6

Intentionality or Phenomenology? Descartes and the Objects of Thought

1. Introduction

Descartes, according to a widespread conception, is seen as having set a distinctive stamp on the mind–body problem: by taking the mind to be something privately accessed by each individual, he made its relationship to the public world of science a matter for prolonged philosophical puzzlement. But for many late twentieth-century philosophers, the long tangle of problems stemming from the supposed 'privacy' of the mental is at last reaching its end, and the focus of debate has shifted back to a quite different aspect of the mind, discussed by philosophers long before Descartes,[1] and later made famous by Brentano,[2] namely its intentionality. Intentionality, that property of the mind in virtue of which it is *directed at*, or *about*, or *of*, certain objects,[3] is not normally thought of as a topic on which Descartes had much to say. In fact, the 'aboutness' or representative

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[1] The key figure for the medieval debates is Aquinas, who distinguished *esse naturale* (real existence in the world) from *esse intentionale* (roughly, existence as an object of thought). See *Summa theologiae*, Pt. I qu. 56 art. 3; Aquinas's views are discussed by Anthony Kenny in 'Aquinas: Intentionality', in T. Honderich (ed.), *Philosophy Through Its Past* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 78–96.

[2] F. Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* [*Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt*, 1874], trans. L. L. McAlister (London: Routledge, 1974), bk. II ch. 1.

[3] See John Searle, 'Intentionality', in S. Guttenplan (ed.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 397. Searle defines intentionality in terms of the mind's being directed at 'objects and states of affairs in the world', though this could be misleading, since neither the medieval scholastic philosophers who first wrestled with intentionality, nor Franz Brentano, who later proposed it as the hallmark of the mental, were committed to supposing the objects of thought must be items

nature of mental states turns out to play a crucial role in his philosophy. I shall argue that it is central to his view of the mind, so central as to elbow to the edge the 'private' or subjective aspect that has long been taken to be the distinctive feature of the 'Cartesian' approach to the mental.

In this chapter, which falls into five parts, I shall start (in the first two, mainly exegetical, sections) by examining how Descartes characterizes the objects of thought from the epistemologically austere starting point of the *Meditations*; it will emerge that his account is by no means as immersed in subjectivity and privacy as often supposed. This result will be reinforced in the last three sections (which I hope will have some relevance to recent debates in philosophy of mind), where the main focus will be on the special problems posed by Descartes's account of sensory ideas. Some philosophers nowadays believe that our experience of colours and pains is characterized by a certain distinctive phenomenology, accessible only to the subject. Since this approach to an important subclass of mental phenomena is often labelled 'Cartesian', it is of some interest to see whether Descartes himself adopted it. I shall argue that despite intermittent tendencies towards a proto-Nagelian subjectivism, Descartes's dominant approach is firmly objectivist: some aspects of the relevant phenomena are dealt with by scientific reductionism, others by a conceptual or language-based approach in terms of intentional content.

2. Preliminaries: Ideas, Psychology, and Logic

The solitary perspective of the Cartesian meditator has given rise to some distorted conceptions of Descartes's view of the mind and its objects. The first is the complaint, often repeated in various guises, that Descartes 'privatized' or 'psychologized' the mind and its objects, paving the way for a suspect Lockean or Humean conception of ideas as psychological episodes of some kind. If, however, we look at Descartes's own use of the term 'idea', we find instead that he is frequently closer to Plato than to Locke: 'idea', as he employs the term, is often a formal rather than a psychological

in the world. It would be better, perhaps, to say that intentionality has to do with the *representational* powers of the mind, leaving open the ontological status of what is represented.

notion.[4] In defining the term, Descartes distinguishes a *thought* ('that which is within us in such a way that we are immediately aware of it') from an *idea*, which is 'the *form* of any given thought' (*forma cujuslibet cogitationis*, Second Replies, AT VII 160: CSM II 113). When I think of something (a triangle, say) my consciousness is, of course, modified in a certain way. According to Descartes this involves on the one hand a subjective psychological episode of some kind, but on the other hand it involves something more objective—an idea's *informing* or *giving form to* the mind (*mentem informare,* ibid.). There thus seems to be a tolerably clear distinction in Descartes between what we should nowadays call the psychological and the logical points of view. Considered from the psychological point of view, the nature of an idea is 'such that of itself it requires no reality except what it derives from my thought of which it is a mode, i. e. a manner or way of thinking' (Third Meditation, AT VII 41: CSM II 28). But considered from a logical point of view, it has a certain representational content: 'considered simply as modes of thought, there is no inequality among my ideas—they all appear to come from within me. But in so far as ideas are considered as representing different things, they differ widely [in that some contain more 'objective reality' or representational content, than others]' (AT VII 40: CSM II 28). Cartesian ideas are in some respects more like publicly accessible concepts than private psychological items: two people could not be said to have the same *thought,* since a thought is a (private) mental item or mode of consciousness; but they could be said to have the same *idea* in so far as their thoughts have a common representational content.[5]

As far as the ontological status of Cartesian 'ideas' is concerned, Descartes's position seems to allow him to take an attractive middle course between psychologizing ideas on the one hand, and reifying them

[4] The closest Descartes comes to explicitly Platonic terminology is in the Third Meditation, where he traces the source of ideas to a primary idea associated with an archetype: 'although one idea may perhaps originate from another, there cannot be an infinite regress here, but eventually one must reach a primary idea, the cause of which will be like an archetype' (AT VII 42: CSM II 29).

