

2.

CONSCIOUSNESS AS SPONTANEOUS KNOWLEDGE

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I am going to claim that the picture of the mind that Descartes gives in the Second Meditation is not in fact what is usually called a Cartesian picture of the mind. This does of course not mean that one should stop arguing against the Cartesian picture of the mind. For all I know, this picture is wrong. It also does not necessarily mean that Descartes' picture of the mind is better than the so-called Cartesian one. But it means at least that arguing against Cartesianism is not the same as arguing against Descartes. Descartes might well be a more worthwhile enemy than an anonymous Cartesian, if only because his views and arguments are clearly stated.

I will first introduce the systematic question that I raise in this contribution: What is the distinctive feature of the mind and its activity, i.e. what is consciousness? Then I will sketch a Cartesian picture of the mind (as opposed to Descartes' own picture), according to which consciousness is a kind of introspective awareness. For the details of this picture, I will refer to Sebastian Rödl's dissertation on self-reference and normativity.¹ This book is also important here because Rödl suggests an alternative to the Cartesian picture that will turn out to significantly resemble the picture of the mind that I think Descartes actually endorsed. An exposition and discussion of Rödl's views will therefore help setting the stage for Descartes' own alternative to the Cartesian picture of the mind.

1. Thought and Consciousness

According to the title of the Second Meditation, this is where Descartes introduces the notion of a human mind. As everyone knows, he argues that even an evil and omnipotent demon could not deceive a thinking being

into thinking that it, the thinking being, does not exist. The reason is that to be deceived is to think, and therefore there must be a thinking thing if there is to be a deceived thing. This thinking thing is the mind. What kind of activity is thinking? In the context of the Second Meditation, one should not just identify thinking with mental activity in general. It would be wrong for Descartes to reason that since being deceived involves one kind of mental activity, the mind whose existence is proven in the Second Meditation must be capable of all other kinds of mental activity as well. One cannot conclude, for instance, that because imagining something is a mental activity, any being that may be deceived must also be capable of imagining things – unless imagining something is necessarily involved in being deceived. There must be some general definition of “thought”, such that thinking turns out to be exactly what one must be capable of doing in order to be possibly deceived. Descartes offers the following two definitions.²

(1) Under the term “thought” I include everything that is in us in such a way that we are immediately conscious of it. Thus all operations of the will, the intellect, the imagination, and the senses are thoughts. I add “immediately”, though, in order to exclude the things that follow from these, such as the voluntary motion that has thought as its origin, but is not itself a thought. (*Meditations*, AT VII 160)³

(2) By the term “thought”, I understand all things that happen in us such that we are conscious of them, insofar as there is consciousness of them in us. Yet in this way not only understanding, wanting, and imagining, but also having sensations is the same as thinking. (*Principia*, AT VIII A 7)

In order to understand what the human mind is, we need to understand these two definitions. Descartes does not define thoughts as events that occur in a mind, and he cannot do this, since he is going to define the mind as the thing that thinks. Therefore, that thoughts occur “in us” cannot already mean that they occur in some inner mental space. This is obvious from the first passage quoted above. Descartes writes that there are some things *in us* of which we are only mediately conscious, such as the bodily movements that follow from our thoughts. These bodily movements do not take place in our minds. They are “in us” in a broader sense: by being attributable to us, such that we are, as bodily human beings, the ones who move.

Not everything that is in us, such that we are conscious of it, is therefore a thought. Our bodily movements are in us, and we may be conscious of them, but they are not thoughts. According to the first definition quoted above, the difference between such movements and

thoughts is one of immediacy. We are conscious of the bodily movements that result from our thoughts, but only mediately: only by being conscious of something else.⁴ According to the second definition, the difference is not one of immediacy, but one of respect. If there are bodily movements in us of which we are conscious, these bodily movements are thoughts only insofar as we are conscious of them. Sensory perceptions, for instance, involve sense organs, nerves, and other bodily things and processes.⁵ When we are conscious of such perceptions, we are conscious of them only in a certain respect, and in this respect, these sense perceptions are thoughts. Likewise, when we go for a walk, there are certain bodily movements in us, and we may be conscious of these movements. Insofar as we are conscious of them, our bodily movements are thoughts; insofar as we are not conscious of them, they are not.

2. Cartesianism

It is obvious that in order to understand any one of Descartes' two definitions of "thought", one needs to understand what he means by "consciousness". Most commentators take it to be some kind of introspective knowledge that we have of our own mental activity. According to this view, to be immediately conscious of a thing is to introspectively know it without doing so only by introspectively knowing something else. And the respect in which we are conscious of a thing is what we introspectively know of it; as opposed to what we do not know of it, or do know of it but not by introspection.

Let me turn to a particular instance of this view: Sebastian Rödl's 1997 PhD thesis *Selbstbezug und Normativität* (published 1998). Rödl does not endorse the view that consciousness is some kind of introspective awareness, but he states it and ascribes it to Descartes. I should note that he has recently thoroughly revised his thesis, and one of the many differences between the two versions is that whereas the first presents itself as a critique of the Cartesian picture of the mind, there are almost no references to Descartes and Cartesianism left in the revised version (2007).⁶ None of what I am going to discuss is therefore meant as a critique of Rödl's present day views, since he might have changed his views on Descartes. I refer to the earlier exposition not in order to criticize his work, but merely in order to shed light on what I take to be Descartes' actual picture of the mind. Instead of discussing Rödl's *Selbstbezug und Normativität*, I could as well have invented my own anti-Cartesian strawman, but referring to a real if possibly outdated account has the advantage that there is some context that may serve to clarify the position

in question.

