Cartesian Sensations
Raffaella De Rosa*
Rutgers University-Newark

Abstract
Descartes maintained that sensations of color and the like misrepresent the material world in normal circumstances. Some prominent scholars have argued that, to explain this Cartesian view, we must attribute to Descartes a causal account of sensory representation. I contend that neither the arguments motivating this reading nor the textual evidence offered in its support is sufficient to justify such attribution. Both textual and theoretical reasons point in the direction of an (at least partial) internalist account of Descartes’ views on sensory representation.

What is Descartes’ considered view on sensations of color and the like? Although Descartes claims that sensations of secondary qualities misrepresent the material world (and properties thereof) throughout his whole body of work, he never provides an explicit account of the mechanisms of sensory representation and misrepresentation. Besides, Descartes’ view that ideas of secondary qualities represent their objects as other than they are in normal circumstances creates the following exegetical and theoretical predicament: What theory of mental representation did allow Descartes to hold this view?

Different motivations have led different scholars to claim that a causal account of Cartesian sensations provides the best answer to all of the above questions. Not only would such an account explain why sensations represent the material world, but also why they misrepresent it. Since Wilson (1990) and Schmaltz (1992) laid the groundwork for a causal account of Cartesian sensations, I will base my discussion of causal accounts on their arguments.2

First, I will present Descartes’ views on sensations of color and the like, explain the sense in which sensations represent their objects as other than they are and discuss the predicament that this claim introduces vis-à-vis Descartes’ overall internalist theory of ideas. Second, I will examine the arguments and textual evidence by which it has been argued that causal accounts provide the best, and most natural, explanation of Descartes’ view that sensations represent material objects although they represent them as other than they are. Finally, I will argue that, despite its prima-facie attractiveness, a causal account of the representationality of sensations cannot be attributed to Descartes. The texts simply fail to support it. Not only are the texts compatible with an (at least partial) internalist explanation of sensory representation and misrepresentation; but also the best available attempt to justify the attribution of a causal account to Descartes on the basis of one major text (viz., Meditation Six) has the opposite effect of revealing the necessity of reintroducing an internalist element in Descartes’ account of sensory representation. The explanation of what this internalist story may be and how it relates with the etiology of sensations, however, is something which goes beyond the scope of this paper.

1. Cartesian Sensations: Misrepresenting Representations

In Meditation Three, Descartes writes that the term ‘idea’, strictly speaking, applies only to that class of thoughts that exhibit intentionality (‘Some of my thoughts are as it were the
images of things, and it is only in these cases that the term ‘idea’ is strictly appropriate’ (CSM II 25; AT VII 37). Descartes then includes perceptions of ‘light and colors, sounds, smells, tastes, heat and cold, and the other tactile qualities’ in the list of representative ideas (CSM II 30; AT VII 43; see also CSM II 26; AT VII 38) and refers to them as ideas of corporeal things (Quantum autem ad ideas rerum corporalium) (AT VII 43; CSM II 29).

But ideas of color and the like, he goes on to claim, constitute a special class of ideas. They are ‘materially false’ insofar as they ‘represent non-things as things’:

[...] material falsity [...] occurs in ideas when they represent non-things as things. For example, the ideas I have of heat and cold contain so little clarity and distinctness that they do not enable me to tell whether cold is merely the absence of heat or vice versa, or whether both of them are real qualities, or neither is. And since there can be no ideas which are not as it were of things, if it is true that cold is nothing but the absence of heat, the idea which represents it to me as something real and positive deserves to be called false [...] (CSM II 30; AT VII 43–44).

For several reasons, Descartes’ claim that the idea of cold represents a non-thing as a thing is to be interpreted metaphorically to mean that ideas of secondary qualities represent their objects (viz., the material world and properties thereof) as other than they are (as resembling the felt sensations) in normal circumstances. So, for example, the idea of red is materially false because it represents a mode of res extensa as resembling the felt sensation of redness.3

Antoine Arnauld was the first one to object that Descartes’ account of sensory representation is ‘inconsistent with [Descartes’] own principles’ (CSM II 145; AT VII 206), viz., the ‘theory’ of ideas outlined in Meditation Three and its related causal principle. Arnauld takes these principles to outline what I will call ‘a descriptivist account of ideas’ (DA), whose tenets are:

(DA) (I) Ideas are individuated by their mode of presentation of an object (or objective reality)4;
   (II) The mode of presentation provides an identifying description of the object.5
   (III) The mode of presentation of an idea determines its object so that the idea refers to whatever corresponds to (or satisfies) its mode of presentation.6
   (I)–(III), imply (IV): for an idea to be an idea of n it cannot represent n as other than n is (on pain of not being the idea of n).

