• CHAPTER 5 •

Descartes on the Representationality of Sensation

THROUGHOUT his writings Descartes identifies our ordinary experiences of color, odor, heat and cold, and other so-called sensible qualities as mere sensations which have a purely mental status. He consistently and emphatically denies that they "resemble" any quality that does or can exist in physical reality. Yet in the Third Meditation he seems to construe such sensations as "ideas of" cold and the like, which *misrepresent* "what cold is" to the mind. Their "falsity" consists in representing what is not a real physical quality as if it were. He presents this view as a corollary of the assumption that *all* "thoughts" are "as if of things."

In the Fourth set of Objections to the *Meditations* Antoine Arnauld strongly challenges the cogency of Descartes's position on sensation. Descartes's reply to Arnauld is both fairly detailed and extremely bewildering. In fact, on the surface it seems to involve a clumsy retraction of the view that sensations are in some way misrepresentations of cold, heat, etc.[1]

In later writings—the *Principles of Philosophy*, *Passions of the Soul*, and certain letters—Descartes provides further comments on the status of sensations, in relation to extra-mental reality, that bear on the issue of whether or not he continues to regard sensations as "representative" (or misrepresentative) "of things." This later material appears to suggest some alteration in Descartes's doctrine on the subject.

Descartes's position on the representationality of sensation (including the "passions") is important to a number of interpretive issues. Within the Cartesian system, sensations and passions are included among our "thoughts" (*cogitationes*); and the various Latin and French terms for 'sensation' are used more or less interchangeably with 'ideas of sense'. So, claims about Descartes's general position on the relation of thought and representation (or "intensionality"), and on the nature of ideas, really need to take account of his treatment of the sensations and passions, as a sort of problem-posing test case. Further, the issue is obviously relevant to the recently disputed question of whether or not Descartes regards the passive emotions as "cognitive." It is central, as well, to his position on the "primary-secondary quality distinction," on the mind-body union, and on the relation of mind to matter generally. Unfortunately, Descartes's various statements on this subject are exceptionally difficult to understand clearly, even considered individually; and the interpretation problem becomes even harder when one tries to figure out what is going on from one work to another.

In the first three parts of this paper I will (a) present the Third Meditation position more fully; (b) examine Arnauld's objection; and (c) try to make sense

of Descartes's reply. I will propose a distinction between senses of 'represent' (or 'idea of') which, I suggest, helps to clarify the difference between Arnauld's and Descartes's positions, while making it easier to interpret the Cartesian texts as intelligible and consistent. In the fourth section I will use the same distinction to help reconcile with these texts seemingly conflicting statements from the *Principles of Philosophy* about whether sensations represent. The final section is concerned with Descartes's position on the representationality of the passive emotions.[2]

I

In an often-cited passage from the Third Meditation Descartes ties the concept of 'idea' in the strict sense to some notion of representation, or apprehending a "thing as subject of my thought."

> Of my thoughts some are as if images of things (*tanquam rerum imagines*), to which alone the term 'idea' is strictly appropriate: as when I think of man, or Chimaera, or Heaven, or Angel, or God. Others, though, have certain other forms besides: as when I will, when I fear, when I affirm, when I deny, I always indeed apprehend some thing (*aliquam rem apprehendo*) as the subject of my thought, but I also comprehend by thought something more than the similitude of this thing; and of these some are called volitions, or affects, but others judgments. (AT VII, 37)[3]

The point that ideas are necessarily "of things" is underscored in later stages of his discussion. For instance, Descartes observes that, although all ideas, considered just as modes of thought, are equal, nevertheless "some are very different from others" insofar as "one represents one thing, another another."[4]

He further relies on the notion that all ideas are "as if of things" in developing the concept of *material falsity*, specifically in relation to sensation. He asserts that "confused and obscure" ideas, notably his sensations of "light and colors, sounds, odors, tastes, heat and cold, and the other tactile qualities," fail to allow him to determine whether they "are the ideas of certain things or not of things" (*sint rerum quarundam ideae, an non rerum*): possibly they are in fact "of" non-things, of "privations" (AT VII, 43–44). But since all ideas are "as if of things" (*tanquam rerum*), even these "confused" ideas seem to represent things: thus they provide "material for error":

> For although . . . falsity properly so-called, or formal falsity, can only be found in judgements, there is nevertheless a certain other material falsity in ideas, when they represent what is not a thing as if a thing (*non rem tanquam rem repraesentant*). Thus, for example, the ideas that I have of heat and cold are so little clear and distinct, that from them I cannot tell whether cold is only the privation of heat, or heat the privation of cold, or each is a real quality, or neither. And because there can be no ideas that are not as if of things (*nisi tanquam rerum*), if indeed it is true that cold is nothing else than the privation of heat, the idea which represents it to me as

