THE MYTH OF CARTESIAN QUALIA

BY

RAFFAELLA DE ROSA

Abstract: The standard view of Cartesian sensations (SV) is that they present themselves as purely qualitative features of experience (or qualia). Accordingly, Descartes’ view would be that in perceiving the color red, for example, we are merely experiencing the subjective feel of redness rather than seeming to perceive a property of bodies. In this paper, I establish that the argument and textual evidence offered in support of SV fail to prove that Descartes held this view. Indeed, I will argue that there are textual and theoretical reasons for believing that Descartes held the negation of SV. Qualia aren’t Descartes’ legacy.

To claim that Cartesian sensations are qualia is to claim that they lack intrinsic intentionality, that is, they present themselves as non-relational or purely qualitative features of experience.\(^1\) Nicholas Malebranche interpreted Cartesian sensations this way. According to Malebranche, Descartes held the view that sensations of color, taste, pain and the like are nothing but modes of the mind because they neither represent nor seem to represent anything in the external world.\(^2\) Since then many scholars have followed in Malebranche’s footsteps in interpreting Descartes this way.\(^3\)

Moreover, this interpretation of Cartesian sensations as qualia is seen by contemporary philosophers of mind as part and parcel of Descartes’ internalist account of mental content (i.e. the view that mental states are individuated non-relationally) and its (allegedly) related skepticism of the veil of ideas.\(^4\) It is Descartes, after all, who opened up the problem of our knowledge of an external world and created an epistemological gap between the mind and the world. And Cartesian qualia are perfect candidates for those third entities between the mind and the world. For example, one may argue that Descartes’ dream and deceiver arguments are arguments for qualia as follows. Suppose Mary is dreaming of a red rose. What Mary is dreaming of is not a real red rose because Mary isn’t seeing
anything. So, the color Mary is experiencing is a property of her own experience. But if dreaming is indistinguishable from veridical experience, then qualia occur in veridical experience also.\(^5\)

Finally, this reading of Cartesian sensations fits the more general view that the Rationalist Descartes denied that the senses play any cognitive role in the search for truth. This role is allotted to the intellect alone. Sensations are mere impressionistic modes of the mind and do not serve any cognitive purpose.\(^6\) So, in many ways, the view that Cartesian sensations aren’t intrinsically representational is the standard view of Cartesian sensations (SV).\(^7\)

In this paper, I argue contra SV that qualia aren’t Descartes’ legacy.\(^8\) I use two different strategies. First, I establish that the argument and the textual evidence offered in support of SV fail to prove that Descartes held SV (sections 3 and 4). Second, I argue that there are textual and theoretical reasons for believing exactly the opposite, that is, that Descartes held that sensations are intrinsically intentional (section 5). I conclude that we ought to abandon SV and that this is a preliminary step towards understanding the distinctive role of sensations within the cognitive architecture of the Cartesian mind.

1. **The Standard View (SV): the arch-argument and its variations**

Nicholas Malebranche distinguishes between sensations and ideas.\(^9\) According to Malebranche, in the case of sensations of color, taste and the like we must keep separate the sensation proper (i.e. the what-it-feels-like-to-see-red, for example) from the natural judgment of projecting what the mind senses onto external bodies (S I.x.52–3).\(^10\) Sensations of color and the like are devoid of intrinsic intentionality. They are qualitative aspects of experience (or qualia). The fact that when we feel pain or we see color we see them in objects, explains Malebranche, is only the result of an involuntary natural judgment (S I.x.52–3 and S I.xiii.68–69). The intentionality of sensations is then inherited. That is, sensations *per se* lack in intentionality but are mistakenly believed to be intentional because of some associated judgment. On the contrary, in Malebranche’s view, ideas have intrinsic representational content because they represent objects in the external world and their properties. Our idea of extension, for example, according to Malebranche, suffices to provide information about all the properties of bodies (S III.vii.237 and S Elucidation III, 561).

Malebranche’s view on sensations of secondary qualities is supposed to be Descartes’ legacy. As Simmons puts it, the interpretation of sensations as qualia is believed to be Descartes’ legacy because “having excised colors, sounds […] from the corporeal world […] [Descartes] relocated them.
in the mind in the form of sensations that do little more than give an ornamental [...] flair to our sense perceptual experience." The argument by which Malebranche attributes this view to Descartes is precisely along these lines:

1. According to Cartesian physics, bodies are modes of *res extensa*, viz., modifications of the essential property of body (i.e. extension).
2. Therefore, colors, tastes, pains and the like are banished from the corporeal world.
3. Therefore, according to Descartes, sensations of pain, color and the like do not resemble any real quality of corporeal substance.
4. Therefore, Cartesian sensations are devoid of any intrinsic representational content. They are mere modes of the mind.
5. Therefore, any appearance of representational content that sensations exhibit must be inherited from the implicit judgment we make that what is present to the mind has a similar counterpart in reality.

Some contemporary scholars have attributed to Descartes the view that sensations of color and the like are qualia on the basis of similar arguments. I will briefly present two different variations of Malebranche's original argument in the following two sub-sections.

1.1 WILSON'S ARGUMENT

Margaret Wilson argues that Descartes in *Principles I*.66–71 distinguishes sensations from other perceptions as follows. Since our sensations of color do not resemble any real property in things (CSM I 216–218; AT VIII A 32–34) and so they “do not represent anything located outside our thought” (CSM I 219; AT VIII A 35), colors and tastes are exhibited to the mind as sensations (CSM I 219; AT VIII A 35). On the contrary, since our clear and distinct perception of size, shape and so forth “exactly corresponds” to real properties of objects (CSM I 218; AT VIII A 34) size and shape are exhibited to the mind as of things (CSM I 219; AT VIII A 35). However, Wilson continues, Descartes points out that we don’t notice the difference between these two kinds of perceptions. When we perceive colors in objects, writes Descartes, “we cannot find any resemblance between the colour [...] and that which we experience in our sensation. But this is something we do not take account of; and what is more there are other many other features such as size, shape and number which we clearly perceive to be actually or at least possibly in objects in a way exactly corresponding to our sensory perception and understanding” (CSM I 218; AT VIII A 34).
Because we do not take account of the difference between perceptions of color and perceptions of size, we erroneously assimilate the two kinds of perceptions and so we make the mistake of “judging that what is called colour in objects is something exactly like the colour of which we have sensory awareness” (CSM I 218; AT VIIIA 35).

Notice that as in Malebranche’s archetypical argument, Wilson argues that (i) sensations proper aren’t representational because they do not resemble any real property of bodies; and that (ii) the representational content of Cartesian sensations is the result of a judgment that in turn is the result of confusing sensations with ideas.16

1.2 MACKENZIE’S ARGUMENT

Ann Wilburn MacKenzie agrees with Wilson that Descartes distinguishes between mere sensations and representative perceptions of extension and figure. She also agrees with Wilson that what causes the error of believing that colors exist in bodies is not the intrinsic intentionality of sensations but the fact that mere sensations are mistakenly associated with the really representative perception of extension, figure, and size. She argues for the lack of intrinsic intentionality of sensations as follows:

(1) There is an ontological difference between secondary and primary qualities. The former are qualities of embodied minds, viz., they are “qualia which embodied minds ‘have.’”17 The latter are real qualities of bodies.

