

JOHN SERGEANT'S ARGUMENT AGAINST DESCARTES AND THE WAY OF IDEAS*

It is unquestionably one of the last objections Descartes might have expected, that if ideas exist, external objects are unknowable. How indeed could he have foreseen such an objection? Did he not seek to establish through his metaphysics, in the *Meditations*, the certainty of the existence of bodies, as well as the reality of the scientific knowledge we claim to have of them? And this procedure had necessarily to presuppose the existence of ideas: first, in order to demonstrate the existence of God (in the Third Meditation), then, to demonstrate the existence of bodies (in the Sixth Meditation) and to establish the reality of our knowledge of those objects. Hence Descartes could not have imagined the above-mentioned objection. And to my knowledge he does not envisage it at any moment in his writings. In the general form in which I have stated it it would have astonished Spinoza, Arnauld, Malebranche and Leibniz as well. And it did not fail to surprise Locke.¹ The objection was formulated in 1697 by John Sergeant in his work: *Solid Philosophy Asserted*.² In this paper I wish to present that objection.

I shall proceed in the following manner. I shall first compare Descartes and Sergeant on a particular topic, the representative character of ideas and what I shall call the ontology of double existence. Then I shall present and clarify Sergeant's objection to the theory of ideas. Finally, I shall return briefly to Descartes and Sergeant.

A. The representative character of ideas and the ontology of double existence

In speaking of the ideas of Descartes in this paper, I wish to speak only of what is called the objective reality of ideas; I am neglecting here the other aspects of ideas, that is, their material and formal reality. And I am speaking only of the ideas of the intellect. I am neglecting those of imagination and of sensibility, and I am not taking account of any of the other ideas such as, for instance, willing and fearing (cf. AT VII, p. 181). In other words, in speaking of Descartes's ideas in this context, I am speaking only of the ideas of the intellect considered in their objective reality.

Descartes has two ways of expressing the epistemic relation of ideas to external objects. The first is that of representation, which is in turn twofold.

In other words, Descartes uses the verb 'represent' in two different ways. Sometimes he uses it in such a way that when he says an idea represents an object, it is understood that the object does in fact currently exist. This sense of the verb 'represent' occurs, in its affirmative or negative use, for example at AT VIII/1, p. 35; IX, p. 181, 182; and XI, p. 342. It is true that in these texts Descartes does not say explicitly that the ideas of the intellect represent external objects. But he affirms that the ideas of the intellect are similar to or consonant with external objects (AT VII, p. 233 and VIII/1, p. 41; also VII, p. 37 and 39). This makes it plain that the clear and distinct ideas of the intellect, unlike the obscure and confused ideas of sense, represent external objects in this first sense in virtue of a resemblance. The other way in which Descartes uses the verb 'represent' occurs when he says that ideas represent objects in a context where it is clear that the present existence of the objects is not assumed (AT VII, p. 8, 42-43 and 46; IX, p. 34 and 36).

Let us therefore distinguish two senses of the verb 'represent'. Let us say that an idea represents₁ an object only if the object exists. An idea that represents₁ an object (currently existing) is similar to and consonant with it. Let us say that an idea represents₂ an object when it represents an object regardless of whether that object really exists. An idea can represent₂ an object even if, in Cartesian terms, the object has no actual or formal existence. Thus, before the Sixth Meditation, Descartes knows that certain ideas represent₂ material objects, but he does not yet know if they represent them in the sense of represent₁ or if they are similar to or consonant with them.

In the Latin text of the *Meditations* the verb 'repraesentare' is often used as a synonym of 'exhibere'³, and Descartes authorizes the French translation of both by the French verb 'représenter'.⁴ But when the Latin verb 'repraesentare' is used as a synonym of 'exhibere', and when 'exhibere' is translated in French by 'représenter', it is always a question of 'represent₂'. We may thus conclude that, for Descartes, to say that an idea represents₂ an object is simply to say that it exhibits it. But what does it exhibit? It exhibits, I believe, its own content, that is to say, its objective reality. In representing₂ an object, the idea exhibits the reality that is objectively in the mind: it presents it. By means of their objective reality ideas exhibit or present their contents directly to the mind. Since the ideas of which we are treating are those of the intellect, they are clear and distinct. There is no possibility that the subject is ignorant of, or errs about, the content of those ideas, when it is attentive. The knowledge of the content of the ideas of the intellect is infallible for an attentive mind, and no special training is required to learn to identify that content. In other words, the subject knows immediately and infallibly what the ideas of the intellect represent₂ provid-

ed that it is attentive. But 'represent₂' is not concerned with the epistemic relation of ideas to external objects. This relation is implied only by 'represent₁', which is that of a resemblance or conformity.