> something real and positive (*idea quae mihi illud tanquam reale quid & positivum repraesentat*) will not improperly be called false, and so of the others. (AT VII, 43–44)

These statements clearly imply that our sensations are representative in two respects. First they are *ideas of* cold, heat and so forth (whatever these may be, and whether or not they are "real qualities"). Second, they present heat, cold, etc. to us *in a certain way, as being such-and-such*; specifically (since all ideas are "as if of things") they represent them to us as "real and positive qualities." But it may not in fact be true that both cold and heat are real and positive properties—or for that matter that either one is. In that case the relevant sensory idea tends to mislead us, or provide "material" for erroneous judgment.

It is important to remember that the issue whether certain putative qualities are "real" is distinct, in Descartes's writings, from the issue about whether anything possessing the qualities in question actually exists. Thus, Burman records that Descartes elaborated on the "material falsity" passage as follows:

> There is . . . material for error, even if I refer [my ideas] to no things outside me, since I can err with respect to their nature itself. For instance, if I consider the idea of color, and say that it is a thing, a quality, or rather that the color itself, which is represented by this idea, is such (*tale quid esse*); or if I say that white is a quality, even if I refer that idea to no thing outside myself, and say or suppose that nothing is white, I can nevertheless err in the abstract, and about whiteness itself and its nature or idea. (AT V, 152)

Descartes also emphasizes the distinction between reality and existence at least twice in the *Meditations*.[5]

At this point one might well want to know more about the notion of "non-thing," insofar as it is distinguished from "non-existent thing." Can a non-thing really be an "it"? Is it intelligible to speculate about what this "it" is? ("If cold is nothing else than the privation of heat, then the idea which represents it to me. . . .") What exactly is the relation between the notion of "non-thing" and that of "privation," anyway?[6] And (most important in the present context), in what sense does a non-thing qualify to be *represented* at all—whether as a "thing" or, for that matter, as a non-thing?

As it happens, none of these questions (except possibly the last) figures in Arnauld's attack on the notion of material falsity. He appears to accept, for instance, that cold could be a non-thing (or anyway, a privation), and that we can intelligibly discuss what an idea "of it" could or could not be. What he particularly objects to is the notion of *misrepresentation* on which Descartes relies in characterizing the ideas of sensible qualities. In the following discussion I will focus on questions Arnauld does raise (to which Descartes replies), setting aside problems specifically concerned with the notion of a "non-thing" and its role in the material falsity passage.[7]

II

According to Arnauld, "if cold is merely a privation, then there cannot be an idea of cold which represents it to me as a positive thing (*quae illud mihi tanquam rem positivam repraesentet*). . . ." He elaborates:

> For what is the idea of cold? Cold itself in so far as it exists objectively in the intellect. But if cold is a privation, it cannot be objectively in the intellect by means of an idea whose objective being is a positive entity. Therefore, if cold is only a privation, there can never be a positive idea of it, and hence no (idea) which is materially false. (AT VII, 206)

Arnauld's claim is that a positive idea cannot in any sense represent a privation. To say that the idea is positive is to say that it represents something "real and positive." For what it "represents" is just the "objective being which it contains" (207). (Note that Arnauld is not denying that we can falsely *judge* that cold is something positive; his objection is partly directed toward establishing that Descartes has confused what is possible on the level of judgement with what is possible on the level of ideas alone. In this case our error would consist in judging that the positive idea "is the idea of cold" (206–07).) "Finally," Arnauld concludes:

> What does the idea of cold, which you say is materially false, exhibit to your mind? A privation? Then it is true. A positive entity? Then it is not the idea of cold. (207)[8]

There is some room for doubt about what Arnauld's main point is, exactly. Is he maintaining just that a positive idea cannot represent (or "exhibit") a privation? Or does he mean to endorse either or both of the following stronger claims:

(a) A privation cannot be represented by any idea at all (since for an idea to represent is just for it to exhibit some reality to the mind, or contain some reality objectively);

(b) For anything **n**, of which it is true that **n** is **P**, then any idea which exhibits something to the mind *as* **not-P** cannot be an idea of **n**?