In *Selbstbezug und Normativität*, Rödl raises four closely related but distinguishable objections against Cartesianism.

(1) *Infallible introspective knowledge*. According to Rödl, Cartesians think of the mind as an inner space, the state of which is immediately and infallibly known (1998, p. 134). If consciousness were a kind of introspective knowledge of one's own thoughts, Descartes would define the mind as an entity that has immediate introspective knowledge of all states and events that occur within it, such that these states and events are mental only insofar as the mind is introspectively aware of them. As a consequence, there could be nothing in the mind that it does not immediately know. The mind is the thinking thing, all it does is thinking, and an activity qualifies as thinking only if and insofar as the mind has (immediate) introspective knowledge of it. On the other hand, its own thoughts would seem to be the only things of which it can have this immediate knowledge. The mind could know things other than thoughts only mediately, by immediately knowing thoughts, which have these things as their objects.

(2) *Semantic self-sufficiency of the mental*. The idea of the mind as a transparent inner space leads to the assumption that the contents of the mind are semantically self-sufficient. Rödl's Cartesian takes consciousness to be a kind of knowledge by which we fully and immediately know our own thoughts. Unless the objects of these thoughts are again our thoughts, we know these objects only mediately, by knowing our thoughts. Whereas the contents of the mind are thus supposed to be fully and immediately accessible to the subject, the objects in the outer world are not. They are only mediately accessible. This however means that the contents of our minds could not for their intelligibility depend on anything in the world. If there were anything about our thoughts that we knew only by knowing something that is not a thought, we would not immediately know the thought, but only know it by means of knowing this other thing. For a Cartesian (as Rödl describes this position), this is impossible. Rödl refers to the resulting view, that thoughts are semantically self-sufficient, as a "Cartesian ontology" of mental states (p. 229).

(3) *Division into mental and physical parts*. Rödl further speaks of a "Cartesian operation" of dividing thoughts and actions into (a) a part that is purely mental and not essentially related to anything non-mental, and (b) a non-mental part (p. 149). This is something that Descartes seems to do, for instance, in the Second Meditation. He writes there that even if he cannot be sure whether he has a body, with which he could perceive and imagine things, he can at least be sure that he *seems* to perceive and

imagine things, and that if one understands sensation in precisely this way (presumably as seeming to perceive), it is nothing other than thinking (AT VII 29). I will return to this passage later on. On the face of it, Descartes appears to divide perceptions into two independent parts: the seeming to perceive something, and the rest, such that the seeming is purely mental and the rest merely bodily.

(4) *The impossibility of reference to particular material objects.* The picture of the mind as fully transparent to itself, together with the “Cartesian operation”, finally leads to what Rödl calls the “Cartesian assumption”, that we can attribute bodily features to ourselves only on the basis of a contingent relation between our minds and our bodies (p. 32). This results as follows. According to the second definition of “thought”, our activities are thoughts and thus belong to the mind only insofar as we are conscious of them. Since Descartes says that we can fully understand everything that belongs to the mind without assuming that any material object exists, there cannot be anything bodily about our thoughts insofar as we are conscious of them. Now, by performing the Cartesian operation, we can divide everything of which we are conscious into two independent parts, such that we are immediately and fully conscious of one of these parts, and not at all immediately conscious of the other one. Further, the Cartesian operation divides not only thoughts into purely mental parts and a possible bodily remainder, it also divides human beings into purely mental things and perhaps a bodily remainder. The mind does not have any bodily features, and the body has no mental attributes. Once this division is in place, the only way to bring the parts together is to say that as a matter of contingent fact, they happen to be present in roughly the same place at the same time.

Rödl argues against the Cartesian assumption by showing that without the possibility of locating oneself as a mind relative to spatial objects, one cannot relate to any particular spatial object at all. The argument runs as follows. I can locate myself relative to another thing in space only if I take myself to be located somewhere in the same space. But only bodily objects occupy spatial locations. In order to refer to any bodily object, I must therefore already conceive of myself as a bodily object. According to Rödl’s Cartesian, however, the thinking thing is in no way bodily and therefore, it does not occupy any particular spatial location. And something that occupies no spatial location cannot relate to any particular item in space. Therefore, if the mind has no bodily features, it cannot even relate to its own body. This shows that Rödl’s Cartesianism is impossible.

If Cartesianism is wrong, we must ask how to avoid it. Rödl shows that Cartesianism leads to an absurdity, but he does not show where exactly

things start going wrong. Instead, he provides an alternative account of the nature of self-consciousness that does not lead to the same absurdity. In order to see in more detail what is wrong with Cartesianism, we must therefore contrast it with Rödl's own alternative. This will pay off later, since I will argue that Rödl's alternative to Cartesianism is very similar to Descartes' own alternative to Cartesianism.

The main difference between Rödl's Cartesianism and his alternative to it lies in that according to Rödl, self-knowledge is not knowledge of a special object, but knowledge of a special kind (2007, p. 59). Thus in order to avoid Cartesianism, we must distinguish between different ways of knowing our own thoughts and actions. Rödl draws this distinction as follows. The knowledge we have of material things in our environment is demonstrative or descriptive. We may also know our own thoughts in this way, for instance when we write them down and read them later. However, when we presently think our thoughts and perform our actions, we (also) know them in another way. We know them by thinking and performing them, and not only by observing the results of thinking and performing them (1998, p. 148). This knowledge is neither demonstrative nor descriptive. In *Self-Consciousness*, Rödl refers to it as spontaneous knowledge.

