

Descartes on Sensations and Ideas of Sensations

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In this paper I sketch and defend three theses. The first is that for Descartes there is a distinction between a sensation and an idea of a sensation. Sensations are qualia, and ideas of sensations are ideas of qualia. The second thesis is that ideas of sensations are ideas and so have objective reality and are representational. A Cartesian sensation is a mode of mind but not an idea. If it is representational, it is not representational in virtue of having objective reality but in virtue of something else. The third thesis is that some of the confusion surrounding the issue of Cartesian sensations is due to Descartes' sometimes interchangeable use of the language of 'sensations' and the language of sensory 'ideas'.

I

In *Sixth Replies* Descartes distinguishes three components or "grades" of sensory experience.¹ The first is the collision of external bodies with our senses; the second is the production in the mind of perceptions of qualities such as size, shape, color, smell, and taste; the third is the set of judgments that we make about which qualities of the perceived object exist independently of our thought. If we are careful, we might restrict such judgments to the qualities that *do* exist in sensible objects – for example size and shape. However, if we do not guard

¹ AT 7:437. Here I am using the translations in John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume I*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1985); Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume II*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1984); and Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume III*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1991). I use "AT" to refer to the pagination in Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, Volumes I-XII, Paris: Vrin (1996).

against "all the judgements about things outside us which we have been accustomed to make from our earliest years,"² we will attribute to sensible objects qualities that do not belong to them. We will be "affected by this sensation of colour," for example, and "judge that a stick, located outside me, is coloured."³ Material bodies impact our senses and make us have sensations of color, smell, and taste. However,

colours, smells, tastes and so on, are... merely certain sensations which exist in my thought, and are as different from bodies as pain is different from the shape and motion of the weapon which produces it.⁴

Part of what it is to sense a body is to have perceptions of qualities that the body does not actually have, but that are conducive to fixing our attention on aspects of the body that are relevant to our preservation.⁵ Sensations of coldness, smell, and taste are among them.

Descartes goes to tremendous lengths to distinguish sensations and the material bodies that occasion them.⁶ Colors, smells, and tastes, as he says, are mind-dependent sensations. They are modes of mind, and we are in a position to recognize that they are modes of mind when our ideas of them represent them accurately:

In order to distinguish what is clear in this connection from what is obscure, we must be very careful to note that pain and colour and so on are clearly and distinctly perceived when they are regarded merely as sensations or thoughts.⁷

For Descartes, a clear and distinct idea is a true idea, and a clear and distinct idea of color represents color accurately. It represents color as a sensation. A sensation is a mode of mind that is occasioned by the impact of bodies on our senses. A clear and distinct idea of a sensation represents a sensation as the mode of mind that it is.

A false idea of a sensation, on the other hand, might misrepresent that sensation as something other than a mode of mind. For example, we might have an idea of coldness according to which coldness is something that exists mind-independently. Such an idea would not *mis*-represent coldness unless it were an idea of coldness; it would just be an idea of something else. Descartes thus says that a false idea of a sensation "does have something positive as its underlying

² AT 7:437.

³ Ibid.

⁴ AT 7:440.

⁵ See for example the Sixth Meditation, AT 7:88.

⁶ See also *The World*, AT 11:6; *Principles II*:1, AT 8A:40; and the Sixth Meditation, AT 7:81.

⁷ *Principles I*:68, AT 8A:33. See also Alan Nelson, "The Falsity in Sensory Ideas: Descartes and Arnauld," in E. Kremer (ed.), *Interpreting Arnauld*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press (1996), 23-6; Alan Nelson, "Descartes's Ontology of Thought," *Topoi* 16 (1997), 166; Katherine J. Morris, "Intermingling and Confusion," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 3 (1995), 290-7; Samuel C. Rickless, "The Cartesian Fallacy Fallacy," *Notes* 39 (2005), 315-7; and David Cunning, "Descartes on the Dubitability of the Existence of Self," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74 (2007), 113-133.

subject, namely the actual sensation involved.⁸ If we think of coldness and conceive of it as a quality that exists mind-independently, then we have an idea of coldness that represents coldness but represents it inaccurately. Descartes thinks that most of us have an idea of coldness that is misrepresentative in this way. He traces the error in our idea to our embodiment and our single-minded focus on self-preservation in childhood:

And when nothing very beneficial or harmful was happening to the body, the mind had various sensations corresponding to the different areas where, and ways in which, the body was being stimulated, namely what we call the sensations of tastes, smells, sounds, heat, cold, light, colours and so on.... At the same time the mind perceived sizes, shapes, motions, and so on, which were presented to it not as sensations but as things, or modes of things, existing (or at least capable of existing) outside thought.... The next stage arose when the mechanism of the body, which is so constructed by nature that it has the ability to move in various ways by its own power, twisted around aimlessly in all directions in its random attempts to pursue the beneficial and avoid the harmful; at this point the mind that was attached to the body began to notice that the objects of this pursuit or avoidance had an existence outside itself. And it attributed to them not only sizes, shapes, motions and the like, which it perceived as things or modes of things, but also tastes, smells and so on, the sensations of which were, it realized, produced by the objects in question.⁹