It may seem at first that Amauld does implicitly endorse (a). For he does suggest that for an idea to represent *is* for it to exhibit some reality to the mind. If so, the non-real could hardly be represented by any idea at all; and there is no indication that Arnauld means to distinguish the non-real and the privative (any more than Descartes himself does).[9] At the same time, however, Arnauld is prepared to advance the hypothesis that the idea of cold "exhibits a privation to the mind"—a possibility incompatible with (a).

It does appear fairly unproblematic, at any rate (and this is the important point here), that Arnauld is committed to (b), on some interpretation or other. For he rests his claim that a positive idea cannot represent a privation on the notion that a privation *is not* something positive. And there is nothing to indicate that privations are somehow special cases in this regard. In other words, he

seems to take it that (in some sense) nothing can count as a representation of **n** that represents **n** *as other than* **n** in fact *is*.

It is hard to guess how broad an interpretation of (b) Arnauld would be prepared to endorse. Take Descartes's example, in Meditation III, of the "two different ideas of the sun" which he finds in himself. One of these, he says, is "as if acquired from the senses": through it the sun appears very small. The other is derived from astronomical reasoning: through it the sun is exhibited as larger than the earth. Surely, he concludes, "both cannot be similar to the same sun existing outside me"; and "reason persuades that that idea is utterly dissimilar to it which seems to emanate most directly from the sun itself" (AT VII, 39). Would Arnauld go so far as to hold that, if the sun is in fact larger than the earth, there can be no idea "of it" through which it appears very small?

Although Arnauld's comments provide no basis for a sure answer to such questions, I do want to suggest that his objection appears to rest on an assumption about representation which divides him from Descartes to greater or lesser degree (depending how exactly we interpret his implicit endorsement of (b)). Insofar as Arnauld assumes (with whatever qualification) that for an idea to be an idea of **n**, or to represent **n**, it cannot *present* **n** as other than **n** in fact is, he seems to rely on what we might call a purely presentational notion of representation. Descartes, as I will now try to bring out further, in examining the Fourth Replies, has what we may call a hybrid notion. For him the representationality of ideas does consist *partly* in presentational content. However, an idea's being an idea of **n**—its representing **n**—does *not* preclude that the idea presents n as other than it is. I will speak of Descartes's notion of representation as partially "referential," as a way of expressing the non-presentational element. (Later on, though, I will argue that the "referential" component of Cartesian representation is hard to explain clearly.) Recognizing this distinction between Arnauld's and Descartes's assumptions helps quite a bit, I will try to show, in making sense of Descartes's reply to Arnauld's criticisms. (One must also, however, be prepared to be very flexible in interpreting his words.) In addition (as I will explain later) it helps to reconcile (with each other and with the Third Meditation) two passages from the *Principles of Philosophy* (I.68 and I.71) in which Descartes appears both to affirm and to deny that sensations "represent" something "outside thought."

Before I move on to the Fourth Replies, let me try to clarify just a bit more the distinction with respect to aspects of representation that I intend to attribute to Descartes. I'm going to hold that (in Descartes's writings) the expressions, 'I have an idea of **n**', and 'my idea **i** represents something **P**' are both ambiguous, in similar ways, reflecting the "hybrid" nature of his conception of representation. Suppose that my mind is in fact an immaterial substance, though (at my present stage of philosophical development) I can only conceive of my mind as an attribute of my body. Then my idea of my mind is in one sense the idea of, and represents, an immaterial substance; in another sense it is not the idea of, and does not represent (to me) an immaterial substance. I introduce the following terms to distinguish the "senses" in question: in the example just given my

idea *referentially represents* an immaterial substance; it *presents* a bodily attribute. (Again, I am not going to claim that the notion of referential representation is ultimately a clear one; only that the distinction in question helps to explain the texts.)[10]

III

Descartes's initial response to Arnauld's rejection of the notion of material falsity (specifically with respect to the "idea of cold") basically conforms to his Third Meditation statement:

> . . . whether cold is a positive thing, or a privation, doesn't make any difference to the idea I have of it, but it remains in me the same that I have always had; and I say that this [idea] provides me with material for error, if cold truly is a privation and does not have as much reality as heat; because, considering the ideas respectively of cold and of heat just as I receive them both from the senses, I cannot see (*non possum advertere*) that more reality is exhibited to me by one than by the other. (AT VII, 232–33)

On the reading I propose, Descartes's point should be that neither idea *presents* more reality than the other, though one may well referentially represent more reality than the other, i.e., may referentially represent a real quality rather than a privation.

Descartes goes on to reject Arnauld's claim that "the idea of cold is cold itself insofar as it is objectively in the understanding" (233). We need, he says, to make a distinction:

> for it often happens in obscure and confused ideas, among which those of heat and cold are included, that they are referred to something other than that of which they are truly the ideas (*ut ad aliud quid referantur quam ad id cujus revera ideae sunt*).

