Representation
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Representation (Latin repraesentatio, French représentation) is not a technical term for Descartes. He offers no definition of it, and he has no explicit theory of it. While representation is a central concept in today’s theory of mind (along with intentionality and consciousness), early modern theories of mind centered on the cognitive faculties (intellect, imagination, memory, senses). That doesn’t mean the concept of representation played no role in Descartes’ theory of mind; it simply means that we have to do some rational reconstruction to determine what that role was.

I. Preliminaries

In the 17th century, repraesentare and représenter mean many things, but their chief meaning is to present something or make something immediately available. One can represent a gift to a friend or a sum of money to a creditor. But the verbs can also mean making something present by way of a proxy or substitute for the thing itself. In this latter sense, a lawyer represents his client. Most cases of philosophical interest fall somewhere in between the two: when an actor represents Henry VIII on the stage, there is a sense in which he is making Henry VIII present to the audience, although he is just a proxy or substitute for Henry himself. The ambiguity found in this case animates discussions of representation in the theory of mind: mental states make objects, facts, and states of affairs present to the mind, but do they do so by means of proxies or substitutes for those objects, facts, and states of affairs? If they do employ proxies, what are the epistemological and metaphysical consequences? And whether or not they employ proxies, how does a mental state manage to represent something distinct from itself? These are questions an account of mental representation must answer.

II. Epistemology of Mental Representation

The question whether Descartes was a “direct realist” and “indirect realist” has occupied commentators since Reid in the 18th century cast him in the latter role. At issue is whether thought (including both sensory and intellectual perception) involves mental representations that mediate epistemologically between mind and world. Direct realists insist that the mind is in immediate epistemic contact with its object. Indirect realists hold that thought is epistemologically mediated by mental representations; for example, in seeing a cupcake on my desk I am immediately aware of a mental representation of a cupcake and only mediately aware of the cupcake itself. Following Reid, the indirect realist reading had many followers (Kenny 1968, Rorty 1979, Wilson 1999), but in the 1970s and 1980s a surge of commentators argued that Descartes was in fact a direct realist, at least in the case of primary quality perception (Arbini 1983, Cook 1987, MacKenzie 1990, Nadler 1989, O’Neil 1974, Yolton 1984). The terms of this debate are frequently unclear, and accounts differ dramatically on each side. What is especially unclear is whether merely taking ideas to be representations commits Descartes to indirect realism. It depends on whether the mind simply has ideas-cum-representations (and in virtue of having them directly perceives a physical object) or actually perceives them (and so has to then infer that a physical object lies on the other side of it).

The debate initially turned on whether Descartes treats ideas as acts of thought or as objects of thought (Kenny 1968). If the former, he’s a direct realist. If the latter, he’s an indirect realist. This way of asking the question, however, is too simple. Descartes
distinguishes two senses of the term “idea”: a “material” and an “objective” sense (AT VII 8; CSM II, 7). Following Chappell (1986) I call them ideas\textsubscript{m} and ideas\textsubscript{o}. Ideas\textsubscript{m} are acts of thinking (sensing, imagining, understanding). Ideas\textsubscript{o} are representations of things (a cupcake, the nature of a triangle, God). The question, then, must be reformulated: what is the relationship between ideas\textsubscript{m} and ideas\textsubscript{o}? Are they two distinct things, such that we can say that ideas\textsubscript{m} perceive ideas\textsubscript{o}? If so, Descartes looks like an indirect realist, with ideas\textsubscript{o} playing the role of epistemic proxies for things. Or are ideas\textsubscript{m} and ideas\textsubscript{o} simply two aspects of a single thing? If so, Descartes may be a direct realist: ideas\textsubscript{m} may be \textit{metaphysical} proxies for things that provide a perceptual act with its content, but not \textit{epistemic} proxies acting as an object for any perceptual act. Although most commentators today deny the coherence of saying that Cartesian ideas\textsubscript{m} perceive ideas\textsubscript{o}, there is little agreement on just what their relationship is. There is some reason to think they are just two aspects of a single modification of mind that are only rationally distinct. When Descartes introduces the distinction, he depicts the idea\textsubscript{o} as “the thing represented by that operation of the intellect,” i.e., by the idea\textsubscript{m}(AT VII 8; CSM II, 7, italics mine). There seems to be only one thing here: a representational act of thought. But insofar as it seems possible to mix and match ideas\textsubscript{m} and ideas\textsubscript{o} (say one’s surprise at a lion gives way to fear of the lion), one might argue that they are at least modally distinct like a ball’s color and shape: no idea\textsubscript{m} can exist without \textit{some} idea\textsubscript{o}, but which one it co-exists with is up for grabs. Finally, to the extent that ideas\textsubscript{m} and ideas\textsubscript{o} are granted different kinds of being or reality (formal and objective, respectively), one might argue that they have an even greater measure of independence (see being, formal vs. objective). At the very least, the issue is more complicated than the early literature suggested, and deciding whether Descartes is a direct or indirect realist is unlikely to be decided simply by examining his account of ideas.

