DESCARTES ON SENSORY MISREPRESENTATION:

THE CASE OF MATERIALLY FALSE IDEAS

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Descartes scholars have debated whether or not Cartesian sensations are representational. On one view, Cartesian sensations merely present experiential states of the mind. On a more liberal view, Cartesian sensations only purport to represent. They fail to really represent since they don’t resemble the represented object. A third more radical view is that Cartesian sensations represent something real even if they misrepresent it. The aim of the present paper is to defend this third interpretation of Cartesian sensations.

Section 1 examines Descartes’s internalist account of ideas (or his “presentational account”). Section 2 presents Descartes’s view that sensations are materially false ideas and Arnauld’s objections to the notion of material falsity and then discusses two prominent contemporary interpretations of it, viz., Margaret Wilson’s and Martha Bolton’s. Wilson argues that the notion of material falsity demands a revision of Descartes’s internalist account of ideas. Since materially false ideas represent objects as other than they are, they pose the problem of explaining how the referent of an idea is determined if not presentationally. She urges a causal account of the referential relation but acknowledges difficulties in attributing any such view to Descartes. Bolton defends a different reading of material falsity that exposes Wilson’s revision as unnecessary. According to Bolton, the presence of a “latent intellectual content” in ideas of sense both explains why these ideas seem to represent the bodily qualities they do not actually represent and determines their referent.

Section 3 tenders an alternative explanation of material falsity. The claim is that Descartes’s view of how ideas of sense are “acquired”
supports Wilson's intuition that a causal element is influential in Descartes's thought without undermining Descartes's internalist account of ideas. By eliciting the relevance of the Cartesian doctrine of the acquisition of sensory ideas for the discussion of material falsity my view has the advantage of explaining why sensory ideas represent their objects as other than they are without either committing Descartes to a causal account of content (as Wilson argues) or rendering a hidden intellectual content responsible for the representationality of these ideas (as Bolton argues). Descartes's notion of material falsity is explained without attributing to him any dubious view.

1. DESCARTES'S "PRESENTATIONAL ACCOUNT" OF IDEAS

According to Descartes, ideas are individuated more finely than the objects they represent; they are individuated by modes of presentation of those objects. Let us call this view the "presentational account" of ideas.

Notoriously, Descartes's use of "idea" is ambiguous. In the Preface to the Reader and in Meditation Three, he distinguishes two meanings: "ideas" can be taken either materialiter (materially) to designate an operation of the mind and, in this sense, all ideas are the same; or objective (objectively) to designate the object of thought (i.e., the thing represented) and, in this sense, all ideas are different. Here's one of the relevant passages:

there is an ambiguity ... in the word "idea." "Idea" can be taken materially, as an operation of the intellect .... Alternatively, it can be taken objectively, as the thing represented by that operation. (AT VII 8; CSM II 7)

Ideas are the subject's means of representing objects in thought. Materially taken, "idea" designates the mental operation that delivers the representation; objectively taken, "idea" designates the representational content of the mental act, i.e., the object that is thought of. However, "the object that is thought of" is itself ambiguous. It can mean either (i) the object that exists in the mind and of which the mind thinks (i.e., a mental object); or (ii) the object that exists (or seems to exist) outside the mind and of which the mind thinks. According to the first option, "the object that is thought of" (the intended object) 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 the second reading, the object that is thought of (the intended object) 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.
Although it is my view 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,”\(^{10}\) it is not my aim here to defend this view. All I need note is that both views above imply a presentational account because on both the identity of the idea does not depend on the actual existence of the object represented. An idea is individuated by a mode of presentation of the object independently of whether the object exists. Whether ideas are, or have, contents, these contents are intrinsic. A direct implication of the presentational model seems to be an internalism according to which ideas are available to the subject even if the represented object did not exist.\(^{11}\) The features of this “presentational account of ideas” (PA) are:

(PA) (i) Ideas are individuated by their mode of presentation of an object.\(^{12}\)

(ii) The mode of presentation provides a clear and complete description of the object.

(iii) The mode of presentation of an idea determines its object so that the idea refers to whatever satisfies its mode of presentation.

Because of (i)–(iii), (PA) implies that for an idea to be an idea of \(n\) it cannot present \(n\) as other than \(n\) is (on pain of not being the idea of \(n\)).\(^{13}\)

In sum, for Descartes there is more to an idea than being an idea of \(x\) (or standing for an object). What “more” there is may be difficult to specify because it may differ from idea to idea. For our purposes, this “more” is the mode of presentation of the idea, and it is that in virtue of which an idea is an idea of \(x\) rather than of \(y\).

2. Are Ideas of Sense a Problem-Posing Test Case for (PA)?

Arnauld noticed that Descartes’s discussion of material falsity seemed inconsistent with (PA). The aim of this section is to introduce the notion of material falsity and Arnauld’s objections to it (2.1) and then present Bolton’s and Wilson’s interpretations (2.2 and 2.3).

