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## Sellars on Descartes

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### 1. Introduction

For Wilfrid Sellars, conversation with past figures is an essential aspect of doing philosophy.<sup>1</sup> René Descartes belongs to his preferred dialogue partners. This is not the case because he considers Descartes's views to be true, but because he thinks that Descartes is a philosopher whose views, although in many respects wrong, provide the opportunity to learn important insights.<sup>2</sup> However, it is clear to Sellars that serious exegetical work has to be done before we can take advantage of this opportunity. It is thus no surprise that Sellars takes issue with Descartes's views in several writings and lectures.<sup>3</sup> This exegetical ambition distinguishes Sellars from 20<sup>th</sup> century and contemporary authors such as Donald Davidson and Hilary Putnam who present themselves as radical critics of what they call the 'Cartesian picture of the mind.' Often, these authors operate rather carelessly in exegetical matters.<sup>4</sup> Not so Sellars. Although we will find several of his exegetical claims disputable, there is no doubt about the carefulness and seriousness of his exegetical work. It provides the basis on which Sellars develops his insightful critique of Descartes's views.

In order to get an overview of Descartes's conception of the mind, we will present his core claims and distinctions in the next section. In section three, we will then expound and critically discuss Sellars's exegetical claims about Descartes's conceptions of intentionality and consciousness. Sellars's critique of Descartes's views that revolves around the Myth of the Given and the conflation of sensing and conceiving will be addressed in section four. Section five summarizes the chapter's main points.

### 2. Descartes on the Mind: Core Claims and Core Distinctions

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<sup>1</sup> See EPH, vii.

<sup>2</sup> At times, Sellars is even prepared to defend Descartes—at least to some extent—against criticism. See for instance MCP, 238, where takes issue with Lichtenberg's objection to the *cogito* reasoning. For a critical discussion see Sievert 1980.

<sup>3</sup> See, in particular, EPM, BBK, PSIM, SM, BD, KTM, and KPT.

<sup>4</sup> For a convincing complaint in this direction see Hatfield 2001.

In his account of the mind, Descartes famously replaces the Aristotelian conception of intentionality as reception of forms by his theory of ideas.<sup>5</sup> The backbone of this theory consists in a short list of core claims and distinctions. These claims and distinctions form the backdrop against which we will discuss Sellars's exegetical views.

(a) *Soul Monism*: Mechanizing the living functions that Aristotelians attributed to the vegetative souls of plants and the sensory souls of animals,<sup>6</sup> Descartes's category of souls reduces to minds.<sup>7</sup>

(b) *Intellectualism*: The essential feature of the mind consists in the intellect.<sup>8</sup> The will as well as the capacities to sense and to imagine merely are accidental capacities the mind as thinking thing exhibits.<sup>9</sup> Hence, while there could exist a mind as pure intellect without will, sense, and imagination, there could not exist a mind that wills, has sense perceptions, or imagines without an intellect. Furthermore, for Descartes, this implies that all<sup>10</sup> mental acts, even acts of willing, sense perception, and imagining, essentially are intellectual acts. Taking up a traditional term for the acts of the intellect, Descartes calls all mental acts 'thoughts' (*cogitationes*).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The second major difference between Aristotle and Descartes concerns their ontology of the mind. Descartes replaces Aristotelian hylomorphism with Platonistic dualism. This difference, however, only plays a marginal role in Sellars's engagement with Descartes (see SM, 31-32).

<sup>6</sup> To be more precise, the functions of the vegetative and the sensory souls are fully mechanized in non-rational beings and the vegetative functions of the soul also are mechanized in rational beings. The sensory functions of the soul of rational beings is partly mechanized and partly intellectualized. The intellectualized part will be of interest in this contribution.

<sup>7</sup> See AT VII 356.

<sup>8</sup> See AT VII 12 and 78.

<sup>9</sup> See AT VII 78 and AT VIIIA 25.

<sup>10</sup> Descartes assumes acts stemming from will that contribute to complex mental acts (we will call them 'non-ideational thoughts'), but cannot occur independent of a representational intellectual act (idea) that they are directed at. If considered in abstraction, these acts stemming from will might appear to one as independent of the intellect. However, since these acts are modes of the mind whose essential feature is the intellect and since modes 'inherit' the essence of what they modify, the acts stemming from will eventually are also essentially intellectual acts. They essentially are modifications of intellectual acts, namely ideas (see AT VIIIA 25).

<sup>11</sup> Descartes's wide notion of thought that includes acts of willing, sense perception, and imagination has been a constant issue in the scholarship. The rationale for this wide notion is not, as has often been claimed, that Descartes redefines the essence of acts of thinking in terms of consciousness. Instead, the wide notion follows from Descartes's intellectual understanding of the mind and of these acts.

(c) *Ideas vs. non-ideational thoughts*: In the 3<sup>rd</sup> Meditation, Descartes divides thoughts into subclasses, namely ideas in the proper sense and thoughts that are not properly called ‘ideas’.<sup>12</sup> I will call the former ‘ideas’ and the latter ‘non-ideational thoughts’.<sup>13</sup> The first class of thoughts, i.e. the class of ideas, include all and only perceptions (in Descartes’s technical sense of the term), i.e. acts or operations of the intellect, which Descartes characterizes as essentially representational.<sup>14</sup> It is less clear, however, what the second class of thoughts, i.e. the class of non-ideational thoughts, includes. As we will see, Sellars understands them as acts of will such as acts of desiring, fearing, or judging, where these acts are considered *in abstraction of any object they are directed at*. Non-ideational thoughts would thus be dependent acts in the sense that they cannot occur without an idea that represents an object and which the act of the will is directed at. As an alternative to Sellars’s view, we will defend the reading that ideational thoughts are complex thoughts composed of an idea and an act of will. Non-ideational thoughts would then be self-contained acts of desiring object X, affirming or denying that p, fearing object X etc. that, in principle, can occur independent of any other act.

(d) *Ideas considered as act and considered as representing an object*: Ideas possess two aspects. The first aspect concerns the fact that ideas are acts (*actus*) or operations (*operationes*) of the intellect,<sup>15</sup> the second that they represent an object. When considered under the former aspect, Descartes calls them ‘material ideas’ (*idea materialiter*); when considered under the latter aspect he calls ideas ‘objective ideas’ (*idea obiective*).<sup>16</sup> The notions of materiality and objectivity applied here are technical terms from scholastic vocabulary and have nothing to do with their usual connotations in contemporary parlance. They just pick out aspects under which ideas can be considered: as act and as representing an object. As Descartes points out, the notion of representing an object involved here does not imply the commitment that object O exists outside of the idea.<sup>17</sup> This naturally suggests that the object represented by the material idea is an

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<sup>12</sup> See AT VII 37.

