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## “AS IT WERE PICTURES”

*On the Two-Faced Nature of Cartesian Ideas*

There is a traditional answer to the question what a concept is: it is a mental representation. To have a concept of something is to have a mental representation of it. In this paper I shall try to elucidate what a mental representation was considered to be at the very beginning of the modern tradition. What is a mental representation (what is its nature) and how does it represent to the thinker what it represents?

Where did this modern tradition begin? I shall not quarrel with those scholarly authors who say it started before Descartes, nor with those who say it started after him. None of them would deny that, within the modern tradition of equating concepts with mental representations, Descartes was eminently influential with his mature philosophy, i. e. especially with his *Meditations*, his *Principles of Philosophy* and his correspondence. So I shall take Descartes's conception of mental representation as a prominent candidate for the honorific epithet: “the first modern conception”. Even if it were not strictly speaking correct to apply this epithet to Descartes, I wouldn't care too much, as long as his conception of mental representation is worth being closely scrutinized.

And I think it is worth it. His conception is still widely misunderstood; and it is of some philosophical interest, both historically and systematically, to get a better idea of what it really comes to. *A propos* idea. Descartes's usual term for a concept, or a mental representation, was “*idea*” which he uses as more or less interchangeable with “*notio*”, “*conceptus*” and “*repraesentatio mentis*”. I shall stick to that; so when I refer to what he has to say about concepts, I shall mainly use the word “*idea*”.

### A SUCCESSFUL CONCEPT

What are ideas, and what makes this concept so attractive that it has been so eminently successful in modern philosophy? This is a question which should be asked, for it is a remarkable fact that after Descartes almost every influential philosophical thinker has taken this concept more or less for granted: Arnauld,

Malebranche, Locke, Spinoza, Leibniz, Wolff, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, ... you name them. There were only few thinkers before our times who were doubtful about the very concept and what it purportedly refers to: John Sergeant, Edward Stillingfleet and Thomas Reid. But their criticisms couldn't stop the success story of the concept "idea". So there should be something attractive about it. Part of what I shall try to develop in this paper is this: Descartes's theory of ideas (and especially his account of how they represent) cannot explain this success. It is not attractive.

What, then, are ideas? First, they are mental entities. One striking difference between Descartes and the today champions of representationalism (like J. Fodor, F. Dretske, W. Lycan and G. Rey, to mention just a few) is that Descartes declared ideas to be immaterial, whereas most theoreticians today consider them to be material items in the brain. I propose that we leave this metaphysical disagreement aside for a moment and stick to a description which any representationalist should accept: They are *mental* entities, whether or not the mental is part of the physical world. Second, they are what the mind thinks with; they are the components of thoughts or mental propositions. And this may, at least in part, explain what makes this concept so attractive, at first sight. The concept of an idea, as employed and possibly introduced by Descartes, allows one to speak, with what may seem to be utmost precision, of the inventory of the human mind. Using this concept, one can refer to *parts of thoughts* in a seductively easy way: Take any meaningful word *X*, and put "idea of" in front of it, and you have a phrase which refers to a mental item (or to a class of such items) which can be used in thinking. (Well, when I just said "Take *any* meaningful word", I was exaggerating, but not much.) This manoeuvre is as simple and theoretically convenient as the following: Take any meaningful word *X*, and put the phrase "meaning of" in front of it. If you do this, you cannot but succeed, it seems, in denoting a special entity, namely the meaning of *X* (assuming *X* to belong to only one language and not to be ambiguous).

The meaning operator comes handy when you want to do semantics. Correspondingly, the idea operator comes handy when you want to develop a systematic account of thinking. This analogy points to another aspect which may be explanatory of the success of the concept "idea": Such devices do not only come handy for anybody who wants to talk about semantical structures or of thought structures; what is more, these ways of talking may easily seem to be completely innocent and indeed undeniable. When you have a meaningful word, you have a word with a meaning; when you have a word with a meaning, then there is something, besides the word, which you can in good faith talk about: namely its meaning. At first sight, it may seem that simple. It may be an open question in metaphysics what exactly a meaning is, e.g. the meaning of the word "apple". But it has got to be there. If there weren't a meaning of the word "apple", this word would have no meaning; in which case it would be meaningless. And we know that this is not so.

A somewhat analogous consideration applies in the case of the concept "idea". Whenever somebody has a thought about Harvey, then there has to be something about the thought which makes it a thought about Harvey. Now let us introduce the phrase "idea of Harvey" as a device for referring to *whatever makes a thought about Harvey a thought about Harvey*. Who could be so crazy as to deny that ideas exist? In order to deny it, he would, for example, have to form a relevant thought, i. e. he would have to think that ideas do not exist. But he can do this only if his thought is, for example, really about existence. But if he has no idea of existence, he lacks whatever could make his alleged thought about the non-existence of ideas the thought that ideas do not exist. It looks like the very thought that there are no ideas, or concepts, is straightforwardly self-refuting. Again, it may be an open metaphysical question what exactly ideas or concepts are. But it seems undeniable that they exist.

Philosophers of *our* time will look at these two lines of reasoning just sketched with some caution. Especially, if the reasoning is laid out explicitly. But it may be suspected that this sketch nevertheless captures something of the secret seductive power, which the concept of an idea may have had for thinkers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century who fell for it without caring to look at it closely – indeed, in many cases, without caring to look at it at all. Such a concept should come handy for anybody, at any time, interested in philosophical questions concerning the mind; it looks pretty innocent, and any attempt to deny it, may seem, and always have seemed, as absurd as an attempt at denying the reality of thought itself. – Of course, it shouldn't be denied, there may be difficulties about the exact nature of ideas. But what could be more plausible and innocent than to assume that ideas are there – whatever exactly they may turn out to be?

### IMMATERIALITY NOT THE CRUCIAL ISSUE

What I want to do in this paper is to give a sketch of what Descartes's conception of what ideas are and how they represent comes to. His extraordinarily successful concept of an idea is part of an astonishingly bizarre theory of mental representation. Many people today seem to think that what is fundamentally wrong with Descartes's account of mental representation is that ideas, for him, were immaterial. As soon as we transfer them to the material world and locate them as tiny entities inside the human brain or some other adequate physical symbol system, we would have cured the basic flaw.

I think that this view is totally mistaken and only betrays a profound ignorance of Descartes's conception. Its basic flaw is not that ideas are considered to be immaterial, but how Descartes wants to characterize the kind of relation which obtains between an idea and its *ideatum* (i. e. what it represents). I shall, later in this

paper, venture the hypothesis that Descartes needed an *immaterial* mind exactly because he had an unintelligible conception of the *idea/ideatum* relationship.

Before we concentrate on Descartes's mature doctrine of ideas, let me add that, as a matter of fact, in earlier stages of his philosophical development, he took ideas to be brain states. But he came to think that this has to be wrong (or cannot be the complete truth about ideas), for "the brain", as he puts it in his reply to Gassendi, "is of no use at all in pure understanding but only in imagining and perceiving by the senses" [*nam sane nullus cerebri usus esse potest ad purum intelligendum, sed tantum ad imaginandum vel sentiendum*, AT VII 358]. The pure intellect operates with ideas which, as Descartes holds, cannot be physical. Arithmetics deals with numbers which are arbitrarily big, and when it turns to geometry, the pure intellect is able to demonstrate that a polygon with very many sides has various properties and lacks certain others. The important point, for Descartes, seems to be this: In what he calls acts of pure understanding, we can, with both ease and utmost precision, keep distinct numbers and shapes which to keep distinct would transcend our other mental capabilities, imaginative and other (cf. *Med* 6, AT VII 72ff.).