2.1 Materially False Ideas and Arnauld’s Objections

Descartes introduces material falsity in Meditation Three. After claiming that ideas are necessarily “of things” (AT VII 37, 44; CSM II 25, 30), he clarifies that material falsity pertains to sensory ideas (in particular, to ideas of secondary qualities) and occurs when “they [ideas] represent non-things as things” (AT VII 44; CSM II 30). For example, the ideas of cold and heat are so confused and obscure that one cannot tell whether cold is merely the absence of heat (or vice-versa) or whether both are
real qualities or neither is. And “since there can be no ideas which are not as it were of things (Et quia nullae ideae nisi tanquam rerum esse possunt, AT VII 44), if it is true that cold is nothing but the absence of heat, the idea that represents it to me as something real and positive deserves to be called false” (AT VII 44; CSM II 30, emphasis added).

Arnauld was appalled by the notion of materially false ideas. In The Fourth Set of Objections, he remarked that material falsity is “inconsistent with [Descartes’s] own principles” (AT VII 206; CSM II 145) according to which the idea of x is just x itself insofar as it exists objectively in the understanding (or, according to which, along the lines of (PA), the idea of x cannot present x as other than x is). If this principle is true, Arnauld argued, and cold is a privation of heat then there cannot be an idea of cold as something positive. In Arnauld’s words:

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 objectively in the intellect by means of an idea whose objective existence is a positive entity. Therefore, if cold is a mere absence, there cannot ever be a positive idea of it, and hence there cannot be an idea which is materially false. (AT VII 206; CSM II 145)

The core of Arnauld’s objection is that if we are to take seriously what Descartes writes about the objective reality of ideas in Meditation Three there cannot be cases of misrepresentation. “[W]hat does the idea, which you say is materially false, represent to your mind?” asks Arnauld. “An absence? But in that case it is true. A positive entity? But in that case it is not the idea of cold” (AT VII 207; CSM II 146). Suppose we learn that cold, which we have always thought to be a positive property, is a privation (i.e., the absence of heat). Then, according to (PA), 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 (PA) it is impossible to have ideas that mis-describe their objects. 14

Descartes, Arnauld concludes, has confused “a judgement with an idea” (AT VII 206; CSM II 145). In his replies to Arnauld and elsewhere Descartes bluntly denies this confusion. Materially false ideas, he clarifies in Conversation with Burman, are ideas of whose content we are mistaken “even if [we] do not refer them to anything outside myself” (AT V 152; CSMK 337).

2.2 Wilson’s Explanation of Material Falsity

Wilson acknowledges that Descartes did not confuse ideas with judgments. However, she claims, materially false ideas are an embarrassment for (PA). Since they represent x as other than x is they pose
the problem of explaining how the referent of the idea is determined if not presentationally. Wilson's solution is that Descartes's discussion of material falsity reveals he never defended a purely presentational view of content; rather, he defended a hybrid view according to which

the representationality of ideas does consist partly in presentational content. However, an idea's ... representing n does not preclude that the idea presents n as other than it is. . . . Descartes' notion of representation [is] partly "referential," as a way of expressing the non-presentational element. (Wilson, "Descartes on the Representationality of Sensation," p. 73)

According to this hybrid view, "being an idea of x" is ambiguous between a referential and a presentational reading. Suppose the mind is an immaterial substance but I believe it is material. So, my idea of the mind represents it as an immaterial substance (in the referential sense), though it represents it to me as a material substance (in the presentational sense).

Wilson finds support for her interpretation in Descartes's reply to Arnauld. 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:

[W]e 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 an idea (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. (AT VII 233; CSM II 163)

Here Descartes claims that in the case of the idea of cold, cold itself does not exist objectively in the understanding. Rather, the idea of cold is a sensation that presents something (or is referred to something, "referantur") other than that of which it is in fact an idea (cold as it is in nature). So Descartes believes that the idea of cold can provide a false presentation of that of which it is in fact the idea while remaining the idea of cold.

In conclusion, Descartes rejects Arnauld's claim that if the idea of cold presents cold as something positive it is not the idea of cold—hence defending his notion of material falsity. The above passage suggests that we should distinguish between what the idea presents to the mind (i.e., a sensation) and what the idea referentially represents (i.e., a privation). A distinction between these two senses of "representation"
seems required since what the idea (referentially) represents is not determined by what it (presentationally) represents. And since an idea may referentially represent \( n \) but presentationally represent \( n \) as other than \( n \) is, the idea provides the material for error.\(^{16}\)

Let me clarify, in concluding this section, the significance of Wilson’s claims. According to Wilson, Descartes is committed to a hybrid theory, according to which referential content is determined *independently of* presentational content (contrary to (PA)). So, Wilson concludes, the referential relation must be determined either causally or demonstratively. Despite the difficulties she herself envisages in providing either a causal (or a demonstrative) account of the referential relation within Descartes’s philosophy, Wilson maintains “the causal account was influential in Descartes’ thought, even if he was unable to develop it fully” (Wilson, “Descartes on the Representationality of Sensation,” p. 76).