As I mentioned earlier, however, there are two ways in which Descartes expresses the epistemic relation. Let us move on to the second, which apparently does not concern representation in either sense.

The second way in which Descartes expresses the relation of ideas to external objects is to say that the same reality can exist both actually or formally and objectively (see for example AT IX, p. 124–25). The thesis according to which a reality can have two ways of existing, objective and/or formal, is what I shall call the thesis of the ontology of double existence. From this point of view, the objective reality of the idea is a representative content which possesses an ontological status. For the objective reality of the idea is a reality which *exists* objectively (and which can also exist formally). But from the point of view of Descartes's ontology of double existence, there is not a mere relation of similarity between the idea and the external object, there is a kind of identity. For the same reality is said to be able to exist objectively and formally. A reality, an entity or a thing remains in some way identical through—or in abstraction from—its two ways of existing, objective and formal.

[Thus one finds in Descartes two ways of characterizing the relation of the ideas of the intellect to existing external objects. On the one hand, it is expressed as if there were a relation of similarity between them. On the other hand, when appeal is made to an ontology of double existence, the relation is expressed as if there were a kind of identity between the reality that exists objectively (the objective reality of the idea) and the reality that exists formally (the external object).]

On this point we can conjecture that Descartes is reproducing a terminological ambiguity that is already found in St. Thomas. St. Thomas asserts that the "species" as understood is a "similitudo" of the species "in re," but he seems to want to postulate a specific identity between the two "species".⁵

As I see it, there is no inconsistency in St. Thomas or Descartes here. When Thomas speaks of a similarity between the "species" as understood and the species "in re," and when Descartes speaks of a similarity between the idea and the external object, they want in fact to speak of a kind of identity between the mental entity and the external thing known by means of the former. In particular, when Descartes gives us to understand that an idea represents₁ an external entity in virtue of a resemblance, he only wants to express in a different manner the identity that is found between the reality that exists objectively (in the idea) and that which exists formally or actually.

A little less than a half century separates the death of Descartes (1650) from the publication of the *Solid Philosophy* (1697) of John Sergeant. In this interval, Malebranche, Spinoza, Arnauld, and Locke, to name only those authors best known today, adopt or transform either (1) the Cartesian conception of objective reality; or (2) the Cartesian thesis according to which certain ideas represent external entities in virtue of a resemblance; or (1) and (2) simultaneously. But I have no space here to discuss the positions of these authors on our questions. Let us therefore move directly to the position of Sergeant.

Sergeant effects a radical cleavage between the two forms of expression used by Descartes. According to him, they express epistemological and ontological doctrines that are not only different, but incompatible. For him, the mere similarity implied by a relation of representation is *toto caelo* different from the identity implied by the ontology of double existence.

Sergeant accepts one of the doctrines, that of the ontology of double existence, and he seeks to refute the other, that of representation. More precisely, he considers that our knowledge of external objects can be explained only if one supposes a kind of identity between the immanent and immediate *terminus ad quem* in the mind and the external object. He thinks that our knowledge of these objects would be impossible if the immanent and immediate terminus of the mind's operation were solely a likeness of external objects. Sergeant explains the knowledge of external objects by what he calls *notions*. A notion is the object itself in so far as it exists objectively in the mind. He is opposed to all the philosophers whom he calls "ideists": they are the philosophers who seek to explain our knowledge of external objects by the way of ideas. For Sergeant, an idea is not the object itself in so far as it exists in the mind, but the mere likeness or resemblance of the external object. Among the ideists he numbers almost all the major philosophers of the seventeenth century, from Descartes to Locke, who is expressly referred to in the subtitle of *Solid Philosophy*.⁶

