our interior perceptions that the senses give us according to him, he fell again into vulgar thoughts of men who cry against the senses instead of crying against the precipitation of their judgements and who speak only of pure intelligences disengaged from all commerce with the body.<sup>49</sup>

I find it implausible to read him as only trying to rehabilitate the “senses” read as brain processes. Desgabets typically contrasts simple conceptions with judgements, especially “precipitous” ones that can lead into error and illusion. But notice in the passage above how it is “interior perceptions” that are contrasted with precipitous judgement—I take it that the former are epistemically reliable while the judgements are not.

The *Supplement* begins with a discussion of Descartes’ “great discovery” and “foundation of a true philosophy”<sup>50</sup>—namely sensible qualities, and the recognition that it is an error to attribute them to material objects themselves. This is a central theme for Desgabets, and he immediately spells out six important corollaries of their discovery.<sup>51</sup> These include the location of sensible qualities within the mind, not the material world; that they are sentiments or perceptions, though he also calls these thoughts; that they do not resemble “the modes or accidents of matter;” that they are nevertheless effects of physical causes; that they cannot be explained within physical theory, though since they wholly reside within the non-physical mind, the material world can be fully explicated through the laws of mechanics and mathematics. This accounts for five of the six implications; however, the remaining one is especially significant. It concerns the nature of knowledge, and the contribution of the internal and external senses. This important consequence of the discovery of sensible qualities begins with Desgabets’ reassertion

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<sup>49</sup> p1c2s5.

<sup>50</sup> p1c1s1.

<sup>51</sup> p1c1s2.

that what is made known by the senses is whatever we are “made [i.e., caused] to think” by physical motion:

If we are made [by bodily motions] to think of matter, of rest, of figure, and of all that can result from matter, [the senses] make known to us things that are outside of ourselves, and which are really such as they are known to us by a clear and simple conception, as will be explained later.<sup>52</sup>

Desgabets is saying that this is an *implication* of the discovery that to attribute sensible qualities to objects is to confuse the material and the spiritual. What does he have in mind here? It seems to be that ideas imparted about the “primary” qualities of material objects are always trustworthy, they “are really such as they are known.”

If we can avoid making “vulgar judgements” about the function of the senses, then we will discern the actual relationship between sensible qualities and material objects:

But since the senses excite these perceptions which are mistaken for corporeal qualities in us almost constantly, it is right to say that we almost know corporeal things as they are in themselves, because they do not have the so-called sensible qualities that are falsely attributed to them.<sup>53</sup>

The “senses”—brain processes—cause “these perceptions,” i.e., the sensible qualities we often mistake for qualities of physical objects. It follows that the mind’s knowledge of itself is “by the senses” and “by consequent it should be said that our perceptions and the soul itself are of sensible things and the proper object of our senses.”<sup>54</sup> This picture of sensible and other qualities, as well as his account of the reliability of sense perception<sup>55</sup> is remarkably Lockean in outlook, as can be seen by comparing what Desgabets has said with this well-known passage from the *Essay*:

[T]he ideas of primary qualities of bodies are resemblances of them, and their patterns really do exist in the bodies themselves; but the ideas produced in us by these secondary qualities have no resemblance of them at all. There is nothing like our ideas existing in the bodies themselves.<sup>56</sup>

Much later in the *Supplement* Desgabets revisits the connection between sensible qualities and acts of simple conception:

Those who take the trouble to apply this truth [that sensible qualities, including sounds, odors, tastes, warmth, coldness, etc...are “sentiments” wholly in the mind] to subjects arising in the service of life, will have occasion to fight and overturn so many contrary prejudices that it will serve as an admirable exercise to accustom them to suspend the judgement in doubtful things and to distinguish simple conception from precipitated

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<sup>52</sup> p1c1s2.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Schmaltz (2002) also suggests a link between Desgabets’ realism and empiricism.

<sup>56</sup> Locke, *ECHU* II.viii.15.

judgements, in what consists uniquely the great rule that must be followed to philosophize well.<sup>57</sup>

Again, the discovery of sensible qualities reveals the deep epistemic significance of conscious states—sensible qualities guide us in the suspension of precipitous judgement and the formation of simple conceptions, thus leading us to the “great rule” of philosophy: the Representation Principle itself.

Desgabets gives two examples that further illustrate the identification of simple conception with perception: that of imaginary space, and, the feeling of heat. These correspond to outward and inward perception, either of the external world, or, of the soul by way of sensible qualities.