<sup>13</sup> In order to avoid confusion, it needs to be kept in mind that although non-ideational thoughts are not ideas, they nevertheless essentially involve ideas. We will elaborate on this shortly.

<sup>14</sup> Descartes illustrates the representational character of ideas by drawing an analogy to material images (see AT VII 37).

<sup>15</sup> Descartes uses ‘act’ and ‘operation’ interchangeably in this context (see AT VII 246). As Sellars notices, the notion of act is to be understood in the sense of an actuality rather than an action (see NAO, 66).

<sup>16</sup> See AT VII 8.

<sup>17</sup> See AT VII 8.

immanent, i.e. inner-mental, object. Under this assumption, we are confronted with two possible readings of the notion of representing an object: According to the first reading, defended by Sellars, the immanent object is a relatum of two representation relations: They are represented by the material idea and they represent an object external to the idea (if such an object exists). The second reading proposes that the first relation is not one of representation, but of presentation. The material idea presents the immanent object to the mind. This second reading builds its case on two observations: The Latin term ‘repraesentare’ often means ‘presenting’ in the sense of ‘mak[ing] something immediately available’ rather ‘representing’,<sup>18</sup> and Descartes often uses the verb ‘exhibere’ (to exhibit, to present) in order to denote the relation between act and immanent object.<sup>19</sup> We will come back to these two reading later.

(e) *Formal vs. objective existence*: Descartes distinguishes between two kinds of existence, namely formal existence (*existantia formaliter*) and objective existence (*existentia objective*).<sup>20</sup> Formal existence is, so to speak, the usual way in which things exist. Sellars calls it ‘existence simpliciter.’<sup>21</sup> Objective existence, as Descartes explains, is the kind of existence that applies to things insofar they are in mental acts. Accordingly, what we think of ‘as being as it were in the [external] object of our ideas, exists [as immanent object] in the ideas themselves objectively.’<sup>22</sup> For Sellars, the distinction between objective and formal existence is the core idea of conceptual representation because it gives expression to the fact that the things represented in conceptual representation as so and so need not exist *simpliciter*.<sup>23</sup>

(f) *‘All thoughts are conscious’-doctrine*: According to Descartes, minds are conscious (*conscius*) of all thoughts (*cogitationes*) that occur in them.<sup>24</sup> In other words, there are no thoughts that are not conscious to the mind, not even during sleep or in coma.

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<sup>18</sup> See Simmons 2016, 645.

<sup>19</sup> See AT VII 39, 40, 42, 43, 44, 46, 82, and 83.

<sup>20</sup> For Sellars’s account of this distinction see SM, 33.

<sup>21</sup> See SM, 33 and 36.

<sup>22</sup> AT VII 161.

<sup>23</sup> See SM, 31.

<sup>24</sup> See AT VII 246 and KPT, 207.

### 3. Sellars on Descartes on Intentionality and Consciousness

#### 3.1 Intentionality

Descartes is revolutionary in his mechanical natural philosophy and his rejection of scholastic hylomorphism, which he replaces by his dualism of substance types.<sup>25</sup> One may be inclined to add Descartes's theory of ideas, which is supposed to replace the Aristotelian account of intentionality as reception of forms, to the list of revolutionary turns in Descartes. For Sellars, however, in his account of intentionality 'Descartes adheres to the scholastic tradition'<sup>26</sup> such that we still find the scholastic distinctions alive in Descartes's writings on this subject. But Descartes's account is not only in substantial continuity with scholastic philosophy, but also with contemporary philosophy. Indeed, for Sellars, 'the Cartesian distinctions ... can be translated into contemporary terms'<sup>27</sup> because they are 'less sophisticated counterparts of distinctions which are drawn with more or less rigor in those contemporary philosophies of mind which have been influenced by formal semantics.'<sup>28</sup> This implies that an intensive analysis of Descartes's views is not merely of historical interest, but has the prospect of revealing assumptions and, perhaps, misperceptions that effect the contemporary philosophy of mind.

As Sellars sees it, Descartes presents us at best merely with a proto-theory rather than a full-blown theory of intentionality.<sup>29</sup> But this proto-theory contains the approach that will dominate two centuries and will even leave its traces in Kant.<sup>30</sup> With the notion of ideas, Descartes proposes a representational account of the intentionality. Ideas are *about* things in the sense of *being intentionally directed at* them in virtue of the fact that they *represent* them. Sellars contends in BD that Descartes models mental representation on the intellectual act of conceiving.<sup>31</sup> However, this is not a fully adequate account of Descartes's view since his intellectualism does not merely imply that mental acts of representing are to be *modeled* on the intellectual act of conceiving; instead, he believes that representational mental acts essentially

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<sup>25</sup> Sellars mentions Descartes's radical break with Aristotelian hylomorphism at SM, 31-32.

<sup>26</sup> KPT, 190.

<sup>27</sup> SM, 31.

<sup>28</sup> SM, 32.

<sup>29</sup> See BD, 261-262.

<sup>30</sup> See SM, 31.

<sup>31</sup> BD, 260

are intellectual acts of conceiving.<sup>32</sup> Sellars's presentation in SM, in which he diagnoses a straightforward misunderstanding of sensation as a kind of conceiving, is more faithful to Descartes's view.<sup>33</sup>

Sellars recognizes that Descartes applies two different metaphors in his account of mental representation: the image metaphor and the container metaphor.<sup>34</sup> He thinks that the image metaphor is not powerful and does not even lead to a proto-theory because it involves strong negative analogies: Images can instantiate the same properties as the represented things do. Therefore, in the case of images, representation of material things can be understood in terms of co-instantiation of properties. But mental acts of Cartesian immaterial substances cannot co-instantiate properties of material things. Accordingly, the image metaphor does not lead very far because representation by images does not help us in explaining mental representation.