In childhood we do not step back and engage in careful philosophical reflection but are immersed in a world of bodies that are relevant to our survival. We do not make a rigorous philosophical distinction between the mind-dependent sensations that bodies produce in us and the qualities that the bodies have themselves. Instead we hastily suppose that bodies have *all* of the qualities that we perceive as a result of their impact on our senses. In an instance of the third grade of sensory perception, we judge that coldness and colour and sound are in bodies just as much as size and shape.¹⁰

It is thus as a result of a bad cognitive habit that our ideas of coldness and color come to misrepresent coldness and color. We super-add to our ideas of coldness and color the predicate of mind-independent existence, and these new ideas are of the sensations of coldness and color but still misrepresent them.¹¹ Even our *analytic* judgments about coldness and color will be false if these ideas are not emended:

Even if I do not refer my ideas to anything outside myself, there is still subject-matter for error, since I can make a mistake with regard to the actual nature of

⁸ *Fourth Replies*, AT 7:234. See also Nelson 1996, 28, and Cunning 2007.

⁹ *Principles* I:71, AT 8A:35-6.

¹⁰ Descartes allows that there is a sense in which qualities like coldness and color can be said to be in bodies. These qualities can be said to be in bodies in so far as bodies are able to make us have perceptions of them. (See *Principles* IV:198, AT 8A:322.)

However, we must always keep in mind that all that we are thereby saying is that in the right circumstances bodies that are not literally colored (or cold) are able to produce in us sensations of color (or coldness).

¹¹ See also *Fourth Replies*, AT 7:233-5.

the ideas. For example, I may consider the idea of colour, and say that it is a [mind-independent] thing or quality; or rather I may say that the colour itself, which is represented by this idea, is something of the kind. For example, I may say whiteness is a quality; and... even if I do not say or suppose that there is any white thing - I may still make a mistake in the abstract, with regard to whiteness itself and its nature or the idea I have of it....¹²

Here Descartes allows that it is possible for us to have an idea of color that misrepresents color as something other than a sensation. An idea of whiteness represents and is of whiteness; whiteness is a sensation; and a true idea of whiteness represents it as such. But an analysis of a false idea of color will deliver a different result entirely. In the same way that we might make an erroneous judgment about bachelors if our idea of bachelor is confused and if no bachelors existed, we might make an erroneous judgment about color if no colors existed. We might judge that what it is for something to be a color is for it to be a mind-independent thing.

For Descartes, there is a distinction between a sensation and an idea of that sensation. Sensations are qualia that we perceive as a result of the impact of bodies on our senses. Ideas of sensations represent sensations. A true idea of coldness represents coldness as a mind-dependent sensation, and a false idea of coldness represents coldness as a mind-independent quality.¹³

Sensations are therefore much like passions in Descartes' ontology. For Descartes, a passion is something that is *felt*:

The perceptions we refer only to the soul are those whose effects we feel as being in the soul itself, and for which we do not normally know any proximate cause to which we can refer them. Such are the feelings of joy, anger and the like, which are aroused in us sometimes by the objects which stimulate our nerves and sometimes also by other causes.¹⁴

A passion is often accompanied and caused by beliefs – for example, we feel esteem when we recognize something as having value¹⁵; we feel love when “we think of something as good with regard to us”¹⁶; we feel joy when we are in possession of a good that we think is our own¹⁷; we feel envy when we regard others as possessing a good that we would rather possess ourselves.¹⁸ All of these are qualitative states or feelings, though they are accompanied by and caused (at least in part) by cognitive states. The *purpose* of the passions, according to Descartes, is to motivate us to act in circumstances in which our cognitive states

¹² *Conversation with Burman*, AT 5:152.

¹³ Or more precisely, the most common false idea of coldness represents coldness as a mind-dependent quality, as there are presumably other predicates that our hasty wills could super-add to our idea of the sensation of color that do not pertain to it.

¹⁴ *Passions of the Soul* I:25, AT 11:347.

¹⁵ *Passions of the Soul* II:54, AT 11:373-4.

¹⁶ *Passions of the Soul* II:56, AT 11:374.

¹⁷ *Passions of the Soul* II:91, AT 11:396-7.