(2) “Descartes’ [views about] the ontological status of [secondary qualities] puts pressure on his view that human sensing is in general a kind of representing.”18

(3) Therefore, Descartes distinguishes two different categories of sensory perception: (i) in sensing secondary qualities we are having mere sensations devoid of any representational content; (ii) in sensing primary qualities we are acquainted with real properties of things.19

Again, the key feature of the archetypical argument is in place here. The sensation of red, for example, does not represent the property of being red because there is no property of being red in objects. The sensation of red is an instance of the property of being red. Consequently, sensations proper aren’t representational.

In conclusion, the standard view (SV) of Cartesian sensations consists of two related theses:

(SV): (1) Cartesian sensations present themselves as the purely qualitative character of conscious experience. That is, they are qualia devoid of any intrinsic intentionality; and
(2) the intentionality they “appear” to exhibit is only the result of an implicit (and illicit) judgment.

As we saw above, what motivates SV is a cluster of diverse argumentations that share a common-core. However, as I will argue next (sections 2 and 3), there are several reasons to doubt the conclusiveness of the argument for SV.

2. Descartes on ideas: terminological and conceptual distinctions

Much of the confusion among Descartes scholars about Cartesian sensations is due to a lack of clarity (certainly encouraged by Descartes’ own carelessness) in the use of the relevant terminological and conceptual apparatus regarding ideas. One of the consequences of this lack of clarity is the conflation of concepts that should be kept distinct. Spelling out (some of) these distinctions is then a preliminary step in my discussion and criticism of SV.

As is well known, Descartes distinguishes between two senses of ‘ideas’ (CSM II 7; AT VII 8. CSM II 27–8; AT VII 40). Ideas taken materially are nothing but modes of the mind. Ideas taken objectively are the objects represented by the ideas whether or not these objects actually exist. In reply to Caterus’ request for clarification of the notion of objective being Descartes replies:

“Objective being in the intellect” [...] will signify the object’s being in the intellect in the way in which its objects are normally there. By this I mean the idea of the sun is the sun itself existing in the intellect – not of course formally existing, as it does in the heavens, but objectively existing, i.e. in the way in which its objects are normally in the intellect. (CSM II 75; AT VII 102)

Ideas taken objectively are then res cogitatae. And the res cogitata is an internal object of thought because the idea presents an object to the mind only as if it existed outside the mind. Given that any idea is to be taken both materially and objectively, we can conclude that for Descartes ideas are modes of the mind that have the property of representing objects as if they existed outside the mind (viz., as if they were real objects or real properties of objects existing outside the mind). So, ideas are modes of the mind that exhibit the property of world-directedness as long as they seem to stand for something other than themselves whether or not this something actually exists.

The notion of the objective reality of ideas is introduced in Meditation Three and is to be kept distinct from the notion of objective being.
objective being of x is the existence of x in the mind as an internal object of thought. However, things, according to Descartes, have different degrees of reality: “A substance has more reality than a [ . . . ] mode; an infinite substance has more reality than a finite substance” (CSM II 117; AT VII 165; see also CSM II 130; AT VII 185). Consequently, according to Descartes, an idea has more or less objective reality depending on the degree of reality of its object. For example, the idea of a substance has more objective reality than the idea of a mode of a substance (see CSM II 117; AT VII 165 and CSM II 278–8; AT VII 40). In conclusion, the objective reality of an idea is the property ideas have to represent whether the object being presented to the mind is a real object such as a substance or a mode of a substance.  

So, the relation and difference between the notions of objective being and objective reality ought to be understood as follows. Reality is one of the properties of the things that have objective being in (or can be represented by) ideas. Accordingly, the objective reality of an idea is the representation of the degree of reality of an object, that is, the representation of the object as either a finite or infinite substance or a mode of substance. In conclusion, the notion of objective being implies the view that any idea has the property of exhibiting an object (whatever that object turns out to be) as if it were a real object outside the mind. The notion of objective reality implies the view that an idea also represents the actual degree of reality of the object being exhibited as if it were real. In this sense, the notion of objective reality implies a clearer knowledge of what the object is.

Meditation Three offers plenty of evidence for the distinction between the notions of objective reality and objective being. There Descartes is investigating the question of whether anything else besides the mind exists. He proceeds to investigate this question by analyzing his ideas and the representational content they exhibit, that is, their seeming to represent something existing outside the mind (CSM II 25; AT VII 37). The question before him is whether we can justifiably infer the existence of any object besides the mind on the basis of the representational content of “adventitious” ideas and the doubts of Meditation One remind him that it would imprudent to make such a rush inference. It is at this point that he introduces the notion of objective reality. It occurred to him, he writes, that the question of whether anything else besides the mind exists can be investigated by looking at the various degrees of reality that the objects exhibited by the ideas have (“There is another way [ . . . ] of investigating whether some of the things of which I possess ideas exist outside of me” CSM II 27–8; AT VII, 40). The change in strategy in pursuing the question at hand reveals a distinction in Descartes’ mind between the notions of objective being and objective reality.

Moreover, later on Descartes writes that although an idea can be caused by another idea eventually we would get to an idea “the cause of which will be like an archetype which contains formally [ . . . ] all the reality
[...] which is present only objectively <or representatively> in the idea” (CSM II 29; AT VII 42). This sentence alone seems to imply that the notion of objective being is conceptually and metaphysically prior to the notion of objective reality. If ideas didn’t have the property of representationality by their own very nature (“the objective mode of being belongs to ideas by their very nature”, CSM II 29; AT VII 42), they wouldn’t a fortiori have the property of representing the degree of reality of the object being represented.

Finally, according to Descartes, an idea can represent something confusedly, viz., can represent something without being clear about the degree of reality of its object. This is precisely what Descartes implies when he introduces the notion of material falsity in Meditation Three. A more detailed analysis of the notion of material falsity will be provided below. For the time being suffice it to say the following. The notion of reality in Descartes is related to the notion of clear and distinct perception (CSM II 83; AT VII 116–7. CSM II 54; AT VII 79). However, according to Descartes, there is a class of ideas – what he calls “materially false ideas” – that are representational (i.e. they seem to represent properties of bodies) although we do not know what real object they represent. According to Descartes, the representational content of these ideas is so obscure and confused that we cannot tell from analyzing it whether or not the idea represents something real (see CSM II 30; AT VII 44; CSM II 164; AT VII 234) let alone what the real object of the idea is (a substance or a mode of a substance?) The very notion of material falsity then testifies of Descartes’ distinction between the notions of objective being and objective reality.25

In light of the above the following three notions should be kept distinct:

(1) The formal reality of ideas – all ideas, taken formally, are modes of the mind.
(2) The objective being of ideas. Any idea has objective being in that it represents something as if it existed outside the mind. That is, (2) is the property that ideas have to seem to represent something outside themselves.26
(3) The objective reality of ideas. Any idea represents the actual degree of reality of the object that it presents to the mind (or that has objective being in the mind).27

Accordingly, we can lay out three possible ways of interpreting Cartesian sensations:

(a) Cartesian sensations are qualia.

According to this view, Cartesian sensations are modes of awareness devoid of representational content. They present themselves as non-relational
or purely qualitative features of experience. The fact that sensations seem to exhibit objects to us (i.e. the fact that we cannot deny that we feel pain in the body or that we see colors in objects) is due to an implicit judgment we make. According to (a), Cartesian sensations lack property (2), and *a fortiori*, property (3) of Cartesian ideas and so they do not classify as ideas at all. (a) exemplifies SV.