[5] Somewhat confusingly modern (post-Fregean) usage with respect to the terms 'idea' and 'thought' seems to be pretty much the opposite of Descartes's: people now tend to think of 'ideas' as psychological items, whereas they talk about 'the thought that *x*' when referring to the (public) content of a proposition. It is significant that Descartes links the possession of an *idea* to the ability to use a linguistic term correctly: 'whenever I express something in words, and understand what I am saying, this very fact makes it certain that I have an idea of what is signified by the words in question' (Second Replies, AT VII 160: CSM II 113).

on the other. On the one hand, an idea is not a simple private impression, or purely subjective modification of consciousness, since ideas, in virtue of their representationality or 'aboutness', may be said to have a certain content, and that content (though Descartes does not quite put it this way) is intersubjectively accessible. On the other hand, ideas are not made into wholly independent entities, in extreme Platonic style, since they turn out to be a way of talking about the formal or representational aspects of my thought.

This last point needs clarifying. In the centuries preceding Descartes, scholasticism had developed out of a continual three-cornered tension between Platonic, Aristotelian, and Christian thinking. Plato's notion of ideas as real, eternally existing objects had appealed to Christian writers seeking an eternal world beyond this transitory earthly life; but consistent with their monotheistic metaphysics they were reluctant to allow them independent status, and located them as eternally existing archetypes in the mind of God. This was the line taken by Augustine, and it also appears in Aquinas.[6] But Aquinas was also strongly influenced by the anti-Platonic arguments of Aristotle concerning universals; and this led him to resist construing an idea as an object really distinct from its instantiations. Thus for Aquinas the intellect has the power to abstract a universal concept from its particular manifestations, but the idea is the 'means of cognition' (*id quo intelligitur*) rather than a separate object of cognition (*id quod intelligitur*).[7] These tensions partly explain a certain fuzziness (deliberate or not) in Descartes's view of the ontological status of ideas—a legacy that led to the protracted and inconclusive debate between Arnauld and Malebranche later in the seventeenth century. Except among his fellow Oratorians, Malebranche's insistence on reverting to the Augustinian solution of placing ideas in the mind of God was widely regarded as little more than a curiosity; in Locke's scathing phrase, ''Tis an opinion that spreads not, and is like to die of itself or at least do no great harm.'[8] But Malebranche's development of the Cartesian model has distinct advantages as against the

[6] Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus* [388–96], lxxxiii. 46; Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences of Lombard* [*Scriptum super libros Sententiarum,* 1253–6], bk. I dist. 36 qu. 2 art. 1, and *Summa theologiae* [1266–73], pt. I qu. 15 art. 1.

[7] Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, pt. I qu. 85 art. 2. See also J. Cottingham, *A Descartes Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), s.v. 'idea'.

[8] A comment made by Locke some three days before his death; cited in N. Jolley, *The Light of the Soul* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 81.

privatizing tendencies of its Lockean alternative.[9] I shall return to some further important aspects of the Malebranchian line later (in sect. 4).

3. What are Ideas About?

As we have seen, ideas in Descartes are associated with the representational powers of the mind. An idea is certainly not an image or picture,[10] but in one respect it is, says Descartes, *like* a certain sort of picture (*veluti quamdam imaginem*), since it is *of* something.[11] But of what? Descartes's typical answer, most notably in the Third Meditation, is that ideas are of things (*rerum*) or 'as it were of things' (*tanquam rerum*).[12] But the word 'thing' here emphatically does not mean an actually existing object in the world, as the famous presentation of the ontological argument in the Fifth Meditation makes crystal clear: I have innumerable ideas of things (*rerum*) which 'even if they perhaps exist nowhere outside me cannot be said to be nothing, since they have they own true and immutable natures' (AT VII 64: CSM II 45). When he was asked to comment on this passage in his interview with Frans Burman in 1648, Descartes is reported to have observed that everything that can be clearly and distinctly conceived is a true entity (*verum et reale ens*).[13] Thus the objects of mathematics are real and true entities, just as much as those of physics, even though they are not actualized. When we think about triangles, our thought is about divinely generated objects (albeit not actualized objects), the properties of and relations between which we clearly and distinctly

[9] The seemingly bizarre theory of vision in God turns out, on Jolley's interpretation, to be a corollary of his firm separation of the province of logic from that of psychology; 'to say that we directly perceive ideas in God is to say that we directly perceive items in logical space' (ibid. 87).

[10] Descartes rebuked Hobbes for failing to distinguish an idea, in his sense, from the scholastic notion of a phantasm in the corporeal imagination (AT VII 181: CSM II 127). Cf. Second Replies: 'it is not only the images depicted in the imagination which I call "ideas"; indeed, in so far as these images are in the corporeal imagination, that is are depicted in some part of the brain, I do not call them "ideas" at all' (AT VII 160–1: CSM II 113).