If this is how to avoid Cartesianism, we need to ask three questions: (1) What exactly is spontaneous knowledge and how is it possible? (2) How (if at all) does the notion of spontaneous knowledge help to avoid the four Cartesian errors pointed out by Rödl? And (3) what does this have to do with the real Descartes?

3. Spontaneous Knowledge

What exactly is spontaneous knowledge? According to Rödl, we spontaneously know our own thoughts and movements by thinking and performing them. This works only for special objects of knowledge. I cannot spontaneously know my haircut by having it, but I can spontaneously know my thoughts by having them. The reason is that spontaneous knowledge is constitutive of the actions and thoughts that are its object. I cannot know my haircut by having it because I can have a certain haircut without knowing it. I can know my thoughts by having them because I cannot have a thought without (spontaneously) knowing it. The crucial point is thus that actions and thoughts are necessarily such that the one who thinks and performs them has spontaneous knowledge of them. Spontaneous knowledge is knowledge of objects that are only possible because there is spontaneous knowledge of them.

This may be a bit easier to see in the case of intentional actions, although very similar considerations apply to thoughts. An action is intentional if it may be properly described in terms of an intention, and to describe an action in terms of an intention is to describe it as a means to a certain end. The kind of reasoning in which we relate means to practical ends is practical reasoning. An action is thus intentional if and insofar as it may be properly described as resulting from practical reasoning (whether the agent explicitly goes through this reasoning or not). This explains why and how knowledge can be constitutive for intentional actions. Since intentional actions are properly described as results of practical reasoning, the knowledge that manifests itself in such reasoning can be prior to the actual bodily movement. An agent may therefore know something about her own intentional actions without having to observe herself perform them.

Rödl makes this point by saying that an intentional action is the answer of an agent to the question what to do. We give this answer by performing certain bodily movements. We do not have to observe our movements in order to know what we are aiming at by performing them, because these movements are our answer to a question that we know and understand. It may of course happen that we fail to move as we want, so that we fail to actually do what we intend to do. Such a failure is something that we can only know by observation. We can know our own actions by performing them, but we cannot know our failures by failing. The reason is that a failure is not as such an answer to the question what to do.

One might therefore say that there are two aspects of an intentional action: In one respect, it is an answer to the question what to do, and in another respect, it is a bodily movement. Insofar as the action is an answer to the question what to do, we may have spontaneous knowledge of it; insofar as it is a bodily movement, we know it by observation. These two aspects of an action seem to be independent, since one may perform the same movements without intending the same, and one may intend the same while performing different movements. Rödl accordingly says that “practical reasoning arrives at the kind of thought on which movement may rest” (2007, p. 19). Since we may fail to move as we intend, it seems that our movements cannot be identical to our intentions; only our intentions seem to directly result from practical reasoning. It therefore seems that all we can say is that the movements *rest on* our thought.

However, to distinguish between movement and intention in this way is to perform the Cartesian operation. It is to split up something that is both mental and physical into two parts, a purely mental one and a purely physical one. Rödl does not want to perform the Cartesian operation.

Therefore, he also writes that an intentional action is “a thought that *is* a movement” (ibid., my emphasis). It is neither a mere thought nor a mere bodily movement, but both at the same time: thought and movement.

How is it possible that an intentional action is both a thought and a movement, if one may fail to move as one thinks? Rödl’s idea is that successful agency is necessarily the fundamental case. When we successfully carry out an intention, there is no distinction between our answer to the question what to do, which is a thought, and the bodily movement that rests on this thought. In this case, the entire action is a thought that is a movement: action = thought = movement. Problems arise only if we do not in fact manage to move as we intend to do. In such cases, there will be a difference between intention and result, and accordingly between our spontaneous knowledge of what we are aiming at and our observational knowledge of what is in fact happening. For instance, I may intend to switch on the light, but end up ringing the doorbell. In this case, I am unsuccessfully switching on the light and unintentionally ringing the doorbell. Although I am acting with the intention to switch on the light, it would be wrong to say that I am intentionally switching on the light; for I am actually ringing the doorbell. On the other hand, although ringing the doorbell is the action that I am actually performing, it would be somewhat out of place to ask what I am aiming at by ringing the doorbell. Asking this question is only a way of pointing out that something is wrong. I cannot answer this question because under the description “ringing the doorbell”, what I am doing is not my answer to the question what to do. One may therefore say that *insofar as* my action is intentional, it is not the ringing of the doorbell, and *insofar as* it is the ringing of the doorbell, it is not intentional.

When I fail to move as I intend, I am performing a bodily movement that is not in every respect my answer to the question what to do. What I am in fact doing is my answer to the question what to do only to a limited extent, but it must be this answer to *some* extent. Otherwise, it would not at all be my intentional action. And to the extent to which it is this answer, there is no difference between thought and movement. For instance, when I ring the doorbell when trying to turn on the light, there is at least one action that I perform successfully and intentionally: to push a certain button. This action is at the same time a thought and a movement. My movement is my thought insofar as it is my answer to the question what to do. It is this answer insofar as it is intentional. And I have spontaneous knowledge of it insofar as both of this is the case. Therefore, insofar as I have spontaneous knowledge of my own bodily movements, these bodily movements are thoughts.