The second, more fruitful metaphor Sellars identifies is the container metaphor.<sup>35</sup> By talking of the container metaphor, he refers to Descartes's assumption that things exist 'in' ideas.<sup>36</sup> Sellars is right that Descartes's account is a proto-theory at best, since Descartes nowhere properly spells out the 'in'-metaphor. By applying this metaphor, Descartes 'explains' representation of an external thing by an idea in terms of the objective existence of the thing in the idea; or, as Sellars puts it, in terms of the idea of *containing* the objectively existing thing.<sup>37</sup> The technical notion of objective existence is supposed to make room for the *prima facie* puzzling thought that even material substances and their properties can exist in mental acts of an immaterial mind. The all-important notion of objective existence remains, however, a primitive and, indeed, mysterious notion in the Cartesian framework.

According to Sellars's reading, Cartesian ideas contain an *immanent*, i.e. inner-mental, object in virtue of which they represent the external object they do.<sup>38</sup> In addition, for Sellars, Descartes distinguishes between two relations of representation: First, mental acts represent their immanent object since 'for a thing or modification to exist "in" a mental act is for the latter to

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<sup>32</sup> See section two above.

<sup>33</sup> See SM, 32.

<sup>34</sup> Sellars also mentions that Descartes describes the representational character of ideas by saying that ideas represent things in virtue of containing likenesses of these things (see KPT, 208-209). Here, Sellars refers to Descartes's frequent use of the Latin term 'similitudo' in its technical meaning in scholastic philosophy (see, for instance, AT 37).

<sup>35</sup> See BD, 261 and SM, 34-36.

<sup>36</sup> See BD, 261 and SM, 33.

<sup>37</sup> See BD, 261.

<sup>38</sup> See KPT, 188-190.

represent it.<sup>39</sup> Second, immanent objects represent, at least potentially, objects external to the idea. They do so if the thing existing objectively in the idea also exists formally external to the idea.<sup>40</sup>

Sellars's reading implies that the objects in ideas are *intermediaries* between the representing mind and the represented object external to the mind. This is a classic reading of Descartes as a so-called 'indirect realist'. While the direct realist claims that the mind is in direct contact with external objects, the indirect realist states that the mind is in contact with them only via the direct contact with immanent objects. We find this reading of Descartes already in the works of Thomas Reid, it was affirmed in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century among others by Anthony Kenny and Richard Rorty.<sup>41</sup> However, in the last decades the direct realist position has become popular and has been defended by several authors.<sup>42</sup> The dispute between the proponents of both readings cannot be fully addressed here. However, it needs to be pointed out that the dispute between indirect and direct realist readings can be understood in at least two different ways which often are not sufficiently distinguished in the scholarly debate: First, the indirect realist might claim that the mind directly *represents* immanent objects, and only by virtue of representing them, it indirectly represents external objects. Second, the indirect realist may contend that the immediate objects of our *beliefs and knowledge* are immanent objects and that only by inference we indirectly acquire *beliefs and knowledge* about external objects. There is considerable textual evidence that Descartes is an indirect realist of the second sort.<sup>43</sup> It is far from clear, however, that he also is committed to an indirect realist position of the first type. Sellars attributes to Descartes an indirect realism of the first kind. This follows from his contention that the material idea represents the objective idea and that by virtue of this it represents external objects.<sup>44</sup> The Achilles heel of Sellars's reading is his understanding of the relation between material and objective ideas as a representation relation. But as already mentioned in section two, this reading is not without alternative. Indeed, the alternative reading according to which the relation is one of presentation rather than representation is textually better supported as is witnessed by

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<sup>39</sup> SM, 33. Accordingly, Sellars calls the mental acts 'representings' (SM, 34) and the objective ideas 'representables' (SM, 33).

<sup>40</sup> See SM 33.

<sup>41</sup> See Kenny 1968 and Rorty 1979.

<sup>42</sup> See Nadler 1989, Perler 1996, and Pessin 2009.

<sup>43</sup> See AT III 474.

<sup>44</sup> See KPT, 197-198.

Descartes's frequent use of the term 'exhibere.'<sup>45</sup> But if this is correct, it is open to Descartes to claim that the mind directly represents external objects. The mind does so by means of immanent objects that are directly presented (and thus conscious) to it. Accordingly, the container metaphor gives expression to the presentation and not to the representation relation.

### 3.2. *Consciousness (conscientia)*

Apart from the notion of representation, the second key notion of Descartes's conception of the mind is that of consciousness (*conscientia*). In BD, Sellars discusses Descartes's conception of consciousness at length and begins his discussion with the important addendum to the 2<sup>nd</sup> *Replies*. In this addendum, Descartes states a set of crucial definitions, the second of which refers to the notion of idea. In BD, Sellars works with the following translation:

*Idea* is a word by which I understand the form of any thought, that form by the immediate awareness of which I am conscious of that said thought[.] (AT VII 160/HR I 159)

This translation is problematic because it operates with a controversial identification of immediate perception with awareness. A more literal translation reads:

*Idea* is a word by which I understand the form of any thought, that form by the immediate perception of which I am conscious of that said thought[.]<sup>46</sup>

In the following, I will work with the latter translation. Furthermore, I will call the form of thoughts that is immediately perceived 'form<sub>C</sub>'.

Sellars thinks that this definition by implication conflicts with Descartes's account of thoughts in the 3<sup>rd</sup> *Meditation*. Since Descartes believes that all and only thoughts are immediately conscious to the mind, the definition of 'idea' seems to imply that all thoughts are ideas. But this seems to contradict the 3<sup>rd</sup> *Meditation* claim that only a subclass of all thoughts are ideas, while there also are thoughts of a second kind, namely non-ideational thoughts.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> See section two.

<sup>46</sup> *Ideae nomine intelligo cujuslibet cogitationis formam illam, per cujus immediatam perceptionem ipsius ejusdem cogitationis conscius sum.*

<sup>47</sup> BD, 260. See also section two above.



