

## Transparency and Broad Content in Descartes\*

### I. INTRODUCTION: IS DESCARTES' ACCOUNT OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE INCOHERENT?

If there is a single philosopher we tend to associate with the idea of the transparency of the mind, it is Descartes.<sup>1</sup> He has a reputation for holding, indeed inventing the thesis that the subject is fully and directly aware of her own mental states. However, Descartes also wrote passages that seem to flatly contradict the transparency claim. Some recent commentaries have attempted to eliminate the impression that this constitutes inconsistency on Descartes' part, by distinguishing between different types and degrees of consciousness, explicit and implicit judgments, and dispositional and occurrent states.<sup>2</sup> It seems evident by now that for Descartes not all of the subject's mental states are accessible to them at all times. Infants cannot form ideas of their own mental states: they lack reflective consciousness (Hatfield 2011. 366–367; Simmons 2012. 11). (At the same time, they do have 'brute' or 'bare' consciousness.) Properties of dispositional ideas, including innate ones such as the idea of God, can be hidden from the less than careful mental gaze (Rozemond 2006. 58; Simmons 2012. 11–12). Implicit (non-conscious) judgments assessing distance are made while perceiving objects or making habitual movements (Hatfield 2011. 365). Realizing all this has been an important step in the direction of understanding the possibility of self-ignorance in Descartes.<sup>3</sup> Some puzzles remain, nevertheless. Keeping all the above distinctions in mind and putting to one side those cases where mental states are not fully known by the subject due to the mechanism of access, Descartes still seems to leave room for error in our self-judgments. However closely

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Jorgensen 2014; Chalmers 1996; Carruthers 2008.

<sup>2</sup> The problematic character of Cartesian transparency was already noted by Wilson 1978. 138 and Radner 1988. More recent discussions are Alanen 2003; Carriero 2009; Hatfield 2011; Simmons 2012. (For details of these views, see below.) Alison Simmons' article is especially pertinent, aiming as it does to provide a nearly complete account of the issues raised and solutions put forward.

<sup>3</sup> 'Self-knowledge', in line with standard usage in contemporary theory of mind, is understood here in the sense of knowledge of one's mental states; 'self-ignorance' is lack thereof.

and reflectively we attend to our conscious, occurrent states, for Descartes, we may still get them wrong.

The claim I will argue for in this paper is that there is a whole other dimension to the transparency problem in Descartes, over and above lack of self-knowledge due to the difficulties of access. In Cartesian terminology, we may regard ideas as referring to something outside the mind, rather than merely as thoughts. In our contemporary terminology, mental contents may be understood in a broad rather than a narrow way, in which case we may be mistaken about our pains, emotions, and nearly all thoughts [*cogitationes*].

The possibility of such errors of self-knowledge tends to be obscured by our conviction that Descartes was ‘the arch internalist’ or ‘a paradigmatic internalist about mental content’, i.e., whose conception of content disregards the relation of the subject’s states to her environment.<sup>4</sup> As I will show, however, there is a clearly externalist thread in the Cartesian understanding of ideas. The distinction between narrow and broad content is present in Descartes, in what I call the *narrow content rule*. This is an injunction to view ideas merely as contents of the mind rather than in their relation to the world. Failing to observe this rule opens the door to lack of transparency of a kind different from the inaccessibility of mental content. When we explore this source of imperfect self-knowledge, as I propose to do, cases of opacity of mental content so far unaccounted for, as well as certain aspects of Descartes’ account of innate ideas, receive an explanation.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, I lay out the textual evidence for and against attributing the transparency thesis to Descartes. Next, relying on recent literature, I look at the factors that can reasonably be taken to constrain transparency. As other commentators have argued, Descartes’ descriptions of certain mental processes make it plausible, even necessary, to understand his statements about transparency in a somewhat weaker manner. Having shown that taking Descartes’ statements less strictly fails to dissolve all tensions, I will expound what I take to be missing from a full account of the possibility of self-ignorance in Descartes: recognizing and reckoning with the distinction between narrow and broad content, clearly made, although not labeled, by Descartes himself in his writings. On the basis of Descartes’ – yet unexplored – externalism, we can make sense of the more stubborn cases of a lack of transparency.

<sup>4</sup> Gertler 2011. 32; Lau and Deutsch 2014. Descartes has also been thought to adopt internalism with regard to *justification*, viz. that truth and falsity are answerable only to the subject’s *internal* standard of clarity and distinctness. The Arnauld circle has caused some doubt regarding this; see, e.g., Della Rocca 2005.

## I. THE PROBLEM OF TRANSPARENCY IN DESCARTES

Let us look at the textual evidence on both sides: claims to the effect that the Cartesian mind is transparent to itself and statements suggesting the necessary imperfection of self-knowledge.<sup>5</sup> I will first mention those passages which motivate the ascription of the transparency thesis to Descartes. One of these famously offers inner awareness as the very mark of thought:

(i) Thought [*cogitatio*]. I use this term to include everything that is within us in such a way that we are immediately conscious of it [*immediate consci simus*]. Thus all the operations of the will, the intellect, the imagination and the senses are thoughts. (Second Set of Replies to the Objections to the *Meditations*: AT vii. 160; CSM ii. 113.)