Descartes never does get to develop his reasoning on this point in great detail. But he was not some dull dualist who simply assumed the immateriality of mental representations because he took the mind's immaterial nature for granted. On the contrary. First, he was never dull. Second, it seems to have been the other way round: He came to believe in an immaterial mind, because he saw no hope for what today we would call a naturalist theory of mental representation – a naturalist theory which could account for the more intellectual achievements of our minds.

### DESCARTES'S DEFINITION OF "IDEA" IRONICAL?

At only one point, Descartes condescends to offer a definition of his term "*idea*". It is in his reply to the objections compiled by his friend Mersenne. There, as an appendix, he includes an axiomatic proof of God's existence and of the distinction between the soul and the body. In the second definition presented there, "*idea*" is defined. But, alas, the wording of the *definiens* is ostentatiously unhelpful, involving without any clue the most worn-out, and semantically omnifarious, term of school metaphysics: "*forma*". The definition goes as follows:

By the term *idea* I understand the *forma* of any given *cogitatio*, immediate *perceptio* of which makes me *consciens* of it. (AT VII 160)

Several years ago, I thought the definitions Descartes offers in the appendix to the *Second Replies* may contain the key to an understanding of his theory of mental representation, and I tried to make scholarly sense of them in the light of the rest of his work. But I failed. (And I have never found anything in the literature which

offers an exegetically feasible reading of what "*forma cogitationis*" could be taken to mean precisely.)<sup>1</sup>

Today, I tend to take a different view of those definitions. One should be reminded of the fact that Descartes didn't really believe in definitions. He emphasized more than once that not all concepts are definable. For him the blind craving for definitions is an intellectual lunacy and a hallmark of poor philosophy. Some concepts just cannot be defined. For there is nothing to define them properly. Every attempt at defining them would inevitably render them more unclear, rather than more intelligible. As an example, Descartes often mentions the concept of thinking. *Cogitatio* is his paradigm of an indefinable concept.

Yet, his series of definitions in the *Second Replies* starts with a definition of "*cogitatio*"; the next *definiendum* is "*idea*". That is to say: first, the paradigm of indefinability is defined; next comes the definition of "*idea*". So these definitions may be a very clever and proud man's ironical bow to the definitional practices of his times which he holds in deep and well-considered contempt. "Don't ask me stupid questions. But if you insist on wanting definitions, I can give you definitions. Well, all right: By the indefinable term '*cogitatio*', I mean this and this; and by the indefinable term '*idea*', I mean such and such."

Although Descartes gave us a definition of what an idea is, his *definiens* doesn't help us much in understanding what ideas, as he conceived of them, are supposed to be.

### "AEQUIVOCATIO IN VOCE IDEAE"

Descartes's concept of an idea in the *Meditations* is neither clear nor distinct. His readers – from Mersenne to recent commentators – have never found it easy to comprehend what exactly an idea à la Descartes is supposed to be. His doctrines on ideas contain many difficulties which have to do with innateness, clearness and distinctness, immateriality, pictoriality, causality and so on. What I want to concentrate on, in the following, is a question which I take to be basic for the very concept of an idea: How does Descartes conceive of the representational nature of ideas?

In the preface to the *Meditations*, Descartes mentions what he calls an equivocation of the term "*idea*", and distinguishes a material reading from an objective one. In the material reading, "*idea*" refers to an operation of the intellect; in the objective reading, the same term refers to "the thing which is represented by that operation ... even if no extra-intellectual existence of this thing is supposed" (AT VII 8).

<sup>1</sup> As is documented extensively in: A. Kemmerling, "Cartesische Ideen", *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 36 (1993), 43–94.

This sounds like a serious warning. Descartes tells us explicitly that “*idea*” may mean either a mental *repraesentans* or its *repraesentatum*. Ontologically speaking, he seems to warn us here that a phrase like “*idea leporis*” may refer either to a mental state or to a rabbit (even if no extra-intellectual existence of this rabbit is supposed). This is not the kind of equivocation which could be taken lightly. A mental *repraesentans* and its *repraesentatum* commonly are very distinct kinds of entities. A philosopher should make it a point of some concern to be clear about which of the two meanings he intends – whether it is, for example, rabbits or mental states he is talking about when he speaks of an “*idea leporis*”. Certainly Descartes did not confuse rabbits, lolloping in the open countryside, with mental states. He knew quite well that these are really distinct entities.

So it is shocking that he concedes, in a rather by-the-way manner, that one of his central conceptual tools fails to keep really distinct entities apart – rabbits and mental states, for example. A sane reaction, on his part, would have been: “Oh God, now I see that by using an expression like ‘*idea leporis*’, I have sometimes been speaking of mental states and at other times of rabbits; fortunately I have now detected this horrible equivocation, and I shall henceforth not use that expression without making it clear whether I’m using it in its material or in its objective reading”. But Descartes is quite cool about this equivocation. What he says is simply this:

There is an equivocation in the term “*idea*”. One may take it materially, as referring to an operation of the intellect [...] or objectively, as referring to the thing which is represented by that operation. (AT VII 8)

And he goes on, in the *Meditations*, to use this ambiguous term “*idea*” without ever making a note on the intended reading. Curiously enough, he did not even care to have this passage included in the French translation of the *Meditations*.

This is, to my mind, a notable difficulty. How could Descartes be so cavalier about this distinction? Why would he choose a seriously ambiguous term as one of his basic technical concepts in the first place? And why does he never, in the course of the *Meditations*, take pains to make clear whether he uses the word “*idea*” in its material or in its objective reading?

One may try to answer such questions in ways which do not take Descartes fully seriously – either as a philosopher or as a writer. One might say for example that he discovered the ambiguity only after he had sent the *Meditations* to the commentators and felt that he could not change the text afterwards; so he just made this short remark in the Preface to the Reader. – But philosophically speaking, this would have been a poor maneuver on Descartes’s part. When a serious philosopher finds out that one of his central technical terms is dangerously ambiguous, he should spare neither trouble nor expense to indicate at each point the intended reading.

It might be replied to this that Descartes may have thought that each textual context within the *Meditations* always makes it clear which reading of the word

“*idea*” applies. So even if the applied meaning of the term is not explicitly indicated in the text, it is implicitly indicated by the context. But this is obviously not the case. There are many passages in which it is not immediately evident whether he is referring to mental states or to what they represent. Consider for example the following passage from the *Fourth Meditation*:

By the mere intellect I only perceive ideas about which I can make a judgement, and strictly speaking there is no error to be found in the intellect if it is precisely regarded in this way. (AT VII 56)

Is Descartes speaking here of ideas taken materially or of ideas taken objectively? Both readings seem to make *some* sense. According to the first reading, the thinker in a first step perceives mental states and then makes judgements about them (for example judgements to the effect that the perceived mental state corresponds to something outside the mind); according to the second reading, the thinker in a first step perceives *repraesentata* of mental states and then makes judgements about these *repraesentata*. Let us here just note that it would have been helpful if Descartes had given us an explicit indication as to which reading he had in mind.

Descartes would have to be blamed as a philosopher, if he had clearly recognized that one of his key-concepts was dramatically ambiguous but not cared to add the necessary clarifications in the text. He would have to be blamed as a writer, if he had thought that there are no passages in the text which needed clarification.

We can avoid making such reproaches, if we assume that Descartes did not think of this ambiguity as a dramatic one. It is this assumption I shall explore in the following. Naturally, one aim of my exegesis is to show how Descartes could *innocently* use the same word “*idea*” both to refer to mental states and to what they represent. The key to a solution is a suggestion which Descartes often made, namely that ideas are like pictures.