(b) Sensations are *intrinsically* representational. They have objective being but lack objective reality.28

According to this view, Cartesian sensations, *in and by themselves*, seem to represent something outside the mind although they fail to represent something real. That is, they seem to represent a possibly existing thing (a substance or a mode of a substance) but they don’t because they do not resemble anything really existing in bodies. So, according to (b) Cartesian sensations qualify as ideas in so far as they share property (2) with ideas. Like ideas, sensations, by their very nature, are representational.

(c) Sensations are not only intrinsically representational (i.e. they have objective being) but they also have objective reality (i.e. they represent something real outside themselves).

According to this view, Cartesian sensations share properties (1)–(3) with Cartesian ideas. They not only seem to represent something existing outside themselves but they *actually* represent something real outside themselves. It is my view that (c) is the correct interpretation of Cartesian sensations and I defended this interpretation elsewhere.29 The focus of this paper, however, is to defend the even more basic view that sensations, like ideas, are intrinsically representational and, hence, share property (2) with ideas.30 That is, the primary goal of the present paper is to argue against SV that Cartesian sensations aren’t qualia.

3. *Problems with the core-argument for SV*

As we saw in section 1 above, the core-argument for SV embodies the following key inference:

*(KI):* There are no real properties of bodies that *resemble* the sensation of color and the like, according to Cartesian physics; therefore, sensations of color and the like do not *represent* anything outside the mind.
However, this inference is problematic for several reasons. First of all, notice that (KI) assumes that resemblance, according to Descartes, is a necessary condition for representation both in the case of clear and distinct perception and sensory perception. However, this seems to be the wrong assumption to make in light of Descartes’ explicit claim that sensations represent their objects as other than they are (CSM II 30; AT VII 44; and CSM II 163–4 and AT VII 233–5). And in fact alternative accounts of the representationality of Cartesian sensations have been offered in the literature. It has been argued that although sensations fail to resemble real properties of bodies they may still represent properties of bodies either in virtue of a causal connection with the environment;31 or in virtue of the biological function of sensations;32 or in virtue of a latent intellectual content.33

Secondly, (KI) becomes invalid in light of the distinction Descartes draws between the notions of objective being and objective reality. (KI) assumes that lack of objective reality is sufficient to establish lack of objective being. But the only conclusion to legitimately infer from the premise that there are no real properties of bodies that resemble the sensory presentation of the object is that sensory ideas lack objective reality. However, as we saw above, an idea may lack objective reality (in so far as it is obscure and confused) but still exhibit objective being and hence be representational. That is, even if colors and the like aren’t properties of bodies our sensations of color can still seem to represent them as if they were properties of bodies. Undoubtedly this counts as obscure and confused representation but Descartes never denies that. Moreover, according to Descartes, even after a proper analysis of the sensory content of the idea of red has revealed that the object exhibited to the mind isn’t a property of bodies that resembles the sensation, our sensory experience of red will not suddenly present to the mind the property of being red as a property of experience (rather than a property of body). Sensations do not stop misrepresenting at some point. So, (KI) is valid only on pain of ignoring Descartes’ distinction between objective being and objective reality.

One may attempt to salvage (KI) from the above criticisms by rephrasing it as follows:

(KI) The sensation of red cannot represent a property of bodies because the sensation of red is an instance of the property of being red.34

Certainly this is a possible way of reading (KI). But even assuming that this rephrasing really captures Descartes’ views on the nature of secondary qualities – and I do have doubts about that, as it will become clear below – I also doubt that this rephrasing rescues (KI) from the
above criticism. All that can be inferred from the claim that the sensation of red is an instance of the property of being red is only that the sensation of red ought not to represent redness as a property of bodies. But from the fact that “it ought not to” it does not follow that “it does not”.

Moreover, (KI) makes clear that the inference for SV moves from an ontological claim about the nature of secondary qualities (according to which secondary qualities would be only modes of the mind) to a claim about that property of the mind that is called ‘intentionality’. But how can we infer from this ontological claim about the nature of secondary qualities anything about the intentionality of the mind? What is exactly the argument that if colors are modes of the mind then the mind does not present colors as if they were properties of bodies? Maybe there is a relation between these two claims, but I don’t see any explicit explanation of the relation and we are in desperate need of one if the case for Cartesian qualia is to be made.

Finally, it is not obvious to me that Descartes had set views on the ontological status of secondary qualities. (KI) takes for granted that, according to Descartes, secondary qualities are nothing but qualia that embodied minds have. However, I am inclined to believe that Descartes’ views on the matter were more complicated than this. Consider the following passages from the Principles:

[. . . ] the properties in external objects to which we apply the terms light, colour, smell, taste, sound, heat and cold [. . . ] are [. . . ] simply various dispositions in those objects which make them able to set up various kinds of motions in our nerves which are required to produce all the various sensations in our soul. (emphasis added, CSM I 285; AT VIIIA 323)

[light, colors and so on] are nothing else in the objects [. . . ] but certain dispositions depending on size, shape and motions [of their parts]. (emphasis added CSM I 285; AT VIIIA, 323; see also CSM I 217; AT VIIIA 33)

These passages suggest that colors and the like are indeed properties in objects that do not resemble the felt color sensations although they play a causal role in our having color sensations. Notice that this is compatible with attributing to Descartes a view that he certainly held, that is, the view that there is something qualitative in consciousness when we experience colors and the like. The above passages provide evidence that, according to Descartes, sensations of color and the like do represent some real property of bodies although they misrepresent it as resembling the felt-sensation. So, for example, although the sensation of red has a qualitative aspect, it still represents (in virtue of a relation other than resemblance) a yet unknown bodily state (i.e. some configuration of the size and shape of the particles that make up matter) that is the cause of the sensation.
For all of the above reasons I find the core-argument for SV at best inconclusive. But even assuming that a supporter of SV may be prepared to concede that there are problems with the argument for SV, she may insist that there is independent textual evidence for SV. So in the following section I will examine this textual evidence and argue that it does not provide incontrovertible support for SV.

4. Is SV textually supported?

In Principles I.66 and 68, Descartes writes that sensations, understood clearly and distinctly, are nothing but modes of awareness:

[Sensations] may be clearly perceived provided that we take great care in our judgments concerning them to include no more than what is strictly contained in our perception – no more than that of which we have inner awareness. (CSM I 216; AT VIIIA 32)

In order to distinguish what is clear [. . .] from what is obscure, we must be very careful to note that pain and colour and so on are clearly and distinctly perceived when they are regarded merely as sensations or thoughts. (CSM I 217; AT VIIIA 33)

These passages are taken to offer conclusive evidence that Descartes holds that sensations are qualia. Notice, however, that the contrast being drawn here is between the obscure and confused and clear and distinct perceptions of sensible qualities. But drawing this distinction is compatible with still maintaining that the obscure and confused perception of color presents color as a property of things (rather than as a mere sensation). And it should come as no surprise that Descartes claims that sensations clearly understood are modes of awareness. It is a basic tenet of Descartes’ epistemology and metaphysics that the content of sense experience can be amended by attending to the clear and distinct ideas of the intellect. Once we have reinterpreted the confused content of experience according to the ideas of the intellect we can see that the true object of, for example, the idea of red is a particular arrangement of the insensible geometrical and mechanical properties of matter and, hence, that there is nothing in corporeal reality that resembles the felt sensation of red. So, Descartes’ claim in Principles I 66 and 68 that colors, clearly understood, are only modes of awareness is still compatible with his maintaining that the obscure and confused ideas of color present color as a property of bodies. In fact it seems precisely this representational feature of ideas of color that explains why we make the rush judgment that in seeing colors we are seeing “a thing located outside us which closely resembled the idea of color that we experienced within us” (CSM I 216; AT VIII A 32).