Another passage attributes self-omniscience to the subject:

(ii) [...] there can be nothing in the mind, insofar as it is a thinking thing, of which it is not conscious. [...] we cannot have any thought of which we are not conscious at the very moment when it is in us. (Fourth Set of Replies to the Objections to the *Meditations*: AT vii. 246; CSM ii. 171)<sup>6</sup>

Finally, it seems possible to render mental states clear and distinct, thus achieving self-knowledge by viewing them in the right way:

(iii) [...] pain and colour and so on are clearly and distinctly perceived when they are regarded merely as sensations or thoughts [*cum tantummodo ut sensus, sive cogitationes spectantur*]. (*Principles of Philosophy*: AT viiia, 33; CSM i. 217)

Other passages speak *against* the ascription of the transparency thesis to Descartes. First, we seem to make judgments without noticing it, which appears to be rather detrimental to the case of transparency:

(iv) [...] we make the calculation and judgment [that is, concerning size, distance and shape] at great speed because of habit, or rather we remember the judgments we have long made about similar objects; and so we do not distinguish these operations from simple sense-perception [...]. (Sixth Set of Replies: AT vii. 438; CSM ii. 295)

<sup>5</sup> I do not put forward a genetic hypothesis concerning the emergence of the transparency problem within Descartes' *œuvre*. A palpable focus on the consciousness of ideas and on adequate self-knowledge seems to start with the Replies to the *Meditations*, and, considering what Descartes has to say about knowing our own passions, it remains present in some form in the period of Descartes' last work, the *Passions of the Soul*.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the First Set of Replies for a more cautious formulation: "there can be nothing within me of which I am not in some way aware" (AT vii. 107; CSM ii. 77).

We misperceive pains and beliefs, as well as emotions:

(v) We frequently make mistakes, even in our judgements concerning pain [...]. (*Principles*: AT viiia. 32; CSM i. 216)

(vi) [...] many people do not know what they believe, since believing something and knowing that one believes it [*on connaît qu'on la croit*] are different acts of thinking, and the one often occurs without the other. (*Discourse on the Method*: AT vi. 23; CSM i. 122)

(vii) [...] experience shows that those who are the most agitated by their passions are not those who know them best, and that the passions are to be numbered among the perceptions which the close alliance of mind and body renders confused and obscure. (*The Passions of the Soul*: AT xi. 350; CSM i. 339)

Finally, it seems that we might be mistaken about the epistemic properties of our thoughts, even including their clarity:

(viii) [...] there was something else which I used to assert, which through habitual belief *I thought I perceived clearly, although I did not in fact do so*. This was that there were things outside me which were the sources of my ideas and which resembled them in all respects. (Third Meditation: AT vii. 35; CSM ii. 25, e.m.)

In the first group of passages, the very concept of thought seems to imply immediate consciousness of the fact that the subject is having it (i). Perhaps (ii) goes even further than (i): the first sentence is most naturally interpreted as referring not only to the mere awareness of the fact of the mental act but also to the accuracy of establishing its content. Awareness of a volition or perception without the capacity to correctly identify its content would appear to contradict the statement that there is *nothing* in our minds of which we are not conscious. Indeed, it hardly appears possible to know what state I am in without being aware of the content of that state. (How would we establish whether we feel pain or being tickled without awareness of the content of the feeling?)

(iii) is a formulation of the narrow content rule. It states that there is a way to make ideas clear and distinct, viz. regarding them “merely as sensations or thoughts”. It also makes it apparent that taking an idea as a mere mode does not mean putting aside its content altogether, for pain and colour (*dolorem quidem et colorem*) are contents rather than acts. Act and content are not independent of each other in terms of awareness. What we apprehend clearly and distinctly is the pain or colour itself, not merely the fact of being in pain or the fact of having a colour sensation.

Do the statements in the second group, registering the possibility of self-ignorance, manifest real self-contradiction on Descartes' part or is the transparency thesis suitably modulated by Descartes himself? Commentators have identified a number of ways in which Descartes, usually more in line with our own psychological intuitions than the Descartes of traditional interpretations, allows for exceptions to, or limits the application of, the transparency thesis, by distinguishing between various forms of access to ideas. Before we get to the accessibility of individual ideas, however, we have to consider the accessibility of causal processes within the mind, for that would also be implied by transparency in its most robust version.