## PICTURES

Imagine a picture of a landscape, an imaginary landscape with a house in it – and someone were to ask “Whose house is that?”. One feasible answer might be: “It belongs to the farmer who is sitting on the bench in front of it”. For the farmer in the picture has a big key hanging down from his belt, and this was, in the school to which the painter of this picture belongs, a conventional means to indicate a house-owner.

Could you follow? I hope that you could. I have just innocently used the phrase “the farmer in the picture”, but I did not refer to a farmer, a fortiori not to a farmer in a picture. In fact, I’ve made it pretty clear that I was talking about a picture which depicts nothing. I have explicitly said that it’s an imaginary landscape, and farmers don’t inhabit *imaginary* landscapes. In spite of this, you thought you understand

quite well what I was talking about when I just said "The farmer in the picture has a big key hanging down from his belt". The farmer, the key, the belt – they don't exist. But we speak of them quite naturally.

This is how we speak of pictures. (Just to make sure: When I say "picture", you're supposed to think of 17<sup>th</sup> century paintings in Europe, not of something like artefacts of the kind which made Jackson Pollock famous.) The picture I have just mentioned shows us a farmer, a farmer is in the picture, the picture represents a farmer, a farmer occurs in the picture. And in exactly this way Descartes speaks of ideas. An idea of the sun is said to *exhibit* the sun to the thinker.<sup>2</sup> Something may *be in* an idea although it does not actually exist.<sup>3</sup> An idea *represents* something; something *occurs* in it.<sup>4</sup>

It is in this respect that ideas are like pictures: they show us things which may or may not exist. Pictures can be taken materially, as oil-on-canvas. And they can be taken objectively, as landscapes for example. And it is the same thing, the picture, which we are talking about when we say: "It contains a few hairs from the artist's brush" or when we say "What a beautiful landscape that is", even though we know that the painting shows no actual landscape. When we nevertheless talk about "this landscape", what we mean to refer to is neither the picture materially taken, nor a landscape which exists really [*in rerum natura*]. We mean to refer to what I shall call a *picture-landscape*. To speak of a picture in these two ways is quite common, and the equivocation of the word "picture" is considered by most of us as harmless.

This analogy between ideas and pictures may help to understand how Descartes could innocently use the same word "idea" both to refer to mental states and to what they represent. But we must be careful not to read too much into the word "represent". As long as I regard my idea of, say, a rabbit "solely in itself", it represents to me, according to Descartes, not an actual rabbit, but rather a rabbit which is objectively real. In analogy to our speaking of a "picture-landscape" we could call an objectively real rabbit simply a "mind-rabbit". This may sound a bit funny, but it captures Descartes's doctrine fairly well. An idea of a thing *x* is, according to Descartes, *x* itself objectively existing in the mind.<sup>5</sup> An idea of a rabbit consequently is a rabbit in the mind; such a mind-rabbit has a mode of existence which is inferior to the actual existence of a real rabbit; yet it does exist, albeit only "objectively".

Let us briefly translate this back to our analogy with pictures. There are at least two different attitudes you may have towards a picture of a landscape. It can be taken materially, as a collection of paint-blobs on a canvas. These blobs represent

<sup>2</sup> AT VII 39.

<sup>3</sup> AT VII 369. Descartes here takes up a phrase of Gassendi's and goes on to deny that from "x is in the/an idea" it follows that *x* exists "*in rerum natura*".

<sup>4</sup> AT VII 39ff.

<sup>5</sup> AT VII 102.



a landscape, in a particular sense of the word "represent". For the landscape represented exists in a second class manner: it has only objective existence (or as we could say "picture-existence"). Nevertheless, this landscape exists. And secondly we can take the picture objectively, in which case it is exactly this objectively existing landscape.

It is this manifold structural analogy between ideas and pictures which, I think, made Descartes say things like "Ideas are as it were pictures of things" [*tanquam rerum imagines*, AT VII 37], although he was acutely aware of the misleading potential of such a comparison. It is of some importance to see that ideas are completely unlike pictures in other respects. They don't represent by way of similarity, and *a fortiori* not by way of some kind of visual similarity, however abstractly viewed. The emphasis in "as it were pictures" is on "as it were", as it were. More about this later on.

## THINGS IN THE MIND

All thoughts of a turtle are turtles,  
and of a rabbit, rabbits.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Maybe you are beginning to lose count. How many things are there? Just one thing, the picture of a landscape? Or two things, namely the actually existing picture and an objectively existing landscape? – Descartes's answer seems to be as follows: *Actually*, there is just one thing. But this thing is of a special kind, it is one of those things which have two modes of existence. First, all things which actually exist, have a formal (or actual) mode of existence. This mode of existence constitutes the basic ontological status of the entity in question – whether it is a substance or a mode, whether it is mental or physical. Additional to this mode of existence, some actually existing things have an objective mode of existence. Moreover, there are things which do not actually exist, but exist merely in an objective mode of existence.

What we see in a picture or perceive in an idea may not actually exist, yet it still does in some sense exist.<sup>6</sup> It is some such sense of "exist", to which Descartes refers by the term "objective".

Since the mind-thing and the idea are identical, Descartes is not being sloppy when he sometimes attributes the objective mode of existence to the idea and

<sup>6</sup> If somebody were to say, with reference to a pipe-painting: "This is not a pipe", a faithful Cartesian should reply: "You are right if what you mean by 'pipe' is exclusively 'actually existing pipe'; you are wrong if what you mean by 'pipe' is 'pipe in any mode of existence'; for what you were just referring to is an objectively existing pipe".

sometimes to its *repraesentatum*. A faithful Cartesian can say “My idea of a rabbit has both an actual and an objective mode of existence”, and he can also say “The rabbit has an objective mode of existence in my intellect and it has an actual mode of existence out there in the fields”. Just as there are, as it were, two sides of an idea, there are two modes of existence which those things have which both actually exist and are thought of. They too have both actual and objective existence. Many entities have only one kind of existence: things which are there but are not thought of, exist only actually; and things which are thought of but have no existence outside the mind, exist only objectively.

A difficulty for Descartes seems to be lurking here. What when we think of an idea, and not of an extramental thing? Then we have an idea #1 of an idea #0. Let's keep this matter simple. Let's assume that the idea which is being thought of – idea #0 – is a pedestrian ground floor idea of a rabbit. Now what about idea #1? Like any idea it can be taken in two ways: materially and objectively. Taken materially, it is just a mental state, an operation of the intellect. There's no problem about this. But what does idea #1 consist in when it is taken objectively? If we take it objectively, it seems difficult to construe it in a straightforward analogy to the case of a ground floor idea like #0: namely as a thing-in-the-mind. For, unlike #0, it is *not* about a thing-in-the-world. Idea #1 is about a state of the mind which by its very nature can be considered in two ways: first, objectively, as a thing-in-the-mind (i.e. the thing, represented by idea #0, as it exists in the objective mode of existence), and second materially, as a state of the mind. So it seems that with idea #1 we have a minor difficulty, because it is about something which essentially can be taken in two ways. An idea of idea #0 must, so to speak, make up its mind about how it is to represent idea #0: as a mind-rabbit, or as the mental state taken materially. I propose we neglect the minor difficulty and turn to the one I take to be more serious. Let's briefly consider both cases just mentioned.

First case: idea #1 represents idea #0 as it is when it is taken materially.

Second case: idea #1 represents idea #0 as it is when it is taken objectively.

The question is: What can we say, in these two cases, about idea #1, taken objectively? In what does the *realitas obiectiva* of idea #1 consist?