The reasoning on which Sergeant bases the positive part of his position is simple. Like St. Thomas, Arnauld, and Locke, for example, Sergeant presupposes the reality of our knowledge of external objects and seeks only to explain it. He asserts that the cognitive act of the subject is immanent in the mind, and therefore that it must terminate within the mind. But since external objects are known to the mind, he concludes that the immanent *terminus ad quem* of the cognitive act must be the object itself insofar as it is in the mind. This immanent terminal point therefore must be a notion:

When I simply apprehend the thing, or any mode or accident of it, this operation of my understanding is within my mind, and completed there; therefore the

thing apprehended, which is the object of that operation, must be there likewise: For, otherwise, this operation of my mind, it being immanent and not transient, or passing out of my mind to the thing without me, cannot be employed about that thing, contrary to the supposition. Nor could the thing be truly said to be apprehended, unless this operation, called my apprehension, had the thing for its object, and this within my understanding, it being an internal operation. But that which is within me when I know it, is the notion of it. Therefore the notion of it (taken, as is declared above, objectively) is the thing itself in my understanding. . . . I know the very thing; therefore the very thing is in my act of knowledge; But my act of knowledge is in my understanding, therefore the thing which is in my knowledge is also in my understanding. (*Solid Philosophy*, p. 29)

Thus although the cognitive act and its termination are immanent to the mind or the intellect, the external object is known because the immanent termination, the notion, is the object itself in so far as it exists in the intellect. This theory of knowledge appeals to an ontology which, like that of Descartes, admits that a reality or a thing can have two different ways of being, one external and formal, the other immanent and objective. Although the cognitive act terminates in the notion, the knowledge of the external object is explained because the notion and the external object are identical, are one and the same thing or reality, despite the difference in their ways of being: "the difference in the manner of existing prejudices not the identity of the notion and the thing".

It may be replied, that the notion of a thing (a stone, for example) has a spiritual manner of being in the mind; whereas the thing or stone, out of the mind has a corporeal manner of being, and therefore 'tis in some respect different from the thing; and consequently, not perfectly the same with it; and so can only be barely like it, or resemble it. I answer, 'Tis granted that it is unlike it, and so different from it, and therefore not the same with it, as to the manner of existing; but I deny that either its existing, or manner of existing, do enter into the notion, [(. . .)], or do at all belong to it, or the thing either; but that the notion is the thing, precisely according to what is common to it both in the understanding, and out of it, abstractedly from both those manners of existing.⁷

Why does Sergeant think that no theory of ideas is capable of accounting for the knowledge of external objects? Because every such theory supposes that there is no *identity* between the operation immanent to the mind (the notion) and the external object (an identity that exists despite the difference in their manner of being), but that there is only, or at most, a relation of representation, a *resemblance*. But if the idea is merely a likeness of the external object, and not the object itself in so far as it is in the intellect, then the subject does not apprehend the object itself, but only its likeness. In that case, every theory of representative ideas condemns the subject

never to be able to know external objects, but only their mental likenesses:

That only is known which I have in my knowledge, or in my understanding. [(. . .)] Therefore, if I have only the idea and not the thing in my knowledge or understanding, I can only know the idea and not the thing; and by consequence I know nothing without me, or nothing in nature. (*Solid Philosophy*, p. 30)

. . . they [resemblances, ideas] can never make us know anything, any more than a picture can make us know a man we never saw, nor ever shall or can see but by means of that picture; that is, not at all. (*Ibid.*, p. 41)

[Thus according to Sergeant the theory of the ideists is in reality a form of idealism. If the immanent and immediate objects of the mind are ideas (mere likenesses) and not notions, the subject can know only ideas and not the things external to the subject.] ALL IDEALISM

[Sergeant sees clearly one of the objections that could be made to him: if ideas represent, or resemble, external objects, one could say that ideas are the means by which we know those objects.⁸ He admits that notions serve as means of knowing external objects, and that for this reason our knowledge of these objects is mediate. But he denies that representative ideas can allow us to know external objects, even mediately.]

It is to refute this objection that Sergeant develops in precision and depth his argument against the ideists and against all theories of representative ideas. His argument is supposed to show that: [either one accepts the ontology of double existence and the existence of notions, in which case one can explain the knowledge of external objects, or one admits the theory of representative ideas, and then one implicitly excludes any possibility of knowing these objects, whether immediately or mediately.]