It has to be noted, however, that Sellars's diagnosis of a conflict is not compelling. This becomes clear if we take into account the distinction between material and objective idea from the *Meditation's Preface to the Reader*<sup>48</sup> and if we take seriously Descartes's talk of form. In the definition of 'idea,' Descartes does *not* identify the idea with the thought the mind is conscious of, but merely with 'the form' of the thought 'by the immediate perception of which [the mind] is conscious of that said thought.' The way in which Descartes puts the definition leaves room for a view that coheres well with the *3<sup>rd</sup> Meditation*.<sup>49</sup> Applying the definition to thoughts that are ideas leads to the claim that the mind is conscious of ideas in virtue of immediately perceiving them. We are not forced to understand this as an appeal to a higher-order perception that has the idea as its object. Instead, we can—and, indeed, we should—read it as saying that the act of perceiving that constitutes the idea considered materially presents to the mind the idea's immanent object. This means that in the case of ideas, the mind is conscious of these ideas only with regard to their immanent object. Applying the definition to non-ideational thoughts results in the statement that the mind is conscious of them in virtue of the act of perceiving that is part of the idea included in that thought. Again, the consciousness only concerns the thoughts' immanent object. Hence, in both cases, the notion of form Descartes is applying in the definition of 'idea' turns out to be the notion of objective idea from the *Meditation's Preface to the Reader*. In other words, the notion of form in play is the notion of presenting an object.

This reading of the definition of 'idea' does not only bring into coherence the definition of 'idea' of the addendum to the *2<sup>nd</sup> Replies* with the *3<sup>rd</sup> Meditation*, but also leads to a different and arguably more adequate understanding of Cartesian consciousness (*conscientia*).<sup>50</sup> Most scholars—Sellars is no exception<sup>51</sup>—understand Descartes as saying that in the case of non-ideational thoughts the mind is conscious of the kind to which the thought belongs: The mind is conscious of them as desires, judgments, fears etc. The reading of the notion of form suggested here leads to a *deflated* view of consciousness in the sense that the scope of consciousness merely embraces the immanent object of thoughts, but not the kind of thought they belong to.

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<sup>48</sup> See for this distinction section two above.

<sup>49</sup> This reading presupposes that we do not understand the non-ideational thoughts from the *3<sup>rd</sup> Meditation* as dependent acts of will, but as self-contained complex acts that involve ideas.

<sup>50</sup> See Barth 2017 for a comprehensive defense of this *deflationary* reading of Cartesian consciousness.

<sup>51</sup> See BD, 262.

We will come back to this contrast between inflationary and deflationary readings of Cartesian consciousness later on.

Sellars makes use of the conflict he diagnoses between the addendum of the *2<sup>nd</sup> Replies* and the *3<sup>rd</sup> Meditation* for an expositional purpose. When he later ‘return[s] ... to the problem posed by the definition of the term “idea”,<sup>52</sup> he introduces a different reading of Descartes’s notion of things existing objectively in ideas. This new reading is supposed to solve the diagnosed conflict.<sup>53</sup> As Sellars points out, Descartes understands conceiving of a triangle in terms of a triangle existing objectively in the act of conceiving, i.e. in the idea. Sellars claims, however, that ‘[t]he terminology is flexible’ and adds that we can alternatively say that ‘the [act of conceiving] can even be said to be triangular.’<sup>54</sup> In a nutshell, Sellars claims that Descartes’s talk of a triangle existing objectively in an idea is interchangeable with talk of the idea objectively exhibiting the character of being triangular. However, we do not find the latter way of talking in Descartes. He does not use terms such as ‘triangular idea,’ ‘green idea,’ or ‘tree-like idea’ in order to denote ideas of a triangle, of green, and of a tree. This is significant precisely because it shows that Sellars’s way of reformulating Descartes’s position is not trivial. It rules out that Descartes believes that in the case of ideas of being triangular, being green, and being a tree, there must be an object, namely a substance, carrying these characters while objectively existing in the ideas. In view of Descartes’s way of expressing his position, this should be considered to be a life option. Hence, Sellars’s claim of terminological flexibility requires defence that he does not provide. Leaving this worry aside, Sellars eventually introduces his reformulation of Descartes’s position in order to save him from incoherence. He wants to point out that if we follow the character reading rather than the object reading, we can prevent him from incoherence in his account of the mind’s consciousness of its thoughts.<sup>55</sup> Sellars’s line of thought goes as follows: For Descartes, all thoughts are conscious to the mind. According to the definition of ‘idea’ in the addendum to the *2<sup>nd</sup> Replies*, minds are conscious of their thoughts in virtue of the immediate perception of their form<sub>C</sub>. What is this form<sub>C</sub>? Sellars suggests that it is ‘a character by virtue of which it is the sort of thought it is.’<sup>56</sup> In the case of non-ideational

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<sup>52</sup> BD 260.

<sup>53</sup> See BD, 263.

<sup>54</sup> BD, 261.

<sup>55</sup> See BD, 262-263.

<sup>56</sup> BD, 262.

thoughts such as volitions it is the character of being a volition such that consciousness of volitions is consciousness of them as volitions. Now, if we want to apply this reading of the definition of ‘idea’ we need to identify the form<sub>C</sub> of ideas, i.e. the character in virtue of which ideas are the ideas they are. And here Sellars’s character reading pays off. Assuming this reading, we can say that the form<sub>C</sub> of an idea of a triangle is its character of being objectively triangular. Minds are conscious of such ideas in virtue of being immediately perceiving their characters of being triangular. Hence, applying the character reading we can, Sellars claims, provide a coherent reading of the definition of ‘idea’: In the case of non-ideational thoughts as well as in the case of ideas, consciousness is grounded in the immediate perception of the thoughts’ ‘character by virtue of which it is the sort of thought it is.’

If Sellars is right, however, then Descartes defines a notion of idea that differs from the one he presents in the *3<sup>rd</sup> Meditation* as well as in the *Meditation’s Preface to the Reader*. According to the definition, ideas are not representational acts (the ideas from the *3<sup>rd</sup> Meditation*) or aspects of them (the material or objective ideas from the *Preface*), but characters of ideas and non-ideational thoughts. This is, as Sellars acknowledges, a ‘wider definition of “idea”’<sup>57</sup> compared to the notion of idea from the *3<sup>rd</sup> Meditation*. But it resolves the apparent conflict between the definition of ‘idea’ in the addendum of the *2<sup>nd</sup> Replies* and the notion of idea from the *3<sup>rd</sup> Meditation* because in the addendum Descartes now turns out to define a notion of idea that differs from the one developed in the *3<sup>rd</sup> Meditation*. There is no conflict because Descartes is concerned with different notions of idea.