What I have said about intentional agency also applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to thoughts. We do not, of course, intentionally think certain thoughts in order to achieve practical ends. But still, we aim at something when we think. We aim at truth, consistency, accuracy, adequacy, and the like. We choose what to think in the light of epistemic goods and standards. For instance, we generally trust our senses and thus take our sense impressions to be veridical. Doing so is giving a certain answer to the question what to think: In general, what one should think is what one's senses convey. And as in the case of practical reasoning, this is why we can know what we are thinking without observing ourselves. Our conscious thoughts are our answers to the question what to think, and insofar as they are these answers, we can have spontaneous knowledge of them.

There are many things that go on in our minds of which we do not have this kind of spontaneous knowledge. I often notice that I am mentally humming a tune without thereby answering any questions, that I am imagining random pictures, and that I am talking mental bullshit. One can observe this, by introspection, in the same sense in which one can observe that one's hair looks funny. There is a clear distinction between such *introspective* knowledge of what goes on in one's own mind, and *spontaneous* knowledge of it. Rödl identifies conscious self-knowledge with spontaneous knowledge. To self-consciously think a thought is to give it as an answer to the question what to think.⁷

4. Conscientia

For Rödl's Cartesian, consciousness is some kind of introspective awareness by which we notice what happens in our minds. For Rödl himself, the self-conscious knowledge that we have of ourselves as thinking subjects is not knowledge by introspection, but spontaneous knowledge that we have of our thoughts insofar as they are our answers to the question what to think. What is consciousness (*conscientia*) for Descartes? Descartes uses this term in his definition of thought, but he does not define it anywhere. And he says that in general, when the meaning of a term is obvious, he does not define it (AT VIII A 8).⁸ As I have argued elsewhere in more detail, these are good reasons for asking what Descartes' predecessors took to be the obvious meaning of the Latin word *conscientia*.⁹ Here I can only give a brief, sketchy, and possibly cryptic answer to this question. Also, I will presently confine myself to scholastic authorities.

Aquinas takes *conscientia* to be an act of applying knowledge to a

particular action.¹⁰ When we decide what to do, we go through a process of practical reasoning and come up with an action. In Rödl's terms, we give an answer to the question what to do. But this application of practical knowledge is not yet what Aquinas calls *conscientia*. The act by which we determine what to do is called *choice (electio)*. *Conscientia* is an act by which we go through the same reasoning a second time, in order to ascertain two things: first, whether we intentionally did a certain thing and what our intentions were; second, whether we had good reasons for doing what we did and whether our intentions were good.

According to Bonaventure and later Franciscan authors such as Walter of Bruges, *conscientia* cannot be any old kind of knowledge that we have of what we did and why we did it. They insist that it must be *practical* knowledge, which actually guides us in our actions.¹¹ Our *conscientia* is not only our knowledge of what we are doing, or what someone else should do in a certain situation, but it is our knowledge of what we should be doing in our situation, and as such, it is knowledge that makes us act. Bonaventure and his followers thus describe an agent's *conscientia* as her knowledge how to answer, for herself, the question what to do. It is practical knowledge in two senses: It is knowledge about actions and it is knowledge that guides these and further actions.¹² As Suárez says, practical knowledge is not only cognitive, but causative (*De Bonitate* 12,2,4, 440b).

If *conscientia* is practical knowledge, it must in some sense be the cause of the actions it is about. But as Aquinas and Bonaventure emphasize, our *conscientia* does not efficiently cause the bodily movements that an agent performs on the basis of practical reasoning.¹³ These movements are caused by choice and appetite, not by the agent's *conscientia*. What the *conscientia* causes is not the movement, but only its being an action for which the agent is accountable. As Rödl might put it, *conscientia* does not cause the movement itself, but only the thought on which it rests. It causes the action only insofar it is intentional.

So much for the traditional sense that the term "*conscientia*" had in the time before Descartes. For the scholastic authorities just considered, *conscientia* is knowledge that we have of our actions insofar as they are intentional. We have this knowledge by going through the reasoning that leads to an action. That is, we have it because and insofar as our actions are answers to the question what to do. It is not theoretical but practical knowledge: We do not only know what to do, but we *determine* what to do. We know our actions not only by observing them, but by intending them.¹⁴

It is commonly supposed that Descartes did not use the word

“*conscientia*” in this traditional sense but gave it a new meaning. And indeed, the word does acquire a quite different and apparently new meaning among the critics and followers of Descartes. As for Descartes himself, however, there is no reason to think that he uses it in an unorthodox way. First, he does not seem to be aware of any unorthodoxy. Second, the traditional meaning suits his purposes very well. The only change he needs to make is to shift from practical knowledge of intentional actions to practical knowledge of thoughts. Traditionally, *conscientia* is the knowledge that we have of our intentional actions insofar as they result from our practical reasoning. That we have such knowledge of them causes them to be intentional. Very much in line with this, Descartes takes *conscientia* to be the practical knowledge that we have of our thoughts insofar as they are our answer to the question what to think, such that they are our thoughts because and insofar as we have *conscientia* of them. His *conscientia* is not a kind of introspective awareness, but spontaneous knowledge.