"Thus," he continues,

> if cold is only a privation, the idea of cold is not cold itself, insofar as it is objectively in the understanding, but something else which I wrongly take for this privation (*sed aliud quid quod perperam pro ista privatione sumitur*); that is, a certain sensation which has no being outside the understanding. (233)

The idea is, referentially, the idea *of cold*; it *presents*, however, something else: a mere, if "positive", sensation. It thus "provides the material" for my error of judging that what is (positively if obscurely) presented to me is what the idea refers to, namely cold (which is in fact, in the real world, a privation).[11] What the idea referentially represents is not what it presentationally represents: that is why Descartes can say that the idea of cold is referred to something other than that of which it is in fact the idea. He is not, in other words, *categorically* accepting Arnauld's claim that if cold is a privation, a positive idea is not the idea of cold. He is merely agreeing that the idea would not be *presentationally*

the idea of cold as it "is" in nature, or *quam res* (namely, a privation). A similar point is at issue in the next paragraph, when Descartes implies that the source of error in our judgements about sensible qualities is that ideas of sense are "referred to something to which [they do] not conform." (233)[12]

A few lines later Descartes comes back to the original objection:

> But [he] asks what that idea of cold represents to me, which I say is materially false: "For if," he says, "it exhibits a privation, then it is true; if a positive being, then it is not the idea of cold."

Descartes now rather startlingly *agrees* with the objection: "*Recte*," he says. But, he continues,

> . . . I call that idea materially false only for this reason, that, since it is obscure and confused, I cannot decide whether what it exhibits to me as outside my sense is positive, or not; and thus I have occasion to judge that it is something positive, although perhaps it is only a privation. (234)

Although Descartes seems to give away the store here, I think he has merely expressed himself ineptly. He does not really intend to retract his position that a particular "positive" sensation counts as the "idea of cold," even if cold is in fact a privation. Despite apparent verbal indications to the contrary, he is really continuing on his original track: the sensation of cold referentially represents cold (let's suppose, a privation)—but fails to *present* cold as it is (namely, as a privation). In the latter respect only it is not the idea of cold, "but something else, which I wrongly take for this privation."

On my proposed reading of the Fourth Replies, Descartes continues to assume that an idea of **n** might represent (present) **n** as other than **n** is. One of course then wants to ask, what *is* it for an idea to be an idea of (say) cold, if it is *not* to present cold as it is (say, as a privation)?[13]

In view of some recent theories of reference and perception, one might hope for a *causal* account of "referential" or non-presentational representation: an idea, that is, referentially represents its cause (or cause under normal conditions), whatever that might be. Thus, for my idea of cold referentially to represent a certain physical state is just for that idea to be caused—in the "right" way—by that state, whatever it might be. On the hypothesis we have been following out—that cold is a privation—this approach would presumably require accepting the notion of privative causes. This sounds odd, but might in the end be tolerable. (Certainly Descartes does often seem to assume that the external reality "represented" by a sensation may just be the cause of that sensation; and who's to say that negative or inhibitory factors can't reasonably be ascribed causative significance?)

There is a more serious problem with this proposal, however. For Descartes (as I mentioned earlier) thinks that *non-existents* can be referentially represented. My (materially false) ideas of cold and white are ideas of cold and white, it seems, even if no physical things exist, and hence even if there are no

instantiations of these qualities as they really are. I am pessimistic that such "entities" can be cast as "causes."[14]

A similar objection would apply as well if we tried to construe referential representation as *demonstrative*. For according to Descartes I can refer a sensation to "a part of the physical world" which in a quite ordinary sense fails to exist. To mention one of his favorite examples, I can point to where an amputated limb should be, in indicating the "location" of a pain. (So "what is going on *there*" will not always "pick out" the real state of the world which my sensation represents referentially.)[15]

On the whole I suspect that the causal account was influential in Descartes's thought, even if he was unable to develop it fully, to create a theory immune to counter-examples. Beyond this observation, I'm unable further to clarify the hybrid conception of representation I've attributed to Descartes. I can only claim that it, or something like it, does seem necessary to make good sense of his response to Arnauld's objection. Further, as I'll now try to show, this understanding helps to bring what he says about sensation in the *Principles* into some kind of alignment with his earlier remarks.