### III. SELF-IGNORANCE DUE TO LACK OF ACCESS

Some authors impute the strongest possible transparency claim to Descartes, namely, that the 'everything' of which the subject is necessarily conscious includes even causal relations between mental states: "[a]rguably, Descartes thought that one could *always* discover the causal origins of one's beliefs. On the Cartesian view causal relations that hold between beliefs and experiences and beliefs are reflectively accessible" (Poston 2008). However, it is unlikely that anyone, even Descartes, would maintain this thesis.

A consideration against such an attribution would be that Descartes' understanding of self-deception requires the possibility of not detecting the motivations of our beliefs – for instance, of "an exaggerated kind of self-esteem" (De Araujo 2003. 79). This special case aside, Descartes clearly assumes that we may be unaware of the causes of our inclinations, likings, even our actions. He offers the following story of how he came to have a predilection for cross-eyed women:

For instance, when I was a child I loved a little girl of my own age who had a slight squint. The impression made by sight in my brain when I looked at her cross-eyes became so closely connected to the simultaneous impression which aroused in me the passion of love that for a long time afterwards when I saw persons with a squint I felt a special inclination to love them simply because they had that defect. At that time I did not know that was the reason for my love; and indeed as soon as I reflected on it and recognized that it was a defect, I was no longer affected by it. (Letter To Chanut, 6 June 1647: AT v. 57; CSMK 322)

Descartes explains this phenomenon by the 'folds' produced in the brain during the original experience, making for a tendency of the same part "to be folded again in the same manner" when the subject goes through a similar experience. Thus, in certain cases, the reason why we cannot trace the causal origins of our mental states is that those origins are *physical*. Processes which are at first blush

intramental, such as coming to like cross-eyed women, are really effects of the body on the mind. An even more surprising example is the body's power to induce the mind to produce poetry, which, as an act of the will, should be the mind's exclusive competence. In a letter to Elizabeth, Descartes explains that if she decides to compose verses, she is – indirectly – inclined to do so by the movement of her animal spirits, which can excite the imagination so much that it supplies the motivation (Letter to Elizabeth, 22 February 1649: AT v. 281; CSMK 367. e.m.).<sup>7</sup>

In all the above cases, mental states and actions, perhaps somewhat counter-intuitively, turn out to be caused by physical changes in ways that are less than perspicuous to the subject. But Descartes never claimed that the physical processes that take place in the body are each fully penetrated by the mind. So the next question to ask is whether states or actions that Descartes himself interprets as purely mental can also have mental effects in such a way that the causal link is hidden from the subject. We do not have to deal with *all* types of purely intellectual processes in order to show that transparency may be lacking even where physical processes are not involved. One case proves the point.

Soon after Huygens lost his brother, Descartes tried to console him in the following manner: “We shall go to find [those who died] someday, and we shall still remember the past; for we have, in my view, an intellectual memory which is certainly independent of the body” (Letter to Huygens, 10 October 1642: AT iii. 798; CSMK 216). While ordinary memory “depends on the traces which remain in the brain after an image has been imprinted on it”, intellectual memory “depends on some other traces which remain in the mind itself”, and cannot be explained “by any illustration drawn from corporeal things without a great deal of qualification” (ibid.). Thus, intellectual memory does not suffer from the obstacle to the consciousness of ordinary memory, viz. the involvement of bodily processes inaccessible to the mind.<sup>8</sup> Even so, full knowledge may be lacking in these cases as well, for we do not necessarily remember the ‘intellectual imprinting’ responsible for a certain memory. In another letter, Descartes calls intellectual memory “the reflexive act of the intellect”: when I have an experience I have had before, I match the new experience with the old one as both belonging to *me* (Letter to Arnauld, 4 June 1648: AT v. 193; CSMK 354). However, the memory may come back without identification of the imprinting event. As Descartes tells us, it is possible that a poet thinks of lines he does not realize he has heard before and believes that he is composing a new piece, while in fact he is recalling one written by another person (Letter to Arnauld, 29 July 1648:

<sup>7</sup> To the objection that composing poetry involves the imagination, which is not a pure intellectual function, it could be replied that we would expect the decision itself to write poetry to come from the mind, even if the actual activity uses material supplied by partly corporeal functions.

<sup>8</sup> On the connection between memory and consciousness in Descartes, see Schmal 2018.

AT v. 220; CSMK 356). Thus, intellectual memory is also fallible, as certain elements of experience may escape it.

Knowledge of causal processes in one's mind necessarily involves memory, for the cause of a state or event at least partly vanishes into the past by the time the effect comes about. Memory is notoriously prone to error: as we have seen, even Descartes' intellectual memory may fail its subject. But there is another, perhaps more compelling consideration in favor of regarding mental causal processes as potentially inaccessible. We may remain ignorant of our own mental causation simply due to lack of knowledge *of its very terms*. Consider (vi): if we cannot necessarily identify our beliefs, then we cannot necessarily identify the causal connections between them, either. It seems safe to say that access to causal processes in the mind is subject at least to the same constraints as mental states in general. So we move on to the latter.<sup>9</sup>

So far, I have considered lack of access to causal *processes*. In the remaining part of this section, I address the issue of lack of access to *individual mental states*.

