Descartes revolutionized our conception of the mind by identifying consciousness as a mark of the mental: the Cartesian mind is essentially (and uniquely) a thinking thing, and Cartesian thought is by its very nature conscious.1,2 Or so the story goes. I do not deny the revolution story, but I want to ask what it amounts to. In particular, I want to explore here Descartes’ rather astonishing claim that all thought is conscious: “Nor can there be any thought in us of which, at the very moment it is in us, we are not conscious.”


2. To say that thought is by its very nature conscious is not to say that consciousness exhausts the nature of thought or even that it gets at the essence of thought. Intellection also plays an important role in Descartes’ conception of thought (see, e.g., Meditation 6, AT VII 78, and Principles I.48, AT VIII-A 23). The precise nature of the relationship among consciousness, intellection, and thought is a controversial matter that I address below in Section I.B. At the moment what matters is that Descartes commits himself to the claim that all and only thought is conscious; hence its status as a mark, whatever else thought may be.

3. Fourth Replies, AT VII 246; see also First Replies, AT VII 107, and Meditation 3, AT VII 49. Strictly speaking, this passage says only that occurrent thoughts are conscious. What of dispositional thoughts like standing beliefs, emotions, and memories? I will say more about them in what follows in Section II.A, but suffice it to say for now that they are not so much thoughts in the Cartesian ontology as they are potential thoughts or dispositions to have thoughts. Thoughts proper are occurrent thoughts. Why? Descartes’ substance-mode ontology will restrict the thoughts of a mind (as it does the shapes of a body) to those that are modifying it from moment to moment. Just as the fact that a spherical piece of clay was cubical yesterday and may be cubical again tomorrow doesn’t make cubicalness a property (that is, a mode) of the clay now, so the fact that I felt a pang of regret yesterday and may again tomorrow doesn’t make regret a property (that is, a mode) of my mind right now. Might standing emotions, beliefs and memories be mental but not thoughts? No. Apart from the transcendental properties that belong to all substances (e.g., duration), Cartesian substances have only one principal attribute of which all of its properties are modes (Principles I.53, AT VIII-A 25). The substance-mode ontology, then, will restrict the mind to a series of occurrent (conscious) thoughts. Thanks to an anonymous reader of the journal for pressing me to be clearer about this point.
Today such a claim seems either hopelessly naïve or blindly dogmatic, and certainly wrong. Empirical work in cognitive and social psychology suggests that so much of our mental life trundles along unconsciously it is a wonder the mind bothers with consciousness at all.\textsuperscript{4} Philosophers comfortably posit zombies that have mental lives devoid of consciousness.\textsuperscript{5} Psychiatrists have been appealing to unconscious mental processes to explain both normal and abnormal human behavior since the 19th century.\textsuperscript{6} But the problem with Descartes’ claim is not simply that it sounds wrong by today’s lights. The problem is that it seems to conflict with his own treatment of the mind. Descartes introduces all sorts of thoughts into the human mind that appear to fall outside the reach of consciousness; innate ideas, intellectual memories, sensory processes, habitual judgments, hidden beliefs and passions, and more. Something is not as it seems. Either Descartes is remarkably inconsistent, or his claim that all thought is conscious is more complicated than it appears.

The claim that all thought is conscious is not, of course, the only contentious thing that Descartes says about the mind and its relation to consciousness. His alleged commitment to mental transparency has been the object of much philosophical scrutiny. Transparency, in this context, implies that consciousness confers on us a host of epistemic privileges with respect to our own minds: indubitability, incorrigibility, and even infallibility. These epistemic privileges have come to seem preposterous to most philosophers.\textsuperscript{7} Descartes scholars have built up a good deal of evidence to suggest that Descartes was not, after all, committed to an implausibly strong version of mental transparency despite first appearances.\textsuperscript{8} I will offer some more grist for their mill, but I will focus on the less examined and simpler claim that all thought is conscious.

My aim is not simply to demonstrate that Descartes was a subtler philosopher-psychologist than we thought and that there are hidden depths to the Cartesian mind. I also want to underscore the shiftiness in our own concept of consciousness. That a surgeon slicing into an abdomen is conscious and the anaesthetized owner of the abdomen is unconscious is clear enough.\textsuperscript{9} But most of our mental life falls somewhere between the concentrated effort of the surgeon and the

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\item For an introduction to these theoretical creatures and a list of philosophical papers that discuss them, see David Chalmers’ “Zombies on the web” at http://consc.net/zombies.html.
\item Freud is the obvious example, but more physiologically inclined psychiatrists before Freud were already arguing for the existence of an unconscious mental life. See, e.g., Henry Maudsley, Physiology and Pathology of Mind (London: D. Appleton, 1867) and William Carpenter, Principles of Mental Physiology with their Applications to the Training and Discipline of the Mind and the Study of its Morbid Conditions (New York: D. Appleton, 1874).
\item Sydney Shoemaker observes: “A distinct feature of recent philosophy of mind has been the repudiation of Cartesianism” a key aspect of which is supposed to be his commitment to epistemological transparency (‘First Person Access’, Philosophical Perspectives 4 (1990), 187). Quassim Cassam helpfully and sympathetically explores contemporary attacks on Descartes’ theory of mind, including attacks on transparency, in ‘Contemporary Reactions to Descartes’s Philosophy of Mind’, in A Companion to Descartes, ed. Janet Broughton and John Carriero (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 482–495.
\end{enumerate}
wholesale unconsciousness of the patient. How we understand that in-between domain (is it a mix of conscious and unconscious? a mix of degrees and kinds of consciousness?) depends a good deal on what concept of consciousness we are working with. There are many such concepts at work in the philosophical and psychological literature today, and there have been for ages. Relatively little attention is paid, however, to sorting out these different concepts and the different roles they play in understanding the life of the mind. Since Descartes got us started down the road of connecting the mental with consciousness, exploring his use of the concept is a good place to start. Although I do not claim that Descartes was explicit about it, or possibly even self-conscious about it, I argue that there are different notions of consciousness at work in his theory of mind. Together they provide the tools for a rich and multifaceted psychology even within entirely conscious confines of the Cartesian mind.