[11] Ideas are *veluti quasdam imagines* ('like images of a certain sort', AT VII 42 line 12: CSM II 29).

[12] *Nullae ideae nisi tanquam rerum esse possunt* ('There can be no ideas except as it were of things', AT VII 44: CSM II 30). Cf. also the phrases: *Quaedam ex* [*ideis*] *tanquam rerum imagines sunt* ('some ideas are as it were images of things', AT VII 37: CSM II 25); *una [idea] unam rem, alia aliam representat* ('different ideas represent different things'; lit.: 'one idea represents one thing, another another', AT VII 40: CSM II 28).

[13] AT V 160: CSMK 343. Cf. J. Cottingham (ed.), *Descartes's Conversation with Burman* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), 23 and 90 ff.

perceive.[14] Ideas, in short, are objects of understanding that are independent of the vagaries of human psychology because they are grounded in the divine being or, as one might nowadays say, located in objective 'logical space'.[15]

Now for two interesting complications. The first is that representations may be clear or fuzzy. The great struggle for the Cartesian meditator is to render our ideas clear and distinct. Because of the imperfection of the human intellect, and the interference effects generated by our bodily condition, many of our ideas may be like photographs that are fuzzy, and include extraneous shadows and haloes which do not properly belong to the objects represented. The task is to lop off these indistinct and confused elements (often supplied by the confusing deliverances of the senses), until we are left with a representation that is distinct—that contains *only* what is clear and open to the attentive mind. The paradigm here is the famous discussion of the wax in the Second Meditation. We start from a confused and unsatisfactory representation, clouded by preconceived opinions and fluctuating sensory impressions. But by systematically eliminating this overlay of dross, and reducing our conception to what is detected by the scrutiny of the intellect alone (*solius mentis inspectio,* AT VII 31: CSM II 21), we can arrive at

[14] Nowadays, we may tend to construe the objects so referred to as belonging to the realm of logical necessity, or describing what is true in all possible worlds. But this (post-Leibnizian) way of thinking is largely alien to Descartes, who instead regards the verities of logic and mathematics, no less than the actually existing universe, as the inscrutable creations of the divine will. This view of the status of the objects of logical and mathematical thought generates a worm of contingency at the heart of the Cartesian system (cf. 'The Cartesian Legacy', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,* Supp. 66 (1992), 1–21; repr. as Ch. 3, above). It is not just that such truths *must* be so, or that they are so in all possible worlds; it is just that they, as a brute fact (as far as our knowledge is concerned), are so. Indeed, it gets worse. If the items to which our thought is directed correspond to fiats of the divine will rather than objects of the divine intellect, this seems to call into question the truth-stating function of the relevant propositions. What we humans take to reflect truth and reality is grounded in something ultimately imperatival rather than indicative. So the famous Cartesian natural light, the divine light of reason which illuminates our souls, turns out in the end to be more like an external force that constrains our thinking than a searchlight that picks out real intellectual objects. A radical gulf thus opens up between human and divine cognition. From the human perspective, our ideas represent 'real and true entities': there is a correspondence-relation between our thought and what it refers to. But from the divine perspective, there is no such correspondence, but rather a kind of pure volitional activity—not a vision of truth, but a series of commands about how lesser creatures are to think. The metaphysics here becomes pretty murky, however, especially when we add in the Cartesian rider that the divine intellect and the divine will cannot really be distinguished: 'we must not think that God understands and wills as we do, by means of operations that are in a certain way distinct from one another; rather, there is always a single identical and perfectly simple act by means of which he simultaneously understands, wills, and brings about all things.' (*Principles of Philosophy*, Pt. I art. 23, AT VIIIA 14: CSM I 201).

[15] For this way of putting it, see Jolley, *Light of the Soul*, 87.

a representation of a pure extended object, mathematically describable. At the conclusion of this Cartesian process, our idea will conform properly to the thing—the true and immutable essence of extended substance.

The second complication is more troubling. Some of our ideas have what Descartes in the Third Meditation calls 'material falsity', and he defines this by saying that materially false ideas 'represent a non-thing as a thing' (*non-rem tanquam rem representant*, AT VII 43). Sensory ideas (of heat and cold, for example) are like this. We might be tempted to construe this as a failure to refer to anything actually existing—like the bogus Victorian photos of fairies at the bottom of the garden, beloved of Lewis Carroll: the photo has a representational content, but there is nothing in the world that corresponds to the *representatum*. But this cannot be what Descartes means; actual external existence is not in question at this stage of the *Meditations*, and in any case, the 'reality' of the things represented by authentic ideas (e.g. of triangles) has nothing to do with actual existence. The problem about sensory ideas is, it seems, not just that there is nothing external corresponding to heat and cold, but that the ideas have *no genuine representational content at all*. In the scholastic jargon that Descartes employs, they lack 'objective' reality. But then Descartes's description of them, namely that 'they represent non-things as things', looks singularly inept: how can they have a representational *character* if there is no representational *content*? To say the least, the divorce between representative character and objective reality is (as Margaret Wilson once remarked) 'an embarrassment'.[16] Descartes's way of putting the matter is clearly not a very happy one. But perhaps what he is saying can be compared to something like this: I start with a set of photographic negatives. Some are fuzzy and indistinct, full of blotches, blemishes, and hazy overlays, but after suitable editing, lopping, and developing, they yield images with genuine objective reality or representational content. Such is my idea of the lump of wax. But others, though they at first sight may appear to have some sort of representational content, turn out, at the end of the developing process, to yield photographs that are entirely blank—there is just nothing represented.