In the first, he asks us to first consider what occurs mentally when we imagine an unreal space. His answer is that there is simple conception of real space and extension known by way of acts of *perception* of the actual environment:

[I]f we **look** closely, we **see** well that the object of their simple conception is space and extension with the dimensions that are **seen** there, and that when we speak of space that is nothing, or imaginary space, we form a judgement concerning this space, and we destroy by this what simple conception made us **see** there, i.e., we form a “being of reason,” as we will discuss hereafter.<sup>58</sup>

This helps explain the source of error and illusion: the notion of unreal space comes by way of a further judgement, or act of will, that goes beyond what is given through simple conception.

The second example also attributes error to the will, as well as stress the role of sensible qualities in forming simple conceptions. When feeling heat from a fire, the simple conception is our conscious awareness of heat. The sensible quality of heat is in the mind, and contrasted with the erroneous judgement that the heat is actually in the fire: “if one says the heat of fire resembles the sentiment that is our heat, one adds a judgement to simple perception and falls into the error, because this judgement extends beyond perception.”<sup>59</sup> The conception/perception of the felt quality of heat is again something that is not prone to error when it is isolated from further judgements of the will—it is tempting to interpret Desgabets here as saying that the way things consciously seem is an infallible aspect of experience. Later I will say more about how he seems to want to go further in saying that the experience of a sensible quality represents a property of the soul itself.

Both examples seem to root simple conception in conscious events, implying that external and internal perception are epistemically basic, and reliable, so long as we are careful not to taint them with precipitous judgement: “the confusion of thoughts does not come from ideas, or from simple conceptions, but from precipitated judgements which make us say that we see something in our sensations that

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<sup>57</sup> p1c1s5.

<sup>58</sup> p2c4s2. There should be a difference in the French between the first and last two **bolds**.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

we don't actually see there."<sup>60</sup> Error is really a misuse of freedom. This deprivation and defect can only be attributed to us, not God, as when we allow our judgements to fail to conform themselves to our raw perceptions. Realizing this, the "alleged deceptions of the senses" can be avoided by

following the rules that are given for that, of which the principal one is to hold that which is known by simple conception, and to suspend one's judgement concerning the remainder, until one has a quite clear idea...If one follows this rule one will not be mistaken even concerning illusions in dreams; and yet, nothing occurs but the true while one stays with the first operation of the mind, which being always true and in conformity with its object in the way that everyone admits....<sup>61</sup>

Simple conception considered in itself can only lead us to reality. So, sense experience considered in its-self, that is, separated from the extrapolations and interpretations of the will is a reliable source of knowledge.

Cook doesn't have a lot to say about the nature of simple conception, and he does not offer any reason to think it is not a form of sensory experience.<sup>62</sup> He does agree that the Representation Principle concerns only simple conceptions, not judgements.<sup>63</sup> His discussion also concedes that simple conceptions can at least sometimes take the form of sensations of sensible qualities, such as the feeling of heat.

I agree with Cook that Desgabets draws no distinction between thought *simpliciter* and simple conception; thinking just is conceiving simply, purely, and truly and without judgement. Simple conception is fundamental to understanding, and does not require acts of will. I would add that Desgabets says ideas and thoughts are one and the same as perceptions, for "what there is clear and well known in sentiment is the sentiment or the perception itself which is all on our side, and which is actually none other than a thought or an idea, by which we know ourselves intuitively and as much as we are in this state."<sup>64</sup> This also makes sense in light of Desgabets' division of the soul into an active will and a passive faculty of understanding. The understanding does nothing but receive ideas, sentiments, and knowledge, and these being nothing but "pure passion" in the soul given by the body and the (physical) senses.<sup>65</sup> Even Cook agrees there are no other categories of mentality to worry about: really there is only simple conception: "thought, properly understood just is simple conception."<sup>66</sup> In a section titled "that thought, idea, knowledge, perceptions, sentiments, are really the same thing," Desgabets remarks that ideas do not differ in their intrinsic character, but

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<sup>60</sup> p2c9s4.

<sup>61</sup> p2c4s8.

<sup>62</sup> Cook 2002; forthcoming.

<sup>63</sup> Cook 2002, p.193.

<sup>64</sup> p1c1s5.

<sup>65</sup> p2c4s6.

<sup>66</sup> Cook 2002, p.193.

only “accidentally” and “extrinsically” in virtue of their causes.<sup>67</sup> Given that he thinks there are sense experiences, this logically implies simple conception is a form of perception.

Certainly Desgabets’ Representation Principle is highly counter-intuitive for at least two reasons. First, it seems we can conceive of things that don’t really exist, like a glass of wine that magically refills itself. Second, since conceiving is really just perceiving, again, it seems just false, since the way we perceive the world often deviates from how things really are (as in hallucinations, illusions, and so on). Desgabets repeats the equation of simple conception and perception when he addresses these worries.