2.3 Bolton's Explanation of Material Falsity

Bolton tenders an explanation of material falsity that is compatible with Descartes’s internalism (or (PA)). According to Bolton, the relevant equivocation in Descartes’s use of “representation” is not between *presentational* and *referential* representation but between *seeming* to represent (initially) and *actually* representing (after one realizes no quality of body resembles a sensation). Bolton’s view is that ideas of sense do not represent their true object as other than it is (hence generating the problem of explaining what determines the referential relation); rather they initially *appear* to represent an object (a quality of bodies that resembles the sensation) that they do not *actually* represent. Since the content of an idea of sense is obscure its true object is (at least partly) veiled from recognition, and hence, it is difficult to detect what it is before the intellect has examined the matter.

However, it remains to be explained why ideas of sense exhibit an initial representationality altogether, i.e., why they seem to represent a quality of bodies. Bolton rules out both a causal explanation and an explanation based on the notion of resemblance. Her view is that an intelligible content, implicit in sensory ideas, is responsible for the initial representationality of sensory ideas. Since this intelligible content is such that it exhibits the true object of the idea (in the case of the idea of red, for example, a certain configuration of particles having primary qualities); and this object cannot be totally “veiled from recognition”;\(^{17}\) the idea of red represents an unknown quality of bodies in virtue of this (semi)-hidden intelligible content. As Bolton puts it, “a false idea (or any obscure and confused idea) represents by means that are not evident from the idea itself.”\(^{18}\)
Bolton's explanation of the initial representationality of sensory ideas finds support in the Cartesian doctrine (sketched in the *Regulae ad Directionem Ingenii*, Rule 12 and in the *Principles*) that every thought is composed of primitive simple notions (ultimately corresponding to the clear and distinct ideas of the intellect) that determine its intentional content. The claim that the intelligible content hidden in sensory presentation reveals a world of bodies having geometrical and mechanical properties together with the claim that this intelligible content cannot be totally veiled from recognition explain why we take sensory ideas to represent bodily qualities. In conclusion, for Bolton, the presence of a latent intellectual content in ideas of sense explains both why they initially seem to represent bodily qualities and what they actually represent.

3. AN ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION OF MATERIAL FALSITY

The aim of this section is to defend the view that Descartes's doctrine of the acquisition of sensory ideas explains how a causal account of the initial representationality of sensory ideas is compatible with Descartes's internalism. This view is best described as steering between Wilson and Bolton, preserving their best intuitions without falling into the difficulties that each faces.

Although it was Wilson's merit to draw our attention to the presence of a causal element in Descartes's account of sensory representation, I disagree with her on what this causal element accomplishes for Descartes. According to Wilson, ideas of sense would have two kinds of content: a "narrow" content that consists in what the mind takes itself to be aware of; and a "wide" content determined by a causal relation with its object. However, short of gesturing towards a causal theory of content, Wilson neither explains the nature of this referential component nor suggests any Cartesian doctrine that might explain it. My contribution consists in identifying the relevant Cartesian doctrine and hence in clarifying the role of a causal element in Descartes's account of sensory representation.

Although I agree with Bolton that, according to Descartes, the clear and distinct ideas of the intellect determine what ideas of sense represent, there are problems with her view that the intellectual content hidden in sensory ideas also explains why they initially seem to represent qualities of bodies. For example, how does exactly an implicit intellectual content—a content of which we are not aware—tell us that these ideas are ideas of bodies? Notice that if it does not the possibility that sensations are mere decorations of the mind deprived of representational content is reintroduced. And even if we acknowledge that a partial recognition of this implicit intellectual content explains the initial
representationality of sensory ideas, there are still questions that need answering. For example, what does it mean for a content to be implicit but not totally veiled from recognition? And how much of this content must be revealed in order for us to take ideas of sense as ideas of bodies? Maybe these difficulties can be met. But, on my view, these difficulties don’t even arise because there is an alternative explanation of the initial representationality of sensory ideas. The passages where Descartes discusses how ideas of sense become available to us (or are “acquired” by us) form a body of evidence that a causal element is responsible for the initial representationality of sensory ideas. Moreover, this alternative explanation is more in keeping with the Meditations, the proof for the existence of material things, and the suggestion in Meditation Six that sense experience (quite independently of the ideas of the intellect) establishes a world of existing objects outside us.

Since Descartes’s doctrine of the acquisition of sensory ideas is crucial to my interpretation of material falsity, let us briefly present this doctrine. As is well known, according to Descartes, all ideas are innate. However, he often emphasizes that his nativism does not prevent him from maintaining that ideas become available to the subject on occasion of encounters with the environment. This is not the place to embark on a full discussion of this view. Suffice it to say that in Comments on a Certain Broadsheet Descartes clarifies that ideas are innate to us as certain diseases are innate to some families. As children of those families do not suffer from the disease in their mother’s womb but are genetically disposed to contract it later in life, so too infants are not born possessing ideas but possessing dispositions to attain them later in life (AT VIIIIB 358; CSM I 303–304). Moreover, after claiming that external things “transmit something which . . . gives the mind occasion to form . . . ideas [of secondary qualities],” Descartes insists that “[t]he ideas of pain, colors, sounds and the like [are] innate” (AT VIIIIB 359; CSM I 304). It seems plausible to conclude that Descartes acknowledges that sensory ideas became available to us (or are acquired by us) on the occasion of causal encounters with the environment.