Another passage often cited as providing incontrovertible support for SV is from Principles I.71: 38

© 2007 The Author
Journal compilation © 2007 University of Southern California and Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
sensations of tastes, smells, sounds, heat, cold, light, colours and so on do not represent anything located outside our thought. At the same time the mind perceived sizes, shapes, motions and so on, which were presented to it not as sensations, but as things, or modes of things, existing (or at least capable of existing) outside thought, although it was not yet aware of the difference between things and sensations. (CSM I 219; AT VIIIA 35, emphasis added)

In the above passage Descartes, according to the supporters of SV, claims that (a) sensations lack representational content altogether; and (b) colors unlike size and shape, are exhibited to the mind as sensations rather than as things. But notice that when Descartes writes that sensations of color and the like “do not represent anything located outside our thought” he may simply be repeating that these sensations do not represent anything real located outside of us that resembles the felt sensation. In fact, Descartes claims that sensations represent real properties of things located outside of us in the section of the Principles immediately preceding the one in the quoted passage. In Principles I.70, he writes that: “when we say that we perceive colours in objects, this is really just the same as saying that we perceive something in the objects whose nature we do not know, but which produces in us a certain very clear and vivid sensation which we call the sensation of colour” (CSM I 218; AT VIIIA 34). Contra (a) above then, a sensation of color, according to Descartes, does represent a real property of bodies (i.e. a mode of res extensa that produces the sensation in us) without resembling it. We simply do not know this until the intellect has examined the matter. As to claim (b) above, notice that Descartes is saying in the passage quoted from Principles I.71 that although we ought to draw a distinction between properties such as colors and sizes (so that the former are presented “as sensations” and the latter “as things”), the mind initially is not aware of this distinction. That is, Descartes acknowledges that the mind presents both kinds of sensations as if of things.

Finally there is the passage from Descartes’ Sixth Set of Replies where he distinguishes three grades of sensation. The first grade of sensation, according to Descartes, comprises only the physiological and mechanical aspect of sensory perception. The second grade “comprises [ . . . ] the perceptions of pain, pleasure, thirst, hunger, colours, sound, taste, smell, heat, cold and the like” (CSM II 294; AT VII 437). And the third grade includes “the judgments about things outside of us which we have been accustomed to make from our earliest years” (CSM II 295; AT VII 437). Then, Descartes goes on to describe the second and third grades of sensation using the example of the blind man with a stick from his Optics (CSM I 152–175; AT VI 81–147):

[ . . . ] the second grade [of sensation] [ . . . ] extends to the mere perception of the colour and light reflected from the stick [ . . . ] Nothing more than this should be referred to the
sensory faculty, if we wish to distinguish it carefully from the intellect. But suppose that, as a result of being affected by this sensation of color, I judge that a stick, located outside of me, is coloured. And suppose that on the basis of the extension of the colour and its boundaries together with its position in relation to the parts of the brain, I make a rational calculation about the size, shape and distance of the stick: although the reasoning is commonly assigned to the senses [. . .] it is clear that it depends solely on the intellect. [. . .] I demonstrated in the Optics how size and shape can be perceived by reasoning alone. [The reason why we mistakenly think that we perceive size and so on through the senses alone] is that we make the calculation and judgment at great speed because of habit. (CSM II 295; AT VII 437–8, emphasis added)

The above description of the second and third grades of sensation (and their relation) is taken to imply that sensations per se aren’t representational and the representational content they exhibit is only the result of an implicit judgment.39 However, as I will show next, there is nothing in this passage that uncontroversially supports this reading. Once we read the passage in light of the Optics (the text Descartes explicitly refers to in the above passage) it becomes clear that the distinction that Descartes is interested in drawing here is between the perception of sensible qualities such as color and light, on the one hand, and size and shape, on the other hand. Descartes is repeating what he had argued in the Optics, that is, that “light and color [are] the only qualities belonging properly to the sense of sight” (CSM I 167; AT VI 130); whereas it is the intellect that, “as if by some natural geometry” (CSM I 170; AT VI 137) “sees” the distance, size and shape of bodies (CSM I 169–173; AT VI 134–143).40 But notice that neither saying that only colors and light are (strictly speaking) sensed nor saying the perception of the size and shape of bodies is the result of a judgment establishes by itself that colors and light are sensed as properties of the mind. So, the possibility that the sensation of color presents color as a property of things without requiring any reasoning is left wide open. And so, the distinction between the perception of properties such as color (as involving the sensory faculty alone) and the “perception” of the size and shape of things (as involving a judgment) does not by itself establish that sensations lack intentionality unless it is already assumed that, according to Descartes, we can talk of intentionality only where a judgment is involved. But this is what we are trying to establish.

But even looking at the passage above independently of the Optics we can see that it doesn’t incontrovertibly show that Descartes thought that sensations lack intrinsic intentionality. In the above passage Descartes writes that the mere perception of color and light reflected from the stick belongs to the second grade of sensation. Then as a result of “being affected by this sensation of color, I judge that I stick, located outside me, is coloured” and this judgment – Descartes writes – belongs to the third grade of sensation. The third grade of sensation is distinguished from the
second because only the latter involves implicit or explicit judgment. And Descartes is here saying nothing different from what he writes in many other places. For example in Meditation Six, Descartes writes that “from the fact that I perceive by my senses a great variety of colours, sounds, smells, as well as differences in heat, hardness and the like, I am correct in inferring that the bodies which are the sources of these various sensory perceptions possess differences corresponding to them, though perhaps not resembling them” (CSM II 56; AT VII 81; See also CSM I 168; AT VI 133). But notice that the claim that the (implicit or explicit) judgment is based on the sensory perception of sensible qualities like colors does not by itself tell us anything about how these qualities are presented by the senses. And if it does suggest anything about how these qualities are perceived by the senses it suggests the opposite of what the supporters of SV want. The very fact that Descartes writes that: “as a result of being affected by this sensation of color, [we] judge that a stick, located outside of me, is coloured” seems to require that the sensation of color presents itself as if of things. Besides, if the sensation of color presented color as a property of the mind rather than as a property of bodies how could we even start to infer that there are colored objects outside of me? How could any judgment result from this sensation, as Descartes suggests? One could reply that this happens because of a presumed similarity between our sensations of color and our sensation of size and shape (which are intrinsically representational). However, one of the reasons why we take the two kinds of sensation to be similar may be precisely that they are both (phenomenologically speaking at least) representational.

In conclusion, a close analysis of the textual evidence that is considered indisputable evidence for SV reveals that this evidence is not so indisputable. But if both the argument and the textual evidence offered in support of SV fail to conclusively establish SV, then there is reason to doubt the correctness of SV. And in fact this is the right conclusion to draw since there are both textual and theoretical reasons for believing that Descartes held that sensations are intrinsically intentional.

5. **Defeating SV**

Meditation Three provides most of the positive textual evidence that Descartes believed that sensations of color exhibit intrinsic intentionality. There Descartes writes that the term “idea” strictly speaking applies only to that class of thoughts that exhibit intentionality (CSM II 25; AT VII 37; see also CSM II 127; AT VII 181); and that “the objective mode of being belongs to ideas by their very nature [ . . . ]” (CSM II 29; AT VII 42). Interestingly, Descartes includes in the list of representative ideas perceptions of “light and colours, sounds, smells, tastes, heat and cold and the
other tactile qualities” (CSM II 29; AT VII 43; see also CSM II 26; AT VII 38).