In the first case, the situation is this. Idea #0, taken materially, is just a state of the mind; let's call it *m*, for convenience. If we try to construe the *realitas obiectiva* of idea #1 in analogy to the case of ground floor ideas, we should say this: Idea #1, taken objectively, is nothing but *m* in its objective mode of existence. But the difficulty then is this: It is not clear at all what the objective mode of existence might be of a *mental* entity which actually exists in the intellect. We cannot give an account which is analogous to the one Descartes gives of the objective reality of ground level ideas, because the trick which is supposed to work for rabbits seems not to work for ideas of them. The trick works for rabbits by, as it were, transferring

them into the mind; but there seems to be not even a metaphorical sense in which a mental state could be transferred into the mind.

In the second case, the situation is this. Idea #0, taken objectively, is a mind-rabbit; let's call it *mr*, for convenience. If we try to construe the *realitas obiectiva* of idea #1 in analogy to the case of ground level ideas, we should say: Idea #1, taken objectively, is nothing but *mr* in its objective mode of existence. The same kind of difficulty arises as in the first case: It is not clear at all what the objective mode of existence might be of a *mind*-rabbit – which itself is nothing but a rabbit already in its objective mode of existence. Therefore it seems utterly pointless to say: “Look, idea #1, objectively taken is nothing but *mr* in *mr*'s objective mode of existence”.

The difficulty, in brief, is this. The distinction between actual and objective existence is explained by Descartes, in the case of ground level ideas, as the distinction between existence outside and inside the intellect. But this explanation of the distinction seems not applicable to the case in which an idea is about an item which actually exists in the intellect and cannot actually exist outside the intellect. It is not clear at all in what the *realitas obiectiva* of something could consist which actually exists in the intellect. – This difficulty is a serious one for Descartes, since higher level ideas are needed in order to speak meaningfully of ideas. I certainly don't want to go so far as to claim that there is no solution for this difficulty which would be consistent with his doctrine. I just wanted to draw your attention to the fact that the “mind-thing”-account of ideas has this problem.

The mode of existence which mind-things have is inferior to that which actual things have. But it has to be accepted, Descartes holds, that mind-things are not nothing and their existence, even if inferior, requires explanation just the same. “How did the mind-rabbit get into the intellect?” is a question just as sensible as the question: “How did the (actual) rabbit get into the bathroom?” If you want to account for the mind-rabbit's presence in the intellect, it is not sufficient to point out that the mind simply happened to bring about some particular mental state. Such an account would treat the idea of a rabbit only materially, and leave out the fact that this idea has an objective aspect. It represents a rabbit, even if only a mind-rabbit.

Descartes holds that this additional mode of existence which pictures and ideas have is, in spite of its inferiority, nothing trivial or peripheral. Somebody who could not take pictures objectively would miss something important – he would not be able to recognize pictures as pictures. It is this, I take it, what Descartes has in mind. This point is even more obvious in the case of ideas. Maybe we could imagine a person who is blind to the objective reality of pictures, that is: could not see what's in a picture, saw only paint on canvas.<sup>7</sup> But it is inconceivable that there might

<sup>7</sup> By the way, animals, as a matter of fact, seem not to be able to draw pictures or to see something in them. It's a tough job, as far as I can tell, to make a dog look at a picture at all. But even if you succeed and the picture depicts something which is dear and well-known to the dog (as, for example,

be a thinker blind to the objective reality of his ideas. Such a thinker would have to be able to recognize that there is something going on in his intellect (otherwise he would be totally idea-blind and could not even take his ideas materially), but would have to be incapable of recognizing that he is perceiving the idea of anything. Descartes explicitly rejects this as impossible when he says that "this objective mode of existence belongs to ideas by their nature".<sup>8</sup>

## TWO NOTIONS OF REPRESENTATION

In the *Fourth Meditation* Descartes introduces another distinction, namely between an idea taken materially and an idea taken formally. An idea is being taken in the formal sense when it is "referred to something else", when it is taken to represent "something real and positive"<sup>9</sup>. An expression like "idea of a rabbit" is taken formally, it seems, when the word "of" is read in a strong sense which entails real existence of a rabbit.<sup>10</sup> So "*idea leporis*" has not only two but three readings, according to Descartes. In its *material reading* it refers to a state of the mind, considered in abstraction from whatever it may (or may fail to) represent. In its *objective reading*, it refers to what the state internally represents, *i. e.* to the internal *repraesentatum* being considered in abstraction from its actual existence. In its *formal reading* it refers to the state as something which represents (or fails to represent) something which actually exists outside the intellect. Correspondingly, we should distinguish two senses in which, according to Descartes, an idea represents. (I shall from now on leave aside ideas of mental entities, we have seen that they may contain special problems for the Cartesian doctrine.) In the first sense an idea represents its objective reality. Every idea does this by its very nature. In the second sense an idea represents extramental reality. Not all ideas do this. Let's call the first concept "internal representation", and the second "external representation".

As regards external representation, Descartes holds views which, considered collectively, may be called a causal theory. The external *repraesentatum* of an idea is that entity which has caused the idea (or the idea's perception), and *nota bene*: which has caused not only the idea as some mental state or other but rather the idea

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his master), nothing much happens. Dogs, and maybe animals in general seem to be picture-blind. Maybe not totally picture-blind, but for all I know pretty much so.

<sup>8</sup> AT VII 42.

<sup>9</sup> AT VII 232, 37, 43

<sup>10</sup> This becomes clear in Descartes's reply to Arnauld (AT VII 232), where he in effect argues in the following way: "When you infer from the actual non-existence of *x* that there can be no idea of *x-as-a-real-thing*, then obviously you take the idea-of-relation in a strong sense which entails the actual existence of the second relatum".

as internally representing the specific content which it in fact represents.<sup>11</sup> So the rabbit out there which has caused the thinker's idea of a rabbit has caused not only some new mental state in her but is also causally responsible for what this state internally represents to the thinker (the idea may for example internally represent rabbits as having long ears). But any such theory has a formidable difficulty. There is no such thing as the unique cause of a mental state. There is a long causal chain which reaches back at least to the rabbit's precursors and reaches forward into the thinker's body. Anything in this chain has, it seems, equal right to be called "*the* cause of the idea". Hence it seems that there is no such thing as *the* cause of the idea. Descartes is well aware of this problem, and the doctrine of internal representation is a part of his solution.

In the *Sixth Meditation* he considers what happens when a movement in the foot produces an idea of pain. I quote from John Cottingham's translation:

When the nerves are pulled in the foot, they in turn pull on inner parts of the brain to which they are attached, and produce a certain motion in them; and nature has laid it down that this motion should produce in the mind a sensation of pain, as occurring in the foot.<sup>12</sup>

The external causal chain which produced the pain reaches from the pineal gland back to the creation of the world. If somebody wanted to refer to *the* cause of this idea, he or she might be at a loss. The stone which was kicked with the naked foot? Something that happened in the foot? Something that happened in the nerves leading from the foot to the brain?

In Descartes's example, the painful idea represents something going on in the foot. But why? Why in the foot? It could as well have represented something going on in the stone or something going on in the brain. Descartes's answer is this: The arbitrarily long external causal chain caused a mental state which *internally* represents a foot. The mental state which was caused (that is: the idea, taken materially) *internally* represents a foot – not a stone, not a brain. That's why this mental state does not externally represent any other link of the causal chain.