¹⁸ *Passions of the Soul* III:182, AT 11:466-7.

themselves would not. In the case of love, hatred, desire, joy, and sadness, for example,

their natural function is to move the soul to consent and contribute to actions which may serve to preserve the body or render it in some way more perfect. From this point of view, sadness and joy are the two passions that have primacy application. For it is only through a feeling of pain that the soul is immediately advised about things that harm the body: this feeling produces in the soul first the passion of sadness, then hatred of what causes the pain, and finally the desire to get rid of it. Similarly the soul is immediately advised about things useful to the body only through some sort of titillation, which first produces joy in it, then gives rise to love of what we believe to be its cause, and finally brings about the desire to acquire something that can enable us to continue in this joy, or else to have a similar joy again later on.¹⁹

In the way that a sensation of color is vivid and attention-getting, and in the way that a feeling of hunger inclines us to eat when the mere instruction that our body is in need of food would not be so motivational, passions like joy and love incline us to do things that we should do and that we otherwise might not. They supply us with additional amounts of motivation.²⁰ When properly ordered, they can incline us to stand down an evil, or to give something of value its proper due.

For Descartes, sensations and passions are mind-dependent qualia. We can have ideas of sensations that thereby represent those sensations, and we can also have ideas of passions. We have a clear and distinct idea of a passion or sensation insofar as we conceive it as it truly is:

There remain sensations, emotions and appetites. These may be clearly perceived provided we take great care in our judgments concerning them to include no more than what is strictly contained in our perception – *no more than that of which we have inner awareness.*²¹

We might find ourselves in a situation in which the passion of joy is produced in us. We might then think about this passion and so have an idea of it. If that idea is clear and distinct, it represents joy as mind-dependent. But mind-dependent joy is not thereby an idea. Neither is a mind-dependent sensation.

For Descartes there is a distinction between sensations and the ideas of sensations that represent them. The latter ideas are adventitious in the sense that we do not form them until we have had the sensations that are produced by the impact of bodies on our senses. Descartes does say in one passage that ideas of sensations are innate, but all that he means in saying this is that when an idea of a sensation is formed in us the content of that idea is not transmitted from the bodies that occasion them. He is thereby reiterating his view that sensations do

¹⁹ *Passions of the Soul* II:137, AT 11:430.

²⁰ Note that I am not suggesting that Cartesian passions are not representational. In section II there is a discussion of the way in which sensations, passions, and linguistic terms are representational in Descartes' system, even though none of these is an idea. See also Graham Mayeda, "Generosity and Representation: Making Sense of a Non-Representational Model of the Passions," *Dialogue* 41 (2002), 291-311.

²¹ *Principles* I:66, AT 8A:32, emphasis added.

not exist mind-independently but are produced in us as a result of the impact on our senses of bodies that do not resemble them:

[T]here is nothing in our ideas which is not innate to the mind or the faculty of thinking, with the sole exception of those circumstances which relate to experience, such as the fact that we judge that this or that idea which we now have immediately before our mind refers to a certain thing situated outside us. We make such a judgment not because these things transmit the ideas to our mind through the sense organs, but because they transmit something which, at exactly that moment, gives the mind occasion to form these ideas by means of the faculty innate to it. Nothing reaches our mind from external objects through the sense organs except certain corporeal motions....²²

Here Descartes is clear that we do not form ideas of sensations until bodies produce sensations in our minds.²³ Ideas of sensations are innate, but not in the sense that our minds have ideas of sensations before we have any experience of sensible bodies. Ideas of sensations are innate in the very restricted sense that they are ideas of mind-dependent qualities.²⁴ Sensations exist in minds only. An idea of a sensation is of a mind-dependent quality even if we do not have ideas of sensations prior to the collision of bodies with our senses.

For Descartes finite minds have a lot of built-in structure. They have ideas that are innate in the strong Platonic sense:

you ask me what sort of idea my mind would have had of God and of itself if, ever since being implanted in the body, it had remained within it, with the eyes closed and none of the senses functioning. Since your question is asked in such an open and frank manner, I shall give you a straightforward and honest reply. I do not doubt that the mind – provided we suppose that in thinking it received not just no assistance from the body but also that it received no interference from it – would have had exactly the same ideas of God and itself that it now has, with the sole difference that they would have been much purer and clearer. The senses often impede the mind in many of its operations, and in no case do they help in the perception of ideas. The only thing that prevents all of us noticing equally well that we have these ideas is that we are too occupied with perceiving the images of corporeal things.²⁵

Minds have in addition an innate idea of body.²⁶ Minds also are able to derive ideas from these innate ideas.²⁷ And as we have seen, a mind has the quite remarkable ability to have sensations upon the impact of bodies on the

²² *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*, AT 8B 358-9.

²³ See also "To More, August 1649," AT 5:402.

²⁴ See also Anthony Kenny, *Descartes: A Study of His Philosophy*, New York: Random House (1968), 104-5, and Daniel Garber, "Descartes and Occasionalism," in Steven Nadler (ed.), *Causation in Early Modern Philosophy*, University Park: Penn State University Press (1993), 23. For a discussion of Descartes' use of the term 'innate' to describe ideas that are strictly speaking adventitious, see Geoffrey Gorham, "Descartes on the Innateness of All Ideas," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 32 (2002), esp. 379-88.