But what are the implications of this Cartesian view for the issues at hand? Descartes’s view on how ideas of sense become available to us provides evidence that a causal element is responsible for the initial representationality of sensory ideas. How so? Descartes’s view implies that the availability of the idea guarantees that there is an object that is the cause of the idea—whatever this object may turn out to be. In other words, the fact that the idea does not become available to the subject until occasioned by encounters with its instances does not guarantee that the cause of the idea is as initially represented. For example: the idea of red is caused in the mind by instances of the property of being
red (some configuration of particles having primary qualities, according to Descartes); consequently, the idea of red (which, at first is just the sensation of redness) is causally connected to (and hence it is taken to represent) the property of being red although it presents it as something it is not (as a physical property that resembles the sensation). So, the idea of red represents something real (in virtue of being caused by real properties in bodies) although it represents this “something real” to the mind erroneously. And this explains materially false ideas, viz., ideas that represent their object as other than it is. Notice that despite the fact that the causal connection between the idea of red and red things explains why we take this idea to represent a yet unknown quality of bodies, the object of the idea, according to Descartes, hasn’t been fixed (and so its content hasn’t been determined yet). And the reason is that the experiential presentation of the object is confused and obscure.  

In conclusion, the Cartesian doctrine of concept acquisition explains the initial representationality of sensory ideas as follows: if one cannot have the idea of x unless one has encountered instances of x, x must exist as the cause of that idea (on pain of not having the idea). The idea of x then represents x even if it initially represents it obscurely as something that x is not. The initial representationality of sensory ideas is then a by-product of Descartes’s view that it is a necessary condition on the acquisition of the idea of x that it be caused by x’s.

Evidence of the Cartesian view that ideas become available to us on the occasion of causal encounters with the environment can be found in several places. The adventitious nature of ideas of sense is crucial to the proof of the existence of material things in Meditation Six. Sensory perception provides us “with a sure argument for the existence of material things” (AT VII 73; CSM II 51) because material things are the only possible cause of our ideas of sense: 

For God has given me . . . a great propensity to believe that [ideas of sense] are produced by corporeal things. So, I do not see how God could be understood to be anything but a deceiver if the ideas were transmitted from a source other than corporeal things. It follows that corporeal things exist. (AT VII 80; CSM II 55, emphasis added. See also AT VII 367; CSM II 253)

As Descartes clarifies in a Letter to Hyperaspistes, dated August 1641, he “proved the existence of material things . . . from the fact that these ideas come to us in such a way as to make us aware that they are not produced by ourselves but come from elsewhere” (AT III 429; CSMK 193). Ideas of color, he writes in the Principles, are such that “when we say that we perceive colors 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 color” (AT VIII A 34; CSM I 218. See also AT VII 83; CSM II 57).

So far it has only been explained how a causal element is responsible, according to Descartes, for the initial representationality exhibited by ideas of sense, viz., for why they seem to represent qualities of bodies. But one may wonder how this causal account of the initial representationality of ideas of sense can square with an internalist theory of content. The answer is simple. Since the initial representationality of ideas of sense is explained by Descartes’s theory of concept acquisition rather than content determination, there is plenty of room for an internalist account of the content of ideas of sense. In fact this seems to be what Descartes had in mind. According to him, the story of concept acquisition is not the whole account of what ideas of sense represent since he acknowledges that ideas of sense initially represent their object obscurely (as an unknown property of bodies). So, if a sensory idea initially represents a real but indeterminate object as the cause of the idea, what makes determine the object of the idea or, mutatis mutandis, what determines the identity of the idea by determining what it is an idea of?

According to Descartes, the presentational content of sense experience can be clarified by attending to the clear and distinct ideas of the intellect. Once the sensory presentation of objects has been “reinterpreted” according to the simple notions (or clear and distinct ideas) of the intellect, it becomes apparent that these objects aren’t as initially represented by the senses. So, once the presentational content of sense experience is reinterpreted according to the “categories” of the intellect, we can see that the object that the idea had been referring to all along is whatever satisfies the clear and distinct presentation provided by the intellect. The psychological mechanism underlying this reinterpretation would consist in becoming aware—by a process of analysis—of what is clear and distinct in our confused perception of bodies. In Meditation Two, for example, Descartes writes that the wax that is perceived by the mind alone is the same wax which we see and touch and then adds that this perception “can be imperfect and confused [i.e., when it based on sensory perception alone] or clear and distinct . . . depending on how carefully I concentrate on what the wax consists in” (AT VII 31; CSM II 21). In conclusion, the true object of the idea of sense is fixed by the clear and distinct ideas of the intellect and Descartes’s internalism is vindicated.²¹