The possibility that the subject may lack access or access of a particular kind to individual states has been much discussed in recent Descartes scholarship. I will present potential constraints to access under three headings. Limited or lacking access may be due to (1) lack of attention/reflection, (2) memory deficiency, or (3) the dispositional character of ideas.

(1) Descartes obviously realized that attention is a limited resource, whether employed in the service of understanding the outside world or the mind itself. Just as we can attend to this or that object in the physical world, we can attend (or fail to attend) to particular properties of, or changes in, our own minds. In this sense, direct access to part of our mental contents is only potential: we only know what goes on there as long as we actually attend to it. Passage (iv) can be interpreted along these lines: Descartes might be claiming that we actually, habitually re-perform calculations of size over and over again but are only aware of the states involved when paying attention to them. More straightforward textual evidence is in the *Optics*, where we are told that a blind person using two sticks can "determine the places [the ends of his sticks] occupy without in any way knowing or thinking of those which his hands occupy" (AT vi. 135; CSM i. 169). We track the location of our bodily parts continuously but only become conscious of the mental states registering those locations, as well as our (mental and physical) efforts to identify them, when attending to them. Another example by Descartes, from the same work, is that our experiences of the muscle movements involved in looking at a piece of celery on the table are perceptible to a very low degree (AT vi. 135). A subject normally has rather limited access to

<sup>9</sup> We may want to restrict the scope of the infallibility claim to simultaneous thoughts anyway, given the qualification in (ii): "we cannot have any thought of which we are not conscious *at the very moment when it is in us*".

these states. We are still not to count them among non-conscious states, Simmons explains, since it is possible to attend to them reflectively and they contribute to the overall phenomenology of the experience, even though we are not conscious of them *per se*. Simmons, on the basis of such passages, makes a persuasive case that we can talk about different *degrees* of consciousness in Descartes (Simmons 2012. 16).

Arguably, it is even possible to distinguish between different *types* or *senses* of consciousness according to whether mental contents are attended to in a particular, reflective manner. Gary Hatfield (2011) builds the distinction between ‘bare’ and ‘reflective’ consciousness on a passage in which Descartes claims that whereas infants only have non-reflective thoughts when, for instance, enjoying nourishment, adults are capable of reflection as well: “when an adult feels something, and simultaneously perceives that he has not felt it before” (AT v. 220f.). Reflective consciousness involves attention to the mental state itself and a sense of its (lack of) novelty. In Hatfield’s view, this is the default form of Cartesian consciousness: “the Cartesian subject [...] brings together, in a unified arena of awareness, those thoughts of which we are *reflectively* conscious” (372). Thus, Cartesian consciousness proper would require attention in a specific, robust sense.

Attention and reflection seem to be the most important factors that determine access to ideas, so lack of these can certainly render ideas inaccessible. There are other sources of inaccessibility, as well, however, which are responsible for some, perhaps less central, cases: memory deficits and merely *potential* access due to the dispositional character of ideas. These are reviewed in (2) and (3).

(2) There are cogitations we immediately forget and which are thus not accessible after their occurrence. This emerges from Descartes’ answer to the worry that while the Cartesian mind would appear to think all the time, we do not perceive ourselves as incessantly having thoughts, for instance, in sleep:

To be conscious of our thoughts when we are thinking them is one thing and to remember them afterwards is another. Thus, we think of nothing in sleep without being conscious of it at the same moment, although in most cases we forget them immediately. (Letter to [Arnauld], 29 July 1648: AT v. 221; see also Letter to Gibieuf, 19 January 1642: AT iii. 479.)

Descartes’ view that self-knowledge can be constrained by lack of memory of certain states has been duly noted (and sometimes criticized) by commentators. Thus Lilli Alanen: “innumerable thoughts occur without leaving traces in our memory – not only while we are awake but also while we sleep and maybe even before we were born” (Alanen 2003. 54). Similarly, Simmons writes:



In the end, Descartes only appeals to the vagaries of memory to argue for the existence of fleeting thoughts in infants and sleeping adults that are unaccompanied by other thoughts that serve to make them salient, and so remembered, in our cognitive lives (Simmons 2012. 14).

Simmons' assessment of the situation is that recalling our thoughts is not the default operation of the mind, but an achievement, one which cannot be taken for granted.

Acknowledging the limitations of both attention and memory makes the Cartesian conception of transparency less implausible. Our own contemporary philosophical understanding of the mind, influenced by psychology and cognitive science, is uniformly more sympathetic to this qualified position. The third factor that constrains access, the dispositionality of ideas, conceived in a particular way, is more difficult both to interpret and to endorse.