Perhaps this is not an incoherent notion in itself. A linguistic analogue might be this: someone could advance a string of propositions which they

[16] M. Wilson, *Descartes* (London: Routledge, 1978), 111.

initially take to present an account of, say, causation, capable of truth or falsity. And as a result of philosophical analysis and argument, they might come to defend the theory as true, or discard it as false. But a third possibility is that they come on reflection to realize that the theory is so confused as to be wholly empty of content: they might end up admitting, 'I now just do not know what I was initially trying to say.' There is nothing to put in the album but a blank print. Even if it is internally coherent, however, this account does not cohere with what Descartes elsewhere wants to say about sensory ideas. For when he moves away from the pure metaphysics of the disembodied thinking self, and turns to the organic life of the embodied human being, he does, I believe, want and need to maintain that sensory ideas, so far from being quite blank, so far from being, as it were, 'about nothing', do indeed have a certain crucial sort of intentionality. It is to the Cartesian theory of sensory ideas, and its implications for his theory of the mind, that I turn in the remaining three sections of this chapter.

4. Sensory Ideas

In a letter to Mersenne written in 1641, Descartes distinguishes two classes of ideas, the ideas of pure mind (*idées de pur esprit*), and ideas which are 'phantasms' attributable to the senses and the imagination (AT III 395: CSMK 186). The latter are thoroughly confusing and misleading for the purposes of metaphysics and mathematical physics, but extremely beneficial for the health and safety of the human being, the mind–body composite (most of the Sixth Meditation is devoted to explaining this). All the ideas relating to what Locke was later to call 'sensible qualities' come into this latter category—the ideas relating to the external senses such as those of colour and taste and smell, and the ideas relating to the internal senses, e.g. of pain.

What sort of intentionality, if any, do these sensory ideas possess? As later developed by Malebranche, the answer seems to be: *none*. Malebranche firmly distinguishes between the mental phenomena he calls *sentiments*,[17] which are purely subjective and lack any intentionality (do not have representational content), and what he calls ideas in the strict sense; the

[17] The term embraces not only 'internal' sensations such as pain, but also mental phenomena such as colour perceptions. Cf. Jolley, *Light of the Soul*, 60.

latter involve objects of cognition—abstract items that exist over and above any subjective mode of consciousness. Please distinguish, Malebranche insists in the *Dialogues on Metaphysics* (1687), between knowledge and mere sensation: 'Je vous ai exhorté à vous accoutumer à reconnaître … la différence qu'il y a entre connaître et sentir, entre nos idées claires et nos sentiments toujours obscurs et confus.'[18]

A plausible rationale for the underlying thought here is that intentionality is closely associated with language: an idea in the strict sense (what Descartes calls an 'idea of pure mind') has a *linguistically expressible content,* and in virtue of this it enables us to arrive at a representation of real objects, including, for example, triangles and God—objects which fall under the rubric of extended or thinking substance. We can formulate propositions describing these substances, and characterizing their essential attributes and the various modes of those attributes. Sensory phantasms, by contrast, are mere internal sensations lacking anything that could be called propositional content. Both Malebranche and—sometimes—Descartes talk about them in a way that suggests they are characterized merely by a distinctive phenomenology: beyond that, any attempt to say what they are 'about' falters and tails off into mere gesturing. Compare, in the Sixth Meditation, Descartes's awkwardly hesitant and wholly non-cognitive talk of pain as that 'curious I know-not-what sensation' (*iste nescio-quod doloris sensus*). Note the so-called 'strong' demonstrative *iste*, rather than the more neutral *hic* or *ille*; in Latin this is often used as a kind of 'shuddering' or pejorative demonstrative (*non erit* iste *amicitia sed mercatura* says Cicero: '*that* [shuddering] will not be friendship but a commercial transaction').[19] Descartes goes on in the same passage to talk of hunger as a *nescio-quae vellicatio ventriculi*—an 'I-know-not-what tugging in the stomach'. The 'nescio-quae' (*je ne sais quelle,* in French) conveys more than just imprecision: the sense is that there is something here that defies cognitive description, that eludes linguistic representation. It calls to mind (may even conceivably be the source for) Hegel's later account of 'sense-certainty' as a mere particular given, something too particular and unmediated to serve as a basis for anything that could be called knowledge, something that is *Das Unwahre, Unvernunftige,*

[18] 'I have encouraged you to accustom yourself to recognise the difference there is between knowledge and sense-perception, between our clear ideas and our invariably obscure and confused sensations.' *Entretiens sur la Métaphysique* [1687], Dialogue III §9.