There is abundant textual evidence for the Cartesian doctrine that the presentational content of sense experience can be amended by attending to the clear and distinct ideas of the intellect initially hidden in sensory representation. In Rule 12 of Regulae ad Directionem Ingenii,
Descartes writes that among the objects of our knowledge we must
distinguish between the notions of simple natures "which we know . . .
clearly and distinctly" (AT X 418; CSM I 44) and the rest of things which
are composed of them. The simple natures divide into intellectual (i.e.,
thought and volition); material (i.e., shape and extension); and common
to both material and immaterial things (i.e., existence, unity and dura-
tion). Composite natures are known by us, for example, "because we
learn from experience what sort they are" (AT X 422; CSM I 46). Then
he warns against sensory experience:

[The intellect can never be deceived by any experience, provided
that when the object is presented to it, . . . it [the intellect] [does] not
judge . . . that external things are just as they appear to be. In all
such cases we are liable to go wrong . . . as someone who has jaundice
does when owing to the yellow tinge of his eyes, he thinks everything
is colored yellow. (AT X 423; CSM I 47)

Descartes's conclusion is that human knowledge consists in "achiev-
ing a distinct perception of how these simple natures contribute to the
composition of things" (AT X 427; CSM I 49).

In Principles I.47-8, Descartes presents the same view that "in order
to correct the preconceived opinions of our early childhood we must
consider the simple notions . . . which are the basic components of our
thoughts" (AT VIIIA 22; CSM I 208). And in Principles I.68, he writes
that we can correct our erroneous judgment that our sensations of color
resemble real qualities in bodies by examining "the nature of what is
represented by the sensation of color" (AT VIIIA 33; CSM I 217). This
nature is revealed by the intellect alone. The intellect shows us that
"nothing whatever belongs to the concept of body except the fact that
it has length, breadth and depth and is capable of various shapes and
 motions" (AT VII 440; CSM II 297) and, consequently, that the sensible
qualities of bodies such as color, taste and so on "consist solely in the
motion of bodies . . . and the configuration and situation of their parts"
(AT VII 440; CSM II 297). In conclusion, it is our clear and distinct
understanding of the nature of matter that makes us realize that ideas
of sense actually represent modes of res extensa.

This point is repeated in Meditation Six. After claiming that sensa-
tions such as those of heat and pain inform us that something outside
the mind exists as the yet unknown cause of these ideas, Descartes
warns that we misuse sensory perceptions "by treating them as reliable
touchstones for immediate judgments about the essential nature of the
bodies located outside us" (AT VII 83; CSM II 57).

Notice that the view defended in this section has advantages over
both Wilson's and Bolton's. By bringing forth the relevance of Descartes's
doctrine of concept acquisition to the discussion of material falsity this view has the advantage, over Wilson's, of explaining material falsity without committing Descartes to a causal theory of content and, over Bolton's, of explaining the initial representationality of sensory ideas in a way which is more in keeping with Meditation Six, the proof of the existence of corporeal things and the suggestion there that the senses (quite independently of the intellect) tell us of a world of things outside of us. Descartes's view that ideas of sense misrepresent their objects is explained without attributing to him any dubious or problematic view.

4. OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

The source of the most recurring objections to the offered reading of Descartes's theory of sensory misrepresentation consists in a misunderstanding of the role attributed to the causal element in Descartes's theory. Addressing these objections will give me a chance to further clarify my view.

The first criticism raises doubts about whether Descartes's story of concept acquisition is able to explain what it is supposed to explain, viz., the fact that sensory ideas misrepresent their right causes. Even if it is a necessary condition on the availability of the idea of red that it be caused by something in the environment, the criticism goes, it is not a necessary condition that it be caused by instances of the property of being red. Why? Because on Descartes's account of concept acquisition the relation between the output (i.e., the ideas) and the input is brute-causal and arbitrary under intentional description and, hence, is not strong enough to guarantee that the idea represents that particular property. So the problem with my account would be that it does not give a satisfactory explanation of why it is instances of the property of being red that cause tokenings of the idea of red in the mind. Yet, this explanation is needed if a causal relation is what explains materially false ideas since these are ideas that misrepresent their true objects.

This objection is particularly pressing because Descartes admits of cases where the idea of n is not caused by instances of n. The phantom limb case is an example. There are people, writes Descartes, who feel pain as if in the limb when the limb has been amputated and the actual cause of the sensation lies either in other areas "through which the nerves travel in their journey from the limbs to the brain" (AT VIII A 320; CSM I 283) or in the brain itself (AT VII 77; CSM II 53). Consequently, if Descartes held a causal account of the initial representationality of sensation he should also have a successful way of dealing with these cases. Does he? I believe he does.
In Meditation Six, Descartes claims that in normal circumstances and assuming God's benevolence the sensation of pain as if in the foot is indeed caused by what it represents, viz., an injury in the foot. Experience has shown us, Descartes writes, that our sensations are "most frequently (quam frequentissime) conducive to the preservation of the healthy man" (AT VII 87; CSM II 60, emphasis added). This evidence bears witness to the power and non-deceiving nature of God since it is only when the sensation of pain in the foot is caused by an injury in the foot that we can successfully engage in health-preserving behavior. However, "notwithstanding the immense goodness of God" (AT VII 88; CSM II 61), Descartes remarks, there exist abnormal circumstances when our sensation of x is either caused by non-x's or by no external object at all (i.e., a brain state) (CSM II 61; AT VII 88–89).