(3) The tenet that one cannot have a mental state and not be simultaneously aware of it does not seem to hold for standing states, the possibility of which Descartes clearly seems to acknowledge.<sup>10</sup> Thus, innate ideas, when present only dispositionally, not as occurrent thoughts, are not necessarily transparent.<sup>11</sup> We have the ideas of God and of extension, for instance, mostly in an implicit manner. Further, when they do come in an occurrent form, innate ideas often take some effort to figure out, so are not transparent, at least not immediately. As Descartes put it in a letter:

If I draw out something from an innate idea which is implicitly contained in it but which I had not noticed in it before, for instance, from the idea of triangle that its three angles equal two right angles, or from the idea of God that he exists, it is far from begging the question [...] (Letter to Mersenne, 23 June 1641: AT iii. 383).

That we do not necessarily get our innate ideas right, and that getting them right can take effort, is shown by Descartes' answers to objections concerning the idea of God. Here, he recommends that those who fail to find certain properties in their ideas of God take a closer look:

<sup>10</sup> It is easier for dispositionalist readings to account for the possibility of a lack of actual access to some features of an innate idea (for such readings, see, e.g., Nadler 2006. 96; Clarke 2003. 196). Nevertheless, 'occurrentist' readings have also attempted to accommodate (partial) ignorance of innate ideas. Thus, Cottingham (1976. xxxiii) talks about innate ideas being present in their entirety but not fully accessible due to other preoccupations of the mind.

<sup>11</sup> Descartes sometimes seems to understand ordinary beliefs in a dispositional way as well, as shown in remarks like this one: „those who have never philosophized correctly have various opinions in their minds which they have begun to *store up* since childhood” (Replies to the Seventh Set of Objections: AT vii. 324; CSM ii. 481).

No one can possibly go wrong when he tries to form a correct conception of the idea of God, provided he is willing to attend to the nature of a supremely perfect being. But some people muddle things up by including other attributes [...] they construct an imaginary idea of God, and then – quite reasonably – go on to say that the God who is represented by this muddled idea does not exist. (Second Set of Replies, AT vii. 138: CSM ii. 99.)

Identifying exceptions to transparency may acquit Descartes of the charge of insisting on the absurd statement that we have access to everything that goes on in our minds; it does not, however, establish consistency between Descartes' claims. Most cases in group (iv)–(viii) have not been addressed and still stand out as apparently contradicting the transparency claim. Further, several of them seem to remain untouched by a delimitation of the set of states to which transparency applies according to access (limiting that set to, e.g., “actually occurring conscious perceptions” [Alanen 2003. 55]). The possibilities that we do not know a presently occurring pain that we attend to (v), that we are mistaken about our passions in general rather than merely in certain individual cases (vii), as well as about the representational properties of ideas (viii), are left wide open.

#### IV. LACK OF TRANSPARENCY DUE TO BROAD CONTENT

The interpretations I referred to above focus on how we access our mental states. In the cases considered so far, there are obstacles to self-knowledge due to factors influencing access: lack of attention or reflection; irretrievability due to undeveloped cognitive structures (in the case of infants) and to the limitations to storing content (in the case of adults); and the implicit or dispositional rather than occurring character of certain ideas. I will argue that there is a further, independent dimension to the transparency problem in Descartes, one that concerns the content of ideas rather than the properties of access.

The transparency question has two parts. One is whether all ideas are accessible to the subject, that is, whether we are necessarily *aware of being in a particular mental state*. The other part is whether we necessarily *get the content of our mental states right*. The access problems reviewed above do not distort the content of mental states, but prevent their subject from accessing them, that is, being aware of having the mental state in question. Now we come to the way in which (part of) the content of a mental state, rather than the fact of having it, might lack transparency to the subject, due to the nature of the ideas themselves, rather than the mode of accessing them.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Self-awareness, or awareness of the mental act, may also be thought to influence content in accessing mental states. While this question of direct or indirect awareness of content

We have already encountered one formulation of the issue, in (iii): the subject perceives color and pain clearly and distinctly only “when they are regarded merely as sensations or thoughts” in the mind. More generally, the precept is that, if we are to achieve adequate grasp of an idea we have, we are to consider it in a particular way, disregarding its relation to extramental reality. The phrase Descartes recurrently uses is regarding ideas ‘in themselves’ or as ‘mere modes of thought’ rather than considering them in relation to their objects or as ‘referring to’ something else:

Now as far as ideas are concerned, provided they are considered solely in themselves and I do not refer them to anything else, they cannot strictly speaking be false; for whether it is a goat or a chimera that I am imagining, it is just as true that I imagine the former as the latter (AT vii. 37; CSM ii. 26).

This is another formulation of what I called the narrow content rule, Descartes’ injunction to view ideas merely as modes of thinking, disregarding any relation to reality. Now while ‘modes of thinking’ might at times be interpreted as applying specifically to acts rather than content, Descartes appears to be thinking of both when he suggests that we disregard ideas’ relation to what they purport to represent. Focusing away from ideas’ relation to the world never seems to be an answer to a question concerning what act the mind is executing, e.g. whether it is making a judgment, having an emotion, or not. Rendering pain and colour clear and distinct and the “confused and obscure” character of perceptions concern content rather than the act directed at it. Imagining a goat or a chimera are

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should be distinguished from that of its broad or narrow character, this possibility should also be mentioned.