²⁵ *Fifth Replies*, AT 7:375.

²⁶ The Second Meditation, AT 7:31; "To Princess Elizabeth, 21 May 1643," AT 3:665-6.

²⁷ "To Princess Elizabeth, 21 May 1643," AT 3:665-6.

sense organs of the human body to which that mind is attached. These sensations bear no resemblance-relation to the impacting bodies, and it is perfectly conceivable that minds might have been constructed so as to not be capable of having sensations. A body might strike one of these minds, and it would never know color or cold. Our minds *have* been constructed with the ability to have sensations. Our minds are also able to have ideas of these sensations that thereby represent them.

II

One of the central topics of the Third Meditation is ideas and their representationality. In particular the Third Meditation offers an important discussion of ideas of qualities like color, sound, and taste, etc. The stated aim of the Meditation is to produce a successful demonstration of the existence of God. After abandoning a demonstration that begins with the premise that an idea is always an exact likeness of an existing object²⁸, Descartes considers that

there is another way of investigating whether some of the things of which I possess ideas exist outside me. In so far as ideas are considered simply as modes of thought, there is no recognizable inequality among them: they all appear to come from within me in the same fashion. But in so far as different ideas are considered as images which represent different things, it is clear that they differ widely. Undoubtedly, the ideas which represent substances to me amount to something more and, so to speak, contain within themselves more objective reality than the ideas which merely represent modes or accidents. Again, the idea that gives me my understanding of a supreme God, eternal, infinite, immutable, omniscient, omnipotent, and the creator of all things that exist apart from him, certainly has in it more objective reality than the ideas that represent finite substances.²⁹

Here Descartes is putting forward a number of views. One is that all ideas are modes of mind and that no idea is a mode of mind to a larger degree than any other. Another is that ideas are representational. Indeed, Descartes says that although something can be dubbed a 'thought' in a loose sense so long as it is a mode of mind, the term 'idea' is to be reserved for modes of mind that are of objects.³⁰ Another view that Descartes is putting forward in the passage is that ideas represent in virtue of their objective reality or content. He will go on to argue that an idea of God has an infinite amount of objective reality and that the

²⁸ AT 7:38-9.

²⁹ AT 7:40.

³⁰ AT 7:37. Descartes says that "some of my thoughts are as it were the images of things, and it is only in these cases that the term 'idea' is strictly appropriate – for example, when I think of a man, or a chimera, or the sky, or an angel, or God."

only possible cause of an infinite amount of being is an omnipotent being or God.³¹

Along the way Descartes examines other ideas that he has – his idea of body, for example, and his ideas of qualities like coldness, sound, and taste. He notices that these ideas do not have so much objective reality that they force him to posit the existence of anything other than his thinking mind as their cause. He also notices that his ideas of qualities like coldness are confused. After examining his ideas of the extensive qualities of bodies, he writes,

But as for all the rest, including light and colours, sounds, smells, tastes, heat and cold and the other tactile qualities, I think of these only in a very confused and obscure way, to the extent that I do not even know whether they are true or false, that is, whether the ideas of them are of real things or non-things. For example, the ideas which I have of heat and cold contain so little clarity and distinctness that they do not enable me to tell whether cold is merely the absence of heat or vice versa, or whether both of them are real qualities, or neither is.³²

Earlier I argued that Descartes subscribes to the view that ideas of sensations represent mind-dependent sensations which are qualia. In the Third Meditation he appears to be reflecting another view entirely. He says that an idea of coldness is so obscure and confused that it is difficult to determine what it represents, or even whether it represents at all. Indeed, if ideas of coldness and the like "represent non-things... they arise from nothing."³³ If they have no cause, and if an idea only has as much objective reality as its cause is able to produce, then they have no objective reality.³⁴ It is difficult to understand how such ideas are ideas in Descartes' strict sense, and it is difficult to make sense of their representationality.

³¹ See *Second Replies*, AT 7:139-40, for Descartes' elaboration of the argument from objective reality in terms of the power that is required for an infinite amount of objective reality to be produced. Some commentators offer a different reading of the argument according to which Descartes is simply supposing that there is a match between the objective reality of an idea and what he calls the "formal" reality of its cause. (See for example Louis Loeb "Was Descartes Sincere in His Appeal to the Natural Light?", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 26 (1988), 384-93, and Thomas C. Mark, "Descartes' Proof in Meditation III," *International Studies in Philosophy* 7 (1975), 79-85.) Everyone would agree, however, that the argument includes the premise that an idea of God has an infinite amount of objective reality, and that is all that I am presupposing for the present discussion. The reason why I read the argument from objective reality in terms of the *power* of a cause to produce an infinite amount of objective reality is because the argument admits that reading and because the argument is otherwise unbelievably terrible. Descartes would not just suppose the premise that there is a match between the content of an idea and its cause. Indeed, he abandons this premise (and the argument that might be built from it) at AT 7:38-9.