Arnauld objected that DA rules out the very possibility of sensory misrepresentation as it rules out cases where an idea refers to a certain object (a non-thing), but presents a different one to the mind (a positive thing). According to (II), an idea contains the identifying description of the object and so, as (IV) implies, an idea cannot represent its object n as other than n is (on pain of not being the idea of n). So, Arnauld concludes, there cannot be an idea of cold that represents cold as something positive (i.e., as a property of body resembling the felt sensation) if cold is a privation (i.e., if there is no such property of body). Here is how Arnauld puts it:

[...] there cannot be an idea of cold which represents it to me as a positive thing [because] [...] what is the idea of cold? It is coldness itself in so far as it exists objectively in the intellect. But if cold is an absence, it cannot exist in the intellect by means of an idea whose objective existence is a positive entity. Therefore, if cold is merely an absence, there cannot be a positive idea of it, and hence there cannot be an idea which is materially false. (CSM II 145; AT VII 206, emphasis added)

[...] what does the idea of cold, which you say is materially false, represent to your mind? An absence? But in that case it is true. A positive entity? But in that case it is not the idea of cold (CSM II 146; AT VII 207)
Arnauld asks us to suppose that we learn that cold, which we have always thought to be a positive property, is a privation. Then, he continues, according to Descartes’ DA, the idea of cold presents it to the mind as either the absence of heat, and in that case the idea is true, or as a positive entity, and in that case the idea is not the idea of cold. Consequently, under DA, it is impossible to have ideas that misrepresent their objects.

Descartes did not always call ideas of secondary qualities ‘materially false.’ However, he did hold consistently throughout his body of work that ideas of sense misrepresent the material world insofar as they are obscure and confused ideas that represent their objects (i.e., bodies) as something other than they actually are (that is, as instantiating properties they do not actually instantiate). In his replies to Arnauld, Descartes already clarifies that sensory ideas are materially false because they are obscure and confused and, so, we are ‘unable to judge whether or not what [they] [represent] to me is something positive which exists outside of my sensation’ (CSM II 164; AT VII 234). He also urges us to keep in mind the distinction between the clear and distinct ideas of the intellect and the obscure and confused ideas of the senses:

When [Arnauld] says that the idea of cold ‘is coldness itself in so far as it exists objectively in the intellect’ I think we need to make a distinction. For it often happens in the case of confused and obscure ideas […] that an idea is referred to something other than that of which it is in fact the idea. (CSM II 163; AT VII 233).

Here, Descartes claims that Arnauld’s objection (viz., that Descartes’ DA makes it impossible for the idea of cold to misrepresent) is ill-founded because the idea of cold is an obscure and confused idea and DA applies to ideas that are not obscure and confused, that is, (presumably) clear and distinct ideas. Sensory ideas, then, can be said to misrepresent insofar as they are obscure and confused.

In the Meditations, sensations are said to be confused and obscure ideas that belong to the mind–body union. This becomes clear in Meditation Six where Descartes claims that our nature as a combination of mind and body (CSM II 57; AT VII 82) teaches us (erroneously) that

the heat in a body is something exactly resembling the idea of heat which is in me; or that when a body is white or green, the selfsame whiteness or greenness which I perceive through my senses is present in the body; or that in a body which is bitter or sweet there is the selfsame taste which I experience, and so on. (CSM II 57; AT VII 82).

Similarly, in Principles I.48, Descartes claims that the sensations of color, sound, smell and the like ‘arise from the close and intimate union of our mind with our body’ (CSM I 209; AT VIII A 23; see also CSM I 279–282; AT VIII A 315–318); and he indicates in subsequent sections (see, especially, Principles I. 46 and 66–71) that the perceptions of color and the like are confused perceptions of bodies (insofar as we perceive color and pain as if they existed in either a body or in some part of our body in a way that resembles our perception of them) and, hence, lead to erroneous judgments about the external world.