A defender of SV may object that we should not give too much weight to the fact that Descartes calls perceptions of color and the like “ideas” because Descartes uses this term loosely as to include everything the mind is aware of. (See, for example, CSM II 113; AT VII 160–1 and CSM II 253; AT VII 366.) And if this is the case, then sensations are rightly called “ideas” but that does not imply that they have objective being. But notice that, although Descartes does use the term “idea” as an umbrella term for different acts of the mind, in this context he is listing sensations of color and the like among ideas after having defined “ideas” in the strict sense of modes of thought that exhibit intentionality. And it would be very strange if after having defined ideas in this strict sense Descartes went back to the loose sense of “ideas” when he talks about sensations.

But the strongest evidence against SV is provided by the very notion of material falsity. According to Descartes, material falsity occurs in ideas:

[... ] when they represent non-things as things. For example, the ideas which I have of heat and cold contain so little clarity and distinctness that do not even 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 43–4, emphasis added)

The notion of material falsity is notoriously complicated. So, for the purposes at hand I will limit myself to two remarks relevant to the issue under discussion. First, notice that Descartes writes that sensations of color and the like are materially false ideas because they represent non-things as things, that is, they represent color and heat as if they were properties of bodies. However, Descartes continues, these ideas are so obscure and confused that we cannot tell from an inspection of their representational content neither whether the object represented is real nor a fortiori what it is, that is, we cannot tell whether these ideas have any objective reality. So, according to Descartes, perceptions of secondary qualities exhibit representationality whether or not they lack objective reality. And that’s all we need to correctly classify sensations among representative perceptions or ideas.

Second, the property of representationality exhibited by perceptions of secondary qualities is precisely what explains the notion of material falsity. A materially false idea, according to Descartes, is an idea that provides the material for erroneous judgments about the properties of bodies (such as “The color white is in the waterlili”). This happens because a materially false idea represents its object as if it existed outside the mind;
but since its representational content is obscure and confused we cannot really tell whether the idea represents something real (i.e. a possible mode of *res extensa*); therefore, the idea may cause the erroneous judgment that there is an object outside the mind that resembles the object represented by the idea.44

I don’t deny that a supporter of SV may concede these two points – that is, that materially false ideas exhibit intentionality and that this intentionality is responsible for the erroneous judgments based on it – but still insist that the property of representationality they exhibit isn’t intrinsic. One may argue that the property of intentionality that sensations exhibit is the result of an implicit judgment and therefore it is inherited. In fact, a similar objection was raised by Arnauld who pointed out that the notion of material falsity conceals a confusion between ideas and judgment. (CSM II 145–6; AT VII 206–7) However, I will argue in the rest of this section that Descartes’ insistence on the distinction between material and formal falsity (especially in his replies to Arnauld) is the clearest indication that Descartes did not confuse a judgment with an idea. And so the case of materially false ideas is indeed the best evidence that Descartes believed that sensations exhibit an intrinsic representationality prior to, an independent of, any judgment.

Material falsity, writes Descartes, pertains to ideas only. More precisely, it concerns the representational content of the idea or the object the idea exhibits to the mind. *Formal falsity*, instead, pertains to judgments and occurs when we judge that there is an actual object that resembles the object presented by the idea (CSM II 26 and CSM II 30). Arnauld objected that: “there cannot be any idea which is materially false” (CSM II 145; AT VII 206). Ideas taken in themselves, points out Arnauld, are true because the idea of cold, for example, “is coldness itself in so far as it exists in the intellect” (CSM II 145; AT VII 206). Besides, as Descartes writes in Meditation Three, “ideas, provided that they are considered in themselves and I do not refer them to anything else, they cannot strictly speaking be false” (CSM II 26; AT VII 37). So, concludes Arnauld, by calling ideas “materially false” Descartes is confusing ideas with a judgment because he is referring the idea to something else existing outside the mind.

Burman had made a similar objection. Burman reminded Descartes of his claim in Meditation Three that ideas themselves “simply as modes of my thought without referring them to anything else, [. . . ] could scarcely give [us] any material for error” (CSMK 337; AT V 152, emphasis added); and then he objected to Descartes that “since all error concerning ideas comes from their relation and application to external things, there seems to be no subject matter for error whatsoever if they are not referred to externals” (CSMK 337; AT V 152, emphasis added).

In reply to Burman, Descartes clarifies that the notion of material falsity does not involve comparing the idea to something existing outside as follows:
Even if I do not refer my ideas to anything outside myself, there is still subject-matter for error, since I can make a mistake with regard to the actual nature of the ideas [. . .] For example, I may say that whiteness is a quality; and even if I do not refer this idea to anything outside myself – even if I do not say or suppose that there is any white thing – I may still make a mistake in the abstract, with regards to whiteness itself and its nature or the idea I have of it . . . (CSMK 337; AT V 152)

Descartes claims here that material falsity does not depend on a comparison between the idea and something else. Rather material falsity pertains to the internal object of thought. In so far as the idea presents an object to the mind and this object is only confusedly and obscurely perceived the idea is materially false because it misrepresents its object. It represents its object as other than it is and hence it makes a mistake “in the abstract.” And by making this error in the abstract, the idea also provides the material for an erroneous judgment. For example, my experience presents the color white as a property of bodily surfaces (and notice that this is quite different from believing that whiteness is a property of bodily surfaces) and on the basis of this experience I may form the erroneous belief that the property of being white is a property of bodies.

Descartes’ replies to Arnauld also confirm that Descartes’ view is that material falsity depends on the intrinsically flawed representational content of the idea. In this context, Descartes insists that it is not true that ideas taken in themselves cannot be false and the case of materially false ideas is supposed to introduce an exception. Their “falsity” is to be understood in light of the obscurity of their content. Descartes writes:

. . . when my critic 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 obscure and confused ideas [. . .] that an idea is referred to something other than that of which it is in fact the idea. (CSM II 164; AT VII 234)

In this passage Descartes distinguishes between clear and distinct ideas and obscure and confused ideas and clarifies that the mark of the latter is that they seem to represent what they do not in fact represent. So, the obscurity of their content explains why sensory ideas, taken in themselves are misrepresentations of their objects.

But the best evidence that material falsity pertains to ideas and that the representational content of sensations isn’t the result of an implicit judgment comes from Descartes’ explanation to Arnauld of the difference between formal and material falsity. Such difference is illustrated in the Fourth Replies in a very illuminating way as follows. Whereas the truth value of a judgment is affected by the actual states of affairs in question (precisely because in a judgment we take the representational content of the idea to correspond with something outside the idea); the “truth value” of the representational content of an idea remains unaffected by
what the real object of the idea turns out to be. And this proves that the representational content of the idea isn’t the result of a judgment. Here’s how Descartes puts it:

[ . . . ] the only sense in which an idea can be said to be ‘materially false’ is the one which I explained [in Meditation Three]. Thus, whether cold is a positive thing or an absence does not affect the idea I have of it, which remains the same as it always was. (CSM II 163; AT VII 232, emphasis added)

So, Descartes insists, material falsity depends on the intrinsically flawed (because obscure and confused) representational content of the idea and this content remains totally unaffected by our discovery of what the real object of the idea is. But presumably if the representational content of the idea were the result of a judgment then the once-materially-false ideas should turn into a materially-true one once the clear and distinct ideas of the intellect reveal to the mind what the true object of sensations is. But this, Descartes says, simply does not happen. An example may help to illustrate the point Descartes is making here. Christopher Peacocke uses the following example to distinguish the content of experience from the judgment caused by experience: “A man may be familiar with a perfect trompe l’oeil violin painted on a door, and be sure from his past experience that it is a trompe l’oeil: nevertheless his experience may continue to represent a violin as hanging on the door in front of him.”