³² AT 7:43-4.

³³ AT 7:44.

³⁴ See also Margaret Wilson, *Descartes*, New York :Routledge (1978), 111, 114-5.

Some commentators have argued that Descartes holds that ideas of qualities like color and coldness are intrinsically confused.³⁵ There is no question that in the Third Meditation Descartes is reflecting the view that such ideas are confused, but that does not mean that in the Third Meditation he is reflecting his own considered view. He is instead capturing the view of a meditator who is very confused at the start of inquiry and who has only proceeded as far as the Third Meditation. He has not yet emended his ideas of sensible qualities, and thus they are as confused as they were at the start of the *Meditations*.

Reflecting the epistemic individualism that is part of the inspiration of the Enlightenment Period, Descartes holds that we should not just accept a view on authority, but should wait until we see its truth for ourselves.³⁶ A problem, however, is that at the start of inquiry our commitments and conceptions are way off, and we are not in the best position to see things as they really are: we (or at least most of Descartes' readers) think that what we know best we know through the senses; our conceptions of mind and God represent mind and God as sensible; our conceptions of qualities like color and sound represent these as existing mind-independently; we think and speak by way of terms that we do not understand or that may have no corresponding idea; and what we take to be the paradigm of a distinct perception is hardly distinct at all.³⁷ We take in information against the background of our current commitments and conceptions, and so are primed to reject what conflicts with them.³⁸ When we work through the *Meditations* from the first-person point-of-view, we accept or reject things when we see for ourselves that they are to be accepted or rejected, but until our intellects are emended we do not have the best perspective from which to see the truth.

The first-person *Meditations* is written accordingly. To offer an everyday analogy, it is not wholly unlike the transcript of the phenomenology of a confused student attending office-hours. Such a student cannot start but from where he begins, and in some cases he begins at a state of deep confusion. If he has any chance of arriving at truth, he will reason from and through this confusion, and past it. The transcript of his thinking will also reflect the interjections of his teacher, but only when he is ready to understand them, and much of the *rest* of his thinking will be confused. In the First Meditation, for example, Descartes' meditator reasons from the premise that whatever is known best is known through the senses.³⁹ He also sees it as conceivable that God is a deceiver. From a more

³⁵ See Wilson 1978, 105-16; and Jill Buroker, "Descartes on Sense Qualities," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 29 (1991), 585-611.

³⁶ See for example *Appendix to Fifth Replies*, AT 9A:208-9.

³⁷ See *Second Replies*, AT 7:130-131; *Principles I*:66-74, AT 8A:32-8; and David Cunning, "Rationalism and Education," in Alan Nelson (ed.), *A Companion to Rationalism*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing (2005), 61-81.

³⁸ *Principles I*:72, AT 8A:36-7; "Preface to the Reader," AT 7:9; *Second Replies*, AT 7:164.

³⁹ AT 7:18. The view that what is known best is known through the senses is false, according to Descartes. See for example the Second Meditation, AT 7:30-4.

considered point-of-view, the prospect of divine deception is of course incoherent.⁴⁰ At the start of inquiry, however, we do not notice this. Descartes introduces the prospect because a consideration of it is instrumental in enabling us to arrive at a clear and distinct perception of mind in the Second Meditation.⁴¹ The latter provides us with an improved standard of distinctness for use in further inquiry.

The Second Meditation also reflects the thinking of a confused meditator. The meditator enters the Meditation with a confused idea of mind that represents mind as sensible. He abstracts from this composite idea the idea of mind that is one of its components.⁴² Later in the Meditation he converges on a clear and distinct idea of body. He abstracts the latter from his confused idea of a particular body (a piece of wax) that has features like color, taste, and smell. He notes that the resultant perception that he has of it is

a case not of vision or touch or imagination – nor has it ever been, despite previous appearances – but of purely mental scrutiny; and this can be imperfect and confused, as it was before, or clear and distinct as it is now....⁴³

The meditator emends his pre-*Meditations* idea of body at the end of the Second Meditation. An idea of body that represents body as having qualities like color, taste and smell misrepresents body, but an idea of body that represents it as having only extensive qualities represents it accurately. What the meditator does not do in the Second Meditation is emend his confused ideas of qualities like color, taste and smell. He takes these into the Third Meditation, and when he inspects them against the background of the new standard of distinctness that he acquired in the Second Meditation, he makes the determination that they are very different from ideas that meet this standard. They are confused.⁴⁴

For Descartes, ideas of sensations are ideas and have objective reality. They represent mind-dependent sensations. Ideas of qualities like color and taste that represent these qualities as existing mind-independently are confused, and the discussion of the Third Meditation reflects this. But sensations themselves are not ideas in Descartes' strict sense of being mental items that represent by virtue of their objective reality. There is not a *single* text in which Descartes says that sensations have objective reality. In addition, there is good philosophical reason

⁴⁰ See for example "Letter to Voetius, May 1643," AT 8B:60, and the Fifth Meditation, AT 7:66-9.