First he considers the complaint that the Representation Principle demands something absurd, namely that unreal things, like chimeras, or a physical God, what he calls “beings of reason,” aren’t really conceived of. But then why does it seem possible to think and speak of them? He responds that “[t]o answer the first difficulty, it is enough to be reminded of what we have said that our principle includes only simple conception and ideas that we have of things without mixing any judgement, which exceeds our perception.”<sup>68</sup> So, as with the examples about imaginary space and heat, conceiving simply means not exceeding what is given in sensory perception. If we confine ourselves in this way, thought will always have an existing object—something genuinely perceived (e.g., seen). But the will forms mere “beings of reason,” signifying “nothing,” when discourses and speech are extended “beyond perception” (or “conception,” as he sometimes says instead), as in “the discourses that are made by extending speech beyond perception, are not human discourses.”<sup>69</sup> Of course, we can speak of artificial separations and unions of real things “chimerically,” but this is akin to telling a “lie,” for him, an assertion of something known or conceived that is not really known or conceived: it is the empty mouthing of words without any content. Setting aside the absurdities of this answer nevertheless leads into another worry. If sense perception is always veridical, how does this square with the many purported examples in which the senses deceive us?

Before continuing, notice that since he is speaking of the deception attributed to the senses, the word “senses” undoubtedly takes on an epistemic dimension—it must refer here to sense experience since it would be bizarre and unintelligible to suppose he means only to resist Descartes’ famous allegations against deceptive brain processes. Deception, Desgabets says, is not suited to sense perception “at all,” for, as Part I of the *Supplement* showed, “it is by their means that we have true ideas of things.”<sup>70</sup> Indeed. He then repeats that beings of reason are false judgements extending “beyond perception.” Purported examples of deception by the senses are likewise attributed to the non-sensory exercise of precipitous

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<sup>67</sup> p1c6s3.

<sup>68</sup> p2c4s8.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

judgement: “the deception that is attributed to the senses is none other than a precipitous judgement by which it is said that the senses cannot know.”<sup>71</sup> The inferiority of precipitated judgement is contrasted with simple conception, and recall before with “interior perceptions.”

Since simple conception is subsumed under the Representation Principle this means Desgabets is also committed to a version of knowledge empiricism. This makes sense of Desgabets claim’ that “strong proof” there is an Earth, the sun, a God, and so on, is that we “see them, touch them” and so on, and that this is the same as knowing them, which is the same as thinking of them and “form[ing] the idea”:<sup>72</sup>

[I]t is that itself that shows the undeniable truth and the necessity of our [Representation] principle that would fall to ground with all that depends on it, if it could happen that the object of our ideas or simple conceptions was not real, i.e., that one could think of nothing. For what other way have we to assure us of the existence of all these things of which I just spoke, if not that we see them, touch them, see them,<sup>73</sup> etc., which is to say that we know them, which is nothing other than to think of them and to form the idea.<sup>74</sup>

Certainty about the external world, God, and so on is guaranteed by the Representation Principle, but its application is directly connected to sensory experience. Sensing appears to be the same as forming self-validating simple conceptions, at least when held apart from precipitous judgement. Simple conceptions, which encompass “all our ideas,” are perceptual in nature.

Another of the many puzzling aspects of all this is how we are supposed to know that the Representation Principle is true. It would obviously be self-defeating (e.g., for a knowledge empiricist) to say that it is known by something like *a priori* pure intellection divorced from sensation. And yet something like this seems to be the only intelligible answer, for it is hard to see what sort of experience could possibly warrant belief in it. Desgabets does say that its denial is an “absurdity” and a “contradiction.”<sup>75</sup> He might have in mind the infallibility and incorrigibility of conscious introspection—that it is absurd and contradictory to say that I can be mistaken about the way things seem. However, other possibilities cannot be decisively ruled out. Perhaps he is just insensitive to this difficulty. Or might he think the ultimate foundation of knowledge is *a priori* reasoning after all? Cook’s view is that he doesn’t so much give an argument for the Representation Principle as to conflate it with intentionality;<sup>76</sup> more charitably, perhaps he means it is an obvious implication of intentionality, properly considered.

These difficulties are not avoided by assuming Desgabets is only a concept empiricist. This is because it is also hard to see what experience could possibly al-

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<sup>71</sup> p2c4s8.

<sup>72</sup> p2c4s2.

<sup>73</sup> The French text reads, “oyons” rather than “voyons”.

<sup>74</sup> p2c4s5.

<sup>75</sup> p2c4s7, p2c6s6.