In the Passions of the Soul, Descartes includes perceptual sensations (i.e., sensations of color and taste) in the general definition of the passions and lists them ‘among those perceptions which the close alliance between the soul and the body renders confused and obscure’ (CSM I 339; AT XI 350). But in what sense are the sensations of color and the like obscure and confused, according to the Descartes of the Passions of the Soul? In various passages, Descartes indicates that these sensations represent bodies. In Part I, section 17, he writes that perceptual sensations are called passions because they are received by
the soul ‘from the things that are represented by them’ (CSM I 335; AT XI 342, emphasis added); and in many other sections of Part I, Descartes claims that the sensations of color, cold, light and so on are received in us from external bodies. It follows that Descartes is saying that sensations are representations of their causes, i.e., bodies. But they are not accurate representations. For example, in section 23 of Part I, Descartes clarifies that when we see the light of a torch and hear the sound of a bell, the sound and the light are two different actions which, simply by producing two different movements in some of our nerves, and through them in our brain, give to the soul two different sensations. (CSM I 337; AT XI 346)

However, ‘we refer these sensations to the subjects we suppose to be their causes in such a way that we think that we see the torch itself and hear the bell’ (AT XI 346; CSM I 337) whereas in actuality we have ‘sensory perception merely of the movements coming from these objects’ (CSM I 337; AT XI 346). In the same way, when we have the perception of cold we experience cold as if it were in the object which causes it (CSM I 337; AT XI 347), whereas the object only causes the movements in our nerves that make the mind have the sensation of cold. So, even in the Passions of the Soul, Descartes holds the view that perceptual sensations are confused representations of bodies insofar as they lead us to make erroneous judgment regarding them.

In conclusion, whether Descartes refers to ideas of secondary qualities as materially false or as obscure and confused his view is that they misrepresent the material world and they are responsible for our mistaken judgments about it. Hence, Arnauld-like questions remain wide open. If sensory ideas are misrepresentations of their objects, they must represent them. But then what theory of mental representation would account for why sensory ideas represent their objects as other than they are in normal circumstances? Did Descartes hold an internalist account of sensory representation but with sufficient qualifications that allowed Descartes to dismiss Arnauld’s objections? Or do we have to infer that Descartes held a theory of sensory representation that wreaks havoc with his overall internalism?

2. Causal Accounts of Sensory Representation and Misrepresentation

Margaret Wilson was the first to provide an answer to this cluster of questions. Rather than concluding that Descartes is not entitled to the notion of misrepresentation, given his internalist theory of ideas (as Arnauld had suggested), Wilson argues that the case of materially false ideas is evidence that Descartes did not have an overall internalist account of ideas. According to Wilson (1990), in the case of sensory ideas, Descartes would be using ‘representation’ ambiguously in both a presentational and a referential sense:

[...]

The notion of referential content is to be understood ‘as a way of expressing the non-presentational element’, viz., as determined independently of its presentational content:

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 [...], 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 that may be.\textsuperscript{11}

So, the \textit{referential content} of ideas, according to Wilson’s Descartes, is determined relationally (viz., by a causal relation with the environment) as opposed to being determined by the presentational content of the idea (viz., by a description of the object associated with the idea). And the \textit{presentational content} consists in the way in which the object appears to us (quite independently of how the object actually is).\textsuperscript{12}

The distinction between presentational and referential representation is \textit{forced on us}, argues Wilson, because if the referential content were determined by the presentational content (along the lines of DA), we could not explain material falsity (or sensory misrepresentation), as Arnauld pointed out. But once we take the referential content of the idea to be determined by a causal connection with its right object, we can explain why sensory ideas represent their objects as other than they are. An idea may referentially represent its true object (because it is caused by it in the right way) although it presents it to the mind as other than it actually is. Accordingly, the idea of cold may represent its true object (i.e., a mode of \textit{res extensa}) as other than it is (i.e., as resembling the sensation of cold).

Wilson cites Descartes’ replies to Arnauld as the only textual support for her interpretation. In response to Arnauld’s claim that the idea of cold is coldness itself insofar as it exists objectively in the understanding, Descartes urges the necessity of distinguishing clear and distinct ideas from the obscure and confused ideas of sense:

\[\ldots\text{ we need to make a distinction. For it often happens in the case of obscure and confused ideas \ldots}\text{ that an idea is referred to something other than that of which it is in fact an idea (\textit{ut ad aliud referantur quam ad id cuius revera ideae sunt}). Thus if cold is simply an absence, the idea of cold is not coldness itself as it exists objectively in the intellect, but something else, which I erroneously mistake for this absence, namely a sensation which in fact has no existence outside the intellect. (CSM II 163; AT VII 233)}\]