⁴¹ See for example "To Buitendijk, 1643," AT 4:62-4.

⁴² AT 7:25-7. See also Cunning 2007.

⁴³ AT 7:31.

⁴⁴ There are texts outside of the Third Meditation in which Descartes identifies ideas of qualities like coldness as confused modes of mind – for example "To Regius, January 1642," AT 3:493, and *Passions of the Soul* 1:28, AT 11:350 – but it is important to note that Descartes thinks that as a matter of fact such ideas are almost always confused. Even if we have done the philosophical work of severing from our idea of coldness the opinion that coldness exists mind-independently, "it is something else entirely to forget such opinions, which is virtually never in our power" ("Letter to Voetius, May 1643," AT 3:37).

for thinking that sensations do not have objective reality. For Descartes, objective reality is something that is internal to an idea. It is something that we can inspect that allows us to determine what our ideas are of. However, it appears to be just a brute phenomenological fact that when we introspect and consider (for example) a sensation of coldness, there is nothing more to what we are considering than the quale itself. In particular, an examination of the mere sensation of coldness does not provide us with any information about the bodies that occasion it. There is indeed a fixed correlation between the sensation and the bodies that occasion it, but this correlation is a matter of brute divine institution, and is discovered by us experientially.⁴⁵

Of course, our inability to detect the objective reality of a sensation by introspection is evidence that sensations have no objective reality only on the assumption that Descartes is not an externalist with respect to the referentiality of ideas.⁴⁶ This assumption is perhaps obvious, but there are at least three reasons for putting it forward.

The first is that in the Third Meditation Descartes does not presuppose the existence of anything other than his thinking. The argument from objective reality supposes that an infinite amount of objective reality exists, and this reality is mental. For Descartes it is objective reality that fixes the reference of an idea, and objective reality is a feature of the idea that has it.

The second reason is that there are texts in which Descartes is explicit that objective reality is mental. He says (in the Third Meditation passage) that ideas "contain within themselves" objective reality. He adds that "the objective mode of being belongs to ideas by their very nature."⁴⁷ There is also the famous *First Replies* passage in which he discusses the way in which objects exist objectively in thought:

'Objective being in the intellect'... signifi[es] the object's being in the intellect in the way in which its objects are normally there. By this I mean that the idea of the sun is the sun itself existing in the intellect – not of course formally existing, as it does in the heavens, but objectively existing, i.e. in the way in which objects normally are in the intellect. Now this mode of being is of course much less perfect than that possessed by things which exist outside the intellect; but, as I did explain, it is not therefore simply nothing.⁴⁸

There is a sense in which the object of the idea of the sun is the sun itself, but (for Descartes) there is another sense in which an idea has as its object an item that is mental. In *First Objections* Ceterus had presupposed the view that the objects of

⁴⁵ See for example *Principles* III:46, AT 8A:100-1; the Sixth Meditation, AT 7:86-9; *Passions of the Soul* I:44, AT 11:361-2; and *Passions of the Soul* I:50, AT 11:368-70.

There is a further discussion of this correlation below.

⁴⁶ For a nice discussion of the nuances of different externalist accounts of the reference of ideas, see Joe Lau, "Externalism about Mental Content," in Edward Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/content-externalism> (2003).

⁴⁷ AT 7:42.

⁴⁸ AT 7:102-3.

ideas are of the first kind only.⁴⁹ Descartes does not accept the view, and he replies accordingly.

The third reason is that the Third Meditation proof from objective reality has no chance of being successful if the reference of an idea is fixed by factors that are external to the idea. The proof moves from the premise that there is an idea with an infinite amount of objective reality to the conclusion that there exists a corresponding entity in actual reality. If the reference of an idea is fixed by factors that are external to the idea, we would not be able to tell by introspection that what we report to be our idea of God is actually of God. It might be of God, but we would not know this if the idea's reference to God was fixed by something other than the content of the idea – for example by the fact that it is caused by God. An infinitely powerful being would not be required to produce those aspects of the idea that are available to introspection, and the proof of God's existence would not succeed.

Descartes holds that ideas of sensations represent sensations, but sensations themselves are not ideas.⁵⁰ But this does not entail that Cartesian sensations are not representational. They are representational so long as there are other ways that a being can be representational in Descartes' system and so long as sensations are representational in one of these ways.