Awareness of being in a particular mental state might be thought to mediate between the object of cognition and the cognition itself, the awareness being what is ‘directly’ apprehended, while the object of cognition only indirectly: “Suppose Fred is contemplating the astronomical idea of the sun. That is, Fred is thinking of the sun; the sun is the object of his thought. His act of thinking of the sun is a mental state, while the sun is a physical object; the two cannot be identified. Given transparency, Fred is directly (non-reflectively) aware of his thinking of the sun. But if he is directly aware of his thinking of the sun, and that act of thinking is not identical to the sun itself, then he would seem at best only indirectly aware of the sun itself. His cognition of an external object is in this way mediated by his awareness of his own mental state.” (Pessin 2009. 5)

Pessin does not seem to distinguish grasping the mental act one is performing from self-awareness while performing the act. Vili Lähteenmäki (2007) advances a distinction here and claims that while acts are not apt to be objects of consciousness, awareness of objects automatically involves that of the self as well. This self-awareness, which necessarily accompanies the consciousness of content, also influences the experience of content.

The question of broad/narrow content should also be distinguished from that of whether sensations represent or not. The present point concerning transparency with regard to content is that we necessarily get content right when viewing it as narrow, whether or not that content actually represents something.

acts with presentational content,<sup>13</sup> concerning which, according to the narrow content rule, the subject cannot be in doubt.

The presence of the distinction between the narrow and broad content of ideas in Descartes may not be very easy to accept. Other than the apparent anachronism involved,<sup>14</sup> one reason is that Descartes himself did not give names to mental contents acquired in these two distinct ways and never treated the distinction in a systematic fashion. A further factor is that shifts to contexts in which ideas are to be understood in a narrow or a broad way often go unannounced. The cogito argument provides an example of such a shift.

The progressive radicalization of the skeptical arguments at the beginning of the *Meditations* involves the application of the narrow content rule. The possibility of regarding ideas without their links to whatever is outside the mind is essential to the argument. No matter whether the content of my thought is veridical or deceptive, having an idea with that content is indubitable, when considered *merely as an idea* (in the sense of an act with presentational, rather than representational content) rather than a representation of something. I cannot go wrong concerning the fact that I am in doubt or in pain, whatever objects these states are directed at:

For even if [...], as I have supposed, none of the objects of imagination are real, the power of imagination is something which really exists and is part of my thinking. [...] I am now seeing light, hearing a noise, feeling heat. But I am asleep, so all this is false. Yet I certainly *seem* to see, to hear, and to be warmed. This cannot be false; what is called 'having a sensory perception' is strictly just this, and in this is restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking. (AT vii. 29; CSM ii. 19.)

After bracketing the relation of ideas to reality and coming to the conclusion that those ideas themselves, along with the subject whose ideas they are, cannot be questioned, Descartes makes a notorious move. He claims that subject is a *thing*, which the argument preceding this proposition makes unjustified. This move is stepping out of the narrow context; the relation to the world has been smuggled back in. The 'I' is not merely a phenomenal one, but a *res cogitans*, which is part

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Wilson 1978.

<sup>14</sup> In agreement with Schmalz 2022 and Lenz 2022 in this issue, I find it possible that our own contemporary concepts can illuminate problems in historical texts. Recognizing the narrowness/broadness of content in Descartes helps account for something in his epistemology and philosophy of mind that has so far seemed inexplicable: why unobstructed access to ideas does not necessarily make for full self-knowledge. I consider the fact that this explanation renders the Cartesian position on the transparency of the mind much less implausible by our own lights only a marginal advantage; my aim is by no means to 'bring Descartes up to' contemporary standards.

of the extramental world.<sup>15</sup> There is a surreptitious transition from viewing ideas in a narrow way to a broad context.

In what follows, I will unpack the implications of the narrow content rule for the transparency of the mind. Commentaries tend to focus on Descartes' instruction to take *sensory ideas* as mere thoughts rather than as involving representational relations when seeking to establish their properties with certainty. But Descartes' rule has an inclusive application, to "sensations or thoughts", that is, potentially to everything contained in the mind (with certain qualifications, to be discussed below). In the Third Meditation, there is a general statement to this effect: "Now as far as ideas are concerned, provided they are considered solely in themselves and I do not refer them to anything else, they cannot strictly speaking be false" (AT vii. 37; CSM ii. 26). What can make those ideas false is relating them to something outside the mind by a judgment. Before clarifying Descartes' conception through an extensive range of examples, we will have a cursory look at explanations attached to – some version of – the rule by commentators.