For all the above reasons, pace SV, a materially false idea such as the idea of color, according to Descartes, is an idea that provides material for erroneous judgments in virtue of its representational content rather than exhibiting representational content only in virtue of an implicit judgment.

Finally, there are two broader considerations that provide indirect evidence that Descartes held that sensations have intrinsic intentionality. First, notice that the intrinsic representationality of sensations is in keeping with Descartes’ overall account of sensory perception. In numerous passages Descartes claims that the faculty of sensory perception is passive – at least partly or to the extent that sensory ideas are caused in us independently of our own will (CSM II 26; AT VII 38; CSM II 55; AT VII 79; CSM I 280–2; AT VIII A 316–318; CSM I 223; AT VIII A 40). And the passive nature of sensory perception is responsible (at least partially) for the fact that we are aware of sensory ideas as if they were of bodies. In Meditation Six the existence of material things is proved on the assumption that ideas of sense present themselves as ideas of bodies together with Descartes’ account of how these ideas become available to us. Given God’s benevolence, Descartes argues, ideas of sense seem to represent bodies to us because they are indeed caused by bodies external to us. So, for example, the sensation of red presents red as a property of bodies because it is by and large (given God’s benevolence) caused by the
property of being red in bodies (although we may not know what the property of being red really is at this stage). And this causal connection between the sensation of red and the property of being red in bodies (whatever this property turns out to be) explains why the sensation presents itself originally as if of things.

A supporter of SV may still object that sensations present themselves as if of things not because of the passive nature of sensory perception but because we implicitly judge that the ideas refer to the objects that we take to be their causes. That is, according to the supporter of SV, the explicit reasoning through which Descartes in Meditation Six proves the existence of material things (viz., that there must a causal connection between sensory ideas and the objects they seem to represent) is in fact the judgment that is implicitly operative in every sensation.47

However, contra the supporter of SV, it is pretty clear from Meditation Six that the reasoning through which Descartes explains why sensory ideas seem to represent something outside themselves (and that ultimately allows him to prove the existence of material things as the actual causes of these ideas) is not the implicit judgment that endows them with intentionality. As Descartes explains in a letter to Hyperaspistes, sensory ideas “come to us in such a way as to make us aware that they are not produced by ourselves but come from elsewhere” (CSMK, 193; AT III 429) and it is precisely this feature of sensory ideas (i.e. that they are ideas of things) that generates the argument that proves the existence of material things in. And so the explanation of why sensations exhibit this intrinsic world-directedness is not to be confused with the implicit judgment that would rob them of their intrinsic world-directedness.

But there is another reason why we cannot take the above objection seriously. And explanation of this reason brings me to the second point I want to make about why we ought to believe that Descartes attributed intrinsic intentionality to sensations. As Martial Gueroult and Marjorie Grene have brought to our attention, Descartes’ own method of inquiry testifies that ideas are the basic units of knowledge. What Descartes is after is “not judgments like those of Aristotle and Kant, but a series of entirely reliable mental acts that carry me by their very nature to trust the veridicality of their contents.”48 Think of how the meditator is invited to search for truth. After the doubts of Meditation One and the discovery of the first truth in Meditation Two, Descartes, in Meditation Three, proceeds to enumerate various ideas within himself in order to investigate whether any of them in virtue of its very content gives sufficient ground to infer the existence of anything else besides the self. It is in this context that Descartes makes a distinction between confused and obscure ideas on the one hand and clear and distinct ideas on the other. A clear and distinct idea is an idea whose content is not only accessible to the mind but also is a reliable presentation of its object (see CSM II 31–2; AT VII
As such, a clear and distinct idea “can serve as the basis for a certain and indubitable judgment” (CSM I 207; AT VIIIA 21–22). On the contrary, it is the lack of perspicuity and distinctness of the content of sensory ideas that makes them subject matter for false judgments (CSM II 30; AT VII 44; CSM II, 163; AT VII 232–4). So, only clear and distinct ideas are such that they exhibit their objective reality on their sleeves and therefore can be trusted to infer the possible existence of their objects. Ideas of sense are obscure and confused and it is this feature that does not allow us (or ought not to allow us) to infer the possible existence of the objects obscurely represented. What all these passages show is that according to Descartes ideas of sense are materially false because they seem to represent what they in fact don’t represent and it is this feature of ideas that leads to erroneous judgments.

And the whole point of Descartes’ method consists in analyzing the content of ideas in such a way to identify the clear elements or simple notions in their contents as to avoid mistaken judgments on the basis of confused contents (see CSM I 208; AT VIIIA 22). As Grene puts it Descartes search for knowledge consists in the examination “within . . . ideas for their clarity and distinctness and in particular for their degree of objective reality.” And so Descartes’ own method for searching truth seems to provide indirect evidence that, according to him, ideas and their contents (be they clear and distinct or obscure and confused) are the basic units of knowledge upon which judgment is based. It follows that Descartes’ view is that judgments must conform to the ways in which we perceive objects through our ideas rather than being the reason why we perceive objects through ideas.

### Conclusion

In sections 3 and 4 above I argued that there is no reason to believe that Descartes held SV. Moreover, in section 5, I argued that there are reasons to believe the opposite, that is, that Descartes attributed intrinsic intentionality to sensations. I conclude then that Cartesian qualia are a myth. Furthermore, attributing to Descartes the view that sensations have intrinsic intentionality not only relieves Descartes of all the problems that qualia are supposed to introduce but also better explains why according to Descartes sensations have both a cognitive and pragmatic role. According to Descartes sensations contain some truth (CSM II 56; AT VII 80), that is, they provide a partially correct representation of things. And their representation is partially correct because sensations inform us of the presence of external objects outside of us although they misrepresent these objects. And the fact that they contain some truth explains both
why they have the pragmatic role of preserving the well-being of the mind-union in its navigation of the environment and why the senses are part of the same search after truth as the intellect. The senses, according to Descartes, provide us with information that is the starting point of a scientific inquiry that culminates with clear and distinct perception. But if sensations are mere ornaments of the mind, it is difficult to see how they can either be used for survival or as the starting point of a scientific inquiry continuous with that of the intellect.\textsuperscript{51}

Department of Philosophy
Rutgers University – Newark

NOTES

\textsuperscript{1} According to this interpretation, Descartes' view would be that in perceiving a color such as red one is merely experiencing the subjective feel of redness rather than perceiving (or seeming to perceive) a property of ordinary objects. In other words, according to this interpretation, Descartes' view is that in experiencing red someone is “experiencing \textit{reddly}” rather than experiencing a bodily surface as red. Notoriously, the very definition of qualia is controversial. On this see Ned Block (1994) “Qualia,” in S. Guttenplan (ed.) \textit{A Companion to Philosophy of Mind} (Oxford: Blackwell), pp. 514–520. In this context, I am concerned only with the question of whether Cartesian sensations are qualia in the sense that they present themselves as devoid of representational content. This is the question that has concerned Descartes scholars and some contemporary philosophers. See Brian Loar (2003) “Transparent Experience and the Availability of Qualia,” in Q. Smith and A. Jokic (eds) \textit{Consciousness} (Oxford: Clarendon Press); Michael Tye (2002) “Visual Qualia and Visual Content Revisited,” in D. Chalmers (ed.) \textit{Philosophy of Mind} (Oxford: Oxford University Press); and Tim Crane (2001) \textit{Elements of Mind} (Oxford: Oxford University Press).