III. The Scope of Representation in the Cartesian Mind

Another much debated question concerns the scope of representation in Descartes’ theory of mind: do all Cartesian thoughts represent something, or are there thoughts that represent nothing? Before looking at contested cases, let’s ask what role representation plays in Descartes’ general conception of mind. This question is itself a matter of debate, and how one answers it has consequences: if the Cartesian mind is essentially a representing thing, then there is pressure to read all Cartesian thoughts as representational.

The Cartesian mind is essentially a thinking thing. But what is thought? There was a tendency in the middle of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century to identify Cartesian thought with consciousness (Kenny 1968), which would allow for thoughts that are conscious but non-representational. The identification of thought with consciousness seems to be inspired largely by (a) the definitions of thought in the \textit{Principles} and Second Replies, (b) the laundry list of thoughts that Descartes includes in his description of the mind in the Second Meditation (AT VII 28; CSM II, 19), and (c) the occasional use of the phrase “thought or consciousness” suggesting their interchangeability. None of (a)-(c) is decisive. The definitions say not that thought is consciousness but rather that thought is what the mind is \textit{conscious of}. The laundry list might pick out a range of \textit{representational} states as much as range of \textit{conscious} states. And the occasional phase “thought or consciousness” occurs in places where Descartes is offering a quick and easy way to distinguish mental from corporeal substances without getting into the details of its nature (AT VII 176; CSM II, 124; AT III 474; CSM(K), 201).

Descartes frequently identifies thought with intellection (AT VII 27; CSM II, 18; AT VII 78; CSM II, 54; AT VIII-A 23; CSM I, 208). Even sensing, he says in the Sixth Meditation, “includes intellection in its formal concept” (AT VII 78; CSM II, 54). What,
then, is intellection? Several commentators have suggested that in one way or another intellection involves representation (Alanen 2003, Broughton 2008, Carriero 2009, Hatfield 2003, Rozemond 1998). To the extent that all Cartesian thought involves intellection, it will also all involve representation.

Further evidence that all Cartesian thought is representational comes from of his technical language. Descartes frequently uses the terms “thought” (cogitatio) and “idea” (idea) interchangeably (AT VII 35; CSM II, 24), but he says that strictly speaking ideas are “as it were images of things” (tangquam rerum imaginem) (AT VII 37; CSM II, 25; see also AT VII 44; CSM II, 30). Thoughts may include “extra forms” in addition to ideas: “when I will, or am afraid, or affirm, or deny, there is always a particular thing which I take as the subject of my thought [an idea strictly speaking], but my thought includes something more than the likeness of that thing” (AT VII 37; CSM II, 25-26). To the extent that ideas strictly speaking are “as it were images of things,” they must be representations of things. And since all Cartesian thoughts include ideas strictly speaking, they must be at least representations. (It is worth noting that Descartes sometimes includes the attitudinal “extra forms” under the general umbrella “idea” (AT VII 181, CSM II, 127), but in these passages he arguably uses the term “idea” loosely, and not strictly speaking. Since these extra forms always occur with an idea strictly speaking, they do not jeopardize the claim that all Cartesian thoughts (as a whole) are representational.)

The wholesale representationality of Cartesian thought is further suggested by Descartes’ insistence that ideas all have “objective being” by their very nature (AT VII 42; CSM II, 29). Objective being is “the being of the thing represented by an idea insofar as it is in the idea” (AT VII 161; CSM II, 113; see also AT VII 8; CSM II, 7; AT VII 40; CSM II, 28; AT VIII-A 11; CSM I, 198). The notion of objective being traces back to Descartes’ scholastic predecessors and just how to interpret it is a vexed matter (see being, formal vs. objective). What is clear is that in virtue of having objective being, ideas represent things. (Note: Descartes confusingly makes the same point with different terminology in his Fourth Replies to Arnauld. Here, to consider an idea insofar as it represents this or that is to consider it formally as opposed to considering it materially as an act of thought; he draws here on the Aristotelian claim that the forms of objects inhere in the cognitive faculty of the cognizer (AT VII 232; CSM II, 163).)