<sup>76</sup> Cook 2002, p.192.

low him to acquire the idea of the Representation Principle. Perhaps he just means you can't have a sense experience of nothing. Even if an experience fails to represent something in the external physical world, there are still sensible qualities in experience which represent the soul—this is, I gather, is the job of the “internal senses.” He does say at one point, that since the body causes all of our thoughts, this shows that to “think of nothing” is the same as not thinking at all, and, moreover, this is made known by “experience.”<sup>77</sup>

Maybe it is my imagination, but Desgabets' pseudo-justifications remind me of Harman's diagnosis of what he calls the “sense-data fallacy.”<sup>78</sup> The fallacy is to assume that even illusory experience must represent something existent—such as sense data—if one assumes seeing always implies a relation to some (perhaps mental) object. Harman suggests this fallacious picture comes from focusing on only one side of a linguistic ambiguity: “seeing” can mean either “seeming to see something” or “genuinely seeing something.” Harman calls the later “seeing\*.” If you think that seeing is always seeing\*, then you won't feel at all bad about postulating a zoo of mental entities in order to explain hallucinations and illusions. Perhaps Desgabets is a genuine example of this linguistic mistake, and this is why he appears to believe that no discursive argument is necessary to establish the Representation Principle. This would explain such apparent non-sequiturs as when he claims that “to think” implies “to think of something” existent<sup>79</sup>—the latter signifies what Harman would call thinking\*. This analysis is also supported by his comparison of thinking to eating. Desgabets argues that if “one thought of nothing, one would think without thinking, the same as one would eat without eating if one could eat nothing, and one could say the same of the thought by which the soul is known as a thing that thinks.”<sup>80</sup> This isn't an indubitable truth, but only a linguistic illusion: while the grammar of eating does entail something eaten, this isn't the case for thinking, unless, that is, one works under the assumption thinking is always thinking\*. This is why I say he is an early sense-data theorist—though I would not call him an indirect realist. He insists it would be a “bad direction in which this discourse could lead us, if we think that our ideas are like things and that they are intermediate objects between the thought and the object itself of which one thinks.” He continues: “[T]he act by which we know an object terminates immediately and directly at the object itself, and not at the idea which is not at all a representative and objective medium, as would be a portrait in which and by the means of which the King would be seen.”<sup>81</sup> Combined with the assumption that there is a non-physical soul, and the Representation Principle, this implies that the character of internal experience represents (and resembles) aspects of the soul itself, and, as we'll see below, Desgabets believed this as well.

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<sup>77</sup> p1c5s3.

<sup>78</sup> Harman 1990.

<sup>79</sup> p1c2s6.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> p1c3s3.

The empiricist reading of Desgabets has other virtues, for instance its account of his handling of “pure” intellection. Is there a faculty for knowing that isn’t based on sense experience? There isn’t: Desgabets thinks that even when the soul knows “by a very pure intellection...it be nothing but a sensation that his body gives him.”<sup>82</sup> He adds that to sense (here he must mean “perceive”) and to obtain knowledge by pure intellection are the same thing insofar as sensing directs one to the “true object” of sensory experience, namely the mind and its qualitative character – the soul, by way of its “sensible qualities” is in fact the “true subject of sensation.”<sup>83</sup>

It is true, as Cook notices, that pure intellection is not imagistic.<sup>84</sup> For Cook, pure intellection is contrasted with imagination, and these are the only two ways of knowing. In imagination alone Desgabets would say there is an image that bears some resemblance to what is represented. But these remarks are compatible with what I am arguing, since Desgabets thinks that pure intellection is not divorced from the senses either metaphysically or epistemically. Since perceptions are really the same thing as thoughts, “[i]t is therefore an imaginary thing to make efforts to act without the help of the exterior senses to have pure intellections.”<sup>85</sup> It is a kind of sensation caused by physical processes in the nervous system. When Desgabets says “we have our purest intellections through the senses, the pretended pure understanding distinguished from the senses, is imaginary,”<sup>86</sup> he means both sense experience and causally antecedent brain processes. Pure intellection is a kind of conscious experience—and this fits better with his insistence that at least some experiences, such as of sensible qualities, like the feeling of heat, do not resemble what is represented—as an image would.<sup>87</sup> Desgabets certainly would not accept the claim that all sense experience can be subsumed under imagination. This is why Schmalz had it right when he said Desgabets recognized no faculty of the understanding that was independent of either sensation or imagination.<sup>88</sup>

Let me briefly restate what has been shown so far. Desgabets’ indubitable foundation of all truth is his Representation Principle, which states that all simple conceptions must be true. Simple conceptions are experiential in nature, and even pure intellection turns out to be a form of perception or sensation. Many of these perceptions are of sensible qualities where the soul is “subject and object,” meaning the soul is “immediately” and “without reflection” sensing characteristics of itself.<sup>89</sup> Desgabets appears to be a knowledge empiricist who offers an early

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<sup>82</sup> p1c2s6.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> Cook forthcoming, p.17.

<sup>85</sup> p1c1s5.

<sup>86</sup> *Sup.*, 1.3.vi, *RD*, p.186.

<sup>87</sup> p1c3s6.

<sup>88</sup> Schmalz 2002, p.95.