B. Sergeant's argument against knowledge by means of ideas

Sergeant's argument is as follows:

We cannot possibly know at all the things themselves by the ideas, unless we know certainly those ideas are right resemblances of them. But we can never know (by the principles of the ideists) that these ideas are right resemblances of the things; therefore we cannot possibly know at all the things by their ideas. The minor is proved thus. We cannot know any idea to be a right resemblance of a thing (nor, indeed, that any thing whatever resembles another rightly) unless they be both of them in our comparing power; that is, in our understanding or reason, and there viewed and compared together, that we may see whether the one does rightly resemble the other, or no. But this necessitates that the thing itself, as well as the idea, must be in the understanding, which is directly contrary to their principles; therefore, by the principles of the ideists, we cannot possibly know that their ideas are right resemblances of the thing. (*Solid Philosophy*, pp. 31-33)

The impossibility of comparing a so-called representative idea with the external object it is supposed to represent had already been brought to attention, before Sergeant, by Simon Foucher.⁹ According to Sergeant, however, the impossibility of such a comparison is implied by “the very principles of the ideists.” For, while wanting to explain the subject’s knowledge of external objects by means of its ideas, the ideists necessarily affirm as well that the subject cannot know objects otherwise than by means of its ideas. But, Sergeant aptly remarks, for such a comparison to be possible, “the thing resembled must be known, not only *besides* the idea, but by *other means* than by it” (*Solid Philosophy*, p. 32; my ital.).

Further:

(. . .) when the one of the two things that are related, or alike, is the prototype, the other taken from it, or (as it were) drawn by it; the prototype must be *first* known ere we can judge that the other is like it. (Ibid.; my ital.)

But this *first* knowledge of the prototype is excluded by a theory of representative ideas:

We cannot have the *first* knowledge of anything by a picture, or resemblances; . . . (Ibid., p. 31)

(. . .) he [-Locke] calls it [-the idea] frequently a resemblance, portraiture, image, appearance, and such like; which still leave[s?] me more dissatisfied than ever: For, who can have the *first* knowledge of a thing by a picture or resemblance of it? Let any man see the picture of a tree, or an apple, who had never seen those things themselves, nor ever should see them any *other ways*; and what knowledge could it give him, but only of things of a far different nature from a tree, or apple, viz. a cloth, board or paper, thus figur’d and colour’d? [. . .] Indeed, had I known such things *formerly*, then a resemblance of them might, in that case, revive, and call into my mind the knowledge of them; but how it should beget the *first* knowledge of them, as our late philosophers put those resemblances to do, is altogether *impossible* and inexplicable. (Ibid., pp. 19–20; my ital.)

Sergeant, as we see, is setting up an analogy between the complex relation “soul-idea-external object” and the relation “subject-picture-real represented object.” In both cases, he supposes that the cognitive function of the intermediate term is secondary. The idea, like the picture, could only *recall* or revive a knowledge bearing on the external object, it could not *produce* it. The recall of that knowledge by the idea would presuppose that that knowledge already exists and that it has been acquired previously to and independently of that of the idea (“formerly” and “by other means”). Thus even if representative ideas did recall a knowledge bearing on external entities, they could do so only if the subject (already) had notions of these en-

tities. On the contrary, if one does not introduce notions into the theory of knowledge, if one sticks uniquely to representative ideas, the latter make impossible all *acquisition* of knowledge bearing on external entities. And since such knowledge would be impossible to acquire, it would naturally be impossible to recall it or awaken it: thus such knowledge would be impossible *tout court*.

[Let us examine some aspects of this argument. In the first place, Sergeant stipulates that the only way the subject could know if an idea adequately resembles an external object would be *a posteriori*, by a comparison. Thus he excludes implicitly an *a priori* justification, which would be founded, as in Descartes, on a guarantee through God's veracity. When he polemicizes against the ideists, Sergeant deprives his opponents of all recourse to divine veracity.]

[Second, to say that the subject cannot know an object by means of an idea if it does not compare the idea with the object, amounts to saying that the subject can never know external objects uniquely by perceiving and knowing its ideas. This means that the perception or knowledge of ideas can never *produce* knowledge of external objects. Sergeant admits that the apprehension of ideas could *recall* knowledge of objects if these had been known in a manner anterior to and independent of the apprehension of ideas. But since, according to the ideists, there can be no knowledge of external objects anterior to and independent of the perception or knowledge of ideas, it follows that ideas cannot recall any knowledge. Thus according to Sergeant ideas could neither produce nor recall knowledge of external objects.]