The evidence is strong, then, that representation lies at the heart of the Cartesian mind.

IV. Metaphysics of Representation in Sensations and Passions

I’ve given some general reasons to interpret all Cartesian thoughts as representational, but scholars still divide on particular cases. Nobody denies that the mind’s clear and distinct intellectual perceptions represent; they represent true and immutable natures (of God, mind, body, geometrical objects, etc.). What is hotly contested is whether the obscure and confused perceptions that arise from the union of mind and body, (sensations and passions) represent anything, and, if so, how and what they represent.

A. Sensations

At issue is whether secondary-quality sensations (sensations of color, odor, flavor, sound, hot, and cold) and internal sensations (sensations of pain, tickling, hunger, and thirst) represent anything. Nobody denies that primary-quality sensations (sensations of size, shape, position, and motion) represent genuine features of bodies. Some people deny that we have primary-quality sensations, arguing that primary-quality perception, even in sensory experience, is always intellectual (Arbini 1983; Jolley 1990; Secada 2000; Wilson 1999). To
keep things simple, I will use “sensations” to refer only to secondary-quality sensations and bodily sensations.

Descartes’ account of the causal production of sensations sets the backdrop for discussions of their representationality. The account is purely mechanical from object to brain: objects in the world produce local motions in the medium, which in turn produce local motions in the sense organs, which in turn produce local motions in the brain. Motions in the brain give rise to (i.e., cause or occasion) sensations in the mind according to psychophysiological institution of nature established by God (AT VI 130; CSM I 167; AT VII 86-89; CSM II, 59-61). Descartes insists that the causal process does not rely on resemblance: motions in the brain need not resemble the objects that initiate the causal chain; and sensations in the mind need not resemble either the motions in the brain that proximately cause them or the objects that distally cause them (AT XI 4-10; CSM I, 81-84; AT VI 81-86, 109-114, & 130-132; CSM I, 152-154, 164-166, & 167-168). Descartes explicitly rejects the scholastic Aristotelian causal account because of its reliance on resemblance (AT VI 112; CSM I, 165; AT VIII A 322; CSM I, 285). Descartes’ rejection of resemblance here has consequences for any account he might have given of mental representation: the sensations resulting from this process either do not represent anything outside the mind (if representation requires resemblance) or they represent things without resembling them. Commentators have defended each option.

1. Non-representational. Commentators arguing that sensations do not represent anything maintain that they are like mental bruises: they are caused by things outside the mind, but do not in turn represent anything outside the mind (Keating 1999, Nelson 1996, MacKenzie 1990). The strongest textual evidence for this view is Principles I.71, in which Descartes describes sensations of taste, color, etc. as “sensations that do not represent [repraesentant] anything located outside our thought” (AT VIII-A 35; CSM I, 219). Sensations seem to represent things outside the mind, the argument goes, because we habitually refer them to objects by (falsely) judging that there is something in objects that resembles our sensations (AT VII 35, 75, & 82-83; CSM II, 24-25, 52, & 56-57; AT VIII-A 32 & 35-36; CSM I, 216 & 218-219; AT XI 346; CSM I, 337). If we isolate our sensations from these habitual judgments, the story goes, we will experience them as they really are: simple modifications of consciousness.

This view has important corollaries. First, it fits most naturally with the view that consciousness constitutes the nature of the Cartesian thought: sensations are thoughts, but if they are nothing more than modifications of consciousness, then the common features among thoughts must be consciousness. Second, sensory experience on this view is deeply bifurcated into (a) non-representational sensations “of” secondary qualities (the genitive here is merely descriptive, indicating what kind of sensation is had) and (b) fully representational perceptions of primary qualities (the genitive here is an objective genitive, indicating what the object of the perception is). Third, colors, smells, pains, and the like are most naturally read as aspects of the formal rather than the objective reality of ideas, since the latter is a representational feature of ideas and sensations have no representationality (and so, presumably, no objective reality). Fourth, it suggests that Descartes is a sensationalist about secondary qualities: since they do not represent color properties, sensations of color must be instances of color properties (see sensible qualities). Fifth, on this view, Descartes’ claims that sensations are obscure and confused, and materially false, cannot be read as saying that sensations intrinsically misrepresent their objects (since they have no objects); he can only mean that sensations are extrinsically mixed up (or con-fused) with the habitual judgments we make about them, resulting in an overall misleading experience of the world as colored,
Sixth, sensations contribute to our knowledge of the world only by our being able to use them as more or less reliable signs for what causes them. Commentators arguing against this view typically argue that one or more of these corollaries is anti-Cartesian. (See De Rosa 2010, Pessin 2009, and Simmons 2003).