<sup>89</sup> p2c6s2.



sense-data theory, motivated by anti-skepticism. These conclusions are compatible with saying that mental processes causally depend on the body.

Actually, it would be more correct to say a firm distinction cannot be drawn between knowledge versus concept empiricism for Desgabets. In light of the Representation Principle, he would say that to form any idea just is to simultaneously guarantee that it is true; there simply are no ideas that somehow fail to be instances of knowledge. Properly speaking, ideas that are not instances of knowledge aren't really ideas at all.<sup>90</sup> However, the question of how we go about acquiring ideas can be further explored, I propose, by following a "Humean" strategy. Although no experience can directly establish that all ideas are derivable from something like "simple impressions," one could indirectly establish the plausibility of concept empiricism by failing to show that there is even one example of an idea that cannot be derived from simple impressions. On the other hand, if there is even one idea that can be obtained apart from sensing, then this point could be used to weaken the case for treating him as an empiricist.

This approach is all the more compelling if the examples chosen are hard cases, that is, those least likely to be constructed out of sensations; the idea of God, the Soul, and Universals are obvious examples, all of which he discusses in detail. To show this I won't (and don't need to) rely on passages where Desgabets says things like "the senses are as necessary to have an idea of an angel or a shape in general as to have that of a mountain or a circle."<sup>91</sup> These kinds of examples use "senses" ambiguously, as seen previously. But I will argue that in all three cases, he means sensory experiences, not just generic "brain processes," are necessary to obtain these ideas.

Consider the idea of God—where does it come from? Desgabets mixes praise with criticism of Descartes' proofs. In the second chapter (part two) of the Supplement, Desgabets concurs with Descartes' conclusion in the Meditations that contemplation of the idea of God suffices to demonstrate His existence. However, he complains that the reasoning Descartes offers is unnecessarily obscure, and contains several errors. The "capital defect" is not noticing that the idea of God is not unique in this respect—given the Representation Principle, ideas of things other than God are also self-validating. Does the self-validating nature of the idea

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<sup>90</sup> Others use Desgabets' views about the created eternal truths as grounds for interpreting him as a knowledge empiricist. Ayers (1998, pp.1029-1030), for instance, argues that he supposed God's voluntary creation of eternal truths implied nothing is necessary, so there is no *a priori* knowledge. Cook rejects this line since Desgabets believes that indeed there are necessary truths (yet somehow "contingent on God"). Easton and Lennon (1992, p.29) offer another suggestion, which is that since we don't know God's will, we can't know anything outside of experience. Desgabets writes that "to know created things we must wait until God has given them their essence and existence, which are equally contingent." (*Sup.*, p.249) (Schmaltz also suggests something like this (2002, p.16).) However, Cook rejects this claim as well, since it is compatible with this passage that Desgabets only means we use non-sensory intellection to discover the necessary truths that God has created. (I admit to finding this line of argumentation troublesome since Descartes' himself adhered to the doctrine of freely created eternal truths).

<sup>91</sup> p1c6s1.

of God issue from *a priori* reasoning? No, it does not. It is one thing to say that the idea of God is self-validating. It is another to say it does not depend on sense experience. I have argued he thinks every idea, including those derived from sense experience, are also self-validating, in that they depend on forming a simple conception/perception.

But what plausible story can be told about how Desgabets thinks it is possible to obtain the idea of God using only sense perception? Would he perhaps agree with Hume that it can be arrived at by amplifying or negating the idea of a limited being, or, might he agree after all with Descartes that the idea is somehow innate? This second option seems to be a non-starter. In a footnote Cook mentions Desgabets' denial that we see "by means of ideas created with us," and speaks of new persons as "blank slates empty of all."<sup>92</sup> Here he would appear to be denying that there are any innate ideas, and this is incompatible with the line of argument Descartes offers in the third *Meditation*. He does say that God "excites in us His idea by a thousand kinds of actions"—though this is somewhat obscure, it is probably safe to assume he continues to have sense experience in mind—it wouldn't be intelligible to speak of "thousands" of *a priori* sources of "excitement," although he does speak of the "innumerable" and "infinite" perceptions continuously experienced.<sup>93</sup>

He also says it is by "revelation and tradition," that is, internal and external experience, that we obtain ideas about "immaterial" things like souls, angels, and demons, and without which these would be "impossible to think of."<sup>94</sup> He also explicitly connects the acquisition of the idea of God to sensation: "speech which composes the discourses made to us concerning the essence of God and his perfections excite in us the idea of God" just as "the movement of the flame gives us that of heat, depending on what we approach."<sup>95</sup> Desgabets also says ideas about God are "infinitely finer and stronger" when caused by "perceptions" such as those found in reading, meditation, and revelation:

[A]ll knowledge acquired by the senses, by reading, meditations, supernatural revelations etc., form a big enough part of the cause of our ideas, for there is no doubt that a man who possesses all of these perfections in a high degree can form thought or ideas infinitely finer and stronger and more understood than another who would not have all these perceptions; there is very true description of this in the Holy Trinity, where the second person who is an infinite and subsistent thought that God forms by knowledge of his perfections, supposes an infinitely perfect agent, which is the Our Heavenly Father.<sup>96</sup>

It is by "very feeble word...and by instruction" that one obtains "everything that is known of the divine essence, the Holy Trinity, Incarnation and other things that are undoubtedly the greatest objects of our knowledge...simple Christians, even

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<sup>92</sup> Cook forthcoming, p.26, n.24. See *CdC*, pp.209-210; *RD*, p.283.

<sup>93</sup> p1c1s1, p2c13s5.

<sup>94</sup> p2c8s10.

<sup>95</sup> p1c6s3.

<sup>96</sup> p2c9s2.

women, conceive all this.”<sup>97</sup> Of course, even Descartes can agree that some ideas are transmitted by the senses; however, he wouldn’t agree that a “proper” idea of God can only be acquired by consultation with the senses. Desgabets differs: “when one soft speaks to us about God, angels and matter, we do not fail to form a proper idea.”<sup>98</sup> Desgabets also addresses, and dismisses, *a priori* approaches to questions of Divinity: “time and trouble would be wasted” in thinking these ideas could be imparted by proof in the style of “arithmetic or geometry.” This isn’t quite the answer Hume gives, but Desgabets does seem to be saying that what we read, hear, and experience in revelation is necessary for a “more understood” conception of God. Occasionally he is even more forthright:

[W]e could know neither our soul, nor God, nor angels, and not prove the connection of our thoughts and movements of body, and what appeared to us so clear that we have no reason to convince ourselves of it, save for certain reflections upon our interior experience, which produces the clearest possible intuitive knowledge.<sup>99</sup>

This last passage is also characteristic of his views on the soul’s knowledge of itself. Here Desgabets is unequivocal in that “the soul is known clearly by the senses and perceptions.”<sup>100</sup> It knows itself “intuitively as a thing which thinks in an infinity of the means of the senses both internal and external.”<sup>101</sup> Section two of chapter six (Part I) is even titled “That the soul is known clearly by senses and perceptions” and again he says it is by way of “sentiments and perceptions” that the soul immediately, and infallibly becomes known to itself. This knowledge includes the close union of the soul and body, “as they are experienced continually acting mutually one upon the other,”<sup>102</sup> as well as their “real distinction” as substances.<sup>103</sup>

These ideas are “excited” by either the exterior or interior senses. This is compatible with what he says in the *Critique* where he writes that “knowledge of our thoughts, sentiments and properties of bodies is through experience.”<sup>104</sup> He also says the ideas through which the soul knows itself are internally oriented “feelings or perceptions.”<sup>105</sup> The soul’s knowledge of itself, including its relationship to the body is mediated by “interior experience”<sup>106</sup> or “impressions of the body” such as hunger, heat, and pain<sup>107</sup>—the sensible qualities—which provide the

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<sup>97</sup> p2c9s3.

<sup>98</sup> p2c4s8.

<sup>99</sup> p1c8s1.

<sup>100</sup> p1c2s6.

<sup>101</sup> p2c4s8.

<sup>102</sup> p1c2s2.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> *CdC.*, p.190.

<sup>105</sup> p2c9s1.

<sup>106</sup> p1c8s8.

<sup>107</sup> p1c6s2.

“clearest possible intuitive knowledge.”<sup>108</sup> The soul is the “subject and object” of these feelings, and, as I mentioned before, the “true subject” of sensation.

Desgabets also speaks of the *cause* of our sensations being, not the soul, but the internal or external senses, by a force that “experience” makes known to oneself intuitively; it is “experience that teaches our dependence on the body,” for “the faculty that the soul has to know and to want is so vast and that one senses it by an experience so alive and so continual.”<sup>109</sup> This leads Desgabets to reject Descartes’ claim in the *Meditations* that the cause of an idea must contain as much perfection or reality “formally” as there is perfection or reality “objectively” or representatively in the idea itself:

[H]ere is a very general proposition in which I find many difficulties, for I do not understand how it can be true with regard to ideas that make our soul known to us, because the majority of these ideas are feelings or perceptions which almost never have the external thing that excites them as an object, as we showed above, but which are as many thoughts or of ideas having the soul for an object as having had such a feeling.<sup>110</sup>

The cause of our ideas about the soul are, of course, physical brain processes—but they do not themselves contain the perfections those ideas represent. Sensible qualities represent the soul, not aspects of brain processes:

[T]he created efficient cause of these feelings or perceptions is not the soul at all which is only the subject and object, they are the external or interior senses, aided by the action of surrounding things which produce and excite and form these feelings in us, by a force and very particular property that experience makes known to us intuitively, so that the general proposition of Descartes is not true at all in this respect, for a small movement of a leaf, e.g., who cannot give all the fears that can be given in a surprise, the present danger of the loss of life, is not at all comparable to these great emotions, that we must say also of fire that gives heat, wine that gives passion, and thus other innumerable feelings.<sup>111</sup>

The intense surprise and fear of the hidden danger that is associated with the leaf’s subtle motion in no way resembles the conscious character of the “great emotions” it produces. Similarly, the sensible qualities excited by fire and wine are representations of the soul, not of something in the fire or in the wine. That is why “[o]ne should also be careful that the ideas excited by the senses are always very clear and very true when one relates them to their own objects, which is often the soul itself in so far as it is in a certain state.”<sup>112</sup>

Desgabets achieved some notoriety for his view that the soul literally instantiates properties represented by sensible qualities. Schmaltz mentions Malebranche’s skeptical account of this, as if the soul is “painted” with the colours it sees—“white or black, hot or cold”—and this led to joking about “green souls”

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<sup>108</sup> p1c8s1.

<sup>109</sup> p1c8s8.

<sup>110</sup> p2c9s1.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.* For ‘passion’, the French text reads ‘*ferveur*’; should it be ‘*saveur*’?

<sup>112</sup> p2c11s1.

and suchlike.<sup>113</sup> But at least this intelligibly reconciles Desgabet's empiricism with the non-resembling character of external sensations. Descartes had used the non-resembling character of sensible qualities to argue that those contents must somehow be already present in the mind—recall the truism that they have to come from somewhere. Desgabet is following a similar path, though I interpret him to be saying, unlike Descartes, that they literally resemble the soul. Let me make this point very carefully: True, Desgabet often denies that our ideas resemble what occurs in the “senses”: “sensible qualities are spiritual perceptions that are from our side and that do not resemble at all what happens in the corporeal senses,”<sup>114</sup> but this is just to say they don't resemble their *physical causes*: a sensible quality does not copy its cause (fire, wine, a leaf moving). And he has already established a distinction between occasional cause and what an idea stands for. However, this is compatible with saying that ideas (at least internally directed simple conceptions) copy or resemble aspects of the soul.

Finally, there are ideas of general things. For Desgabet, “the knowledge of universal things is not different from that of particulars save for what is most confused[.]”<sup>115</sup>

[A]ll the difference there is between the manner in which we use our interior senses to know particular and universal things consists only in what makes radiate the animal spirits upon the corporeal species, we stop them longer upon those that we want to serve to represent to us more distinctly something and we make them enter deeply there, so that the species recalls more strongly and conserves longer the idea that we want to have.<sup>116</sup>

As with others at the time, Desgabet's conception of brain processes is influenced by the example of the circulatory system, and he adopts a hydraulic model in which patterned-tributaries, or “species” sprayed within the brain serve as conduits for the flow of “animal spirits.” The patterns themselves are presumably produced by activities of the internal and external senses. However, the will can also exert its spectral influence over the spirits' motions—“the soul acts on the body in voluntary movements, in the same way the body acts on the soul in involuntary thoughts[.]” it can “stop them” and make them “enter deeply” specific pathways.<sup>117</sup> One of the primary functions of the will seems to be the direction of attention. Thoughts endure, for instance, because the will exercises control over the movements of the animal spirits.<sup>118</sup>

When attention is highly focused, this results in a stronger, more lasting idea with more specificity; however, when the spirits “pass lightly and slide as though superficially” through the hydraulic pathways, we fail to perceive “what distin-

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<sup>113</sup> Schmalz 1996, p.77.

<sup>114</sup> p1c6s3.

<sup>115</sup> p2c6s1.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> p2c9s1.

<sup>118</sup> p2c5s2.

guishes one from the other,” and the idea is more fleeting, less distinct, more confused, and, crucially, more “universal and abstract.”<sup>119</sup> This is not to say exactly that universal ideas are derived from ideas about particulars, but they are derived from a similar, though inferior, process.