Descartes indicates that we need to draw a distinction between ideas whose presentational content is obscure and confused (sensory ideas) and ideas whose content is clear and distinct (the ideas of the intellect). Only in the latter case, Descartes claims, presentational and referential content correspond (so as to suggest that the former determines the latter along the lines of DA). But in the former case the situation is different. The idea of cold represents its object (i.e., coldness, whatever it turns out to be) as other than it is (as resembling the sensation). The important thing to notice, argues Wilson, is that Descartes, even under the pressure of Arnauld’s criticism, sticks to his view that the idea of cold is still the idea of cold even if cold does not resemble the sensation of cold. According to Wilson, Descartes claims that the idea of cold is \textit{a sensation that presents something (referantur) other than that of which it is in fact an idea (cold as it is in nature)}.\textsuperscript{13} So, Descartes believes that an idea can provide a false presentation of cold \textit{while remaining the idea of cold} (contra what Arnauld had argued). Wilson’s reasoning is that only a referential sense of representation would allow Descartes to maintain this. A distinction between the two senses of ‘representation’ is required since what the idea (referentially) represents is \textit{not} determined by what it (presentationally) represents. And since an idea may referentially represent \textit{n} but presentationally represent \textit{n} as other than \textit{n} is, the idea misrepresents its ‘correct’ object and provides the material for error.\textsuperscript{14}

Although highly influential, Wilson’s causal account of Cartesian sensations is also highly sketchy. Wilson admits that neither Descartes nor she on Descartes’ behalf ‘develop [the causal account] fully, to create a theory immune to counter-examples.’\textsuperscript{15}
Moreover, Wilson never identifies any Cartesian doctrine that supports the causal reading. To the contrary, she admits that this reading may be difficult to reconcile, for example, with the Cartesian claim that ‘non-existents can be referentially represented’. In conclusion, Wilson proposes this causal reading mostly on ‘in principle’ reasons. As she puts it, attributing the causal account of sensation to Descartes, ‘seems necessary to make good sense of his response to Arnauld’s objection’ where he defends the notion of misrepresentation.

A more textually grounded causal account has been offered by Tad Schmaltz. Schmaltz (1992) identifies the causal principle of Meditation Three and its employment in the proof of the existence of material things in Meditation Six as, respectively, the Cartesian doctrine and textual evidence that support the attribution of a causal account of sensation to Descartes. Schmaltz interprets the causal principle of Meditation Three as a containment principle implying that $X$ is the formal cause of the objective reality of an idea only if $x$ contains properties similar to the properties contained objectively in the idea. Against many scholars who have argued the opposite, Schmaltz claims that the similarity condition on formal causation is what allows the causal action of bodies on minds. He claims that ideas of secondary qualities, for Descartes, like all ideas, have both formal and objective reality. Their formal reality consists in their being mental acts with a certain phenomenal content. Their objective reality consists in representing bodies as having the properties of extension, shape and size. And once we distinguish between the formal and objective reality of ideas this way, we can argue that bodies are proper formal causes of our sensory ideas as follows. Although bodies cannot be the causes of the ideas as modes of awareness (since there is nothing in bodies that is the same as the phenomenological aspect of experience), bodies can be the causes of the objective reality of ideas (since bodies contain the same properties of extension and shape that are contained objectively in the ideas). Bodies are, then, partial formal causes of sensory ideas. They are the formal causes of their objective reality (or representational content). The mind is the formal cause of their phenomenal content. In conclusion, Schmaltz’s argument is that sensory ideas represent bodies because they are caused by bodies and that bodies can cause sensory ideas because there is a similarity between bodies and the representational content of ideas. That is what the causal principle allows.

The above argument, according to Schmaltz, is confirmed by the very proof of the existence of material things in Meditation Six. For, there, Descartes employs the causal principle to conclude that bodies are the (formal) causes of our sensory ideas:

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\ldots \text{ in Meditation VI [Descartes] appealed explicitly to [the causal] principle in support of [the] claim [that bodies cause sensory ideas]. He argued there that the cause of sensory ideas must formally or eminently contain what is contained objectively in these ideas. After affirming that it is inconsistent with the veracity of God that the cause of these ideas eminently contain this objective reality, Descartes concludes that bodies must cause the ideas }\ldots \text{ He simply assumes that bodies formally contain what is contained objectively in sensory ideas.}
\]

The argument in Meditation Six would then confirm that bodies are the causes of the objective reality (or representational content) of sensory ideas. The explicit use of the causal principle would warrant this claim, and again what allows bodies to be the causes of sensory ideas is the similarity between the former and the representational content of the latter.

Unlike Wilson, Schmaltz does not center his discussion of Cartesian sensations around the problem of misrepresentation. However, he agrees with Wilson’s overall explanation. What allows Descartes to characterize sensory ideas as systematic ‘representations of their
objects as other than they are’ is the fact that sensory ideas (referentially) represent their right objects in virtue of a causal connection with them. So, ideas referentially represent their true objects independently of how they present them to the mind. In fact, Schmaltz writes, although sensory ideas ‘represent the qualities of bodies in [a] broad sense’ (and here ‘represent the qualities of bodies’ must be taken de re), ‘the mind cannot know simply by introspection which qualities these ideas represent: that is why Descartes called such ideas confused and obscure.’ Accordingly, sensory ideas misrepresent because what they presentationally represent to the mind is different from what the ideas referentially represent.