2. Representational. Increasingly, commentators have come to argue that sensations are representational in and of themselves, i.e., independent of any habitual judgments we make on their occasion. There is considerable disagreement, however, about what and how sensations represent.

Some commentators argue that sensations represent modes of extension, typically the mode of extension that serves as their distal bodily cause (e.g., color sensations represent surface textures or the spin that that surface puts on light particles), and that they do so in virtue of a systematic extrinsic relation in which they stand to those modes of extension. Larmore suggests that sensory representation is grounded in the systematic co-variation between sensations and the modes of extension that distally cause them (Larmore 1980). Wilson grounds what she calls a sensation’s “referential representationality” in the mechanical causal relation that links it to a mode of extension (Wilson 1999). Taking a rather different tack, Schmaltz and Hoffman ground sensory representation in Descartes’ principle that ideas contain objectively what their distal causes contain formally or eminently; although objective reality is intrinsic to an idea, they maintain that it is grounded in the formal reality found in its distal cause—an idea’s objective reality, after all, just is the objective being of that distal cause (Schmaltz 1992, Hoffman 2002). Drawing on texts in which Descartes says that our senses show us bodies not as they are in themselves but as they are related to our well-being, Alanen insists that a sensation represents not modes of extension but the ways in which the mind-body union is affected by extended bodies, and that their representationality is grounded in the contingent extrinsic connection instituted by nature between motions in the brain and sensations in the mind (Alanen 2003).

One general advantage of extrinsic accounts is their ability to make sense of misrepresentation and material falsity, i.e., cases of mismatch between what a sensation seems to represent and what it in fact represents. Since what a sensation really represents is determined extrinsically, there is no mystery that from the inside we may not know (and may even mistake) what our sensations represent to us; we are, perhaps, distracted by their intrinsic phenomenal properties. There are, however, notable disadvantages. First, it’s difficult to find a principled way to isolate the distal cause of the sensation as its res repraesentata, since (a) in illusory cases (such as the phantom limbs Descartes was fascinated by (see phantom limb phenomenon)), the resulting sensation is the same as the normal case, but there is no distal cause to fix its object (do these sensations not represent after all, or does their representationality piggyback somehow on the normal cases?) and (b) the proximate cause (motions in the brain) arguably has a better case than the distal cause to serve as the res repraesentata for a sensation since it is both a necessary and sufficient cause of the sensation (the distal cause is neither). It is clearly intrinsic features of the sensation that make us want to identify the distal cause as the res repraesentata. Co-variation and causation are not enough. Moreover, it’s not clear why a pain and a color sensation represent, but a bruise does not, when each is but the causal result of (and co-varies with) a punch. We need an account of when co-variation and causation yield representation, when they do not, and why.

Other commentators argue that sensations intrinsically represent things, but do not reveal the nature of what they represent because of their obscurity and/or confusion. Brown
and Pessin both argue that a sensation’s representationality is due to its intrinsic objective reality. They disagree, however, about what a sensation’s objective reality is, and so about what it represents. Pessin argues that a sensation represents the modes of extension that distally cause it (and which exist objectively in the sensation); he casts the phenomenal character of a sensation as a mere appearance that has neither formal nor objective reality, but that nonetheless impedes our view of what is being intrinsically represented to us by the sensation. Brown argues that sensations represent themselves; that is, their objective reality corresponds to their own formal reality. In referring them to bodies by habitual judgments, however, we come to misrepresent them as modes of body. Taking a different line, De Rosa argues that sensations represent in virtue of an intrinsic but latent intellectual content that is present in all sensations but obscured by the phenomenal character that they have in virtue of the mind’s causal interaction with matter (De Rosa 2010).

These commentators avoid the obvious problem with intrinsic accounts of representation: if representation is intrinsic, shouldn’t we know from the inside what our sensations represent? They deny this implication by marking an appearance-reality distinction within the mind. Sensations are too obscure for us to discern their intrinsic contents from the inside, or we render them obscure by confusing them with habitual judgments that we make. Their representational content is thus hidden from our view.

Yet other commentators maintain that Descartes has hybrid notion of representation that mixes intrinsic and extrinsic features, at least for sensations. In a landmark article on the topic, Wilson distinguishes a presentational and a referential sense of representation. A sensation presentationally represents its phenomenal character; it referentially represents the modes of extension that distally causes it (Wilson 1999). Like Alanen, Simmons casts the representationality of sensations as something to be understood in the context of the mind-body union, arguing that sensations represent ecologically salient features of objects (e.g., pain represents harm, color sensations represent macroscopic surface differences) and do so in virtue of a combination of their intrinsic phenomenal character (pain intrinsically alerts us to something bad) and the functional role they play in the life of a mind-body union negotiating a world of objects that can affect it for good or ill (pain regularly occurs when some part of the body is harmed) (Simmons 1999).