One objection that may be raised at this point is that Descartes seems to give a new meaning to the term *cogitatio*, which he does define, and he includes perception, sensation, and imagination in his list of instances of *cogitatio*. These however seem to be instances of receptive knowledge.¹⁵ If so, some of our conscious activity is receptive rather than spontaneous, and this seems to speak against identifying Descartes’ consciousness with a kind of practical knowledge. Further, Descartes explicitly says that since sensation and imagination depend on the body, they do not belong to the essence of the thinking thing (AT VII 78). Now if Descartes defines thought as what is spontaneously known, then why does he at the same time include perception and sensation in his list of instances of thought, even though they depend on the body? This may seem especially strange since the First Meditation is supposed to lead the mind away from the senses, and therefore Descartes should have good reasons for not classifying sensation and imagination as instances of thought.¹⁶

However, that perceptual knowledge is receptive knowledge does not mean that we must have receptive knowledge *of* our perceptions. We may spontaneously know that we receptively know something (Rödl 2007, p. 144). Thus, even though perception and imagination are not kinds of spontaneous knowledge, they may still be things that are spontaneously known. Further, that a belief is our answer to the question what to think does not mean that we perform an act of intentionally believing something, by which we aim at some practical good. Both intentional actions and beliefs are our answers to the question how to do certain things, but these questions take on very different forms. The question what

to do is a question about means to practical ends. The question what to think is a question about justification according to epistemic standards. When we consciously perceive something, we answer this latter question. We do not deliberate what to think based on our preferences. Rather, some perceptual content is given, and all we do is decide how to deal with it. We need to integrate our perceptions with our beliefs, such that when we have a sensation that does not fit our beliefs, we either change other beliefs or treat the sensation in a special way, in order to consciously accept it as our perception. There are norms and standards that apply to all our conscious perceptions, and this is possible only because to perceive something is in some sense to affirm its actual presence. That we cannot simply choose what to think does not mean that the question what to think is not a practical question. We still determine what to think, if not at will. On the other hand, we cannot freely invent the content of our perceptions, and according to Descartes, we cannot even freely choose what to imagine. Both depend on bodily processes that we do not completely and immediately control. Therefore, just as there is a bodily side to our actions that might turn out to differ from what we intend, there is a bodily element in our perceptions and imaginations, which may conflict with our answer to the question what to think. Still, imagination and sense perception are conscious activities, since we also have spontaneous knowledge of them.

5. The Real Descartes

I conclude that for Descartes, consciousness (*conscientia*) is not a kind of introspective awareness. It is not knowledge by observation, but practical knowledge. It is what Rödl calls spontaneous knowledge. That we are conscious of our thoughts means that we consciously think them, and this means that they are our answers to the question what to think. This also answers the question why a being that may be deceived must be capable of thinking. The key presupposition of being deceived is that one aims at not being deceived, i.e. at a true and accurate representation of something. Further, whenever one aims at something, one must have spontaneous knowledge of the act of aiming at it. This act may fail, but even in this case there must be some act that fails of which one has spontaneous knowledge. Therefore, the only thing that an evil demon could not possibly take away from us is our spontaneous knowledge of what we aim at in our thoughts.

If this is how we should read Descartes, we should review the four objections that Rödl raises against Cartesianism, and ask to what extent they still apply.

Let me begin with the so-called *Cartesian operation*. We have seen that it is important for Rödl not to divide actions into two independent parts, such that one of them is a mere intention, and the other a mere bodily movement. Likewise, it is important for him not to divide thoughts into a part that is purely mental and another part that is a mere brain process, or whatever the bodily correlate of a thought may be. Cartesians, as Rödl depicts them, do this in two ways. First, they allow for thoughts and intentions that do not have any bodily correlate at all. Second, they divide actions, imaginations, and sensations into one part that is bodily, and another one that is mental.

Does Descartes perform the Cartesian operation? I have already pointed out that in the Second Meditation, he distinguishes between actually perceiving a thing and seeming to perceive this thing, and he seems to say that only the latter is a thought. Here is the passage:

Yet I certainly seem to see, to hear, and to be warmed. This cannot be false, this is what is properly called sensation in me, and taken in precisely this way (*praecise sic sumptum*), it is nothing but thinking. (AT VII 29)

Descartes says that sensations are thoughts if they are precisely taken to be mere appearances. What does he mean by “precisely” here? A bit earlier in the Second Meditation, he writes that he is “precisely only” (*praecise tantum*) a thinking thing (AT VII 27). Gassendi criticizes this formulation. Since Descartes does not yet know anything about his body in the Second Meditation, Gassendi objects, he can also not know that he is not a bodily thing. Therefore, his claim that he is precisely only a thinking thing is unwarranted (AT VII 263-5). In a letter to Clerselier, Descartes replies that by saying that the mind is precisely only a thinking thing, he did not want to say that all it really is is merely a thinking thing. Rather, he says, “*praecise*” in this context means as much as “cut short.” What Descartes wants to say is thus that if the mind is only considered in a certain restricted way, it is nothing but a thinking thing.¹⁷ The same might well be true for the passage quoted above: If we consider our sensations and perceptions in a certain restricted way, they are nothing but thoughts. This does not mean that thoughts are really nothing but mere appearances. It only means that if we take them to be at least as much as such appearances, they are thoughts.

The general structure of Descartes’ argument is the following: We may consider A insofar as it is B, and considered *praecise* in this way, A is nothing but C. It does not follow from this that A is nothing but B, B nothing but C, or A nothing but C. For instance, one may consider Daniel Craig insofar as he is the new James Bond, and considered in this

restricted way, one may say that he is a good actor (or a bad one, for that matter). But this does not mean that Daniel Craig is nothing but the new James Bond, or that the new James Bond is nothing but a good actor, or that Daniel Craig is nothing but a good actor. In particular, it does not follow that insofar as Daniel Craig is someone other than the new Bond, he is not a good actor. Likewise, one may consider a perception in a certain restricted way, namely only insofar as it is an apparent perception. Considered in this way, the perception turns out to be a thought; but this does not imply that the perception is nothing but a thought, that thoughts are nothing but appearances, or that insofar as the perception is not merely apparent, it is something other than a thought. Therefore, in the Second Meditation, Descartes does not claim that sensations are thoughts *only* insofar as they are mere appearances.