In conclusion, the claim is that causal accounts of the representationality of sensation are textually grounded and provide the only possible explanation of Descartes’ view that sensory ideas are systematic misrepresentations of their objects. In the next section, however, I will argue that this claim cannot be sustained.

3. Are Causal Accounts Textually Supported?

In this section, I will examine the texts that allegedly motivate and support causal accounts and conclude that they provide insufficient motivation and support. Wilson’s line of argument is that a causal account of sensory representation is forced on us because it is the only possible explanation of Descartes’ defense of the notion of sensory misrepresentation. But pace Wilson, there is an alternative way of explaining why sensory ideas represent their right objects as other than they are that does not invoke a referential sense of representation and is, instead, along the line of Descartes’ overall internalist account of ideas.

Wilson claims that the only way to explain why sensory ideas represent their right objects as other than they are consists in interpreting the phrase ‘represent their right objects’ de re; that is, it consists in invoking a referential sense of representation, according to which the idea is about the object itself (de re) as opposed to being about the object as described by a mode of presentation contained in the idea (de dicto). However, we can take the phrase ‘represent their right objects’ de dicto and explain misrepresentation equally well, roughly, as follows. In sensory representation the phenomenological aspect of sensory experience is mixed up with the world-directedness of the sensory idea (due, for instance, to the latent presence of the intellectual ideas of extension and figure) and, so, we confusedly presentationally represent the (true) object of the idea (i.e., a mode of res extensa) as resembling the sensation. Imagine, for example, that the sensory idea of n presents n as other than n actually is, i.e., as having some property that n does not actually have (as, according to Cartesian physics, bodies do not instantiate any sensible-properties-as-they-are-in-the-soul). This becomes apparent, according to Descartes, once we clarify the sensory content in light of the clear and distinct ideas of the intellect. Accordingly, sensory ideas represent their objects as other than they are because they present the (true) object of thought obscurely and confusedly (viz., as instantiating some properties that the object does not actually instantiate). Notice that no referential sense of representation is invoked here to explain misrepresentation.

Notice, moreover, that this explanation is compatible with Descartes’ replies to Arnauld’s original objection. As we saw above, Arnauld had objected that the notion of material falsity is inconsistent with Descartes’ internalist theory of ideas. He protested: ‘What does the idea of cold which you say is materially false represent to your mind? An absence? But in that case it is true. A positive entity? But in that case it is not the idea of
cold.’ Descartes replies in a way which is at odds with Wilson’s interpretation. He responds:

\textit{That is right (Recte). But my only reason for calling an idea materially false is that owing to the fact that it is obscure and confused, I am unable to judge whether or not what it represents to me is something positive which exists outside of my sensation. (CSM II 164; AT VII 234, emphasis added)}

If Wilson’s interpretation were right, Descartes ought to have simply denied the assumption that drives Arnauld’s objection (viz. that an idea provides the identifying description of its object).\textsuperscript{24} Instead, Descartes agrees with Arnauld’s assumption and clarifies the sense in which sensory ideas ought to be understood to misrepresent their correct objects. Sensory ideas misrepresent because they present their (correct) objects obscurely. Undoubtedly, the emphasis on the confused and obscure feature of these ideas can still be interpreted as implying that the ideas refer to their correct object (in virtue of a causal connection) but present another to the mind (as causal accounts suggest). However, given Descartes’ agreement with Arnauld, an alternative explanation is preferable. Sensory ideas could be presenting their correct objects (in virtue of internal resources) but obscurely (that is, as having some properties that these objects do not actually have).\textsuperscript{25} They would, so to speak, exhibit a \textit{distorted} image of their correct object. This alternative explanation would be consistent with Descartes’ overall internalist account of ideas and with his response to Arnauld. And, so, Descartes’ defense of the notion of sensory misrepresentation vis-à-vis Arnauld’s objections does \textit{not} force us to accept a causal account of Cartesian sensations.