The obvious disadvantage for these hybrid views is that they fail to give Descartes a single coherent account of the representationality of sensations. On the other hand, since Descartes does not explicitly take on the topic, it would not be surprising if he lacks a single coherent account, but draws on different conceptions depending on the context.

B. Passions

The question whether Cartesian passions represent anything is complicated by an ambiguity in what constitutes a passion. Passions, like fear of a lion, are among the thoughts that include an idea proper (idea of a lion) plus some additional form (the fear). If the whole complex constitutes a passion, then they clearly represent: fear of a lion represents a lion. But the issue among commentators is whether that extra form itself (call it the “passion proper”) represents anything, or whether it is merely a feeling that accompanies our perceptual (i.e., sensory, imaginative or intellectual) representation of an object.

Some commentators suggest that the passions are akin to bodily sensations in that they (confusedly) represent physiological states of one’s own body. When I feel fear in the presence of a lion, that fear represents something like my increased heart rate (James 1997; Wilson 1999). Not only does this reading make it difficult to distinguish bodily sensations from passions; it also has difficulty explaining the evaluative and motivational impact of the
emotions. Passions are clearly *caused* by states of one’s body, but they seem not to be representing those states.

Others argue that the passions modify the content of our perceptual representations of things. Hatfield and Hoffman suggest that they are responsible for the evaluative content of a representation, viz., our representing something *as good or bad* for the embodied mind (Hatfield 2007; Hoffman 1991). Similarly, Alanen, Brown, and Shapiro suggest that the passion proper effectively gets into the content of the representation adding an element of behavioral significance, so that through them we represent things *as fearful or as loveable* (Alanen 2003; Brown 2006; Shapiro forthcoming). Passions, then, are representational states that have evaluative content. This reading has a lot of texts on its side (e.g., AT XI 342, 347, 387, 431-432; CSM I, 335, 337, 356, 377). It also respects Descartes’ taxonomy by placing passions alongside the other obscure and confused perceptions *as obscure and confused representations of things*, viz., of the good/bad, benefit/harm of things. On the other hand, Descartes routinely suggests that sensations already represent objects as good/bad, beneficial/harmful (AT VII 83; CSM II, 57; AT VIII-A 41; CSM I, 224; AT XI 430; CSM I, 376). Why would the passions repeat what is already done by the senses? Moreover, in emphasizing the evaluative role of the passions, this reading neglects the motivational function of the passions: Cartesian passions do not simply *inform* us of harm the lion may cause but *prompt us to act* in an appropriate way.

Other commentators maintain that the passions proper do not represent anything, though they essentially occur in conjunction with a very special kind of representation: a representation not simply of a lion but of the relation that the lion bears to my well-being as the embodied mind. (The evaluative component, on this reading, is already built into the sensory, imaginative or intellectual representation of the object.) Passions, on this view, are at bottom motivational states whose job is to incline the will to take special note of, and initiate action with respect to, the things that are perceptually represented as beneficial or harmful to the embodied mind (Rorty 1986; Greenberg 2007; Schmitter 1994). This account makes good sense of Descartes’ claim that the function or use *[usage]* of the passions is to *dispose or incite* the soul to will to do what is beneficial for the mind-body union (AT XI 372; CSM I 349; AT XI 430; CSM I 376). Moreover, although Descartes does align the passions with sensations and bodily sensations as obscure and confused perceptions, he also differentiates them. One difference is that only the passions are caused by motions in the brain that influence the will (AT XI 365; CSM I 346). This again suggests the passions ought to be thought of as chiefly motivational.

V. Conclusion

Although Descartes gives no explicit theory of representation, his other commitments in the philosophy of mind strongly suggest that all Cartesian thoughts have at least a component, an idea proper, that represents something; there are no stand alone feelings in the Cartesian mind. Whether the status of ideas proper as representations commits Descartes to a form of epistemological indirect realism is debated, but today largely dismissed. Just what and how ideas proper, and the more complex ideas that merely include ideas proper, represent remains a topic of lively discussion.

See Being, Formal vs. Objective; Cause; Distinction (Real, Modal, and Rational); Idea; Intellect; Material Falsity; Passions; Perception; Sensation; Thought.

**For Further Reading**