Perception, sensation, and imagination are thus kinds of thought if considered in a certain restricted way. In the Second Meditation, the relevant restrictions are imposed by the context. Descartes is still engaged in doubting everything he can doubt, and under these conditions, his sensations and imaginations can only figure insofar as they are at least apparent sensations and imaginations, not insofar as they are whatever else they may be. When Descartes says that as long as these restrictions are in place, the sensations and imaginations of the thinking thing are thoughts insofar as they are appearances of actual sensations and imaginations, he does not say that under normal circumstances, they are just that.¹⁸ He has no business in denying that under normal circumstances, sensations are bodily processes.

It is important to see what Descartes is trying to show in the Second Meditation. His aim is to show that the thing whose existence cannot be doubted is a thinking thing. The point he makes is that in order to doubt whether a sensory image corresponds to anything real, it is enough to seemingly perceive. As long as the thinking thing seems to perceive and imagine things, he argues, it is at least thinking something. Therefore, there must be a thinking thing even if it only seems to perceive and imagine. But what is enough in this context may not be enough in other contexts. There may (and probably must) be thinking things that do not only seem to perceive and imagine things, but actually do perceive and imagine them.

I conclude that in the Second Meditation, Descartes does not perform the Cartesian operation as Rödl describes it. He does not divide the acts of the mind that involve the body (sensation, perception, and imagination) into two independent acts, one of which is purely mental, the other merely bodily. All he says in AT VII 29 is that even if such acts are considered

insofar as they are only appearances of sensing, perceiving, and imagining, they are still thoughts.

As for the *impossibility of spatial objects*, I agree with Rödl that one cannot refer to any particular bodily object without locating oneself relative to a (possibly different) bodily object. As a consequence, a pure mind cannot refer to any particular bodily object. This however does not show, as Rödl seems to suppose, that the concept of a pure mind does not make any sense at all. It only shows that if there were a pure mind, it could not relate to any particular body. It could only relate to pure ideas and to minds, such as itself and God.¹⁹ (It might also be able to relate to abstract bodies, such as geometrical shapes.) This only implies that the human mind, as long as it does relate to particular bodily things in the world and is united to a human body, is not a pure mind. Strictly speaking, only the immortal soul that survives its separation from the human body is a pure mind (and it is so only until the resurrection of the body). According to Descartes, the embodied mind that we have during our lives as human beings is not pure. It is true that he does not explain how a thinking thing may be impure, such that it may relate to bodily things. But at least he does not assume that a mind can both be pure and relate to a particular bodily item at the same time.

Self-sufficiency of the mental. On the basis of what has been said so far, it should also be clear to what extent the contents of our minds are semantically self-sufficient. Most of our beliefs are based on sense perception and imagination. A pure mind may have beliefs about God and itself as a pure mind, but it cannot have beliefs about particular material objects. Descartes has no problem admitting that our empirical ideas and thoughts depend for their existence on there being more than our own mind. He emphasizes that qua mental states, all our ideas are indistinguishable, and that they can be distinguished only by distinguishing the objects they represent (AT VII 40). Unless all objects of our ideas are further ideas, this clearly means that our ideas are not semantically self-sufficient. We need to be able to distinguish among things that are not ideas in order to distinguish between different ideas.

There is also a second way in which Descartes explicitly admits that there must be more than our minds for our minds to be possible. He argues that if a thinking thing such as our mind exists, there must also be another, more perfect thinking thing. Therefore, our mind depends on something external to it. Further, in the Sixth Meditation, he considers the suggestion that God, the perfect thinking being, might be the only other thing there is, and that our ideas of particular material things derive directly from God. He rejects it, since then it would seem that God is a deceiver. For we are

inclined to think that our ideas of particular material things derive from such things, and we have no means of correcting this assumption (AT VII 79-80). In any case, there could be no finite mind without there being more than this finite mind. One reason for this is precisely that a finite mind is not semantically self-sufficient.

What about the Cartesian conception of consciousness as *infallible knowledge*? If there is anything objectionable about a mind that is transparent to itself, then this objection still applies. If consciousness is practical knowledge rather than introspective awareness, Descartes does not any longer claim that we know all our thoughts by introspection. But still, he claims that we necessarily know all our thoughts, since we must have practical and spontaneous knowledge of all of them. Thoughts are only possible as spontaneously known by the thinker. Therefore, the thinking thing must have spontaneous knowledge of everything that belongs to it. This is true for thinking subjects as Rödl depicts them as much as for a Cartesian mind.

On the other hand, Descartes occasionally concedes that we do not necessarily know what is in our minds. In the *Discours*, for instance, he writes that the activity by which we believe something differs from the activity by which we know that we have this belief, such that we may believe something without knowing that we do so (AT VI 23). One might account for this by assuming that in the *Discours*, Descartes speaks of introspective knowledge, and that he claims that although we must spontaneously know all our thoughts, we need not be introspectively aware of all of them. In a letter to Mersenne, however, Descartes also writes that our own thoughts are not fully within our power (AT III 249), and this should mean that we need not even spontaneously know everything about our own thoughts. This is a puzzling passage, and it might not be possible to make sense of it in the end. In any case, Descartes does not say, without qualification, that we necessarily know everything that is in our minds.