However, Sellars’s interpretation of the addendum and the *3<sup>rd</sup> Meditation* conflicts with key passages in Descartes. As he remarks himself, according to his reading there is an important difference between the form<sub>C</sub> of ideas and the form<sub>C</sub> of non-ideational thoughts. The former exist objectively (e.g. being triangular) in the mind, the latter does so formally (e.g. being a volition). This implies that two very different mechanisms must be responsible for the mind’s consciousness of ideas and of non-ideational thoughts respectively. Minds are conscious of non-ideational thoughts in virtue of having a meta-perception of them. For instance, I am conscious of my act of desiring in virtue of having a separate meta-act of perceiving this act as an act of desiring. In the case of ideas, by contrast, the act of perceiving that constitutes the material aspect of the very idea is responsible for the consciousness of the form<sub>C</sub>, for instance, the idea’s

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<sup>57</sup> BD, 263.

character of being objectively triangular. But then we end up with a hybrid conception of Cartesian consciousness, or rather with two radically different kinds of consciousness applying to ideas and to non-ideational thoughts respectively.<sup>58</sup> However, Descartes's characterizations point to a unified account that equally applies to all thoughts. Consider again the definition of 'idea': Descartes claims that it is *the immediate perception of the thought's form* that is responsible for being conscious of them. There is no place in his work at which he gives reason to think that the immediate perception is radically different in the cases of ideas and of non-ideational thoughts.

I suspect that things start going problematic in Sellars's interpretation at an early stage, namely in his account of the division of thoughts in the *3<sup>rd</sup> Meditation*. As we have seen, Sellars understands Descartes as sub-dividing thoughts into representational ideas such as the idea of the sun and non-representational acts of the will such as the mere act of desiring.<sup>59</sup> Now, two points count against this reading of the *3<sup>rd</sup> Meditation* passage:

First, the wording of the passage strongly indicates that Descartes understands the second kind of thoughts to be self-contained complex acts such as desiring object X or judging affirmatively that p rather than merely the abstracted and dependent acts of desiring and affirming. The passage reads:

Other thoughts have various additional forms: thus when I will, or am afraid, or deny, there is always a particular thing which I take as the object of my thought, but *my thought includes something more than the likeness of that thing*. (AT VII 37/CSM II 25-26; my highlighting)

Descartes here uses the scholastic term 'similitude' (likeness) in order to denote the idea's immanent object that is 'like' the supposed external thing. As the passage makes clear, the other, i.e. the non-ideational, thoughts do not only include 'various additional forms' such as the act of willing, of fearing, or of denying, but also 'the likeness of that thing,' i.e. the immanent object

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<sup>58</sup> The view that the consciousness of ideas as well as of non-ideational thoughts is grounded in meta-perceptions is no option because it inevitably leads into a vicious regress. Sellars is well aware of this (see KPT 210).

<sup>59</sup> See also BD, 265.

that exists objectively in an idea of that object. Non-ideational thoughts are self-contained complex thoughts involving an idea.

Second, in this passage Descartes intends to distinguish between two kinds of thoughts in the context of investigating which thoughts are *truth-evaluable*. His general aim is to find out which mental acts can be false.<sup>60</sup> Hence, Descartes is interested in whether the desire to eat ice cream, the fearing of an approaching lion, or the judgment that the sun is rising can be true or false. He surely does not raise the absurd question whether the mere act of desiring, fearing or judging can be so.

Thus, we find strong evidence that Descartes intends to distinguish in the 3<sup>rd</sup> *Meditation* between simple, representational thoughts (ideas) and complex thoughts that involve an idea and a dependent act stemming from will (non-ideational thoughts). With this understanding of the classification of thoughts, a unified account of Cartesian consciousness becomes available. We can now understand him as saying that thoughts in general are conscious to minds because thoughts are or include ideas and because ideas are perceptions that present immanent objects to the mind. It is these perceptions that Descartes refers to in the definition of ‘idea’ and that he claims to be responsible for the mind’s consciousness of its thoughts. However, this also means that the ubiquitous Cartesian consciousness only concerns the immanent objects of thoughts, but not the kind to which these thoughts belong.<sup>61</sup>

In KPT, Sellars understands the consciousness of mental acts as a non-representational affair.<sup>62</sup> This partly conflicts with the reading presented in BD according to which consciousness of non-ideational thoughts rests on a meta-perception and, thus, is representational. Perhaps, Sellars presents Descartes’s view differently for didactic purposes in the student lectures in KPT; or he only has in mind the consciousness of ideas, but not of non-ideational thoughts. Be that as it may, the way in which Sellars there understands the non-representational character of the

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<sup>60</sup> See AT VII 37.

<sup>61</sup> In BD, Sellars presents another line of thought that is supposed to support his meta-perception account of the consciousness of non-ideational thoughts in Descartes (see BD 263-265). The passage from the *Passions of the Soul* Sellars discusses is important, but I cannot discuss it here in any detail here. The main problem with Sellars’s textual evidence in this case is that the term ‘conscientia’ just does not occur in this passage. It is far from clear that Descartes is concerned with Cartesian consciousness (‘conscientia’) in this passage at all.

<sup>62</sup> Sellars ascribes to Descartes the view that there is representational awareness of extramental things and non-representational awareness of intramental things (see KPT 210-212).

consciousness of ideas also runs into difficulties. Sellars presents his reading in order to show that Descartes does not fall prey to a vicious regress.<sup>63</sup> His account of Cartesian consciousness solves this problem, but at the cost of ignoring the definition of ‘idea’ from the addendum to the *2<sup>nd</sup> Replies*. As we now know, in the definition Descartes states that consciousness is due to an *immediate perception*. But Sellars understands non-representational consciousness as a *non-perceptual* affair. He explicitly separates the non-representational consciousness from perception; the latter only grounds representational consciousness.<sup>64</sup> But Sellars’s understanding of Cartesian consciousness of ideas as non-representational does not fit the wording of the definition of ‘idea’ that refers consciousness back to an immediate perception. The deflationary reading of Cartesian consciousness, which we developed above, is in better position in two respects: First, it avoids the regress because according to the deflationary reading Cartesian consciousness also does not rest on a higher-order perception, but on the act of perceiving that is the material aspect of the idea in question. Second, the deflationary reading does justice to the wording of the definition of ‘idea’ from the addendum to the *2<sup>nd</sup> Replies* since it contends that Cartesian consciousness indeed rests on an immediate perception.