IV

Although Descartes does not say directly, in the Third Meditation, that all "*thoughts*" (as opposed to ideas properly so called) are "as if of things," his wording does suggest this position. Some thoughts are *just* "as if images of things"; others have other "forms" *besides*. So, it might seem to follow, Descartes does not wish to admit that there are "thoughts" that don't have the "of-a-thing" character *at least*. And he has indeed been interpreted in this way.[16] Works later than the *Meditations*, however, provide some reason to question whether this interpretation is correct. I have in mind his treatment of sensations (again, experiences of pain, color, odor and sound, etc.) in the *Principles of Philosophy*, and his account of passive emotions in *Principles* and in the *Passions of the Soul*. At one time I thought that the discussion of *Principles* I.68–71 indeed suggested a deep change in Descartes's position on the representationality of sensation.[17] However, I now think that the change is not so great after all. If we read the *Principles* passages in light of the distinction I have just proposed, they come out saying something at least fairly close to the position on sensation in the Third Meditation and Fourth Replies. I will try to establish this point first, then move on (in the next section) to murkier question of whether—or in what sense—Descartes construes the passive emotions, too, as "representational."

The following statement from I.71 provides the strongest apparent evidence that Descartes has come to deny that sensations do represent (are as if of things):

> . . . In early childhood our mind was so tightly bound to the body that it had no leisure for any other thoughts, except only those by which it sensed what affected the body: and it did not yet refer these to anything located outside itself, but only

> sensed pain where something occurred harmful to the body; where something beneficial occurred, it felt pleasure; and where something affected the body without much harm or benefit, for the different parts in which and ways in which the body was affected, it had certain different sensations, namely those which we call the sensations of taste, odor, sound, heat, cold, light, color and the like, *which represent nothing located outside thought.* (*PP* I.71; emphasis added)

Later on, Descartes explains, the mind realized that its sensations were caused by external objects, and mistakenly attributed heat, color, odor, etc. to the objects. In doing so it failed to recognize the different natures of the mere sensations on the one hand, and sizes, shapes, motions and the like on the other hand: the latter only "were exhibited to it not as sensations, but as certain things, or modes of things, existing, or at least capable of existing, outside thought."

Yet a little earlier he has indicated, more visibly in keeping with the Third Meditation, that sensations might be said to "represent" external states in some very limited sense. The problem with sensations (he seems to say here) is just that we "cannot tell" *what* they represent. An inattentive person, he remarks, may persuade himself that sensations of color or pain give him some notion of external physical qualities, because he may suppose that there is in the object something similar to what he experiences;

> but if he examines what it might be, which this sensation of color or pain represents, as if existing in the colored body or painful part, he will notice that he is wholly ignorant of it. (*PP* I.68)

In line with what I have just proposed about the Fourth Replies, I suggest that we read these passages as expressing the following view. First, nothing is *intelligibly presented* to the mind in ordinary sense experience "of" colors, odors, and so on. Second, we nevertheless tend to take the presentational content of sense experience to be something real, to refer *it* to external reality. (The story of how we happen to do this is different from that found in the *Meditations*, though, since it does not rely on the claim that "all ideas are as if of things," or the notion of material falsity.) Third, the sensations may correctly be said to have some *referential* representativeness, though what they represent in this sense is wholly indeterminate from their presentational content. They are, in other words, "as if images of things," but wholly *confused* images. This reading is borne out by a remark towards the end of the *Principles*, when Descartes remarks that color, sound, and the like are not distinctly imagined or understood; rather, "their images in our thought are always confused, and we do not know what they are (*semper . . . eorum imagines in cogitatione nostra sunt confusae, nec quidnam illa sint scimus*)" (*PP* IV.200).[18]

V

Descartes's treatment of the passive emotions provides another interesting set of problems for the interpreter of his position on the representationality of thought.

In particular, it provides an even harder case than his treatment of sensation in the *Principles* for anyone who would hold that for Descartes any thought is necessarily representative, or involves a representative element.[19]

These days it has become common to hold that emotions are always, or nearly always, partially or even wholly cognitive states, essentially involving representation (presentation) of an object. For example, *fear* can only be understood as a state of the fearing being that essentially involves a judgement that something is dangerous to that being. Descartes is sometimes cited as a proponent of the opposed, erroneous view that emotions are mere feelings (perhaps "contingently" connected with an object which causes them).[20]

This interpretation may well seem to conflict directly with the statement from the Third Meditation that I quoted at the outset, in which Descartes mentions fear in particular, and the "affects" in general, as examples of "thoughts" which "always" include the apprehension of some "subject" of the thought, but also have "other forms besides."[21] But of course we cannot immediately exclude the possibility that Descartes changed his view about the affects, when he came to consider these states of mind more systematically in later works.