If consciousness is spontaneous knowledge, there is a fairly clear sense in which it must be infallible. We have spontaneous knowledge of our thoughts and actions insofar as they are our answers to the question what to do and think. This means that in cases where we are actually doing what we intend to be doing, we must also spontaneously know what we are in fact doing. In other cases, where we fail to act as we intend, we must at least know spontaneously what we are aiming at. We cannot fail to know what we are doing insofar as we are doing what we intend to do, and if we are performing any intentional action at all, there must be some extent to which we are doing what we intend to do. Likewise, we cannot fail to

know what we are thinking, insofar as we are thinking what we take to be epistemically justified.

There is a further sense in which spontaneous knowledge may be taken to be infallible: We cannot spontaneously know what we take to be mistaken. Giving the answer to the question what to do and evaluating it as the correct answer are one and the same. We cannot evaluate whether what we are doing is right or wrong independently of deciding what to do, and we cannot evaluate our thoughts as true or false independently of deciding whether we should entertain them or not. We may of course evaluate our own thoughts and actions as mistaken or wrong, but when we do so, we cease to provide them as our answers to the question what to think and what to do. Therefore, when we evaluate our own thoughts as mistaken, we cease to have spontaneous knowledge of them, and we cease to have spontaneous knowledge of them precisely *because* we take them to be mistaken. Further, that we cannot reject the objects of our spontaneous knowledge while having spontaneous knowledge of them means that we cannot at all truly evaluate them according to moral or epistemic standards while spontaneously knowing them. In order to evaluate an answer to the question what to do, one must also be able to evaluate it as incorrect, and this we cannot do while at the same time giving that answer. Spontaneous knowledge is thus infallible, in this sense, because there can be no spontaneous knowledge of a failed action or thought insofar as it fails. The objects of our spontaneous knowledge are irrejectable, because spontaneous knowledge necessarily withdraws before it fails.

Let me now point to an issue in which Rödl and Descartes clearly take different sides. According to Descartes, there is an ideal observer and evaluator of all our thoughts and actions. This evaluator is God: the infinite thinking thing whose thoughts are not subject to any further evaluation. God's evaluation may be arbitrary, but it cannot possibly be wrong. His thoughts are infallible, not only because he cannot question them as long as he entertains them, but because by thinking them, he objectively determines what is right and wrong. God is a thinker who can judge himself, and the thoughts of God are, by definition, true.

According to Rödl, in contrast, an observer of my actions and thoughts can only evaluate these as actions and thoughts by employing a standard that also applies to her own actions and thoughts. All thought is an answer to the question what to think, and every such answer can be mistaken. Further, all evaluation of a thought is a further thought, and it can be as mistaken as the first. I have argued that we cannot take our own actions and thoughts to be mistaken while and insofar as we have spontaneous knowledge of them. If consciousness is such spontaneous knowledge, this

means that we cannot truly evaluate what we are conscious of. Further, if thought is conscious activity, we cannot at the same think and truly evaluate our own thoughts (that is, insofar as we have spontaneous knowledge of them, we can only evaluate our thoughts as correct). In order to truly evaluate their own thoughts, thinking subjects must distance themselves from their thoughts, and when they distance themselves from a thought in this way, they cease to have spontaneous knowledge of it. Therefore, no thinking thing can reject its own current thoughts as mistaken.

But if thoughts are answers to the question what to think, they must be subject to a standard of correctness. Every answer to the question what to think can be mistaken, and therefore, every thought is subject to an evaluation that might reveal it to be mistaken. Now, because one cannot think and reject a thought at the same time, this means that every thought must be subject to a possible evaluation from a second or third person perspective. There can be no thinking subject whose thoughts are not subject to such an evaluation. Descartes assumes that there is a thinking thing whose thoughts are not subject to any evaluation by any other thinking being. Rödl argues that there can be no such perfect evaluator (1998, p. 271). The reason is that first, no thinking being can judge itself. Second, there can be no thinking being whose thoughts are not subject to any evaluation.

6. Conclusion

I have argued in this contribution that in order to understand Descartes' picture of the mind, we must understand what he means by consciousness, and that consciousness is not a kind of introspective awareness. I take it that Rödl has successfully demonstrated that if consciousness were a kind of introspective awareness of what happens in the mind of a thinker, the mind would be semantically self-sufficient and could not relate to any particular spatial item. However, Descartes does not think of the human mind in this way. I have argued that in Descartes' time, the term *conscientia* was mainly used for the knowledge of our own actions that may be expressed by a practical syllogism. It is knowledge that we have because and insofar as we perform the actions known and are accountable for them. If this is so, Descartes' consciousness is not a kind of introspective awareness but rather a kind of spontaneous knowledge. We have this knowledge of our own thoughts and actions insofar as they are our answers to the question what to think and what to do. According to Rödl, self-conscious subjects are beings that may spontaneously know

their own thoughts and actions. They know themselves by being themselves. When Descartes defines the mind as a being that is conscious of its own thoughts, he is basically saying the same as Rödl. For Descartes, thought is what happens in a subject such that and insofar as this subject is immediately conscious of it. If consciousness is spontaneous knowledge, this means that thinking subjects are subjects who engage in an activity of which they have spontaneous knowledge. This also explains why only conscious beings can be deceived. One can only be deceived if one aims at not being deceived, and whenever one aims at something, one must have spontaneous knowledge of the act of aiming at it. If consciousness is spontaneous knowledge, this means that one must engage in conscious activity in order to be possibly deceived. It further explains why Descartes thinks that the existence of the human mind implies the existence of God. For Descartes, God personifies all standards of correctness, and if to engage in conscious activity is to provide an answer to the question what to think and what to do, all conscious activity must be subject to some standard of correctness. For Descartes, this means that all conscious activity presupposes the existence of a being that can apply this standard without being subject to it, i.e. God.