[19] Cicero, *De natura deorum* [45 BC], bk. I, conclusion.

bloss Gemeinte ('untrue, irrational, simply gestured at'.)[20] What Hegel is suggesting (I think) is that though we may think we 'mean' something when we point to a sensory datum, there is nothing that can coherently be expressed in language.

All this impinges in a fairly crucial way on the famous thesis of Franz Brentano that intentionality is the hallmark of the mental. If sensory ideas lack intentionality, we would be forced to modify Brentano's thesis, or at least expand it to a disjunctive list, in the manner, for example, of Richard Rorty, who argues that for something to be classed as mental it must fall into one or other of *two* domains, the intentional or the phenomenological.[21] Mental states, on this view, include, on the one hand, propositional states such as beliefs and desires, which are about something, and, on the other hand, raw feels or sensations, which are mental in virtue of being present to consciousness in a certain characteristic way, despite the fact that (in some cases at least) they lack any intentional content.[22] It might seem from our analysis so far that Descartes's view of the mind corresponds pretty much to the schema canvassed by Rorty: on the one hand we have pure ideas (Malebranche's ideas proper), which have representational content, expressible in language, and are about something; on the other hand we have sensory ideas (Malebranche's *sentiments*), which have a characteristic phenomenology but are not about anything, and are not associated with any cognitive content expressible in language. Well, perhaps that is Descartes's view. But I want in the final two sections of this chapter to underline the philosophical problems that beset such a view, and to argue that Descartes is in a position to offer a different and arguably better account.

5. Beyond Phenomenology

One of philosophy's principal tasks, now as in the seventeenth century, is to explore how mental phenomena can be integrated into the rest of our conceptual scheme. But if sensations are characterized in raw

[20] G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* [1807], sect. 110.

[21] R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).

[22] The dichotomy is not meant by Rorty to be an exclusive one: it allows for the possibility of mental states—for example being angry with someone—which have an intentional object as well as a phenomenological aspect.

phenomenological terms, unrelated on the one hand to our linguistic and cognitive capacities, yet on the other hand implying mental activity that goes beyond mere physiological and behavioural response, they risk becoming mysterious *sui-generis* items beyond the reach of scientific or philosophical understanding. From the scientific point of view, if they are accessible only from a subjective perspective, then either they turn out to be 'nomological danglers', detached from the objective laws of science, or—even if they can somehow be *correlated* with physiological or functional properties—their intrinsic character remains beyond the reach of scientific understanding. Moreover, there are also serious difficulties on the conceptual side: familiar Wittgensteinian arguments against private meaning pose intractable problems for the notion of sensory items as 'semantic danglers', detached from objective rules of meaning, and identifiable only by a mysterious process of internal baptism ('I name thee ''Hunger'' ').

Descartes himself was by instinct an integrator, and if we interpret the strange, seemingly isolated world of his metaphysical meditations in the light of the rest of his philosophy, we discover a far richer and more integrated account of the nature of sensations. In the essay on *Optics* (*La Dioptrique*) published with the *Discourse on the Method* in 1637, one of Descartes's targets is the popular construal of ideas as images, which inclines us to think that the representational powers of the mind must operate via the construction of something quasi-pictorial. The pictorial model might seem nice and simple, but it is not as straightforward as it looks. 'Engravings', says Descartes, 'consist simply of a little ink placed here and there on a piece of paper,' but manage thereby to 'represent to us forests, towns, people and even battles and storms'; and 'although they make us think of countless different qualities, it is only in the case of shape that there is any real resemblance'. But in any case, argues Descartes, representation can be achieved in the absence of anything that is remotely pictorial: 'we should recall that our mind can be stimulated by many things other than images—by signs and words, for example' (AT VI 112–13: CSM I 165). What Descartes is unmistakably telling us here is that *representation need not imply resemblance*; and this in turn allows room for the possibility that a mental item can have intentionality, can be about something, even though there is nothing in its intrinsic qualities to yield anything like a transparent match between *representans* and *representatum*. The problem, he notes in the *Optics*, is to discover how brain events can 'enable the soul to have

sensory awareness of all the various qualities of the object to which they correspond, not to know how they can resemble those objects' (AT VI 113: CSM I 166).

Descartes, like Locke and many other early-modern philosophers, often stresses that our ideas of colour, say, do not resemble anything in external objects. But what the passages from the *Optics* show is that this need be no bar to their having intentional content. And the more closely one looks at what Descartes says about sensory ideas, the more it emerges that they are indeed representational. They involve something's being 'indicated to the mind' (*menti exhibere*, Sixth Meditation, AT VII 88 line 9). When the foot is damaged, there arises in the soul a sensory idea, which indicates that something untoward is happening in the foot, and which has the function of 'stimulating the mind to do its best to get rid of the cause of the pain' (ibid.). Now this kind of idea is not like the clear and distinct perceptions of the intellect. It does not represent certain patterns of extended substance—it does not, so to speak, give us a computer printout of the position and shape of all the affected particles in the environment and in the nervous system. But a moment's reflection reveals that, for creatures of finite intellect, such information would be useless to the point of dangerousness. An airline pilot who had to analyse a computer printout before being able to take evasive action would still be at work with his calculator and log tables when the crash occurred. Instead, he is alerted to the danger by various crude but effective devices—warning buzzers or flashing lights. These represent the relevant information very selectively, and in highly schematic and simplified form, but one that enables the necessary decisions to be taken quickly. This is exactly how it is with respect to human beings and their bodies. Sensory ideas are indeed about something: they convey information about the internal states of our bodies, and the relationship between our bodies and the environment. But the mode whereby such representation is effected is entirely unlike that which operates in the case of the mathematical ideas employed by the physicist: instead of a transparent presentation of configurations and properties as they obtain in the extended world, there is a kind of opacity. The structure of the relevant objects does not correspond to my sensory grasp of them; but the sensory grasp is adequate for survival purposes—indeed more effective for those purposes than a more transparent representation would be.