See Loar, op. cit. Daniel Dennett summarizes the traditional view of qualia as attributing to them the following features: ineffability, intrinsicality, privacy and direct accessibility. (See Daniel Dennett, “Quining Qualia,” in D. Chalmers, op. cit., pp. 226–246) It’s not hard to see how this tradition can be traced back to Descartes.

For this kind of example, see Tye, op. cit., p. 447. Notice that the interpretation of Descartes as holding a representationalist theory of the mind (according to which ideas are “third entities” that mediate our knowledge of the world) goes back to Thomas Reid and is accepted by Richard Rorty and Jonathan Bennett (among many others). On this see John Yolton (1984) Perceptual Acquaintance from Descartes to Reid (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), pp. 3–41. I do not mean to suggest that Descartes didn’t hold a representational theory of mind. But holding a representational theory of mind doesn’t necessarily mean reifying mental states and reifying mental states doesn’t necessarily imply robbing them of intentionality. More generally, there is an inclination to burden Descartes with the introduction of qualia simply because, according to Descartes, it is (conceivably) possible to have sensations without there being an external world that causes these sensations in us. But notice that the fact that this is a possible scenario for Descartes doesn’t even begin to support the view that sensations present themselves as purely qualitative features of experience. The deceiver and dream arguments of Meditation One are perfectly compatible with sensations seeming to represent an external world.

See for example MacKenzie, op. cit., p. 125: “For Descartes sensations are inherently non-veridical and can play no role in the mind’s search after truth.”

I use “representationality” interchangeably with “intentionality”. The property of intentionality is the property ideas have of representing, or seeming to represent, something outside themselves. Although Descartes’ notion of representation is essentially a notion of presentation, ideas are modes of presentation of objects that are taken to exist outside the mind. I will argue for this interpretation of Descartes more extensively below.

The issue of whether there are independent arguments for believing that sensations aren’t representational is beyond the scope of this paper. All I intend to show here is that the arguments for qualia (at least as defined above) cannot be found in Descartes. I should clarify that my critical target is the view that Cartesian sensations (taken in themselves) are qualia or mental items lacking in intentionality; but I do not deny that sensations, according to Descartes, have a qualitative aspect in addition to the intentional one. Thanks to the anonymous referee for Pacific Philosophical Quarterly for pointing out the necessity of this clarification.

The abbreviations to Malebranche’s works are as follows: “S” stands for The Search After Truth, translated by T. Lennon and P. Olscamp (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1980). “S” will be followed by book, chapter and page number. Despite the fact that Malebranche uses “idea” in general to signify anything that is immediately perceived by the mind he wants to distinguish ideas in the strictest sense from sensations proper. See S I.i and S Elucidation III, 561. It is in this strict sense that I use the terms “idea” and “sensation” here.

I am limiting my discussion to sensation of so-called “secondary qualities”. The same distinction between sensation proper and an act of judgment doesn’t seem to apply to the case of sensation of extension, according to Malebranche. See S I.vii.


See S I.i; x; xiii. The validity of these inferences will be questioned in section 3 below.

The abbreviations to Descartes’ works are as follows:

Notice that it is unclear (both in Wilson and in Descartes) whether the distinction here is drawn between the sensory perceptions of primary and secondary qualities or between the sensory perceptions of secondary qualities and the clear understanding of primary qualities. The issue is complicated since it is not clear in what sense sensory perception of size “exactly corresponds to” (resembles?) the primary qualities of things. On this see Alison Simmons (2003) “Descartes on the Cognitive Structure of Sensory Experience,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LXVII, pp. 549–579. Since it is at least unproblematic that, according to Descartes, the clear and distinct understanding of these features exactly corresponds to real properties, I assumed that the above distinction is between the clear and distinct understanding of primary qualities and the sensory perception of secondary qualities.

See Wilson, *op. cit.* , p. 119.


Mackenzie, *op. cit.*, p.115. Notice that MacKenzie seems more explicit than Wilson and Descartes himself in saying that the difference is between the sensory perception of primary qualities and the sensory perception of secondary qualities. Moreover, notice that although MacKenzie writes that she doesn’t want to take a stand regarding what was Descartes considered position on the ontological status of secondary qualities, she pretty clearly does take a stand. Descartes’ considered view, according to her, is that colors are basic properties of the mind rather than being non-basic properties of bodies. See MacKenzie, *op. cit.*, pp. 114–116 and 122–124.

Although it is clear that ideas objectively taken indicate *res cogitatae* (or objects of thought) for Descartes, it is a matter of scholarly dispute how to interpret the phrase ‘the objects of thought.’ It can mean at least two different things: (1) the object that exists in the mind and of which the mind thinks (i.e. a mental object); or (2) the object that seems to exist outside the mind and of which the mind thinks. According to (1), ‘the object that is thought of’ is the idea itself and, accordingly, objectively taken ideas may be considered as distinct from formally taken ideas. The former are the content of the latter. According to (2), the object that is thought of is the external object (whether it exists or not) represented by the idea. Ideas are acts of thought having representational content rather than being the representational content of those acts. I agree with several commentators that by ‘idea’ Descartes meant “either the thought of an object or [. . .] the object thought of, but not [. . .] a third thing between thought and object.” (Michael Ayers (1991) *Locke. Epistemology and Ontology*. London: Routledge, p. 57) Descartes thought of ideas as ways of making external objects cognitively accessible to the mind. And although he certainly held what today would be called a “representationalist theory of the mind,” holding this view does not necessarily imply the reification of ideas.

Notice that I am assuming here that although there is a distinction between the two senses of ideas, this distinction is only conceptual and hence there is no idea taken materially.

22 Notice also that I am not considering the case of ideas of ideas in this context. Thanks to Alison Simmons for bringing to my attention the need to clarify this point.

23 This distinction is all too often overlooked. See, for example, Steven Nadler (1992) Malebranche and Ideas (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 27 footnote 17. See also Alalen, op. cit., pp. 232–6.

24 Notice that for Descartes real means possibly existing. Descartes makes clear in several places that the notion of objective reality has to do with clear and distinct representation (see, for example, CSM II 30; AT VII 44; CSM II 31; AT VII 46; CSM II 164; AT VII 234); and, in other places, he makes clear that when we clearly and distinctly perceive something we perceive it as real in the sense of “possibly existing.” (with the exception of God) (see, for example, CSM II 54; AT VII 78; CSM II 83; AT VII 117).

25 One may concede that the above textual evidence supports the claim that Descartes distinguished between the notions of objective being and objective reality but still object that there are other passages where Descartes seems to use “objective reality” and “objective being” as synonyms. For example, in Meditation Three Descartes writes: “[ . . . ] although the reality which I am considering in my ideas is merely objective reality, I must not on that account suppose that the same reality need not exist formally in the causes of my ideas, but that it is enough for it to be present in them objectively” (CSM II 29; AT VII 42). And in the Second Set of Replies, Descartes defines the objective reality of ideas as follows: “By this I mean the being of the thing which is presented by an idea, in so far as this exists in the idea” (CSM II 113; AT VII 161). I have two replies to this objection. First, both in Meditation Three and in the Second Replies, Descartes, after the passages quoted above, goes on to explain that reality is a property (like perfection and intricacy) that is possessed by the objects contained objectively in (or represented by) the ideas (for example, “In the same way [that we talk of ‘objective reality’] we can talk of ‘objective perfection’, ‘objective intricacy’ [ . . . ]”). Second, even if “objective reality” indicates the kind of reality that belongs to things existing in the mind, objective being and reality cannot be the same thing since, as Chappell has pointed out (see Chappell, op. cit., p. 190), things either have being in the mind or they do not; however, reality come in different degrees, according to Descartes.