I have also pointed out that Rödl and Descartes disagree on an important point. They both argue that we may be conscious of our own thoughts and actions because we determine what to do and think in the light of certain practical ends and epistemic standards. All conscious activity is therefore subject to an evaluation in terms of practical ends or epistemic standards. According to Descartes, however, there is an ideal evaluator of all human thought, such that conscious activity might also be defined as an activity that is subject to an evaluation by this ideal evaluator in terms of practical ends and epistemic standards. According to Rödl, only a being whose actions are subject to an evaluation as thoughts and actions can understand what it is to think and act. Every thinker must therefore be subject to an evaluation from a second- or third person perspective, and every evaluator of a thought must be subject to a further such evaluation.

Notes

¹ Sebastian Rödl, *Selbstbezug und Normativität* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1998).

² Cf. Robert McRae. "Descartes' Definition of Thought", in R. J. Butler, ed., *Cartesian Studies*, (London: Basil Blackwell, 1972), 55-70; John Cottingham. "Descartes on 'Thought'," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 28 (1978), 208-14; Daisie Radner. "Thought and Consciousness in Descartes", *Journal of the History of*

Philosophy 26 (1988), 439-452; and James Hill. "What Does 'To Think' (cogitare) Mean in Descartes' Second Meditation?" *Acta Comeniana* 19 (2005), 91-103.

³ This refers to Adam and Tannery, *Oeuvres de Descartes* (Paris: Vrin, 1996), vol. VII, page 160. Translations are in general my own.

⁴ This is also true of my unconscious desires: I may be aware of them, but only on the basis of what my psychoanalyst tells me. They are unconscious because I am only mediately aware of them. Cf. David Finkelstein. "On the Distinction Between Conscious and Unconscious States of Mind", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (1999), 81.

⁵ See AT VII 27, among other passages, for the claim that sensations depend on the body. For imagination, cf. AT VII 72.

⁶ Sebastian Rödl, *Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁷ Finkelstein notes that there seems to be something wrong with saying "I unconsciously believe that *p*, and in fact, *p*" (1999, p. 81). The reason might well be that whenever we accept *p* as a fact, we also give *p* as an answer to the question what to think. Therefore, we cannot both accept *p* and not be conscious of our belief that *p*.

⁸ See also AT IV 116 and AT X 369.

⁹ It is important to see, first, that although the term *conscientia* is of central importance for Descartes, it is impossible to extract its meaning from Descartes' own writings. This can only be shown by carefully looking at these writings. It follows that in order to understand what Descartes means by *conscientia*, we must look at the way in which this term was traditionally used before Descartes. Second, before Descartes, there are no clear instances where "conscientia" means what we today call consciousness or introspective awareness. Again, this claim can only be established by an extensive survey of the passages that belong to the tradition on which Descartes built. I have done my best to establish these two claims in *Conscientia bei Descartes* (Freiburg: Alber Verlag 2006); Cf. also my "Cartesian Conscientia", *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 15 (2007), 455-484.

¹⁰ *Summa Theologiae* Ia 79,13; *De Veritate* 17,1.

¹¹ Bonaventure, *In II Sent.* 39,1,1; Walter of Bruges, *Quaestiones Disputatae* 13 c.a., p. 118; Cf. Rudolf Hofmann, *Die Gewissenslehre des Walter von Brügge und die Entwicklung der Gewissenslehre in der Hochscholastik* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1941).

¹² Hill claims that because *conscientia* is a kind of *scientia*, it must be some kind of intellectualistic knowledge (2005, p. 101). This is far from plausible, given that up to the time of Descartes, *conscientia* is clearly practical, moral, and normative knowledge. On the other hand, this also means that Hill is clearly right in rejecting the view that Cartesian thoughts must be conscious in the present-day sense of "conscious" – if there is one.

¹³ Aquinas, *De Veritate* 17,1 ad 4; Bonaventure *In II Sent.* 39,1,1 c.a.

¹⁴ The account of *conscientia* that I have just sketched is of course not particularly Cartesian. We need to refer to the tradition precisely because Descartes does not give his own positive account. And Descartes' tradition is also everyone else's

tradition.

¹⁵ In *Principia* II,2, Descartes writes that the mind is aware (*consciis*) that sensations do not originate from it (AT VIII A 41).

¹⁶ His main reason for including imagination seems to be that at least according to his earlier account in the *Regulae*, our imagination plays a crucial role in geometrical (and therefore generally in scientific) thought. Cf. Dennis L. Sepper, *Descartes' Imagination* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996).

¹⁷ Cf. AT VII 8 and AT VII 27. See John Cottingham, "Cartesian Dualism: Theology, Metaphysics, and Science", in Cottingham, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, 236-257) 243; Marleen Rozemond, *Descartes' Dualism*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 12.

¹⁸ AT VII 33, he says that *for now*, in the Second Meditation, he does not distinguish between seeing and thinking that one sees.

¹⁹ Descartes claims that the mind can relate to itself and to God without being united to a body. Cf. AT VII 73 (*pura intellectio* happens when the mind turns toward itself); III 395 (on ideas of the pure mind); IV 114 and XI 350 (our ideas of our own will do not depend on the body).