In the *Passions*, too, however, Descartes very often phrases his accounts of the various different passive emotions in terms of the soul's responses to objects it thinks of (responses caused and "fortified" by particular physiological changes). Here are a few examples:

> WONDER
>
> When the first encounter with some object surprises us, and we judge it to be novel, or very different from that which we knew before . . . , that causes us to wonder at it and be astonished by it. (II.53)

> LOVE AND HATRED
>
> . . . [W]hen a thing is represented to us as good for us, that is, as beneficial to us, that makes us have Love for it; and when it is represented as bad or harmful, that excites Hatred in us. (II.56)

> CONCERNING PITY
>
> Pity is a type of Sadness, mixed with Love or good will toward those whom we see suffer something bad, which we consider them not to deserve. Thus it is contrary to Envy, because of its object, and to Mockery, because it considers [the object] in another way. (III.185)

I will not try to settle here the question, just how far such passages go towards establishing that Descartes does think of passive emotions as *typically* tied, in a definitional or "non-contingent" way with mental presentations of (putative) external objects. (Clearly they do go *some* way to supporting such a reading.) What must be noted is that, first, Descartes explicitly acknowledges in both the *Passions* and *Principles* the existence of emotions that *lack*, so to speak, objective content. For instance, thick and sluggish blood produces a feeling of sadness, "although [the soul] perhaps does not know why it should be sad" (*PP* IV.190; cf. *PS* II.51). Further, in both works, Descartes does characterize pas-

sive emotions as feelings or "sensations" (*sensus, sentiments*), regardless of whether or not they include the thought of an object. Unlike the sensations of color, taste, etc., and even hunger and thirst, they are not "referred" to material reality: rather they are referred only, or particularly, to the soul (*PS*I.23–25; 27; cf. *PP* IV.189–90). And here I take that expression to mean that they are *attributed* to that in which, as thoughts, they occur; in this respect they do not refer beyond themselves. Does the fact that the passions actually present themselves as *internal states of the soul*—are not *referred to objects*, combined with the fact that some of them do not even require the conscious *presentation of objects*, show that this category of "thoughts," at least, includes some that have no representative aspect at all? Is there any use in invoking here the distinction between presentation and reference?

The objectless internal sensations probably do provide the best basis for questioning whether Descartes conceives thought as necessarily, or invariably, representational.[22] I doubt, though, that they provide a conclusive counter-example. My main reservation has to do with the fact that Descartes characterizes the internal sensations, like the external ones, as "confused thoughts" or "confused and obscure perceptions" (*PP* IV.190; *PS* I.27–8). If to call "external" sensations "confused" is to suggest (as Descartes does in the *Principles*) that they referentially represent something, but do not intelligibly present it, perhaps we should understand the term in the same sense, when it's used of the sensations that he calls "internal" in the *Passions*. Perhaps, for instance, an "objectless" sadness referentially represents and confusedly presents a bad condition of our own blood, even though the presentation is *so* confused that even the *sense* of external reference is lost. (This sort of sadness must be distinguished, of course, from the sadness we feel when it occurs to us *that* our blood may be diseased).[23]

As far as I know, there is no passage that directly confirms such a reading—and none that refutes it, either.[24] However, a remark from a late (February, 1647) letter to Chanut tells, I think, somewhat in favor of the view I am suggesting—that even the "objectless" affects are in some degenerate sense representations of physiological conditions. (It also provides an interesting insight into Descartes's conception of the relation between the sensational and "cognitive" components of emotion where both are in fact present.) Descartes is discussing the relation between rational love (such as love of God or of knowledge), which can occur wholly independently of any embodiment, and sensuous love. He writes:

> [Sensual love] is nothing but a confused thought, excited in the soul by some motion of the nerves, which disposes it to the other, clearer thought which constitutes rational love. Just as in thirst the sensation of dryness in the throat is a confused thought which disposes us to the desire for drink, but is not that desire itself; so, in love a mysterious heat is felt around the heart, and a great abundance of blood in the lungs, which make us open our arms as if to embrace something, and this makes the soul inclined to join itself voluntarily to the object which is present. But *the thought by which the soul feels the heat* is different from the thought which joins it

> to this object; and it even sometimes happens that this sensation of love occurs in us without our will being impelled to love anything, because we do not discover any object we think worthy of it. (To Chanut, February, 1647; AT IV, 602–3; emphasis added.)