So the causal theory of external representation presupposes that there is an internal *repraesentatum*. But what makes this mental state internally represent something going on in the foot and not, for example, something going on in the brain? Descartes suggests an answer: The internal *repraesentatum* is that which, *ceteris*

<sup>11</sup> For Descartes, the representational content of the idea fixes the *repraesentatum*. Notice how he introduces the terms "*idea*" and "*substantia*" in the appendix to the *Second Responses*. He first explains what a thought and what an idea is (AT VII 160f.). It is only then that he offers the following explication of what a substance is: "Every thing which has any quality of which we have a real idea" (AT VII 161). *Substantia* is defined in terms of *idea*. If we have a real idea which represents a quality Q, then there is a substance which has Q; otherwise substance is undefined.

<sup>12</sup> AT VII 87 (*The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Vol. II*, translated by J. Cottingham/R. Stoothoff/D. Murdoch, Cambridge UP 1984, p. 60).

*paribus*, is optimal for the person. In our example, the pain “stimulates the mind to do its best to get rid of the cause of the pain, which it takes to be harmful to the foot. It is true that God could have made the nature of man such that this particular motion in the brain indicated something else to the mind; it might, for example, have made the mind aware of the actual motion occurring in the brain, or in the foot, or in any of the intermediate regions; or it might have indicated something else entirely. But there is nothing else which would have been so conducive to the continued well-being of the body”.<sup>13</sup>

Let us imagine that God created one thinker whose internal *repraesentatum* of the pain-idea is not a foot-state but a brain-state. This person could not be deceived by the pain as easily as we can. We can, given special circumstances, have this pain even though our feet are O.K.; but, for all we know, it is much harder to have this pain even though you are not in an appropriate brain-state. Therefore the internal *repraesentatum* of the idea which this exceptional thinker has, renders his pain even more reliable than our corresponding ideas. But there would be a huge disadvantage on his part. Other things being equal, he would tend to do the wrong things and fail to do some of the right things. He would be alarmed about the “wrong” parts of his body; whenever this idea occurs, he would care for his brain and fail to care for his foot.

So in the Cartesian account of representation a subjective and an objective component intertwine. The subjective aspect is captured in the concept of internal representation; what an idea internally represents may, in principle, differ from thinker to thinker. Your idea may represent to you something happening in your foot; your neighbour’s idea which has the same causal history as yours may show her something happening in her brain. This subjectivity infects external representation, as we have just seen. There may be cases where you are wrong and your neighbour is right, although the two of you are in exactly the same “objective” circumstances. What is objective about representation is, first, the causal chain in which the external *repraesentatum* must be a link, and, second, the identification of the external *repraesentatum* by the internal *repraesentatum*. There is no indication that Descartes thought of, or allowed for, the possibility that a thinker who has an idea today and refers it to an external object *x*, may have the same idea (with the same internal *repraesentatum*) tomorrow and refer it not to *x* but to *y*, although the causal circumstances are in all relevant respects identical. That is, once the internal *repraesentatum* and the causal chain are given, there is no interpretational latitude left for the thinker; he cannot now “choose” to refer his idea to *x* or to *y*. – Whatever amount of subjectivity involved in representation, it ought not to create any skeptical puzzle for Descartes, a puzzle of the type “How could I know that she has the same ideas as I have, when she is in the same situation as I am?”. One can rely on the assumption that if God found it optimal for me to have this idea in

<sup>13</sup> AT VII 88 (quoted from J. Cottingham’s translation).

such-and-such circumstances, then he will have found that optimal for my fellow human beings as well.

It may happen, though, that the internal *repraesentatum* is in some sense misleading. As we have seen, in unusual circumstances (for example when a brain surgeon stimulates my brain) I may have a pain-in-my-foot idea although my foot is completely O.K. (or even when it no longer exists). So that's one sense in which the internal *repraesentatum* may be misleading. But it may be misleading in other, somewhat more philosophical senses. We may be led by the internal *repraesentatum* of an idea to refer it to something that exists outside the intellect although the external causal chain of the production of this idea contains no such external thing as a link. If coldness for example is not a thing in the external world but only the absence of heat, then an idea of cold which represents it as a "real and positive" thing out there in the ice cube you have in your mouth is misleading. Your idea represents to you a "thing" in the icecube, but there is no such thing in it but only a lack of heat.

In this case, your idea represents to you a *non-res* as a *res*.<sup>14</sup> How does it do that? Well, basically by being confused and obscure. One should have a closer look at such ideas before one refers them to anything. When one carefully inspects what the idea of cold contains, one finds that it does not represent anything existing outside the intellect but rather a sensation which exists only in the intellect. So your naive internal *repraesentatum* of the idea of cold may be misleading in two respects: it may represent a lack as a thing; and it may represent a mental entity as a corporeal entity.

Let me mention briefly one more point before I leave the topic of misleading ideas. When Descartes discusses this issue in his reply to Arnauld, he makes it clear that the internal *repraesentatum* of the confused and obscure idea of cold cannot be characterized as "coldness itself as it is objectively in the intellect". This is a pretty subtle point which deserves some consideration. As we have just noted, coldness itself is, according to Descartes, a sensation. Now if our confused idea were to internally represent this sensation, then it would not be misleading. So how should the internal *repraesentatum* of the misleading idea be characterized? Descartes is quite vague: it's not coldness itself as it is objectively in the intellect, but rather something else ("*aliud quid*").<sup>15</sup> He does not say what exactly it is that in this case has objective existence in the intellect. Certainly it is nothing which has actual existence in the extended world. Is that because in this case there is nothing that has objective existence? This cannot be what Descartes means, for he says that this misleading idea, as I receive it from the senses,<sup>16</sup> "represents coldness to me

<sup>14</sup> AT VII 43f. and 231ff.

<sup>15</sup> AT VII 233

<sup>16</sup> AT VII 232

as something real and positive"<sup>17</sup>. So the internal *repraesentatum* of the misleading idea has to be something-in-the-intellect, even though not coldness itself. What exactly it is, is hard to say, because our perception of this idea is only very confused and obscure ("*valde confuse et obscure*"<sup>18</sup>). Again, an analogy of ideas to pictures can be drawn: it is hard to say what *exactly* a confused picture shows, even if it seems to show something.<sup>19</sup>

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Here comes a brief summary of the main features of Cartesian representation. An idea always and intrinsically has an internal *repraesentatum*. If all goes well, the internal *repraesentatum* is just the external *repraesentatum* as it is objectively in the intellect. The external *repraesentatum* is that link in the external causal chain which is the actually existing version of the internal *repraesentatum*.

So we have two levels of representation. At the basic internal level, the idea, taken materially, represents its internal *repraesentatum* (i. e. itself, taken objectively):

idea<sub>tm</sub> → idea<sub>to</sub>.

The internal *repraesentatum* has been selected by God for the thinker as the optimal semantical value of his mental state. It is obvious that no similarity is involved in internal representation, for *repraesentans* and *repraesentatum* are identical: the internal *repraesentatum* of an idea is nothing but the idea itself, taken in a particular way. But notice that what is going on at this level is not self-representation in any usual sense. Though the *repraesentans* and the *repraesentatum* are the same, the representational content is not self-referential. The idea, taken as a mental state, does not represent itself *as an idea*.

At the external level, the idea, taken formally, represents its external *repraesentatum* (if there is any).

idea<sub>ff</sub> → thing out there.

The external *repraesentatum* (if there is any) is that thing in the world which is [a] a link in the causal chain which brings about the idea, and which is, specifically speaking, [b] the same thing in the mode of actual existence as that which exists objectively in the mind (as the internal *repraesentatum*). This sounds highly technical. What to make of it?

I don't know. I wish I could provide an intelligible account of this doctrine. But I can't. Of course, one may adopt this way of speaking. One may speak of

<sup>17</sup> AT VII 43.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> In fact, in the French version Descartes points out in this context that ideas, since they are like pictures, inevitably seem to represent something.



mind-rabbits and actual rabbits, fine. But what's the philosophical point of it? – Let me offer a guess about what may be part of the point of talking that way.