So, on the basis of this distinction between normal and abnormal circumstances Descartes has available a twofold answer to the phantom limb counterexample. First, given our physiology and God's benevolence it simply does not happen frequently that we feel pain in a limb when there is no limb. Second, even when this error takes place, as in the case of the amputated limb, the error is explained in light of what would happen in normal circumstances. In normal circumstances, the injury causes a certain motion of particles in the brain that upon arrival at the pineal gland interfacing with the conscious mind causes a certain idea. A trace of that idea is "retained" in the conscious mind and upon the pineal gland's being reached by the same motion of particles in the brain the mind is disposed to form the same idea. Errors are then explained in light of the "memories" of ideas caused by what they represent in normal circumstances. In conclusion, normal circumstances and God's benevolence account for why it is a necessary condition on the acquisition of the idea of red that it be caused not simply by anything but by instances of the property of being red.

But then, one may still object, what explains the relation between instances of the property of being red and tokenings of the idea of red in the mind is not the causal relation but God's benevolence and the notion of "normal circumstances." In particular, God's benevolence makes it the case that ideas are caused by the right sorts of things in order to guarantee the senses' fulfillment of their function of promoting our well-being. After all, in Meditation Six, Descartes writes that God's benevolence has endowed us "with the best system that could be devised" (AT VII 87; CSM II 60), namely, with a system such that any given movement occurring in the part of the brain that affects the mind produces the one sensation that "is most especially ... conducive to the preservation of the healthy man" (ibid.).
It is undeniable that Descartes maintains this. However, what Descartes claims in *Meditation Six* threatens my account only under some interpretation of it. If we interpret what Descartes claims in *Meditation Six* as saying either that the function of the senses is ultimately responsible for the representationality of sensation or that God is like a *deus ex machina* that guarantees the mapping of ideas with their objects, then my reading of *Meditation Six* is threatened since the causal account becomes subordinate to either the teleology of sensation or God's action. However, there is no reason why we should accept this reading of *Meditation Six*. What Descartes is saying there is that God has pre-ordained things in the world so that ideas of sense are caused, by and large, by the right sorts of things and that this causal relation guarantees the well-being of the mind-body union. Notice that this reading of *Meditation Six* does not contradict my claim that what explains the relation between instances of {n} and the idea of {n} is a causal relation. It only adds that this causal relation was *instituted* by God.

A second criticism can be raised in light of my answer to the first. If according to my story God has pre-ordained things so that ideas are caused by the right sorts of objects, why not saying that this causal relation is a necessary condition for the determination of the content of ideas? After all, the critic remarks, if we are talking about what the idea of red represents, we need to have dealt with the issue of content determination. So, when I say that the idea of red represents instances of the property of being red because it is a necessary condition on its acquisition that it be caused by them what I really should be saying is that it is a necessary condition on the content determination of the idea of red that it be caused by instances of the property of being red.

This is a good point. But it is possible to reply to it. First of all, what is at stake here is the explanation of misrepresentation. But, notoriously, a crude causal account of content determination has trouble in explaining misrepresentation. According to a crude causal theory, the idea represents what actually causes it. So, for example, if a causal connection with the property of being red is a necessary condition for determining the content of the idea of red, then the idea refers to instances of being red and represents them as they (truly) are. Consequently, either the idea of red represents the property of being red as it actually is (since what causes the idea is the property as a mode of *res extensa*); or if it represents it as other than it is, it is *not* the idea of red. So, if the psychological mechanism that delivers the acquisition of the idea of red is conflated with the process of content determination, there is no room for misrepresentation. Materially falsity is still left unexplained.

Secondly, it is the conflation of the issues of concept acquisition and content determination that leads one to interpret my explanation of mate-
rial falsity in terms of Descartes’s view of how ideas become available to us as necessarily implying something more (i.e., as implying attributing to him a causal theory of content). However, a theory of concept acquisition and a theory of content determination are in principle distinct because their tasks are. The former explains the necessary conditions under which we come to have a certain idea in the mind; the latter explains the necessary conditions under which the idea (which we possess) has the content it has. The story of content determination begins, so to speak, where the story of how we come to have it ends. It answers the following questions: What is the idea we have? What determines its content? Moreover, conflating the issues of concept acquisition and content determination, as we saw above, does not offer any solution to the problem at hand.