My conclusion, then, is that it is possible to defend attributing to Descartes a thoroughgoing conception of "thought" as representational, even down to the hardest case, the objectless passions. But the case gets more and more tenuous—and doubtless changes character—as one progresses from ordinary thoughts about this or that, to the treatment of sensation in Meditation III, to the treatment of sensation in later works, and finally to the treatment of the sensuous component in emotion—particularly the objectless affects.

NOTES

1. In my book, *Descartes* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), I uncharitably dismissed Descartes's response as "a model of confusion confounded." (I discuss the Arnauld-Descartes exchange on representation, and related issues, at pp. 100–119.) The present account is intended to supplement, and on some points correct, that earlier one. See also Anthony Kenny, "Descartes on Ideas," in Doney, *Descartes: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), for a detailed, highly critical treatment of aspects of Descartes's position dealt with in the present paper. (Kenny's discussion also forms a part of his book, *Descartes* (New York: Random House, 1968).)

Some of the same ground is covered by Alan Gewirth in his well-known paper "Clearness and Distinctness in Descartes," also in Doney (but originally published in 1943). My approach resembles Gewirth's in being primarily constructive, rather than critical, but I try out different distinctions and terminology. For another related discussion see Vere Chappell, "The Theory of Ideas" in A. Rorty, *Essays on Descartes' "Meditations"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). (Chappell focuses on a passage from the Preface to the *Meditations* in which Descartes says that an 'idea' in one sense is a representing entity; in another sense 'idea' is what is represented—i.e. a represented content. I focus on other passages, in which (as Chappell grants) Descartes appears straightforwardly to assume that *what* ideas normally represent are simply things, states, etc.)

2. Much of what I will say corresponds quite closely to views expressed by Jean-Marie Beyssade in "Descartes on Material Falsity"—a paper read to the April, 1989 conference on "Ideas" in early modern philosophy, the University of Iowa, Iowa City. What I see as a convergence in our viewpoints is, however, coincidental: we did not know of each other's recent work on this subject in advance of preparing our respective essays.

3. I translate '*tanquam*' awkwardly as 'as if' in order to be able to translate it the same way in all contexts. ('Like', for instance, wouldn't work under this condition: Descartes's claim that "all ideas are *tanquam rerum*" (see below) can be translated "all ideas are as if of things," but (obviously) not "all ideas are like things."

4. The "difference" in question here is not individuation of one idea from another, but rather difference of status on a three-tiered scale of "degree of (objective) reality": ideas which represent—or "exhibit"—substances stand higher than those which represent

modes, and one that represents God, or infinite substance, above those representing only finite substances.

5. AT VII, 46, 64. In *Descartes* (*op. cit.*, pp. 107–8) I suggest that a "real thing" in the sense relevant here is a possible existent, noting Descartes's claim (AT VII, 116) that possible existence is contained in the "concept or idea" of whatever is clearly and distinctly conceived. Unfortunately this suggestion doesn't help with the problem, touched on briefly below, of how a "non-thing" can be *represented*.

6. For what it's worth, Descartes does remark later in the Third Meditation that he "perceives" rest and darkness by the "negation" of motion and light (respectively) (AT VII, 45). Presumably, then, rest and darkness are privations, and are perceived by Descartes as privations. Either this does not count as having an idea of a non-thing that represents it as a non-thing, or Descartes is here violating the principle that all ideas are "as if of things." My own view is that Descartes *should* allow that the *content* of a distinct idea can be a privation, but not a non-thing. (I believe the underlying conception of reality is—or is tied to—distinct conceivability, and I take it that Descartes needs to be able to say that (relative) rest as well as motion is a distinctly conceivable physical state.) In other words, he should not conflate the two terms. There can be no doubt that he does, however.

7. I will not be able to discuss all of Arnauld's objections, however. Among the points that I will not touch on here is his claim that allowing positive content to an idea which Descartes allows might "arise from nothing" (as he says in passing about ideas of sensible qualities) violates Descartes's principle that an idea's "objective reality" requires a cause of at least equal "formal reality." I have discussed this issue at length in my book *Descartes* (*op. cit.*, ch. 3).

8. In the course of his exposition Arnauld draws some relevant morals from Descartes's argument, later in the Third Meditation, that the idea of God, as an infinitely perfect being, cannot but be true. I omit consideration of these remarks in the interest of keeping the discussion reasonably focused.

9. See note 5, above.

10. I don't claim either that the notion of presentational representation is free of problems. Roughly, though, it coincides with what the mind takes itself to be aware of. (If I think I see a tanager, then I can be ascribed a presentational representation of a tanager, regardless of what may actually be going on in the world or (otherwise) in me.) As Peter Markie has suggested to me, the notion may be close to that of "narrow content" in the jargon of contemporary philosophy of mind.