In talking that way, one avoids suggesting that representation essentially involves similarity. The Cartesian formula is: the idea *a* externally represents the thing *b*, if *a* is objectively what *b* is actually. This formula is not just a claim about some kind of correspondence-relation obtaining between items of distinct realms, a relation which may or may not involve similarity. The formula has it that there is, in spite of substantial differences, some kind of essential connection between *a* (the idea, taken objectively) and *b* (its external *repraesentatum*). The mind-rabbit and the actual rabbit which is externally represented are substantially different but they are essentially connected: they are *the same thing* in different modes of existence.

This aspect is emphasized in Descartes's doctrine that the internal *repraesentatum* is the *essence* of the external *repraesentatum*. In his reply to Gassendi's objections, Descartes says:

An idea represents the essence of a thing, and if something is added to or taken away from the idea, it immediately becomes the idea of another thing.<sup>20</sup>

Certainly it is crucial whether Descartes is speaking of internal or of external representation, when he says that an idea represents the essence of a thing. Fortunately there are other passages where it becomes clear that he is speaking of internal representation. In a letter which he wrote in 1645 or 1646 he says:

... by essence we understand the thing in so far as it is objectively in the intellect, but by existence *the same thing* in so far as it is outside the intellect ...<sup>21</sup>

This makes clear that Descartes means "internal representation", when he says to Gassendi that an idea represents the essence of a thing. In this quotation from the letter he identifies the internal *repraesentatum* with the essence of the external *repraesentatum*. And he is quite explicit here about the doctrine that it is one and the same thing which is objectively in the mind and actually outside the mind. In his conversation with Burman he says in 1648:

Existence is nothing but the existing essence.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> AT VII 371. John Cottingham translates as follows: "An idea represents the essence of a thing, and if anything is added to or taken away *from the essence*, then the idea automatically becomes the idea of something else". (*The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Vol. II*, p. 256; italics mine). Descartes's Latin construction is syntactically ambiguous and allows for both translations. – In support of my translation see also Descartes's letter to Mersenne from 21 January 1641, where he says: "We have no other viewpoint for knowing whether two things are different or identical than to consider whether we have different ideas of them, or just one". (AT III 285)

<sup>21</sup> AT IV 350.

<sup>22</sup> AT V 164. (I read this as saying: An actually existing thing is nothing but the essence, in its actual mode of existence.)

All this heavily emphasizes the essential connection I have just mentioned: the internal *repraesentatum* of the idea (i. e. the idea taken objectively) is the essence of its external *repraesentatum* (i. e. the thing out there). So the relationship between an idea and its external *repraesentatum* is identical to the relationship between the essence of a thing and the thing itself. But the essence of a thing is not famous for being similar to the thing. It is famous for comprising exactly those features which the thing has *necessarily* (in some appropriate sense of this difficult word). And this points to an account of external representation which puts the emphasis not on similarity but on necessity of some kind.

The internal *repraesentatum* somehow fixes what features the external *repraesentatum* must have – must have, that is, in order to qualify as the external *repraesentatum* of this idea. The important thing about external representation à la Descartes is that the *repraesentatum* is fixed in terms of its essence. The relationship obtaining between an idea, taken objectively, and its external *repraesentatum* is more like that which obtains between a *definiens* and the thing picked out by it than that which obtains between two similar things. Think of that Steven Spielberg movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, where these people – Richard Dreyfus, for example, among them – had an idea of that mountain in Wyoming (or wasn't it Wyoming?), not knowing, not even having the slightest idea, that there was an external *repraesentatum*. They could produce external *Ersatz-repraesentata*, for example drawings and three-dimensional models made of mashed potatoes which looked like that mountain. But the crucial thing was that they had something to which nothing in the actual world but that one mountain corresponded essentially. Had they worked with a linguistic description of that mountain, this would have been just as fine – and even better, if it would not have been a film but a radio play. The mode of representation is secondary as long as *the right thing* is picked out. And a *definiens* (for which it is not required that there is something defined by it) always picks out the right thing, if it picks out anything.

This attempt at making sense of Cartesian representation has immediate problems. For it seems to become difficult to understand how an idea may misrepresent its external *repraesentatum*. If an idea is like a *definiens* for which there is there is only hit or miss, and nothing in between, how can the idea represent something and yet misrepresent *it* – the same old thing? How could I, for example, have two ideas of the sun which are incompatible, in so far as one represents the sun as big and the other represents it as small? One possible answer to this problem is that, first, an idea, as long as it is not brought to clearness and distinctness, may represent not only the essence of its external *repraesentatum* but also lots of further features of it, and, secondly, that unclear ideas may mislead us with respect to what they represent. So what really would be excluded by the Cartesian doctrine is this: that I have two clear and distinct ideas of a thing, one of which represents the thing as having an essential feature *F*, and the other one represents the same thing as not having *F*. – I do not know passages which

would establish this, but neither am I aware of anything which rules out such an interpretation.

## THE ONTOLOGY, PSYCHOLOGY AND SEMANTICS OF CARTESIAN IDEAS

In the concept of an idea, several strings of the Cartesian doctrine are supposed to meet. Let me mention a few points about what I shall, for convenience, call the ontology, psychology and semantics of Cartesian ideas.

[1] *Concerning the ontology.* – It is a highly remarkable feature of ideas, that several of them have both a mental and a physical side. In the *Meditations*, Descartes sounds very strict about the nature of ideas: they belong to the realm of the mental. It seems that in the *Meditations* he wants to rigorously abandon his earlier concept of ideas as brain-states. But when we take a closer look at how he expresses himself in the *Replies* and later on, we find that he sometimes acknowledges that many ideas at least have a physical aspect. Consider for example what he says right after introducing his official definition in the appendix to the *Second Replies*:

... Thus it is *not only* the images depicted in the imagination [*phantasia*] which I call “ideas”. Indeed, insofar as these images are in the corporeal imagination (that is, are depicted in some part of the brain), I do not call them “ideas” at all; I call them “ideas” only in so far as they inform [*informant*] the mind itself when it turns to that part of the brain. (AT VII 160/161, italics mine)

In brief, brain-states are ideas, but not in virtue of being brain-states but in virtue of the fact that they “inform” the mind, i. e. in virtue of occupying a particular causal role.<sup>23</sup> In the *Fifth Replies* he says to Gassendi:

... you restrict the term “idea” to images depicted in the imagination, whereas I *extend* it to all which is thought. (AT VII 366, italics mine)

There is another recurring indication of the fact that Descartes took some ideas to exist in the brain. He is prepared to characterize ideas as “whatever is immediately perceived by the mind”; sometimes he even refers to them as “anything which is perceived in any manner whatsoever”.<sup>24</sup> But there are several passages even in his mature philosophy, where he says that motions in the brain “*directly* represent [external] objects to the soul” and that corporeal images in the brain “act *immedi-*

<sup>23</sup> Descartes helps himself to the scholastic term “*informare*” but he uses it in a slightly different sense. In the schools there was one supreme paradigm of informing: Aristotle’s example of the seal which “informs” the wax. Descartes’s deviant usage of the word “inform” is much closer to what we mean today when we speak of information. The Cartesian picture of how body informs mind is nicely sketched in the *Sixth Meditation* (especially AT VII 86ff.).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. for example AT VII 181, 185.

ately on the soul".<sup>25</sup> In the *Principles*, Descartes says that some thoughts, namely sensory perceptions, are the *immediate* consequences of certain brain-states;<sup>26</sup> this heavily suggests that what is immediately perceived by the mind, when it has those perceptions, are the brain-states in question. If brain-states are immediately perceived by the mind, they must, according to the usual characterization, be ideas. And there is at least one passage, in the *Passions*, where Descartes explicitly says that the "ideas of hatred are imprinted in the brain and dispose the soul to have thoughts which are full of acrimony and bitterness".<sup>27</sup>

So I think there is good reason to assume that according to Descartes there are ideas which belong to the realm of the physical, for example the ideas of the senses and of the imagination. But it is not simply *qua* physical brain-states that they are ideas; in order to be an idea, a brain-state must occur in a brain which is the seat of a mind, and it must have certain effects on the mind.