Marleen Rozemond's view is that we can bracket connections to reality in those cases where ideas of the Aristotelian proper sensibles (perceived by a single sensory faculty only, such as light and sound) are involved. She writes:

[...] we cannot assume that Descartes would be willing to generalize from the certainty of our judgments about perceptions of proper sensibles, which from the point of view of the Aristotelian tradition were privileged, to certainty for all claims about what we seem to sense (or otherwise think or experience). Indeed, his allowance for error about our mental states in other contexts suggests not. (Rozemond 2006. 63–64.)

Rozemond does not offer examples of the possibility of error she has in mind. It is not difficult to provide some, though: perceptions rendered obscure by their inherent link to the body; innate ideas some properties of which do not meet the internal gaze; emotions with dubious causal histories. Now, to be sure, the attempt to clear up the representational properties of an idea may not result in adequate self-knowledge. But the reasons for this have to do with the details, to be seen later, of the application of the narrow content rule to different types of mental states rather than with the privileged character of sensation in regard to self-knowledge.

John Carriero similarly focuses on sensation when addressing Descartes' idea that we cannot go wrong provided we examine our mental contents in separation from the relation they bear to the world (Carriero 2009. 25). He is concerned

<sup>15</sup> I understand this transition as a change in the representational features of the 'I', rather than being premised on the assumption, to the use of which Descartes at this point in the argument is not entitled, that modes require a substance to inhere in.

with unjustified inferences from the phenomenal character of sensation to what is actually there outside the mind. Unlike Rozemond, Carriero offers no explanation, historical or otherwise, for Descartes' conception, and, despite his own focus, does not restrict the circle of mental states to which it applies.

Now sensory ideas do seem to present a special problem concerning representation. As Simmons remarks, “[t]here is just something about our sensory ideas that prevents from having a clear view of what it is they are representing to us” (Simmons 2012. 12). It is difficult to tell, for instance, whether heat is the privation of cold or the other way around (AT vii. 43–44); in general, “for all the rest, like light and colors, sounds, odors, flavors, heat and cold and the other tactile qualities, these are thought by me only in a very confused and obscure way”. Simmons takes it to be inherent in the nature of sensory ideas that “[t]he cataracts are on our sensory ideas for good” (13). She notes that we can be cautious in our judgments when attending to them, but what they represent will remain uncertain.

Sensory ideas are special in that there is a stark discrepancy between how their contents depict the world to us and what is ‘out there’ in the world. This was a point Descartes, following Galilei, took serious pains to establish.<sup>16</sup> What such ideas represent is indeed uncertain. The application of the narrow content rule is meant to render ideas immune to precisely this kind of uncertainty, by having us disregard representational relations. The distinction between narrow and broad content arises in connection with a much more inclusive circle of states as well, however: it extends to desiring, willing, and imagining, as well as having emotions and making judgments. In the following, I will look at the ways in which different kinds of ideas, other than sensory ones, can be viewed in a narrow or a broad way. In some cases, while we can tell narrow from broad context, one of these is necessarily lacking due to the properties of the ideas in question.

Willing and the emotions do not as such represent. These mental states may “not refer [...] to anything else”, so “cannot strictly be false”; “things which I may desire are wicked or even non-existent, [...] does not make it any less true that I desire them” (AT vii. 37; CSM ii. 26). The properties of extramental objects at which desires are directed are irrelevant to establishing the fact, and identifying the presentational properties, of desiring them: the attitude and its content can be recognized regardless. Representation and judgment, even implicit, linking the content of the state to the world, are lacking. As such ideas do not belong to the type in which error is possible (they do not represent, so there is nothing in the world to check them against), their contents are necessa-

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed review of Galilei's influence and Descartes' development of the idea, see Ben-Yami 2015. 51ff.

rily *narrow*. (They may be, and normally are, coupled with some representation, though, and in this sense may be said to ‘refer to’ something.)<sup>17</sup>

If it is impossible to get the representational content of emotions wrong, there being none, how can Descartes claim that we tend to be profoundly mistaken about the passions in general, and about the passions in the narrow sense in particular (as in vii)? The answer is that while broad contexts can be created by representation, ideas that represent and those that do not may both connect to extramental reality in another way as well, namely through their causal relations. In these cases, it is ignorance of their causal histories that makes ideas obscure.

Having applied the narrow content rule to bracket representational features, we may still lack knowledge of our passions due to a failure to identify their causes. Causal relations are especially difficult to track down in the case of passions in the narrow sense, for here we cannot rely on practices of identifying causes that work for other types of passions. “The perceptions we refer to things outside us, namely to the objects of our senses, are caused by these objects, at least when our judgements are not false” (AT xi. 346; CSM i. 337). Similarly, we judge our feelings of hunger or pain (‘perceptions we refer to our body’) to be caused by states of our bodies. For the emotions, in contrast, “we do not normally know any proximate cause to which we can refer them. Such are the feelings of joy, anger and the like, which are aroused in us sometimes by the objects which stimulate our nerves and sometimes also by other causes” (AT xi. 347; CSM i. 337).<sup>18</sup> When those agitated by certain emotions do not know them, they fail to identify these causes. They can still establish the phenomenal properties of the feeling, but they are not aware of its causal connections to other states.<sup>19</sup> As knowledge of its causal history is part of a complete knowledge of the state itself, the content of the passion is, again, taken in a broad way. Thus, there is a narrow (‘phenomenal’ or ‘presentational’), and a broad way of thinking about the emotions, the latter including their causal histories.