Recent scholarship has shown that Cartesian sensations are indeed representational. They are representational in that they communicate to us important information about the relevance of particular bodies to the preservation of our own bodies.⁵¹ Cartesian sensations are representational, but they are not ideas. Descartes unpacks their representationality instead in terms of the arbitrarily instituted link between the terms of a language and the objects to which they refer. He writes,

Words, as you well know, bear no resemblance to the things they signify, and yet they make us think of these things, frequently even without our paying attention to

⁴⁹ AT 7:92-3.

⁵⁰ I am therefore disagreeing with commentators who want to retain the view that Cartesian sensations are ideas and who conclude that a Cartesian sensation is an idea of itself. (See for example Calvin Normore, "Meaning and Objective Being: Descartes and His Sources," in Amélie Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, Berkeley: University of California Press (1986), 229, and Nelson 1996, 28.) Note that the view that sensations are modes of mind but not ideas is also (though perhaps more explicitly) in the Cartesian philosopher Nicholas Malebranche. See for example Nicholas Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, in Thomas Lennon and Paul J. Ocamp (trans. and eds.), *The Search After Truth and Elucidations of The Search After Truth*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1997), II.ii.5, 228-9, and Nicholas Malebranche, *Elucidation Ten*, in Lennon and Ocamp (1997), 621-2.

⁵¹ See for example Alison Simmonds, "Are Cartesian Sensations Representational?," *Noûs* 33 (1999), 347-69; Alison Simmonds, "Sensible Ends: Latent Teleology in Descartes' Account of Sensation," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 39 (2001), 49-75; Laura Keating, "Mechanism and the Representational Nature of Sensation in Descartes," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 29 (1999), 411-29; and Nelson 1996, 18-20.

the sound of the words or to their syllables. ...Now if words, which signify nothing except by human convention, suffice to make us think of things to which they bear no resemblance, then why could nature not also have established some sign which would make us have the sensation of light, even if the sign contained nothing within itself which is similar to this sensation?⁵²

Descartes appeals to the same analogy with human language when he fleshes out the way in which passions are representational.⁵³ We have a sensation of pain when an object has damaged our body; the sensation serves as a sign that we should avoid that object. Similarly, we have been so constructed that the passion of fear is tightly associated with our detection of objects that are a danger to us. It kicks in when such objects are present and is a sign that we should flee them.⁵⁴ There is no question that Cartesian sensations and Cartesian passions are representational. However, they are not ideas in the strict Cartesian sense.

III

Descartes holds that sensations of color, taste, and sound, etc., are mind-dependent entities that are produced in a mind upon the impact of bodies on the sense organs of the human body to which the mind is attached. There are a number of passages, however, in which he says that the entity that is thereby produced in a human mind is an *idea*. For example, he writes,

everyone knows that the ideas of tickling and of pain, which are formed in our mind on the occasion of our being touched by external bodies, bear no resemblance to these bodies. Suppose we pass a feather gently over the lips of a child who is falling asleep, and he feels himself being tickled. Do you think the idea of tickling which he conceives resembles anything present in this feather?⁵⁵

There are a number of important issues that surround the question of whether or not Cartesian sensations are ideas. If they are ideas, they have objective reality, and they present us with the question of whether or not there is something internal to a sensation from which we can read its referent. If Cartesian sensations are not ideas, their failure to present us with their objects is to be expected. A second issue is that the result that Cartesian sensations are ideas will incline us to conclude that Cartesian sensations are representational. Cartesian sensations may well be representational, but we are missing something if they are not ideas and if

⁵² *The World*, AT 11:4.

⁵³ *Passions of the Soul* I:50, AT 11:368-70.

⁵⁴ For a nice discussion of the similarities and differences between Descartes' views on (1) the connection between sensations and motivation and (2) the connection between passions and motivation, see Lisa Shapiro, "What Do the Expressions of the Passions Tell Us?", in Daniel Garber and Steven Nadler (eds.), *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy* 1 (2003), 45-66, and Lisa Shapiro, "Descartes' Passions of the Soul and the Union of Mind and Body," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 85 (2003), 211-48.

⁵⁵ *The World*, AT 11:5-6. See also the Sixth Meditation, AT 7:75, and *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*, AT 8B:359.

one of our reasons for thinking that they are representational is that they are ideas. If Cartesian sensations are not ideas, then the only evidence for the view that Cartesian sensations are representational is the evidence cited by Simmons and others to the effect that God has created us in such a way that there are correlations between our sensations and the health of our bodies.