Consider, for example, a thinker who imagines the sun. He forms an idea of the sun by drawing a figure in the brain, as it were, and then he perceives this figure. Such a corporeal figure in the brain is called a "species" by Descartes. The mind "applies itself to this species, but it is not received in the mind".<sup>28</sup> According to one use of the word "idea" which can be found in Descartes's writings, such a corporeal species (in so far as it is immediately perceived) is an idea. According to another use, the mental act of perceiving is the idea. According to a third use, the mental *repraesentatum* ("the objectively existing sun itself") is the idea. The word "idea" refers to entities which are, ontologically speaking, not very homogeneous at all: first it refers to brain-states which occupy particular causal roles; second, to mental activities; and third, to mental objects which are, in a sense, the products of these mental activities.

Descartes has a tendency to play down this ontological diversity. In the final ontological analysis, he says, ideas are nothing but mental activities, that is, modes of the mind. And this is to say that their existence is dependent on the substance called "mind". That's the whole ontological story to be told about ideas, Descartes suggests.

[2] *Concerning the psychology.* – As soon as we consider ideas as representations, we open a different chapter in the volume on ideas, a chapter which could bear the title "The subjective psychology of the act of perception". This chapter would deal with what the mind is aware of when it undergoes an act of perception. It is here where an account of internal representation belongs. As we have seen, Descartes is fond of talking about things-in-the-mind in order to provide such an account.

<sup>25</sup> *Passions of the Soul* AT XI 338, 356.

<sup>26</sup> AT IX 316.

<sup>27</sup> AT XI 405.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Fifth Replies*, AT VII 367.

Yet he is not prepared to grant them an ontological thing-status. Ontologically speaking, these things-in-mind are nothing but acts of perception considered in a special way. Speaking of them as objects is just a manner of speaking which emphasizes their representationality.

Central to such an account is, for Descartes, the analogy with pictures. There is a wonderful passage in a letter to Regius (from June 1642) where he points out that the ontology of ideas is not what is important about them; when we, for example, use the concept of an idea in order to prove the existence of God,

... we must observe that the point at issue is not the essence of the idea, in respect of which it is only a mode existing in the human mind [...] but its objective perfection (i. e., in our words: what it internally represents) ... Suppose someone said that anyone can paint pictures as well as Apelles, because they consist only of patterns of paint and anyone can make all kinds of patterns with paint. To such a suggestion we should have to reply that when we are talking of Apelles's pictures we are not considering just a pattern of colours, but a pattern skilfully made to produce a representation resembling reality, such as can be produced only by those very practiced in this art.<sup>29</sup>

Ontologically speaking, pictures are nothing but patterns of paint-blobs on a canvas or a board. But this is not very interesting, since it leaves out the nub of the matter. And exactly as the ontology of pictures is silent about the point of pictures, the ontology of the act of perception does not reveal *the point* of ideas.

Of course, the point of ideas is that they represent. Their representationality bears several further similarities with pictures: many pictures exhibit directly what they represent, that is, they can be “understood immediately”; they can show things which do not actually exist; they can represent things only as having certain features (this is sometimes called “implicit propositionality”); they can represent things in varying degrees of clearness and distinctness. – But it is important that in spite of all these analogies between pictures and ideas, ideas do not represent in virtue of the fact that they bear a similarity to the *repraesentatum*.

What I have called here “the psychology of ideas” concerns the intramental functioning of ideas, and this chapter would have to deal with a lot of interesting topics like: clearness and distinctness, the distinction between pure thinking and having sensations, the mind's being conscious of all thinking, the ordering of mental capacities, and so on. One important section in this chapter would certainly have to provide an account of “the *internal* semantics of ideas”, i. e., an account of how acts of immediate perception represent mind-things.<sup>30</sup> This section poses, I think,

<sup>29</sup> AT III 567.

<sup>30</sup> Arnauld says: “To say that our ideas and our perceptions (taking these to be the same thing) represent to us the things that we conceive and that they are their images, is to say something completely different from saying that pictures represent their originals and are the images of them, or that spoken or written words are the images of our thoughts. For in the case of ideas we mean that the things we conceive are *objectively* in our mind and in our thought. And this *way of being objectively in the*

serious problems as soon as we try to say more clearly what it is supposed to mean that an idea, taken materially, represents itself to the mind as a mind-thing. It seems that this is Descartes's key-concept in his attempt to say what the philosophical point of the concept of an idea is. But the doctrine of objective existence, to which Descartes occasionally alludes in this context, is unintelligible if it is supposed to function as an explanation. If, on the other hand, "the rabbit exists in the mind objectively" is nothing but a synonym for "there is an idea of a rabbit in the mind", then nothing has been explained.

[3] *Concerning semantics.* – Another chapter of the volume on ideas would have to be written on the *external* semantics of ideas. It deals with topics like truth, external reality and everything else which comes into play when ideas are referred to the extramental world. We have seen that Descartes prefers a causal theory of external representation, but one which presupposes the existence of an internal *repraesentatum*.

If this is not too far amiss, one can see how the Cartesian doctrine leads to debates like the one between Malebranche and Arnauld. For in his ontology, Descartes wants to be quite parsimonious: ideas are nothing but mental acts of perception. In the psychology of these acts, he helps himself to the notion of mind-things which appear to be the intramental objects of such acts of the intellect. It is by no means clear that this ontology and this psychology are compatible (even assuming the latter to be intelligible). Just speaking of the merely objective existence of the intramental objects is not enough.

## TENSIONS

This doctrine of ideas, as sketched, transgresses both of Descartes's two basic metaphysical borderlines: (i) the one between mind and body, and the other one (ii) between substance and mode.

*Ad (i)* – In order to make Descartes's view of ideas true, there would have to be a bunch of *entitates* (namely those of thought-of things), somehow beyond the mind/body-distinction. These *entitates* would have to be both mental and physical. They would have to be some unification of a mind-*x* and the very same *x* as something physical.

*Ad (ii)* – In order to make Descartes's view of ideas true, those *entitates* of thought-of things would somehow have to find an ontological location beyond

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*mind* is so peculiar to the mind and to thought, since it is what specifically gives them their nature, that one seeks in vain anything similar outside the mind and thought" (*On True and False Ideas*, 1683, Chapter 5, Definition 9; quoted from S. Gaukroger's translation: Manchester UP, Manchester and New York 1990, p. 66/67).

the substance/mode-distinction. For any such *entitas* would have to be both a substance (insofar as it exists as the external *repraesentatum* outside the mind) and a mode (insofar as it exists as an idea, taken objectively, in the intellect). One and the same rabbit-*entitas* would have to be capable of existing both as a material substance (lolloping in the open countryside), and as an immaterial mode (being an immediate object of thinking).

I know of no textual evidence that Descartes felt uncomfortable about any of this. But, for me, it is hard to imagine that he should have failed to notice those tensions which seem to concern the very heart of his metaphysics.

So maybe I am misconstruing things. But I do not know any better.