#### 4. Sellars’s Critique of Descartes

##### 4.1. *The Myth of the Given*

To a large extent, the critical side of Sellars’s engagement with Descartes’s conception of the mind revolves around the famous Myth of the Given. As Sellars points out at the beginning of EPM, philosophers have been appealing to the Given against the backdrop of construing in specific ways the philosophical situations they find themselves in. Sellars calls this way of construing the situations ‘the framework of givenness,’<sup>65</sup> i.e. the situations are construed as frameworks within which the idea of the Given becomes attractive or appears even without alternative. Throughout history, philosophers construed different situations as frameworks of givenness and identified different things as the Given in these situations.<sup>66</sup> The Myth of the

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<sup>63</sup> See KPT 210-212.

<sup>64</sup> See KPT, 212.

<sup>65</sup> See EPM, 253.

<sup>66</sup> See EPM, 253-254.

Given is, then, a general scheme that involves two variables that take on different values with regard to different philosophers:

The *first variable* concerns the question which specific situation is construed as ‘the framework of givenness’.

The *second variable* concerns the question what is identified as given by the philosopher in the situation that is construed in this way.

Depending on which values the variables take on, we receive ‘various forms’<sup>67</sup> of the Myth of the Given. Yet, in the first *Carus Lecture*, Sellars puts forward a hypothesis about the principle that ‘is, perhaps, the most basic form of what I have castigated the “The Myth of the Given”’.<sup>68</sup> The principle reads: ‘If a person is directly aware of an item which has categorial status C, then the person is aware of it as having categorial status C.’<sup>69</sup> If Sellars is right, what philosophers identify as the Given in *all* forms of the Myth satisfies this principle. In all cases, some item is thought to ‘impose [its categorial structure] on the mind’<sup>70</sup> such that awareness of the item *as* having this categorial structure results. Importantly, in this process the mind does not actualize its conceptual capacities. The awareness in question is pre-conceptual, yet a classificatory awareness-as in which something particular is recognized as exhibiting a general feature.

For Sellars, almost all philosophers<sup>71</sup> construed in their work situations as frameworks of givenness. Descartes is no exception. Indeed, we will see Sellars claiming that Descartes appealed to the idea of the Given twice. The *first situation* in which Descartes appeals to it is his critical epistemic project culminating in the *Meditations*. In this text, the meditator’s aim is to figure out which of her cognitions are indubitable and certain such that they qualify as foundation of all other knowledge. In this situation, the meditator applies the sceptical method and eventually comes to identify his own current mental acts as providing this foundation. According to Sellars, the way in which Descartes develops his position fulfils the criteria of the

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<sup>67</sup> EPM, 286 and FMPP, 3.

<sup>68</sup> FMPP, 12.

<sup>69</sup> FMPP, 11.

<sup>70</sup> FMPP, 12.

<sup>71</sup> See EPM, 253.

Myth of the Given: The Cartesian mind is pre-conceptually aware of its inner acts *as having the categorial status they have*, i.e. *as its inner acts*. Indeed, for Sellars, Descartes puts forward an even stronger thesis: The mind is aware of its own inner acts as belonging to the kind of act they belong to (judgments, willings, sense perceptions, etc.) and as being of the object they are of. For instance, as Sellars understands Descartes, in the case of a perception of a triangle, ‘there would be a[n] ... awareness of the perception of a triangle as a perception of a triangle.’<sup>72</sup> And this is a classic form of the Myth of the Given. However, it needs to be said that Sellars’s charge rests on his inflationary understanding of Cartesian *conscientia* according to which it implies awareness not only of the inner act’s object, but also of the kind to which the act belongs. Seen in light of the deflationary reading of Cartesian *conscientia* we developed above, the charge reduces to a ‘mythical’ awareness of the object as the object it is, but not of the inner act as belonging to the kind it belongs to. But at least this reduced form of the Myth is correctly attributed to Descartes.

Sellars believes that Descartes applies his Myth of the Given also in a *second situation*, namely when confronted with the task of explaining our possession of mental ideas. In BBK, he attributes to Descartes this view with regard to the idea of sensation:

[B]y virtue of having sensations we experience sensations as sensations ..., and ... from this experience, by an act of so-called abstraction, the intellect can acquire a non-analogical understanding of what it is to be a sensation. (BBK §25)

If Sellars is right, for Descartes we acquire our mental ideas by abstracting them from our pre-conceptual awareness of our own current mental states. It is surprising, however, that Sellars attributes this position to Descartes, since Descartes is well known for his thoroughgoing innatism of ideas. As an innatist, Descartes would not claim that the idea of a sensation is abstracted from our awareness of sensations, but that the awareness of them provides the occasion to actualize the innate capacity to conceive of sensations as sensations.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> KPT, 211. See also BBK §25 and §57.

<sup>73</sup> Perhaps, Sellars thinks that Descartes’s innatism merely concerns mathematical and metaphysical concepts because in SM he attributes an innatist position concerning these kinds of concepts to Descartes. If this is correct, it suggests that Sellars only takes into account the narrow notion of innateness from the *3<sup>rd</sup> Meditation* (see AT VII 37), but not the broad notion of innateness from the document *A Certain Broadsheet* (see AT VIII B 357-358, 360-361, and 366). However, both notions are not in conflict since Descartes is concerned with different issues in these two passages. While the former concerns ideas as acts and asks in which circumstances ideas occur, the latter is



Even if we take Descartes's innatism into account, one might still think that Sellars is right that Descartes exploits his Myth of the Given a second time. He does not do so with respect to the question of the possession of mental ideas, but with respect to their actualization. For, one might argue that Descartes can only account for the actualization of innate mental ideas by appealing to our pre-conceptual awareness of our mental acts as the acts they are. To put it metaphorically: How could the mind 'know' that the actualization of the innate idea of sensation (rather than a different innate idea or no innate idea at all) is in order if the mind were not aware of a current sensation *as a sensation*?

However, we do not find textual evidence for this kind of view in Descartes. He nowhere explains the actualization of innate ideas by an appeal to consciousness and, in particular, by claiming that consciousness provides an awareness of mental acts as belonging to the kind they belong to. Instead, we do not find any detailed account of the actualization of innate ideas in Descartes at all. Of course, Descartes might appeal to God and the way in which he arranged the world including the inner workings of minds. The innate ideas get actualized as they do because God created things the way he did. Yet, without a concrete account of how these inner workings and the actualization of innate ideas proceed, this appeal to God is not merely heavy metaphysical baggage, but also amounts to sheer hand-waving. In the end, we do not find anything that amounts to an explanation of the actualization of innate ideas in Descartes. This is theoretically dissatisfying, but it also does not give reason to think that Descartes understands consciousness in the way Sellars assumes.