But, besides being motivated by Descartes’ defense of the notion of sensory misrepresentation, causal accounts are also allegedly supported by one major text, that is, Meditation Six. There Descartes writes that the faculty of sensory perception is a passive faculty ‘for receiving (\textit{recipiendi}) and recognizing (\textit{cognoscendi}) the ideas of sensible objects’ (CSM II 55; AT VII 79).\textsuperscript{26} To explain this passive reception, we need to search for ‘an active faculty, either in me or in something else, which produced or brought about these ideas.’ (ibid.) Descartes argues that this active faculty cannot be either the mind as a purely intellectual faculty [as the \textit{reception} of sensory ideas ‘clearly presupposes no intellectual act on my part’ (ibid.)] or the will [as ‘the ideas in questions are produced without my cooperation and often against my will’ (ibid.)]. God would be a deceiver if he caused these ideas in us as we \textit{have a propensity to believe} that they come from external bodies. The only possible conclusion is that material bodies produce these ideas in us. And this proves that body, or corporeal nature, exists as the cause of our sensory ideas.

This argument is read as implying a defense of a causal account of sensations as follows. As what is at stake, in the above argument, is the explanation of why ideas of sense exhibit objective reality (viz. represent bodies), the conclusion that bodies are the causes of our ideas of sense \textit{would imply} that bodies are the causes of the objective reality of sensory ideas. Sensory ideas represent bodies because they are caused by bodies and the explicit use of the causal principle in the proof would warrant this reasoning.

However, there are at least three reasons to doubt the legitimacy of this implication. First, Descartes’ causal principle states some general necessary conditions on efficient causation (‘there must be at least as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause’, CSM II 28; AT VII 40); and it is introduced in Meditation Three to prove whether \textit{there exist} things (other than the mind) on the basis of the \textit{ideas} we have of them (‘If the objective reality of any of my ideas turns out to be so great that I am sure the same reality does not reside in me […]’, and hence that I myself cannot be its
cause, it will necessarily follow that I am not alone in this world, but that some other
thing which is the cause of this idea also exists’ (CSM II 29; AT VII 42). In Meditation
Six, the principle is also invoked to prove the existence of bodies. Once this is clarified,
the mistake of causal readings becomes apparent. Causal accounts like Schmaltz’s misuse
derstand the role of the causal principle in Meditation Six. This principle is used to estab-
lish that material things exist on the basis of how they are already (possibly non-relationally)
represented rather than to explain the representational content of the ideas. And so, causal
accounts confuse the causal principle qua a tool to prove the existence of bodies on the
basis of how they are (already) represented with a tool to explain the representationality
of sensory ideas.

Second, supporters of the causal accounts read the argument for the existence of mate-
rial things as a metaphysical argument (viz. bodies must exist as the content of sensory
ideas is determined by a causal connection with bodies). But the argument in Meditation
Six is an epistemic argument.28 The argument begins with the assumption that we have
sensory ideas and that these ideas represent or exhibit objects to us. According to Des-
cartes, we know by the natural light that ‘in order for an idea to contain such and such
objective reality, it must surely derive it from some cause which contains at least as much
formal reality as there is objective reality in the idea.’ (CSM II 28–29; AT VII 41) So,
sensory ideas need a cause. Descartes concludes that this cause is body (or corporeal nat-
ure) because we have ‘a great propensity to believe that [ideas of sense] are produced by corporeal things’ (CSM II 55; AT VII 80) and, so, God would be a deceiver if they came
from God rather than from corporeal things. Hence, corporeal things exist qua causes of
our sensory ideas. Notice that this conclusion derives directly from the premise that we
believe that ideas come from external things rather than directly from some premise about
the representational content of sensory ideas. No doubt it is the representational content
of the ideas (i.e., the fact that they exhibit bodies) that engenders this belief. Still, from
the fact that the belief must be true on pain of God’s being a deceiver it does not follow
necessarily that the causal connection with bodies is what makes the ideas (that engender
that belief) have the content they exhibit. The content could be determined in some other way, possibly internally.

Both reasons above point out that the use of the causal principle in Meditation Six,
contra supporters of causal accounts, is compatible with an internalist account of the repre-
sentational content of sensory ideas. Bodies could still be regarded as causes of sensory
ideas without being the determinants of their contents. But I want to conclude by discuss-
ing a third, and stronger, reason why we should deny that the use of the causal principle
in Meditation Six justifies the attribution of a causal account of sensations to Descartes.
Pace Schmaltz, the use of the causal principle in Meditation Six betrays the necessity of rein-
troducing an internalist explanation of sensory representation rather than securing a causal
explanation of it. According to Schmaltz, the use of the causal principle confirms that
bodies are causes of the representational content of sensory ideas because bodies contain
formally what the ideas contain objectively. That is, bodies are the causes of ideas of bodies
in virtue of a relation of similarity between the cause (bodies) and the effect (the repre-
sentational content of sensory ideas). So, on the one hand, sensory ideas represent bodies because they are caused by them. On the other hand, what allows the causal connection
between bodies and sensory ideas is the similarity between the cause and how the cause is
represented.