A final case in which Cartesian ideas are to be understood in a broad way is that of *ideae innatae*. Innate ideas are those of “God, mind, body, triangle, and in general all those which represent true, immutable and eternal essences” (Letter to Mersenne, 23 June 1641: AT iii. 383). These ideas are universally imparted by God to humans, with determinate representational contents.<sup>20</sup> The extramental

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., Descartes’ description of the process of getting frightened by a wild animal in *The Passions*: AT xi. 355–56; CSM i. 342.

<sup>18</sup> For an exposition of the idea of ‘referring’ in connection with the passions, see Brown 2006. Chapter 4.

<sup>19</sup> In addition, if we do not know the causal connections of the feeling to other states, we cannot eliminate it. Psychotherapy in *The Passions* mainly consists of severing the link between an emotion and those states that tend to trigger it (such as training ourselves not to react to the sight of a particular type of medicine with disgust).

<sup>20</sup> Here, I put aside the issue of the *truth* of innate ideas, as well as of the innateness of *all* ideas. Although representing true essences may be seen as implying the truth of the repre-

items with which these ideas stand in necessary representational relations are eternal essences rather than items in the physical world. (Therefore, it is conceivable that there is no extended world without a change in the innate idea of extension.<sup>21</sup>) An innate idea cannot be fully grasped without its connection to the immutable essence it represents. That is, there is no way to establish its phenomenal features in a way that disregards the link to extramental reality; the content of an innate idea is always broad.<sup>22</sup>

Now what if someone apparently does ignore this link between content and essence and forms a *different* idea of, say, God? “No one can possibly go wrong when he tries to form a correct conception of the idea of God”, Descartes will tell them (Second Set of Replies to the *Meditations*: AT vii. 138; CSM i. 99). (This does not mean that all the contents of the idea are accessible *at once*.) Innate ideas come with particular contents, and different contents would change their identities. If someone claims that according to their idea of God, he is extended and imperfect, putting aside the relation to an eternal essence, Descartes tells them that their idea is *not* that of God; they should think again. (That *other* idea of something, not God, could be made transparent more easily, simply by applying the narrow content rule – since there is nothing that inherently relates it to reality in a way that its phenomenal properties cannot be established independently.)

Adequate self-knowledge is significantly more difficult to achieve, and in some cases impossible, when the contents of the relevant ideas are broad. It is highly unlikely that we would be aware of all features of all of our ideas at any particular point: we are barely conscious of the elements that even a couple of innate ideas contain, let alone at the same time be in a position to review the causal properties of our current passions. Complete self-knowledge, that is, a thoroughly transparent mind, would seem to be a futile aim.

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sending ideas themselves, this implication is not taken for granted by all commentators (see, e.g., Bonnen and Flage 2002. 46ff). In either case, the representational relations described hold. As to the innateness of all ideas, I apply the term ‘innate idea’ to what Steven Nadler calls ‘innate ideas in the strict sense’, with its use extending to a rather limited set of ideas only: those traditionally conceived as such (Nadler 2006. 95).

<sup>21</sup> For the innateness of the idea of extension, see AT iii. 383; CSMK 183.

<sup>22</sup> This shows an ambiguity in Descartes’ truth criterion of clarity and distinctness in terms of internalism/externalism. This criterion now seems to be inconsistently internalist: what counts as clear and distinct is determined partly by the state of the world. A *clara et distincta idea* of God is not such on the basis of its phenomenal properties only, in the way a pain or a color sensation can be made clear and distinct by disregarding its representational properties.



## V. CONCLUSION

In the past decades, Descartes scholarship has started to notice the wild implausibility of attributing the claim of complete mental transparency to Descartes. What has so far garnered attention in this regard is Descartes' recognition of the inaccessibility of certain types of mental states. We are not conscious of all that goes into calculating our next stride, of whatever goes on at the periphery of our field of vision, and of the first impressions we enjoyed in infancy. Descartes, as textual evidence shows, was much more familiar with this than we had credited him for. This is not the only source of self-ignorance for Descartes, however, as I have been trying to prove on these pages. There is an unlabeled but significant and pervasively applied distinction in Descartes between narrow and broad content, with the latter being an independent contributor to error in self-knowledge. Once this externalist strand in Descartes is fully explored, an important obstacle to a coherent understanding of Cartesian self-knowledge disappears.

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