The abstractionist conception (as well as the innatist conception) of mental ideas implies that mental ideas are primary in the order of conceiving. More precisely, they are primary in the order of conceiving compared to ideas that apply to forms of thinking that take place in public verbal utterances, i.e. what Sellars calls 'thinking-out-loud.' For Descartes, the ubiquitous pre-conceptual consciousness of one's own current mental acts immediately provides the mind with mental ideas (or provides occasion to actualize innate mental ideas). Our own mental acts belong to the first items we have conceptions of and the conceptions we have of them do not presuppose conceptions of any other things.

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related to dispositions to have ideas and states that all ideas are innate to the mind in the sense that dispositions to have them are so.

Sellars emphasizes that there is a radically different conception of thought available which Descartes did not have at his disposal.<sup>74</sup> This radically different conception avoids the Myth of the Given and innatism. The key moves are, first, to recognize that thinking-out-loud is an everyday phenomenon that belongs to our normal behavior and, second, that there is a concept of thinking-out-loud available that does not depend on the concept inner thinking in the order of conceiving. This concept of thinking-out-loud is behaviorist in kind. Combined with an inferential-functional concept of meaning, it constitutes the core of what Sellars calls the ‘verbal behaviorist model of thinking’ (VB model).<sup>75</sup> The essential point is that the VB model could have been rationally formed and mastered independent of and prior to the concept of inner thinking. Sellars summarizes his anti-Cartesian strategy nicely in SK:

48. Many have thought that to explicate the concept of non-inferential knowledge of ‘what is going on in one’s mind at the present moment’, one must return to the Cartesian framework. From the point of view sketched in this lecture, the essential feature of the latter framework is that it denies that ‘thinking-out-loud’ makes sense save as analyzable into ‘thinking *occurrent non-verbal thoughts* and giving them expression in one’s verbal behavior’. In short, the Cartesian argues that the concept of thinking-out-loud *includes* the concept of thoughts as Cartesian inner episodes. According to the VB position, on the other hand, the concept of thinking-out-loud stands on its own feet as the *primary* concept pertaining to thought, so that if a concept *like* the Cartesian concept of thought *episodes* which are *not* propensities to think-out-loud does turn out to be needed in giving a full account of ‘what thinking is,’ those who are inclined to accept something like the VB position would argue that it is a concept built on a VB foundation and is in some sense a derivative or secondary concept. As a useful parallel, consider the case of microphysics. Macro-objects, we say, if we are scientific realists, are *really* systems of microphysical particles. Yet our concepts of these particles are built—not on direct observation—but on a foundation of knowledge at the perceptual level. In short, though VB argues that even if

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<sup>74</sup> For a thoughtful comparison of Descartes’s and Sellars’s conceptions of thought see Alanen 1992.

<sup>75</sup> For the VB model see LTC 514-520, SK 318-327, and BLM 8-11. The VB model includes additional concepts of thought such as the concepts of proximate and of remote propensities to think-out-loud. Yet, the concept of thinking-out-loud is ‘[t]he central concept’ of this network of concepts of thoughts within the VB model (see MEV, 327). It is ‘the primary concept’ in the order of conceiving and ‘[a]ll other concepts of thinking are to be understood in terms of their connection with it.’ (BLM, 9)

there is a sense in which Cartesian thoughts are prior in the order of being to thinking-out-loud, the latter is prior in the order of knowing. (SK 327)

In the famous ‘Myth of Jones’ in EPM, Sellars rationally reconstructs how a theoretical concept of inner thinking could have been developed from the VB model and how this theoretical concept could have then gained a reporting first-personal use.<sup>76</sup> In this way, Sellars gives an anti-Cartesian explanation of the development of our capacity to self-reflect and to gain knowledge our own mental acts. Whereas in Sellars’s Descartes, mental acts are Given, i.e. minds have a direct, pre-conceptual awareness of them as what they are, Sellars presents a different story<sup>77</sup> that is supposed to work without anything Given, while displaying the rationality of our mental concepts and legitimizing our claims to have self-knowledge and first-person authority.

#### *4.2. Sensory representation: Conflating conceiving and sensing*

Descartes applies the term ‘cogitatio’ in an extremely wide sense. In particular, not only purely intellectual acts such as those of metaphysical and mathematical thinking count as thoughts, but also sensations and imaginations. We noted above that Descartes’s wide application of the term ‘cogitatio’ is due to his intellectual conception of the mind, i.e. his view that the essence of the mind consists in the intellect and that, for him, all mental acts therefore are intellectual acts.

Sellars recognizes the intellectualist drive in Descartes’s conception of the mind and its effects on his conception of sensation, i.e. on mental acts such as the sensing of blue or the feeling of pain. He observes that Descartes explicitly refers to sensations as ‘confused thoughts of the external cause’<sup>78</sup> and that he is implicitly committed to an intellectualist conception since he takes conceivings ‘as his paradigm of the modifications of the mind that represent.’<sup>79</sup>

In many texts, Sellars emphasizes this intellectualist shape of Descartes’s understanding of sensation. For instance, in EPM he explicitly calls it a ‘conceptualistic interpretation of sensation;’<sup>80</sup> and in SM, Sellars points out that Descartes rightly saw that sensations have a

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<sup>76</sup> EPM §§56-59.

<sup>77</sup> Another myth? See EPM §63.

<sup>78</sup> EPM §25. See also BD, 267.

<sup>79</sup> BD, 267.