26 When I say that ideas have the property of seeming to represent something outside themselves, I do not mean to suggest that their intentionality is apparent. Rather, I mean to say that their intended object either may not be there or may not be there as it is initially represented. Thanks to the anonymous referee of Pacific Philosophical Quarterly for this point.

27 A few words of clarification about (2) and (3) are in order here. As I pointed out above, when I say that for an idea to have objective reality is to have the property of representing the reality of something, I do not mean that the idea represents the degree of reality of something actually existing but only of something possibly existing. One may object that the difference between the notions of objective being and objective reality is only nominal. If ideas have objective being because they exhibit something to the mind independently of whether this something actually exists; and the objective reality of ideas is the property ideas have to represent something real, where “real” means a possible existent; then, why is (2) different from (3)? Couldn’t we just say that the objective reality of ideas is the property of seeming to represent something – whether this something exists or not? In the end, this is how we may cash out “possible” existence. But notice that this reasoning is unsound for several reasons. First, the two notions of seeming to represent and representing
something as a possible existent are very different notions. For example, one may seem to represent something that is not a possible existent like in the case of a square circle. Besides, according to Descartes, the notion of possible existence is connected to the notion of clear and distinct perception. But according to Descartes, there are obscure and confused representations of things (i.e. materially false ideas) and so collapsing the two notions together would mean confusing the notions of clear and distinct perception with that of obscure and confused perception. Second, we would have to simply ignore all the textual evidence for the distinction.

28 From now on when I talk of the representational content of sensations I mean “intrinsically” content unless otherwise indicated.


30 Notice that by defending the view that sensations are intrinsically representational I want to defend primarily the negative claim that their representationality is not the result of a judgment. Accordingly, saying that the representationality of sensation is intrinsic does not commit me to saying that their intentionality is a primitive property that cannot be explained in virtue of some other features of the ideas.


34 The difference between (KI’) and (KI) is that the latter only says that there are no properties of body that resemble sensations of color and the like but it doesn’t take a stand on the ontological status of secondary properties. KI’ clearly does.

35 MacKenzie argues that Descartes changed his mind about the ontological status of secondary qualities over the years. According to Mackenzie, in the Optics Descartes would hold the view that colors are extra-mental properties. However, in the Principles, Descartes would hold the view that colors are qualia that embodied minds have. (MacKenzie, op. cit., pp.114–116) I disagree with Mackenzie although I won’t be able to argue for this point here. But I take it that the passages quoted above are sufficient evidence against her view.


40 It is worth noticing that there is disagreement as to what exactly the role of the intellect is supposed to be in the third grade of sensation. On this see Alison Simmons (2003) op. cit., p. 555.

41 For a similar point see Alison Simmons (2003) op. cit., p. 560.

42 A supporter of SV could also reply by acknowledging that the explicit judgment that there are colored objects outside of me may be the result of my sensations of colors as properties of bodies but that my sensation of color as a property of bodies is in turn the
result of an implicit judgment. But this reply raises more problems than it solves. For example, let’s assume that the supporter of SV is right. Then isn’t an infinite regress of judgments – implicit or explicit – initiated? This cannot be what the supporter of SV has in mind, for no other reason than that Descartes didn’t believe in the preexistence of the soul. So the supporter of SV must acknowledge a starting point. But then given that there is a starting point and given that any sensation of color, heat and so on are, according to the supporter of SV, implicit judgments does that mean that the mind’s first acts ever are acts of judgment? That seems hardly believable – also in the face of so much evidence that Descartes distinguishes between ideas (and sensations are listed as adventitious ideas as we shall see below) and judgment and that he takes the former to be prior to the latter (see, for example, CSM II 25–6; AT VII 37; CSM II 39; AT VII 56). Moreover, if ideas are the basic unit of knowledge for Descartes and so they are the building blocks out of which judgments are made, how can ideas be implicit judgments? All these questions would need an answer but they aren’t even addressed by supporters of SV.

43 See CSM II 163; AT VII 232.

44 There is a different way of reading the notion of material falsity that is compatible with attributing to Descartes the view that sensations are qualia. According to this reading, materially false ideas are ideas that represent sensations (or qualia). For a defense of this reading see Nelson, op. cit., and Field op. cit. Nelson’s and Field’s arguments deserve far more attention than I can devote to them in this context. Suffice it to say here that I believe that this reading of material falsity is both textually and theoretically unsound. Descartes always discusses ideas of secondary qualities (i.e. materially false ideas) in the context of his discussion of ideas of material things and the very proof of the existence of material things in Meditation Six assumes that ideas of sense are ideas of bodies. Besides, I find the attribution to Descartes of the view that the mind “represents” its sensations to itself very uncartesian. Ideas are the ways by which objects become cognitively accessible to the mind. But sensations do not need to become cognitively accessible to us by way of ideas. They can certainly be made the object of our attention by reflecting on them but this hardly implies that this is the way they are normally experienced by us. The idea of red, for example, is not the idea that presents the sensation of redness to me; rather it is the sensation of something red. I am grateful to the anonymous referee of Pacific Philosophical Quarterly for making me aware of the necessity to say something about this alternative reading of materially false ideas.


46 There is general agreement among scholars that Descartes thought that the mind is passive in the reception of sensory ideas. See, for example, Margaret Wilson (1999) “Descartes on the Origin of Sensation,” in Margaret Wilson, Ideas and Mechanism (Princeton: Princeton University Press), pp. 41–69; and Alison Simmons (1998) “The Sensory Act: Descartes and the Jesuits on the Efficient cause of Sensations,” in S. F. Brown (ed.) Meeting of the Mind: The Relations between Medieval and Classical Modern European Philosophy (Turnhout: Brepol), pp. 63–76. The question of how the passive character of sensation is to be reconciled with Descartes’ views (i) that ideas of secondary qualities are innate and (ii) that the mind plays some active role even in sensation cannot be addressed in this context. For our purposes it is sufficient to point out that Descartes believed that the mind is at least partly passive in the reception of sensory ideas.

47 For a possible objection in this direction, see Nelson, op. cit.


49 Notice that in the Fourth Set of Replies Descartes classifies ideas as more or less materially false depending on the degree of obscurity of their content. (CSM II 163–4; AT VII 233–4) “Ideas which give the judgment little or no scope for error” writes Descartes,
“do not seem as much entitled to be called materially false as those which give great scope for error” (CSM II 163; AT VII 233). And the greatest scope for error is provided by the confused ideas of the senses. Why? Because, explains Descartes, “the obscurity of the idea is the only thing that leads me to judge that the idea of the sensation of cold represent some object called ‘cold’ which is located outside of me” (CSM II 164; AT VII 234).

Grene, op. cit., p. 17.

A version of this paper was presented to the Southeast European Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy at Bogaziçi University; to the Atlantic Canada Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy at Dalhousie University; and at the meeting of the Central Division of the American Philosophical Association (Chicago, April 26–29, 2006). A number of colleagues and friends provided helpful discussion and comments. I would like to thank especially Martha Bolton, Richard Field, Roger Florka, Sean Greenberg, Tad Schmaltz, Tom Vinci and the anonymous referee for Pacific Philosophical Quarterly for their insightful comments.