[Third, Sergeant's argument is supposed to show the advantages of his theory of notions. For since a notion is by definition the object in so far as it is in the understanding, and since it is by definition identical with the external object, the subject has no need to compare its notions with external objects. From Sergeant's point of view it is incumbent only on the ideists to make such a comparison, since they suppose that mental entities are not the objects in so far as they exist in the mind, but only likenesses of external objects.]

[Fourth, the argument purports to be a *reductio* of the theory of ideas. Suppose, says Sergeant, that ideas do produce knowledge of external objects. If so, the subject knows that his ideas are "right resemblances" of them. He knows this, however, only if he compares the external objects with his ideas. But this comparison is possible only if he knows the objects independently of his ideas and before them.] That is, he must know the external objects without the mediation of ideas. Sergeant's point is that the systems of the ideists, such as Descartes and Locke, defeat their own pur-

pose. Their systems are absurd, because a theory of ideas can account for our knowledge of external objects only if that theory entails the subject's knowing those very objects without the aid of ideas. Thus from Sergeant's point of view, the very implications of the theory of ideas render ideas totally useless.

But on the other hand, if it is true that ideas can neither produce nor recall a knowledge of external objects, it follows that the theory of ideas leads to the most radical scepticism: to the negation of all knowledge, immediate or mediate, of external objects.

In short, once Sergeant's argument is made duly explicit, we see that it leads to a fundamental aporia. According to him, this aporia concerns every theory of ideas that denies the existence of notions and that postulates ideas as mere likenesses of external objects. The aporia is this: either the theory of ideas is useless for explaining our knowledge of external objects, or it implicitly denies the reality of the fact it is supposed to explain, that is, our knowledge of those objects.

To my knowledge, Sergeant's argument, together with Foucher's objections, constitutes the strongest criticism of the way of ideas made by a seventeenth-century author. *

C. *Sergeant and Descartes*

We have seen that Descartes uses the verb "represent" in two different senses. As a result of the presentation of Sergeant's objection, the question arises, whether Sergeant is criticizing only the thesis according to which an idea can represent₁ an external object, or if he is criticizing only the thesis according to which an idea can represent₂ an object, or if he is criticizing both at once. After what we have seen above, we shall find that he is taking account of both locutions at once.

In fact he denies implicitly, but clearly, that an idea can represent₁ an external object to the subject. For he says that the subject could never know that, or if, an idea adequately resembles a supposedly existent external object.

He also denies implicitly, but clearly, that an idea can represent₂ an object to the subject. To make this clear, let me return to the text of Sergeant quoted above, in which he compares ideas to pictorial representations. He takes as his example the picture of a tree or of an apple (*Solid Philosophy*, pp. 19-20). He compares the relation "soul-idea-external object" to the relation "subject-picture-object." He wants to show that our knowledge of ideas (if they existed) would be analogous to the perception we would have of a pictorial representation if we had no knowledge (previous to and independent of our perception of the picture) of the objects or sorts of objects

it is supposed to represent. We could not know *that* the picture of a tree or an apple *is* the picture of a tree or an apple if we did not have knowledge of a tree or an apple previous to and independent of our perception of the picture. Without that previous and independent knowledge, we could not perceive a picture *as representing* a tree or an apple. We would perceive it only as "a cloth, board or paper, thus figur'd and colour'd." That is to say, we would be incapable of identifying or recognizing the representative content of the picture. According to Sergeant, if the theory of ideas were true, the subject would be in a wholly analogous situation in relation to its ideas. Not having any knowledge (previous to and independent of its apprehension of its ideas) of the objects or sorts of objects its ideas are supposed to resemble the subject would be unable to identify or recognize their representative contents. It could not even perceive its ideas as representing this or that, whether or not the objects represented did really exist. In other words, it could not perceive its ideas as representing₂ this or that.

Thus Sergeant implicitly denies that ideas could represent₁ or represent₂ objects to the subject. From this point of view Sergeant's argument directly touches the position of Descartes.