<sup>80</sup> EPM §25.

representational function, but did not understand the representationality of intellectual perceptions and sensations ‘in the spirit of analogy, the positive being counterbalanced by the negative, but literally, the negative analogy construed as specific difference.’<sup>81</sup> As Sellars rightly points out, Descartes’s approach results in a conflation of the non-cognitive representationality of sensations with the cognitive representationality of truly intellectual acts and that he misconstrues the representationality of sensations as a specific form of the latter.<sup>82</sup> If sensations represent as intellectual acts do by means of objectively existing immanent objects, it is unclear why there is so much a phenomenal difference between conceiving and sensing; why there is so much a differ phenomenal difference between conceiving of a triangle and seeing a triangle, between conceiving of pain and feeling pain, and between conceiving of blue and sensing something blue.<sup>83</sup> Descartes’s contention that sensory ideas are clear, but confused, while intellectual ideas are clear and, at least potentially, distinct merely hints at a difference that he neither properly characterizes, nor explains.<sup>84</sup>

In other texts, however, Sellars develops a more positive account of Descartes’s position. In KPT, Sellars pushes the view according to which Descartes believes, first, that sensations and conceivings are both representational, but, second, that only the representationality of conceivings amounts to a classificatory and cognitive awareness, while the representationality of sensations does not do so. Instead, sensations are representational states of which we are or, at least, can be aware, but they do not themselves amount to classificatory awareness.<sup>85</sup> According to this reading, Descartes registers deep differences between the non-cognitive representationality of sensations and the cognitive representationality of conceivings, i.e. Cartesian perceptions, such that ‘we have that important distinction in Descartes, I was suggesting, between sensations and perceptions.’<sup>86</sup> Most importantly, while conceivings contain

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<sup>81</sup> SM, 32.

<sup>82</sup> SM, 32.

<sup>83</sup> See Haag 2007 for a more extensive treatment of this issue.

<sup>84</sup> The idea that conceiving is like inner speech could have safeguarded Descartes from the conflation because understanding conceiving as inner speech makes obvious the deep difference between conceiving and sensing. But the inner speech model of conceiving is missing in Descartes (SM, 35). The container model, in contrast, supports the conflation of conceiving and sensing (SM 35-36).

<sup>85</sup> KPT, 201-203.

<sup>86</sup> KPT, 203.

an objectively existing object, sensations do not do so, but exist *simpliciter* through and through.<sup>87</sup>

The proposed reading according to which Descartes sees ‘that important distinction ... between sensations and perceptions’ is not in line with Descartes’s official intellectualist account of the mind. Furthermore, although this more perceptive Descartes recognizes an important distinction, Sellars rightly points out that he still is confronted with two difficult problems that he does not have the resources to resolve:

First, the idea that sensations exist *simpliciter* through and through leads to the absurd view that the mind literally turns blue when seeing a blue object. As Sellars suggests the solution to this problem, which was not available to Descartes, is to think of sensations as exhibiting properties that are analogical to but not the same as the properties exemplified by physical objects.<sup>88</sup>

Second, Descartes famously distinguishes between the primary qualities size, shape, and movement and secondary qualities such as color, sound, and smell. While the former are objective categorical properties of physical objects that are clearly and distinctly conceivable, the latter are dispositions in physical objects to cause in minds non-cognitive sensations of colors, sounds, and smells. Now, according to this reading of Descartes, the phenomenality of experiences results from the cognitive conceivings of primary qualities and non-cognitive sensations. For instance, the phenomenality of the visual experience of a blue triangle results from a conceiving of a triangle and a sensation of blue. The problem is that if Descartes draws the distinction between conceiving and sensation in the way Sellars thinks he does, then he is in troubles explaining why the phenomenality of the experience is seamless. How can it be that an objectively existing color and a *simpliciter* existing shape go together seamlessly to constitute the experience of a blue triangle?

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<sup>87</sup> KPT, 202-203.

<sup>88</sup> See BD, 270 and KPT, 201.

To conclude, even the more perceptive position Sellars at times attributes to Descartes lacks the resources to develop a proper account of the distinction between the sensory and intellectual elements as well as their cooperation in sense perception.<sup>89</sup>

## 5. Evaluating Sellars's critique

In his writings, Sellars presents a classic interpretation of Descartes as an *indirect realist* who accounts for intentionality in terms of immanent objects that exist in mental acts. While there is some truth in this interpretation, Sellars misconstrues important details. Sellars believes that the immanent object is *represented* by the mental act and itself represents an external object, if such exists. However, in fact Descartes does not understand the former relation in terms of representation, but in terms of presentation. The mental act presents its immanent object to the mind such that the mind is conscious (*consciuis*) of it, and by means of the act-cum-object the mind (potentially) represents an external object. In a nutshell, contrary to what Sellars believes, Descartes does not understand the immanent objects as representational intermediaries, although he does understand them as epistemic intermediaries.

Sellars's account of Descartes's conception of consciousness (*conscientia*) is *inflationary* in kind in that the mind's consciousness concerns the immanent objects of current mental acts as well as the kind to which these acts belong. For Sellars, Cartesian consciousness is consciousness of one's current mental acts as the acts they are and as being of the objects they are of. We have argued that this *inflationary* reading is not well supported and defended a *deflationary* account according to which Cartesian consciousness merely concerns the acts' immanent objects, but not the kind to which the mental act belongs. Cartesian consciousness is rooted in the fact that mental acts present their immanent objects to the mind. The acts do not in addition present themselves to the mind as what they are.

Sellars sees Descartes as subscribing to a version of the Myth of the Given. More precisely, for Sellars, Descartes identifies one's own current mental acts as what is given to the mind in the problematic sense of the Myth. This objection to Descartes is developed against the backdrop of Sellars's inflationary account of Cartesian consciousness. If we take seriously the proposed deflationary reading, Sellars's charge to Descartes still stands, but reduces in its scope. What is Given in the problematic sense then merely are the immanent objects of thoughts, not the mental

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<sup>89</sup> See BD, 273-274.

acts as belonging to this or that kind. Sellars also attributes to Descartes an abstractionist view of the acquisition of mental ideas. However, this attribution is misguided since Descartes is a thoroughgoing innatist.

Finally, we have seen that in many texts Sellars criticizes Descartes for conflating sensation and intellection. As a consequence of this conflation, Descartes cannot properly account for the phenomenological difference between both kinds of acts, e.g. between thinking of pain and feeling pain or between thinking of blue and seeing something blue. In other texts, however, Sellars believes that Descartes has some awareness of this important distinction. Yet, even if Descartes draws this distinction, he faces the challenge of explaining how the intellectual thought of primary qualities such as shape and the sensation of secondary qualities such as being blue go seamlessly together as they do in sense perceptions of blue rectangular surfaces. As Sellars rightly points out, Descartes does not have resources to properly address this problem. Indeed, for Sellars, no one will have these resources earlier than Kant.

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