Is this consistent with Descartes's apparent talk elsewhere of the confused and indistinct nature of sensory awareness? I think it is; and to explain how, it may be useful to draw an analogy with Sigmund Freud's account of how things are represented in dreams. In the *Traumdeutung* (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1900), Freud introduces the notion of *representation in displaced form*:

> The ... species of displacement which occurs in dream formation ... results in a *colourless and abstract* expression ... being exchanged for a *pictorial and concrete* one. The advantage, and accordingly the purpose of such a change jumps to the eyes. A thing that is pictorial is, from the point of view of a dream, a thing that is capable of being represented: it can be introduced into a situation in which abstract expressions offer the same kind of difficulties of representation in dreams as a political leading article in a newspaper would offer to an illustrator ... The dream seeks to reduce the dispersed dream-thoughts to the most succinct and unified expression possible ...[23]

The analogy is a powerful one, irrespective of whether one buys the wider Freudian theory of the psychoanalytic significance of dream experience. The central point is that the dreaming mind is ill-equipped to cope with certain kinds of information except in a displaced and stylized form. And similarly, the Cartesian view is that the human being is ill-equipped for survival unless the realities of the extended universe (the 'colourless and abstract' molecular configurations in the environment and in our own bodies) are represented in a displaced and stylized form. From a cognitive point of view, sensory ideas are representationally inadequate; but from a functional point of view, they do the job of enabling us to take the appropriate actions to preserve the health of the mind–body composite.

The analogy can be pressed further. Just as, if Freud is correct, the symbols that appear in dreams need to be deciphered, via the psychoanalytic process, if we are to achieve a full understanding of what is really going on, so in Cartesian science, the deliverances of the senses need to be decoded if we are to achieve an adequate understanding of what the reality of the world is like.[24] 'If we say we see colour in an object,' says

[23] S. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* [*Traumdeutung*, 1900], ch. 6; emphasis added. In *Standard Edition of Complete Works*, trans. J. Strachey, iv.

[24] Compare Jean-Luc Marion, *Sur la théologie blanche de Descartes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991).

Descartes, 'this amounts to saying that we see something there of which we are completely ignorant' (*Principles*, pt. I art. 68). Or again: 'when we say that we perceive colours in objects, this really must be the same as saying that we perceive something in the objects whose nature we do not know, but which produces in us a very vivid sensation which we call the sensation of colour' (art. 70). The Cartesian scientist, like the Freudian psychoanalyst, needs to 'crack the code'—not, of course, the code used by the mind in dreams, but the code encapsulated (whether naturally or by divine decree) in our sensory awareness. Visual sensations, says Descartes in his early treatise *Le Monde*, are 'signs established by nature'; what it is that is signified remains to be discovered.

6. The Boundaries of the Mental

If sensory ideas are like signs, if they do have intentionality (even though the mode of representation involves a certain sort of opacity), then Descartes's approach to mentality turns out to match Brentano's rather closely. Intentionality does indeed turn out to be the hallmark of the mental, and what is given in sensory awareness does not need to be classified separately, as pure, non-intentional phenomenology. Cartesian sensory ideas represent, crudely and schematically, certain states or events: 'something nasty is occurring to my left foot'; 'here is a flower of a distinctive visual hue'. There is clearly intentional content here: we are dealing with something much richer than mere 'natural meaning'—'those clouds mean rain'; 'those rings mean the tree is fifty years old'—since when I have a sensory idea this involves a directedness of thought towards my own internal condition, and/or the condition of the environment.[25]

Even if the claim just made is correct, the question nonetheless arises as to whether sensory states such as being in pain, or seeing a yellow colour, may not involve, and involve essentially, something *more* than just the presentation of ideas with a certain intentional content. Those who believe in this 'more', this raw, non-intentional residue, rely on what we

[25] Arguably, even when I am subject to a vague feeling e.g. of anxiety or euphoria (without any specific object of dread or elation), the feeling can still be said to be directed on something—myself. (See T. Crane, 'Intentionality', in E. Craig (ed.), *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998).)

nowadays think of as the Nagelian dimension: the subjective or qualitative aspect of a sensory idea, the *way it is* for the experiencing subject. And this is supposed to be a further fact, not captured by the intentional content of the sensory idea (nor indeed by the purely physical properties of its bodily counterpart).[26] In favour of this view is what seems to many to be an intuitively clear gulf between merely *believing* that, for example, one's foot is being damaged (plus desiring to remove it from the noxious source), and *feeling* that damage as a *painful* stimulus (though for functionalists, of course, the alleged gulf could be shown to disappear in the light of a correct analysis of the complex pattern of input–output relations involved). Against the view in question is the philosophical difficulty (already touched on) of giving a coherent account of such 'qualia', construed as items beyond the reach both of linguistic contents on the one side, and of even the fullest functional-cum-physiological account of the workings of our bodies on the other.