Notice, however, the circularity of this reasoning. Sensory ideas are said to represent
bodies because they are caused by them (this is what a causal account of their objective
reality amounts to). However, bodies are said to be able to cause these ideas because the
properties of bodies are similar to the representational content of the ideas. But then the representational content of the idea must be available before, and independently of, a causal explanation of it. In conclusion, the circularity embedded in this account reveals that it is the nature of the representational content of the idea that allows a causal ‘explanation’ of its content rather than being a causal connection that explains the nature of the representational content of the idea.29

The relation of similarity may account for why body can causally interact with the mind without providing an explanation of why the mind outputs sensory ideas that contain objectively the properties of their causes. Short of believing that bodies imprint these properties on the mind by causal impact – and there is strong textual evidence that Descartes denied this claim30 – we must conclude that the directionality of the ideas (or the representation of the properties of bodies) must come from the mind itself. It must be the mind’s internal representation of its right object that, so to speak, allows ideas to be caused by this object in the right way. But, needless to say, this conclusion is self-defeating since it hardly counts as a causal explanation of the representational content of ideas. For what explains why it is a causal connection with the distal cause that determines the representational content of the idea is an already available description of that cause.31

Conclusions

Although it is tempting to attribute to Descartes a causal account of the representationality of sensory ideas, I have argued that causal accounts are not supported by the texts. The texts are compatible with an (at least partial) internalist explanation of sensory representation and misrepresentation. Pace Wilson, Descartes’ responses to Arnauld are compatible with an explanation of sensory misrepresentation along the lines of Descartes’ overall internalism. And pace Schmaltz, Meditation Six does not provide any conclusive evidence that the objective reality of sensory ideas is determined causally. And the self-defeating character of Schmaltz’s account reinforces these conclusions since it reveals in no uncertain terms that an internalist element must be taken into account in explaining Descartes’ views on sensory representation (and hence misrepresentation). For it highlights the fact that the mind could not output the representation of bodies as a result of a causal connection with the environment unless it already conceived of the cause as a body. It still remains to be explained how the mind has the internal resources for representing the causes of sensory ideas; and whether, and to what extent, the causal interaction with bodies plays any role in making sensory ideas misrepresentations of their causes.32 But tackling these questions goes beyond the scope of the present paper whose primary aims were to set out the lie of the land regarding Cartesian sensations; establish that Descartes’ views on sensations do not force us to attribute to him an unlikely causal theory of sensory representation; and that the prospects of understanding Descartes’ views must lie in explaining how he can meet Arnauld-like objections without relinquishing his overall internalist theory of representation.

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Raffaella De Rosa’s research interests are in early modern theories of cognition, mental representation and concept acquisition; as well as contemporary theories of mind and concepts. Her work can be described as at the intersection between early modern and contemporary theories of mind. She has authored papers in these areas for *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, Synthese, Pacific Philosophical Quarterly, History of Philosophy Quarterly, The Philosophical Quarterly*. Her latest research has focused on Descartes’ theory of sensory representation and her book *Descartes and the Puzzle of Sensory Representation* is forthcoming with Oxford University Press. Before coming to Rutgers University (Newark), where she currently teaches, De Rosa taught at the University of South Carolina. She holds a laurea from the University of Pisa and a PhD in Philosophy from Rutgers University.

Notes

* Correspondence address: 175 University Avenue, Conklin Hall, Newark, NJ 07102, USA. Email: gabri@andromeda.rutgers.edu

1 I am assuming here that Cartesian sensations are representational and that they seem to (and do) represent something outside themselves, i.e., properties of the material world. For a criticism of the non-representationalist view, according to which sensations are non-relational and purely qualitative features of experience, see De Rosa (2007). For a full defense of the claim that sensations seem (and do) represent properties of the material world, see De Rosa (2010).

2 See also Hoffman (1996) and Normore (1986). Many scholars have defended the claim that bodies are the causes of ideas of sense in the context of the debate on whether Descartes’ doctrine of the innateness of ideas of sense commits him necessarily to occasionalism. However, such defense (by and large) does not extend to the stronger claim that bodies are the causes of the representational content of sensory ideas. See for example, Kenny (1968); McRae (1972); Adams (1975); Clarke (1982); Cottingham (1986); Williams (1987); Jolley (1990); Wilson (1991); Garber (1993); Nadler (1994); Rozemond (1999); Scott (2000) and Kendrick (2000).