### WHY IS THE CARTESIAN MIND IMMATERIAL?

At the heart of Descartes's concept of an idea, there is his conception of the relation between an idea and its *ideatum*. The doctrine of the immateriality of the mind – and consequently of the immateriality of ideas – may have a lot of difficulties, but what makes his theory very hard to understand, up to the point of unintelligibility, is his conception of the idea/*ideatum* relation. The heart and soul of Descartes's theory of mental representation is his doctrine of internal representation in combination with the metaphysical doctrine of different modes in which things exist. This is not just another theoretical module which one could simply substitute by a more plausible component.

To see this, you may ask yourself: What does Descartes need the *immaterial* mind for? His anti-skepticism can be executed exactly along the lines of the *Meditations* without assuming a realm of immaterial substances and modes. (Remember that skepticism is refuted in the *Second Meditation*, but the real distinction between mind and body is proved only in the *Sixth Meditation*.) The same is true of the proof of God's existence; the thinker develops various proofs before he comes to see that his mind is really distinct from his body. Does Descartes need the immaterial mind in order to make the immortality of the soul intelligible? That's not plausible either. First, the proof of the soul's immortality seems not to have been high on his philosophical agenda. Second, it is not clear at all that the immortality of the soul could be made intelligible only on this assumption. Third, Descartes did not think that all that Christians have to believe, in order to be faithful Christians, could be rendered intelligible.

So what was the theoretical advantage which made Descartes insist on the immateriality of the mind? After all, this doctrine is an albatross around his neck. Well, there is, as we have seen, at least one thing, Descartes needs the immaterial mind for. It provides the metaphysical *locus* for *all* the things of which we think, including those which do not actually exist. Thinking is having things in mind.

For various reasons Descartes was convinced that mental representation cannot in principle work by symbols which go proxy for things, as words or images do. If our thinking of Peter, the rabbit, is our having Peter in our minds, and if our having Peter in our minds is not achieved by some sort of symbolizing performed by us, but by Peter's being himself present in our minds, then what is needed is a way which allows Peter to have that special presence in us without disappearing out there in the open countryside. Descartes called that way of being present: "Peter's objective mode of existing". And the mind, put crudely, is the place where things appear in their objective mode of existence, without disappearing anywhere in the material world. *That's* what Descartes certainly needs the immaterial mind for.

At its root, Descartes's theory of mental representation is a theory about things being in more than one place at a time. It is assumed that what we can think of possesses the miraculous capability of having multiple simultaneous appearances as one and the same complete and intact entity. The thing thought of is the very same thing inside and outside the mind; Descartes emphasizes this point variously (cf. AT IV 350, AT VII 102). What is different about the entity as it appears simultaneously inside and outside the mind, is just its mode of existence.

In this way, Descartes avoids what later has come to be taken as the central philosophical problem of mental representation. What makes Harvey's thought that Peter is a rabbit a thought about Peter? From a Cartesian point of view, the answer is: Well, nothing, really. In so far as the question presupposes that, over and above Peter and Harvey's very thought, there is something else, a *tertium quid*, which establishes a representational connection between them, the question rests on a misunderstanding. There simply are no representational connections between an idea, or a concept, and its *repraesentatum* which would constitute what we nowadays are fond of calling the idea's, or concept's, representational content. For Descartes, the idea and what it internally represents are just the same mental item, considered in different ways; and the idea and what it externally represents are quasi-identical: they are just the same *entitas*, existing in different modes of existence. Hence, for Descartes, representational connections are no genuine, "substantial" connections at all.

The dualism at work in Descartes's theory of mental representation is, in the last analysis, a dualism of modes of existence.<sup>31</sup> That concrete, datable entities have different modes of existence may seem to be an outmoded construction of the old schools. That one and the same entity can exist in different modes of existence may seem particularly incomprehensible – nothing but a petrified philosophical fabrication which is definitely passé. Maybe it is worth noting, *en passant*, that a contemporary author like John Searle recently takes resort to what appears to be a dualism of the same stripe, when he distinguishes between certain entities

<sup>31</sup> His additional substance dualism may be just a by-product, his particular way of spelling out such a theory.



(conscious states) “which have a *first-person mode of existence*” and other entities “such as mountains [which] have a *third-person mode of existence*”.<sup>32</sup> He claims that objective biological processes, which enjoy a third-person (or objective) mode of existence, produce conscious mental phenomena, which are irreducibly subjective and enjoy the first-person (or subjective) mode of existence. He insists that the distinction he is trying to make is an ontological one which concerns the entities themselves; it is not just an epistemological distinction which concerns the question who knows best, and in which way, about them.

As far as I can tell, Searle never goes so far as to explicitly state that one and the same entity (let's say a certain pain which Peter had yesterday at 2 p.m.) exists in both modes of existence: first as a brain-state (in the third-person mode) and secondly as an experience (in the first-person mode). But in effect he seems committed to such a claim when he says that the “universe [...] contains an irreducibly subjective physical component as a component of physical reality”.<sup>33</sup> *Nota bene*: The ontologically subjective component à la Searle is, at the same time, a component of the physical reality.

So there seem to be two options, in Searle's scheme of things: *Either* every component of physical reality has the third-person mode of existence (and some of them additionally have the subjective mode of existence); *or* the components of physical reality divide into two classes: those which exist only in the one mode and those which exist only in the other mode. In the first case, we have milk-and-water Cartesianism: there are two modes of existence, and entities which exist in each of them, but there is no entity which exists in both of them at the same time. In the second case, we have full Cartesian metaphysics: not only are there two modes of existence, but moreover there are entities which exist in both modes at the same time. The exegetical question: “What exactly does Searle commit himself to, when he brings in different modes of existence?”, may be left aside today. – I just wanted to point out that the concept of different modes of existence, which I find the hardest thing to swallow in Descartes's theory of mental representation, seems to be alive and kicking even in current philosophy.

## CONCLUSION

Descartes's concept “idea” was introduced by a definition, and it came along with a theory of mental representation. The definition is incomprehensible, or at least, as far as I can tell, it has not been brought to intelligibility by anybody so far. Descartes's theory of mental representation – i. e. his answer to the question: What

<sup>32</sup> John R. Searle, *Mind, Language and Society – Philosophy in the Real World*, New York: Basic Books 1998, 42f.

<sup>33</sup> John Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind*, Cambridge, Mass. 1992, 123

is an idea, and what makes an idea of  $x$  the idea of  $x$  and not of something else? – is equally unintelligible. So what could explain the success of this concept, as adopted by Arnauld, Malebranche, Locke, Spinoza, Leibniz, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, the German Idealists, and many more thinkers until today?

Maybe the fact that John Locke took it up and made it really big. But he was cautious enough never to define it. And he didn't have a general theory of mental representation which could be applied to all the sorts of ideas he was fond of distinguishing. In fact, he preferred to say nothing about the metaphysical nature of mental representations at all: He refrained from telling us whether ideas are material or rather not. Yes, he had one theory about what makes an idea of  $x$  an idea of  $x$  (and not the idea of something else), but only for those ideas he called "ideas of the senses". But this theory, concerning ideas of the senses, is not applicable to what he calls abstract ideas, nor to what he calls ideas of reflection. (By the way, for Locke, *concepts*, as what we mean by our words, are almost always what he calls abstract ideas; and he has no worked-out theory of mental representation about them.) – But of Locke, some other time.

If the modern conception of concepts as mental representations begins with Descartes and Locke as its prominent proponents, the record, it seems to me, is this: Stage #1 (Descartes): Unintelligible definition & unintelligible theory. Stage #2 (Locke): No definition & no theory (at least none which is applicable homogeneously to most of the salient cases).

Maybe the second stage is more explanatory of the success.