As far as Descartes was concerned, there are at least two pieces of evidence that he was from time to time (rightly or wrongly) drawn to the notion of sensory qualia in the sense just alluded to. The first is the fact, already noted, that he refers to sensations such as hunger and pain in a way that suggests they have an irreducible and indescribable phenomenology—the 'I know not what' aspect. The second piece of evidence is Descartes's assertion (which I have discussed elsewhere)[27] that God bestows kinds of sensation on his creatures in a fashion that Leibniz scathingly called *arbitrary*: God simply decrees, Descartes sometimes suggests, that sensations of such a kind, rather than of another kind, should 'arise' in our souls when our brains are stimulated in a certain way. Thus, talking of damage to the foot, and its associated nerve stimulations and brain events, Descartes suggests that 'God could have made the nature of man such that this particular motion generated an entirely different kind of sensation in the mind' (AT VII 88: CSM II 60). Now if sensations involve access to intrinsic qualities that can be arbitrarily bestowed or withheld at will by the Deity, then the secular analogue of this is that there is part of the

[26] Thus Crane (op. cit.) invokes qualia to suggest that pains have essential non-intentional *properties*. Though I cannot defend this here, I am myself inclined to the view that qualia talk is best analysed in terms of abilities and dispositions (of 'knowing how' rather than 'knowing that'), and hence that it is misguided to think that *properties* (and hence *facts*) are involved here.

[27] See J. Cottingham, 'Descartes on Colour', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 90/3 (1989–90), 231–46; repr. as Ch. 7, below.

mental realm that has an intrinsic nature that lies beyond either intentional content on the one hand or physical reduction on the other. If this can indeed be laid at Descartes's door, then he is father to a long history of philosophical puzzles: Locke's bizarre suggestion that your violet could be my marigold, and the whole barrage of arguments—qualia swaps, inverted spectrums, and the like, which have bedevilled the philosophy of mind ever since.

The term 'bedevilled' is appropriate here for the reason that, if qualia are really as 'arbitrary' and 'free-floating' as this story suggests, then it seems they might belong to anything—chimpanzees, goldfish, even tomatoes. Without any scientific basis for connecting the occurrence of qualia with either propositional thoughts on the one hand, or physiological or behavioural states on the other, we appear to be plunged into a problem of other minds so acute that total scepticism threatens. Of course there are attempted replies to this, and clearly I do not have the space to launch into this vexed issue here (though I will briefly touch on one aspect of it in bringing this discussion to a close). The relevant point I want to pick out for the present purpose is that if Descartes really was a wholehearted qualia-merchant, then we might expect him to line up with the sceptics on what mental states could or could not be attributed to other creatures. But in fact he generally takes both a firm (non-sceptical, non-hesitant) and also an austere (that is to say, restrictive) line, adamantly refusing the attribution of mentality to non-human creatures. Let me conclude this survey of Descartes's account of the mind and its objects by focusing on the special problem posed by animal sensations.

Descartes has taken a lot of stick for characterizing animals as mechanical automata—a thesis that is taken to imply a denial that, for example, they can be in pain. The truth of the matter, I think, is that Descartes often adopts a *reductionist* stance about sensation (and for that matter, locomotion, nutrition, memory, and a lot of other faculties), but that his reductions are not *eliminativist*: he does not *deny* any of these faculties to animals, or indeed to the mechanical android described in the *Treatise on Man*; he merely attempts to explain their workings in micro-mechanical terms.[28] What he does deny is that these faculties and events are *mental*.

[28] See my 'Cartesian Dualism: Theology, Metaphysics and Science', in J. Cottingham (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), esp. 246 ff.

But (I hear you cry) if he denies mentality to animals, doesn't that mean they can't have sensations? It depends what you mean by mentality, and it depends what you mean by sensations. I have suggested that the dominant account of mental states in Descartes is that they are intentional states with a propositional content; this applies primarily to pure intellectual representations, but secondarily to sensory representations, which still have intentional content, albeit of a rather special and schematic kind. It fits in rather well with this that the famous discussion of animals in Part Five of the *Discourse* is almost entirely concerned with the refusal to attribute *linguistic* abilities to them—a refusal which (aside from the marginal and still debated case of chimpanzees) is surely entirely correct. So what is denied to animals by this reasoning? Not, as I have just explained, that they can be in pain, or be hungry, or see objects in the environment; all these statements remain true, and reductively explained. What is denied is that they have sensory *ideas*. But that, surely, is, once again, entirely correct. Given what I take it we agree, that animals have no access to propositional content, it is hard to see how one could defend the notion of their having ideas, in the sense of representational mental states. For in the light of the Cartesian analysis that I unfolded earlier, this would have to come out as—absurdly—the subjects' having access to 'signs' which they were wholly incapable, *even in principle*, of interpreting linguistically, let alone decoding into the language of mathematical science.