These two reasons explain why it is argued in section 3 above that it is possible to explain material falsity in terms of Descartes’s view of concept acquisition without denying his internalism. In light of God’s benevolence, it is a necessary condition on concept acquisition that ideas of sense are not only caused by something external but also, by and large, by the very objects that they represent. As a consequence, the very availability of the idea, say, of red guarantees that the property of being red caused the idea and, hence, that the idea (although obscurely) stands for it. However, a necessary condition on concept acquisition is not a necessary condition of content determination. And it is precisely because this is not the case that we can explain misrepresentation. A necessary condition for content determination, as we saw above, does not allow room for the mismatch between what causes the sensation and what the sensation represents. But a necessary condition on concept acquisition does allow for the idea to represent its object obscurely (or as some unknown property) precisely because it is not a necessary condition on the content of the idea (i.e., it is not what fixes what the idea represents). As a result, an internalist theory of content is not only compatible but also complements Descartes’s doctrine of the acquisition of ideas. What makes the idea of red represent a mode of res extensa is the intellectual presentation of the property of being red that is implicitly contained in the obscure sensation of red. Since the true object of a sensory idea is revealed only after its confused content has been analyzed into the clear and distinct ideas of the intellect we can say that the sensation of red misrepresents its object only after the sensory presentation of the object has been reinterpreted according to the “categories” of the intellect. So, the story of how the idea is acquired together with the story of how the content of the idea is determined explains how misrepresentation occurs. It occurs when an idea is referred to its object in virtue of the way in which it is acquired before its content (and object) has been clarified by a theory of content. The inevitable result is a misrepresentation of the object of thought.
CONCLUSION

The account of material falsity in section 3 seemed to be caught in a dilemma in light of the criticism raised in section 4. Either there is a necessary relation between the property of being red and the mental tokenings of the idea of red or there isn’t. Either way, however, I couldn’t account for misrepresentation. On the one hand, if it is a necessary condition for what the idea of red represents that it be caused by instances of the property of being red, we couldn’t explain why a mental token of the idea of red misrepresents that property. On the other hand, if there is no necessary connection between the property of being red and the mental tokening of the idea of red, then we cannot explain why the idea would misrepresent its object. My suggestion was that we can avoid the dilemma by distinguishing between the necessary conditions for concept acquisition and the necessary condition for content determination. It is precisely by making the causal connection between instances of the property of being red and the idea of red a necessary condition for the acquisition (rather than the content determination) of the idea that material falsity and misrepresentation can be explained. Since God makes it a necessary condition on the acquisition of sensory ideas that they be caused by the right sorts of things, we can infer from the very fact that we have the idea of red that it is caused by the property of being red (whatever that is) and, hence, represents it (although the causal relation isn’t sufficient to fix the object of the idea). Because of this we tend to make the mistake of also inferring that the property the idea of red represents is similar to the felt sensation. But this mistake can be prevented if we acknowledge with Descartes that the causal story of the acquisition of the idea does not even begin to tell us what the idea is. The idea of red and its kin, Descartes never tires to remind us, are obscure and confused. It is the intellect’s job to clarify what the idea is and to fix its referent.27

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NOTES


5. A clarification of the sense in which ideas of sense are “acquired” according to Descartes despite his view that all ideas are innate will be provided in section 3 below.


7. See also AT VII 40; CSM II 27–8. In this paper, I use the following abbreviations:


8. The debate between Malebranche and Arnauld originates from, and at the same time is evidence for, this ambiguity in Descartes. On this see S. Nadler, *Arnauld and the Cartesian Philosophy of Ideas* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989).

9. Nadler labels these views on ideas “the object-approach” and “the content-approach” to intentionality. About the latter he writes: “The intentionality . . . of the act is indifferent to the existence or non-existence of the object intended by the act. This follows from the fact that the [intentionality] is a function of the act’s content, of a non-relational intrinsic feature of the act” (*Arnauld and the Cartesian Philosophy of Ideas*, p. 146).


11. I am well aware that it has been claimed (see, for example, J. Yolton, *Perceptual Acquaintance from Descartes to Reid* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982]) that the view of ideas as mental entities is responsible for Cartesian skepticism or “skepticism of the veil of ideas,” whereas the view of ideas as mental acts directed toward eternal objects is supposed to block this sort of skepticism. As should be clear from above, I doubt that the view of ideas as mental acts is better positioned to avoid (or solve) the problem of skepticism. However, this is no place to discuss this issue.

12. Ideas so individuated are abstract ideas that represent particular objects and are tokened by the same mind at different times or by different minds. I do not wish, in this context, to discuss Descartes’s view on the relation of an abstract idea with (i) its tokenings in the mind and (ii) the particular objects represented. Notice, however, that attributing this view to Descartes does not necessarily commit him to maintain that abstract ideas are abstract objects really distinct from both the finite mind and particular objects. Chappell, for example, convincingly argues that ideas taken objectively cannot be really distinct from ideas taken formally. Ideas taken objectively can only be conceptually distinct from the substance (i.e., the mind) of which they are modes. (See Chappell, “The Theory of Ideas”) Moreover, despite the presence of a few passages where Descartes seems to suggest that ideas of mathematics are ideas of abstract objects (i.e., “true and immutable essences”) which are really distinct from particular objects, in the *Principles of Philosophy* Descartes seems to think of abstract ideas as general ways of conceiving of particular things (AT VIII A 26, 27, 28; CSM I 211–212).