3 For a full discussion of why we should adopt a metaphorical reading see De Rosa (2010), ch. 1. Suffice it to say the following here. According to Descartes, both the idea of cold and heat are materially false. However, under a literal reading, at least some ideas of secondary qualities (on the assumption that they represent their objects as something positive) would turn out to be materially true (for example, if cold is an absence, then heat is a positive property and, so, the idea of heat is materially true). For a similar point see Wilson (1978), p. 109; Field (1993), p. 317. Moreover, it is questionable whether it is even possible for an idea to represent nothing for Descartes, given that his account of mental representation consists in his theory of objective being.

4 There is a plenty of textual evidence that Descartes held the view that the representational content of ideas is *internally* rather than *relationally* determined. In the preface to the *Meditations*, Descartes writes that ideas, objectively taken, present objects (*res*) to the mind, independently of whether these objects exist outside the mind (CSM II 7; AT VII 8). In the First Set of Replies, Descartes insists that ‘possible existence is contained in the concept of everything that we clearly and distinctly understand’ (CSM II 83; AT VII 117) and that ‘our understanding of [...] things [other than God] always involves understanding them as if they were existing things [although] it does not follow that they exist’ (CSM II 83; AT VII 117). As ideas are of things in virtue of their objective reality and possible existence is contained in the idea of every single (finite) thing, it follows that the notion of objective reality is related to possible existence. Hence, ideas are individuated by the possibly (rather than actually) existing objects to which they refer. Finally, Descartes’ exchange with Caterus on the notion of objective being confirms this internalist reading of how the object of thought is determined.

5 DA is modeled after the clear and distinct ideas of the intellect, since, according to Descartes, those are the ideas that present the object to the mind the way it actually is. (II) is implied by Descartes’ claim that ‘the idea of the sun is the sun itself existing in the intellect’ (CSM II 75; AT VII 102). That is, the idea of the sun contains the true representation of the sun or the identifying properties of the referent. As we shall see, the example of the idea of the sun is the example that Arnauld has in mind when he criticizes Descartes’ notion of material falsity.

6 I take (III) to illustrate Descartes’ views on reference. The object of the idea (or referent), is the object that, if it existed, would satisfy the description contained in the idea.

7 Descartes introduces the notion of material falsity in Meditation Three (CSM II 30; AT VII 43). Then, he discusses it again in reply to Arnauld’s objections (CSM II 163–164; AT VII 232–235) and in the Conversation with Burman (CSMK 337; AT V 152).
One may object that I am arguing past Schmaltz because he may not need to take a stand on the issue of how, see also Axiom V in Descartes’ Second Replies: ‘How do we know that the sky exists?’

Curiously enough the ability to ‘recognize’ ideas of sensible objects does not seem to imply passivity. I will not focus on this detail here but it is interesting to notice that, according to Descartes, the overall passive character of sensory perception may not rule out an active role of the mind.

Whether this reading is actually supported by the above passage is contentious. Even if it is a possible reading of the text, it is certainly not an obvious one.

Schmaltz’s reference to Descartes’ claim in Meditation Six that the objective reality of sensory ideas corresponds only to the properties of bodies that we clearly and distinctly understand (CSM II 55; AT VII 80) indicates that the properties of bodies sensory ideas contain objectively (or represent) are the primary qualities of bodies.

The question of how it possible for an idea of n to still represent n, in virtue of resources internal to the idea itself, while misrepresenting it, is still very much an open question. But I will not address this question here. For an explanation see De Rosa (2010), ch. 5.

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See also Axiom V in Descartes’ Second Replies: ‘How do we know that the sky exists? […] The only reason why we can use this idea as a basis for the judgment that the sky exists is that every idea must have the same nature as the effect. (The above inference is problematic but I am assuming that it is valid for the sake of argument). Accordingly, for x to be the efficient formal cause of the objective reality of an idea x must contain the same properties as those contained objectively in the idea. I am also assuming with Schmaltz and others [see, for example, O’Neill (1987)] that Descartes’ view is that bodies can only be formal (as opposed to eminent) causes of sensory ideas. However, this is a contentious claim.

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issue of how the representational content of sensory ideas is determined. Hence, my criticisms cannot be dismissed so easily.

30 See CSM I 172; AT VI 140–141; CSM I 304; AT VIII B 359 and CSM II 21; AT VII 31.

31 In fact, there are deeper theoretical reasons for concluding that this must be the case. These reasons have to do with the question of whether a simple causal relation with us (i.e., bodies) is sufficient to explain the mind’s output of ideas of us (i.e., of bodies). The suspicion is that this output is possible only because the representation of the cause as such and such is already available to the mind. For this criticisms of causal accounts see Sterelny (1983) and Devitt and Sterelny (1987).

32 For an explanation see De Rosa (2010).

**Works Cited**