If the points made in the last two paragraphs are conceded, then Descartes's position with respect to the mental life of animals is neither suspect because he denies they can see or be in pain (for he does not deny that such properties, reductively explained, can be ascribed to them), nor because of his denial that they have representational states (since such a denial, if 'representational' is construed propositionally, is eminently defensible). So what remains to object to in his position? Presumably, that his view threatens to rob animals of 'qualia'—that it denies that animals are the subjects of raw phenomenological states of an entirely non-linguistic kind. Yet how, given the way qualia are supposed to be accessed, namely from an entirely subjective standpoint, can we possibly know whether such a denial is correct or incorrect? The worry whether we should tack access-to-qualia onto animals (or for that matter onto goldfish or tomatoes) seems entirely intractable. It is important to see, moreover, that this is not just an epistemological problem. In the absence of an account in terms of intentional linguistic content on the one hand, or the possibility of reductive

explanation in terms of physiology and behaviour on the other, we are left entirely without any criteria for the attribution of such qualia-access to others. So the supposed problem of leaving no room for animal qualia can hardly, I suggest, be a decisive objection to the Cartesian position, for the simple reason that we are now in an area beyond the bounds of the sayable.

I want to end, however, with a concession. Though I think the Cartesian position is broadly defensible, suspicions may remain that it draws the boundaries of the mental too narrowly. Most people, one suspects, would be fairly happy to deny mentality to cockroaches and goldfish, but intuitively inclined to extend it to dogs. Do we not want to allow for some kind of mentation that falls short of the full propositional intentionality of the language-user, yet goes beyond the mere teleology of the wasp or the shark? I tend to agree that we do. When we see a group of chimpanzees chasing a monkey, gesturing, throwing stones, screaming with excitement, we are strongly inclined to maintain that the screams are 'about' something, albeit in a rudimentary way.

One way of understanding what is going on here is in terms of what Marcia Cavell has dubbed 'pre-intentionality' (a term she uses to describe the responses of infants at the pre-language stage). The behaviour in question can indeed be about something, in so far as it forms part of a complex interactive context in which *X* recognizes a mutuality in respect of its dealings with *Y*. The baby begins to learn that its smiling responses to the mother's smile elicit further complex maternal responses, and so on. In short, Cavellian 'pre-intentional' behaviour is intentional in a rudimentary sense, which can be cashed out, in a Wittgensteinian way, by focusing on a complex network of social practices: 'the path the child travels in learning to *mean* will be the same as that which teaches her something about the responses of another, about how to elicit those responses, and to know that something she has done is the reason why the other is responding as he is'.[29] I should add that it is hard not to agree that something similar is going on when the dog fetches its lead and lays it at the feet of the master—something that may or may not have been done to Descartes by his own pet dog, whom, significantly, he named '*Monsieur* Grat'.[30]

[29] Marcia Cavell, *The Psychoanalytic Mind: From Freud to Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 122. See further my review of Cavell, in *Philosophical Quarterly*, 46/182 (Jan. 1996), 134–6.

[30] Adrien Baillet, *La Vie de M. Des-Cartes* [1691], ii. 455–6; see also AT v 133.

It is these genuine, if rudimentary, cases of intentionality that make us want to extend the boundaries of the mental to at least some animals. But if this is supposed to be a victory over Descartes, it is a Pyrrhic one. For the dominant Cartesian thesis (or the Descartes–Brentano thesis, as one may perhaps now be allowed to call it) is that intentionality exhausts the domain of the mental. The Cavellian strategy just canvassed either works or it does not (there is no space for me to evaluate it here). If it fails, then Descartes's restriction of mentality to humans is not threatened. If it succeeds, then mentality can be extended to animals, but only in so far as intentionality turns out to be stretchable a little way beyond the linguistic domain; and this would turn out to be a perfectly benign extension, since it can be cashed out in terms of the complex interactive patterns of mutually recognized purposes among relatively intelligent creatures. Such cases will remain, to be sure, on the borderline of the mental; but a grey area here is something that after Darwin we should accept, and indeed expect. Descartes's creaking ontology, of course, is something that does not support grey areas: you either have an immaterial soul or you don't. But if I am right, he nonetheless went a long way towards identifying, correctly, intentionality as the feature delimiting the boundary of the mental. And the identification of such a property remains a significant philosophical achievement despite the demise of the incorporeal substrate in which Descartes misguidedly insisted that any such property must inhere.

We can see in conclusion that Descartes's view of the mental is Janus-faced. He was sporadically attracted by ineffability, the mind as private theatre, the raw phenomenology of the 'I-know-not-what' inner feeling—the whole catalogue of tangles so often pejoratively labelled 'Cartesian'. But what I have called his dominant view was that when we have taken out all the aspects that can be fully explained physiologically and behaviourally, we are left with a residual realm of the mental that can adequately be characterized in terms of the capacities of language-users and the intentional content of ideas. It is an ambitious and in some ways revisionary view, which prefigures post-Kantian conceptualist accounts of the mental domain. And it may very well be correct.