However, we have seen that for Descartes the thesis according to which an idea represents an existing external object in virtue of resemblance is indissociably linked to the thesis according to which the same reality has two ways of existing, objective and formal. Must we suppose that Sergeant overlooks this, and that, for this reason, his criticism of Descartes is not pertinent? Not at all. Sergeant does not miss this point. But since he believes that the two theses lead to incompatible epistemologies and incompatible ontologies, he concludes that, when Descartes and the Cartesians assert both theses at the same time, they contradict themselves:

* They [the Cartesians] tell us sometimes they hold the idea considered objectively, to be the 'res' or thing itself; but when they add, that it is the 'res' or thing *quatenus repraesentata* they seem to deny it again; for the words *quatenus repraesentata* signify, in true logic, the bare representation of the thing; as *partes quatenus albus* means *albedo*, the restrictive word *quatenus* cutting off the precise notion to which it is annex'd, from all others. (*Solid Philosophy*, p. 171)

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NOTES

*Translated from the French by Marjorie Grene.

1. Cf. J. W. Yolton: "Locke's Unpublished Marginal Replies to John Sergeant," *Jl. Hist. Ideas*, 12 (1951), p. 528-59.

2. The complete title of this work is: *Solid Philosophy Asserted, against the Fancies of the Ideists, or the Method to Science further illustrated with Reflexions on Mr. Locke's Essay*, London, 1697. In 1929 N. C. Bradish published an article in *The Monist* (39: p. 571-628) called "John Sergeant, a Forgotten Critic of Descartes and Locke." He gives details of Sergeant's life and works and a list of his published writings along with the complete text of *Non Ultra: or a Letter to a Learned Cartesian: Settling the Rule of Truth, and First Principles, Upon their Deepest Grounds* (London, 1698). Further references to publications on Sergeant can be found in *Eighty Years of Locke Scholarship*, ed. R. Hall and R. S. Woolhouse (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1983), p. 207.

3. The verbs "repraesentare" and "exhibere" are equivalent in AT VII, p. 40, 42-43, and 232-33.

4. Compare AT VII, p. 46 with AT IX, p. 36; and compare the texts mentioned in 3, above, with AT IX, pp. 31-32, 34 and 180.

5. Aquinas adopts the ontology of double existence: "intellectum est in intelligente immaterialiter, per modum intellectus; non autem materialiter, per modum rei materialis" (*Summa Theologica*, Pars Prima, Qu. 85, art. 1, ad primum). He also thinks that the *species impressa* is a "similitudo" of an exterior object: "Sed virtute intellectus agentis resultat quaedam *similitudo* in intellectu possibili ex conversione intellectus agentis supra phantasmata, quae quidem est *repraesentativa* eorum quorum sunt phantasmata, solum quantum ad naturam speciei" (loc. cit. ad tertium [my ital.]). And, as Descartes will do later, he blends the two perspectives, saying: "intellectum est in intelligente per suam similitudinen" (loc. cit., art. 2, ad primum).

6. According to Sergeant the ideists state: (1) that ideas are mental entities, terms which are immanent to the mind, terms which are immediately perceived by the mind; and (2) that at least some of the mind's ideas are supposed to represent external objects by means of a resemblance. According to Sergeant ideists reject—or are committed to rejecting—what he calls notions. What we will henceforth call "a theory of ideas" (as conceived by Sergeant) comprises all these points.

7. *Solid Philosophy*, p. 38. In his *Method to Science* (1696) Sergeant says: "The same 'ens' or thing may have diverse manners of existing: one corporeal, the other intellectual or spiritual; since the thing [. . .] abstracts even from existence itself" (quoted by Yolton, p. 548, cf. n1).

8. "[. . .] I doubt not but wit and fancy will furnish a prejudiced person with evasions; and the next will, possibly, be this, that we know the things are without us by means of the ideas or resemblances of them which are within us. To overthrow which pretence I argue thus [. . .]" (*Solid Philosophy*, p. 31). Clearly, Sergeant thinks that ideas would make both immediate and mediate knowledge of external things impossible.

9. Cf. *Dissertation sur la Recherche de la vérité (contenant l'Apologie des Académiciens, où l'on fait voir que leur manière de philosopher est la plus utile pour la religion, et la plus conforme au bon sens)* (Paris, 1687), pp. 86-87 and 145.