11. In the First Replies Descartes accepts that the idea of the sun "is the sun itself existing in the understanding." He makes clear, however, that the content existing in the understanding has "existing in the understanding" as an intrinsic denomination, whereas the sun in the heavens is only extrinsically related to the mind. He does not there address the question whether (or under what circumstances) a *misrepresentation* of the sun can count as "the sun itself existing in the understanding."

12. Later in the paragraph (AT VII, 234) Descartes says that "confused ideas coming from the senses," such as the ideas of color and of cold, "exhibit nothing real." I take him to mean that what is exhibited—namely the sensation itself—is not, as presented or exhibited, something real. This is the same position he takes in the *Principles*, which I discuss in the next section.

13. Cf. Kenny, "Descartes on Ideas," *op. cit.*, p. 245.

14. At the beginning of Meditation VI Descartes defends the claim that he can't form in imagination the idea of a chiliagon, by noting that,

> If I . . . want to think of a chiliagon, . . . I well understand this to be a figure consisting of a thousand sides, as I understand a triangle to be a figure consisting of three; but I do not in the same way imagine those thousand sides, or intuit them as if present. And although, because I am in the habit of always imagining something, when I think of a corporeal thing, I perhaps represent some figure confusedly to myself, it is nevertheless obvious that this is not a chiliagon, because it is in no respect different from what I also represent to myself, if I should think of a myriagon or some other figure with more sides. (AT VII, 72)

What interests me in this passage is the suggestion that an "idea" (sc. in imagination) of a chiliagon, to be an idea of a chiliagon, has to be distinguishable (so to speak by inspection) from an idea of a myriagon. This suggests that such an idea's referentially representing **a** *does* depend on the idea's somehow *presentationally* exhibiting **a**. At present I regard this passage as presenting a problem for the interpretation of Descartes that I'm trying to support.

15. Calvin Normore stressed the phantom limb case as a problem for my proposed reading, in commenting on an earlier version of the paper. I'm not at all sure that the issue I deal with here captures the full force of his objection.

16. Norman Malcolm, "Thoughtless Brutes," Presidential Address delivered before the Sixty-ninth Annual Eastern meeting of the American Philosophical Association, December 28, 1972; Alan Donagan, *Spinoza* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 37–38.

17. See *Descartes*, *op. cit.*, pp. 116–19.

18. Sometimes Descartes talks of external qualities that give rise to sensations as the "objects" of the sensations: cf. *PP* II.194 (FV); *Le Monde* (AT XI, 5): ". . . if the sense of hearing brought (*rapportoit*) to our thought the true image of its object, it would have to be the case that it made us conceive the movement of the parts of the air which tremble against our ears at the time, rather than making us conceive sound."

19. I take it to be clear that Descartes does regard the active or "interior" emotions—those caused in the soul by the soul itself—as always having an "object."

20. See, for instance, the editors' introduction to *What is an Emotion*, edited by Cheshire Calhoun and Robert C. Solomon (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 10–11.

My discussion of the *Passions* has benefitted from, and in places follows rather closely, a paper by Ronald A. Nash, which as far as I know is not yet published. Because I haven't seen a final version of his paper, I won't try to comment in more detail on the relation of our views at this time.

21. I am assuming that, as traditional interpretation holds, "subject" here means "object" which a thought is "of," rather than subject to which it belongs. See, though, Third Replies, AT VII, 175, where "subject of a thought" has to be understood in the latter sense.

22. In the language of the Third Meditation, we could say that they are *mere* forms, detached from ideas.

23. Does this reading imply that the objectless affects are, after all, themselves *ideas*? I think I have to say yes to this question (which was brought to my attention by Nydia Lara), though I acknowledge that Descartes himself does not (as far as I know) call them ideas; and also that construing them as such creates problems for the Third Meditation distinction between ideas and "other forms" that merely attach (so to speak) to ideas.

24. William Lyons, while identifying Descartes as a proponent of "the feeling theory"

of the emotions, evidently takes *Passions* I.36 to show that Descartes regarded the passions as *perceptions of* physiological states (*Emotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 2–4). I think that construing emotions as "perceptions" of anything at all is at odds with construing them as simply "feelings," but (more to the point in the present context) I think Lyons' reading of *Passions* I.36 is untenable. *There* Descartes says only that certain physiological conditions are "ordained by nature to make" the soul experience certain passions.