To make this more concrete, consider the difference between thinking of a specific glass of wine, and wine “in general” (i.e., the concept of wine). I imagine a basin in the hydraulic system with several “fissures” or canals found along the sides of its surface. The physical relationship of basin-to-fissures is the physical manifestation of the relationship between general and particular ideas about wine. Desgabets is saying that when attention is low, the basin collects only fast-moving spirits, the fissures remain empty, and distinctions between particulars are not made. However, since the basin itself contains some slow-moving spirits, these fainter motions still occasion the idea of wine in general—the concept of wine. When the spirits are slower and more abundant, the fissures also fill, and a particular idea of a specific glass of wine results. Perhaps this implies one cannot have a particular idea without first forming the corresponding general idea—an inversion of the cliché empiricist doctrine that universal ideas are derivations or abstractions of particulars; then again, maybe the generic idea isn’t formed unless the *whole* of the basin is filled—maybe spirits flowing narrowly through part of the basin into one specific fissure do not occasion the general idea. In any case, Desgabets is not just saying that ideas about universals come from generic brain processes. General ideas are an inferior, more confused, more obscure, form of knowledge. This is precisely because they result from low-level activity in the “canals” that would otherwise occasion stronger ideas of particular things. The more you attend to an idea, the more specific it becomes. A decrease in attention corresponds to the occasioning of an idea that is more abstract. This squares with empiricism—ideas of particulars are obtained by way of sense experience, where attention is under the guidance of the will; this is how the channels are initially formed. There is no special epistemic faculty for acquiring general ideas—they result from a derivative, and inferior, interaction between attention and the movements of the animal spirits through these channels.

All this talk of wine and spirits is making me thirsty. Time to wrap up.

## **Conclusion: Whose empiricism?**

I have evaluated Desgabets according to eight empiricist credentials:

- (1) A reaction to *rationalist* skepticism
- (2) The use of *sense experience* to defeat skepticism about the external world

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<sup>119</sup> p2c6s1.

- (3) The assumption that the mind is *passive* until it receives un-interpreted, incorrigible, sense data
- (4) The rejection of innate ideas, or perhaps that persons begin as “blank slates”
- (5) Rejection of a *distinction* between the understanding and the imagination considered as “modes of operation”
- (6) The assumption that the mind “manipulates” sense data (perhaps by combining, abstracting) to form ideas/concepts. This gives us *concept empiricism*: ideas are “derived,” “originate” or otherwise “arise” from sense experience
- (7) Ideas resemble, or are copies of, sensations
- (8) *Knowledge empiricism*, or the view that all knowledge, or perhaps all “genuine” knowledge, is *a posteriori*

This isn't supposed to be a definitive list, some items arguably bleed into others, and I do not assume all are equally important. Still, this does a decent job of saying what it means to be an empiricist, or not. Take Descartes: he would, unsurprisingly, receive a score of 0/8 if we used this list as a test of his degree of commitment to empiricism. Classic empiricists (Locke, Berkeley, Hume) would receive scores of 8/8, 7/8, and 7/8, respectively. I have argued that Desgabets also receives a high score—a perfect score, actually.

Desgabets is certainly Cartesian in various ways. But his epistemology begins with a reaction to Descartes' skepticism about the senses. Most importantly he does not, like Descartes,<sup>120</sup> dismiss sensible qualities as confused and obscure. On the contrary, Descartes' greatest achievement was his introduction of sensible qualities to philosophy; but their importance owes to their role in acts of simple conception, the basis of all our ideas and, indeed, all knowledge. We can know what they represent (the soul), whether they represent truly (they do), and why they are important to knowledge (because they make simple conception possible). Sensation establishes the existence and nature of body, just as it establishes the existence and nature of the soul, and even Divinity. There is no awareness of thoughts in the absence of sensation, in virtue of its connection to bodily motion.<sup>121</sup>

I suppose Cook would deny Desgabets the resemblance credential (point seven above). Since sensible qualities, like heat, are in us, not the fire, or our senses, “we should no longer assume that if our ideas come from the senses then they must be similar to what happens in the senses.”<sup>122</sup> Indeed, according to Cook, Desgabets thinks none of our ideas exist as they do in the senses.<sup>123</sup> However, if this is to be taken as an argument against the empiricist reading, it is a non se-

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<sup>120</sup> AT VII.43; HRI 164.

<sup>121</sup> p.28; *Sup*, I.2 iv-v, *RD*, pp. 171-174.

<sup>122</sup> Cook forthcoming, p.10.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7.

quitor, and an ironic one at that: for Cook is now trading on the very ambiguity that he has cautioned against. Cook has already established that “the senses” means something like “motions of the body.” But then the argument backfires, since an empiricist can obviously agree that ideas and sensations do not have to resemble their physical causes. Indeed, Desgabets is stressing that *sensible qualities*—the essential character of *sensation*—don’t resemble bodily motion. Why should that be a reason to deny credential seven? The non-resemblance of ideas to their physical causes is quite compatible with my thesis. For the same reason this also shows why Desgabets’ revision of the *Nihil* principle doesn’t make it any less empiricist—the change only emphasizes that ideas don’t have to resemble their physical causes. The foundational Representation Principle is an empiricist doctrine—it holds that conscious experience, either in the form of interior or exterior perception, separated from interference of the will, always yields knowledge.

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