13. I owe this last phrasing to Wilson, “Descartes on the Representationality of Sensation,” pp. 72–73. Notice that (i)–(iii) are not necessarily related. It just happens that they are related in Descartes’s theory of ideas. Moreover the above definition is modeled after clear and distinct ideas. The idea of God may seem to provide a counterexample to the above definition since in *Meditation Three* Descartes claims that we could not have the (clear and distinct) idea of God unless God existed and caused it in us. This may suggest that Descartes offers a causal account of (at least) the idea of God. However, this is not what Descartes maintains. Descartes infers that God exists and is the cause of the idea in us because of the way in which we clearly and distinctly represent him
in our minds. For an interesting view of how Descartes’s theory of ideas involves both a causal and resemblance theory of reference see Normore, “Meaning and Objective Being: Descartes and his Sources.”

14. Despite obvious differences, notice the similarities between Kripke’s critique of the description theory of naming and Descartes’s (implicit) critique of (PA) in allowing for materially false ideas. As, according to Kripke, “Gödel” refers to Gödel even if Gödel is not in fact the individual that satisfies the description “the man who proved the incompleteness of arithmetics,” so, according to Descartes, the idea of cold refers to cold even if cold is not in fact what satisfies the “presentational content” of the idea. As Kripke points out, one reason the description theory must be false is that it cannot account for cases in which “the speaker has erroneous beliefs about some person.” (S. Kripke, Naming and Necessity [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972], p. 106) We can say Gödel was not the man who proved the incompleteness of arithmetic; but if the description theory were true “Gödel” would refer to whoever in fact proved the incompleteness of arithmetic, say, Smith; and hence we would have a correct belief about a different person. Similarly, as Arnauld’s criticism shows, if (PA) were true we could not have materially false ideas, i.e., we could never have a false representation of the correct object of an idea. We would just have a correct representation of a different object. Whereas Kripke infers from this “defect” that the description theory is false, Arnauld opts for the denial of materially false ideas.

15. My reading of the passage may depend on how I interpret the meaning of the verb “refero.” In Latin, “refero” means “to report” and hence it seems closer in meaning to “to present” than to “to refer” (in the sense in which referring and reference, in philosophy of language and mind, are opposed to describing).

16. There is a passage in Descartes’s replies to Arnauld that seems inconsistent with what Descartes claims in Meditation Three. See AT VII 234; CSM II 164. But I am inclined to agree with Wilson that Descartes there “expressed himself ineptly” (Wilson, “Descartes on the Representationality of Sensation,” p. 75).

17. Bolton, “Obscure and Confused Ideas of Sense,” p. 395. This seems to be a by-product of Descartes’s view that there is no thought of which we are not conscious but that, at the same time, we need not be aware of all that is in our ideas. For Descartes’s commitment to the epistemological transparency of thought see, for example, CSM II 43; AT VII 49 and CSM II 171–172; AT VII 246. My understanding of Bolton’s view benefited from numerous conversations with her and from reading her manuscript “The Work of Margaret Wilson: a Talk for the APA.”


20. Notice that one may object that the object is indeed fixed by the causal connection. We just don’t know what it is yet. And this view is compatible with
a causal theory of content. However, this cannot be Descartes’s view because, according to him, what we know clearly and distinctly about x fixes the referent of the idea of x. This reply may sound question-begging because the discussion of material falsity raises precisely the issue of whether this notion caused Descartes to break with his presentational account of ideas. But this criticism can be met. The very fact that Descartes defines ideas of sensation as obscure and confused and hence as mis(re)presenting their true objects is evidence that he did not have a causal account of reference.

21. A clarification is in order. The distinction between what ideas of sense initially represent (or misrepresent) and eventually represent (what they represent after the experiential content has been amended by the clear and distinct ideas of the intellect) does not suggest that sensations stop misrepresenting at some point. Sensations represent their objects while misrepresenting them. The change occurs in us not in the sensations themselves.

22. Descartes’s view that the idea of red is simply occasioned by external stimuli implies his endorsement of what in contemporary terminology would be called a “triggering” model of concept acquisition and this model implies a non-rational (or brute causal) relation between input and output. See J. Fodor, “On the Present Status of the innateness Controversy,” in Representations (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1981), pp. 257–316.


24. A teleological reading of Cartesian sensations has been defended by Alison Simmons in her “Are Cartesian Sensations Representational?” Nous, vol. 33 (1999), pp. 347–369. I doubt that Descartes had a teleological account of sensory representation, but I won’t argue for this point in this context.


26. See Fodor, Psychosemantics, p. 101: “Suppose, for example, that tokenings of the symbol ‘A’ are nomologically dependent upon instantiations of the property A; viz., upon A’s. Then according to the theory (read: the crude causal theory) the tokens of the symbol denote A’s (since tokens denote their causes) and they represent them as A’s (since symbols express the property whose instantiations cause them to be tokened). But symbol tokenings that represent A’s as A’s are ipso facto veridical. So it seems that the condition for an ‘A’-token meaning A is identical to the condition for such a token being true. How then do you get unveridical ‘A’ tokens into the causal picture?”

27. My thanks go to Martha Bolton, Otávio Bueno, John Cottingham, Frances Egan, Ernie Lepore, Brian Loar, Paul Lodge, Antonia Lolordo, Kirk Ludwig and Tad Schmaltz for helpful discussions of earlier versions of this paper.