There are a number of passages in which Descartes identifies the entities that bodies occasion in finite minds as *sensations* and not ideas. Here are a few:

I see no reason which compels us to believe that what it is in objects that gives rise to the sensation of light is any more like this sensation than the actions of a feather and a strap are like a tickling sensation and pain.⁵⁶

Now I maintain that when God unites a rational soul to this machine... he will place its principal seat in the brain, and will make its nature such that the soul will have different sensations corresponding to the different ways in which the entrances to the pores in the internal surface of the brain are opened by means of the nerves.⁵⁷

[W]e have sensory awareness of, or rather as a result of sensory stimulation we have a clear and distinct perception of, some kind of matter, which is extended in length, breadth, and depth, and has various differently shaped and variously moving parts which give rise to our various sensations of colours, smells, pain, and so on.⁵⁸

[W]hen we see the light of a torch and hear the sound of a bell, the sound and the light are two different actions which, simply by producing two different movements in some of our nerves, and through them in our brain, give to the soul two different sensations.⁵⁹

Nature also teaches me, by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst and so on, that I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit.⁶⁰

In all of these passages Descartes speaks of sensations as the things that are produced in our minds as a result of the impact of bodies on our sense organs.⁶¹ In the first two sections above I sketched the view that Descartes holds that ideas of sensations are representational and represent sensations. A true idea of color represents color as the mind-dependent entity that it is, but an idea can also represent color and mis-represent it. In either case the idea is of color, which is a sensation or quale but not an idea itself. Sensations represent – this is beyond question – but they do not represent in virtue of having objective reality. A final aim of this paper is to make sense of the passages in which Descartes says that color, taste, and sound, etc., are ideas.

⁵⁶ *The World*, AT 11:6.

⁵⁷ *Treatise on Man*, AT 11:143.

⁵⁸ *Principles* II:1, AT 8A:40.

⁵⁹ *Passions of the Soul* I:23, AT 11:346.

⁶⁰ The Sixth Meditation, AT 7:81.

⁶¹ See also the Sixth Meditation, AT 7:75-6; *Sixth Replies*, AT 7:437-8; *Principles* IV:198, AT 8A: 322-3; and "To Princess Elizabeth, 6 October 1645," AT 4:310.

I offer two proposals to this end. Both are speculative, but they help to make room for the view that Cartesian sensations are not ideas. The first is that Descartes will sometimes refer to sensations as ideas in the course of emphasizing that sensations are mind-dependent entities and not things that exist in bodies. In one of the central passages cited in section I, Descartes had said that we clearly and distinctly perceive pain and color when they are regarded merely as sensations or thoughts. He says immediately thereafter,

But when they are judged to be real things existing outside our mind, there is no way of understanding what sort of things they are.⁶²

In *Principles* I:68 and similar passages, Descartes is not necessarily telling us the final story about the ontological status of things like color and taste. His principle aim in these passages is instead to highlight that pain and color do not exist in bodies. He makes this point by saying that pains and colors are not external-mental existents, but are modes of mind. He is not thereby saying that they are thoughts or ideas in the strict sense. As we have seen, he allows that we can use the term 'thought' to mark something as a mode of mind even if it is not an idea in the strict sense – that is, even it is not a mode of mind that has representational content.

Another suggestive text is the *Conversation with Burman* passage (also cited in section I) in which Descartes shifts from speaking of (1) the idea of whiteness as a mind-independent quality to speaking of (2) the sensation of whiteness and the idea that misrepresents it as a mind-independent quality. Initially, Descartes echoes the language of passages in which he refers to color, pain, and tickling as ideas. He says that we might mistake what is in fact an idea of whiteness for a mind-independent quality. He then corrects himself and says that strictly speaking our idea of whiteness is an idea that represents (the sensation of) whiteness. On the interpretation that I have been proposing, Descartes holds that sensations are qualia. Ideas of sensations are ideas and so are representational, but sensations are not ideas themselves.

There are other considerations in favor of the view that Cartesian ideas of sensations represent qualia that are not themselves ideas. These were discussed in sections I and II. One is that if we accept the view then the controversy about the referentiality of Cartesian ideas of qualities like color and taste is immediately dissolved. Ideas of sensations represent sensations which are qualia. Clear and distinct ideas of sensations represent sensations as they actually are, and false ideas of sensations represent them as something other than they are. That the Third Meditation meditator is not in a position to notice any of this is to be expected. A second consideration is that if we accept the view then it becomes clear how materially false ideas of qualities like coldness can be of those qualities while still mis-representing them. A third is that there is not a single mention in Descartes' corpus of sensations as having objective reality. The fourth is that a sensation does not appear to have any objective reality upon inspection.

⁶² *Principles* I:68, AT 8A:33.

IV

In this paper I have attempted to sketch and defend three theses. One is that for Descartes there is a distinction between a sensation and an idea of a sensation. Sensations are qualia, and ideas of sensations are ideas of qualia. Another is that ideas of sensations are ideas and so have objective reality and are representational. A Cartesian sensation is a mode of mind but not an idea. It is representational, but not by virtue of having objective reality. Another is that some of the confusion surrounding the issue of Cartesian sensations is due to Descartes' sometimes interchangeable use of the language of 'sensations' and the language of sensory 'ideas'. He makes clear however that he will sometimes identify something as a thought or idea even though it is not a thought or idea in the strict Cartesian sense.