I. The Conscious Mark

Before looking at the scope of Cartesian consciousness, we need some sense for what it might be. Unfortunately, Descartes shows little interest in explaining what consciousness is. He never defines the Latin conscientia or the French conscience. In fact, he rarely uses them. When he does, he seems to depart from historical usage, divesting the terms of their normative moral connotation, captured better by the English “conscience”, and rendering them purely descriptive and psychological. And so questions arise. What exactly is this new Cartesian consciousness? What’s the precise nature of its relationship to thought? And what kind of analysis, if any, might we give of it?

10. Ned Block describes consciousness as a “morgel concept” in his paper “On a Confusion about a Function of Consciousness” (The Behavioral and Brain Sciences 18(2) (1995), 227–287), and he does so with good reason. The Oxford English Dictionary today lists eight distinct meanings for the term; the Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy distinguishes four concepts; and the main entry on consciousness in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy distinguishes twelve.

11. Within a few decades after Ralph Cudworth introduced the term “consciousness” into philosophical English in 1678, Samuel Clarke disentangled no fewer than five distinct senses of the term (see A second defense of an argument made use of in a letter to Mr Dodwell, to prove the immateriality and natural immortality of the soul. In a letter to the author of A reply to Mr Clarke’s Defense, &c (London, 1710), 38). A century later, in 1877, George Henry Lewes wrote an article for the fledgling journal Mind alerting readers to the “great ambiguity” in the terms “conscious” and “unconscious” (see “Consciousness and Unconsciousness”, Mind os-2 (1877), 156–167). Alexander Bain followed Lewes’ salvo in the 1894 edition of Mind with both an attempt to disentangle the many different uses of the term and an argument that such a mangled concept should by no means serve as the central term of psychology (see “Definition and Problems of Consciousness”, Mind 3 (1894), 348–361). Thanks to Donald Ainslie for directing me to Clarke’s text, which antedates a text more frequently cited in this context, viz., John Maxwell’s Appendix to Richard Cumberland’s A Treatise of the Laws of Nature (London, 1727). Maxwell’s Appendix simply summarizes Clarke’s text.

12. One obvious exception is the attention paid to Ned Block’s distinction between phenomenal and access consciousness, which has become central to contemporary discussions of consciousness.


14. As many have noted, the adjective conscia occurs only once in the body of the Latin Meditations (AT VII 49), and the noun conscientia not at all. The terms turn up intermittently in the rest of the corpus.

15. Geneviève Rodis-Lewis suggests that Descartes is in fact the first to use the term in this purely descriptive and psychological sense (see Nicolas Malebranche [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963], 175). She discusses the transformation of both the Latin and French terms in Le problème de l’inconscient et le cartésianisme (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), 39, 113ff., noting that the French term was slower to change meaning, as testified by the resistance of French translators of Descartes to use the French conscience for the Latin conscientia. For another helpful discussion of the transformation of the concept during the 17th century, including the English part of the story, see Udo Thiel, “Cudworth and Seventeenth-Century Theories of Consciousness”, in The Uses of Antiquity, ed. Stephen Gaukerger (Boston: Kluwer, 1991), 79–99. Boris Hennig has recently challenged the claim that Descartes uses the terms in a descriptive and psychological sense in his article “Cartesian Conscientia”, British Journal for the History of Philosophy 15(3) (2007), 455–484.
A. Phenomenality
Whatever else Descartes means by consciousness, he pretty clearly means something that confers what we might today call phenomenality on our mental life. Consciousness is responsible for the “lights-on” or experiential character of our mental life. This is implied by Descartes’ persistently including sensations like pain, titillation, heat, and cold among our most primitive thoughts. In a letter for Arnauld, Descartes identifies the “first and simple thoughts of infants” with things like “the pain they feel from some wind that distends their intestines, or the pleasure they feel from being nourished by sweet blood” (AT V 221). If they are nothing else, sensations of pain, titillation, pleasure, heat, and cold are phenomenal states of mind. There is something it is like to have or be in one of these mental states when it occurs.

As for our more sophisticated intellectual thoughts, thoughts that the adult mind has the freedom to enjoy, they too seem to have a certain phenomenology. Descartes offers a comparative phenomenology of imaginative and intellectual thought in Meditation 6: imagining a pentagon involves an image while understanding one does not; imagining a chiliagon involves a certain effort of mind while understanding one does not. One might think the point here is that imaginative thought has a phenomenology while intellectual thought does not. But that can’t be right. Intellectual thought at its best is clear and distinct perception, and that must surely have a phenomenology. After all, Descartes spends the bulk of the Meditations trying to get us to (a) recognize it when it occurs, (b) distinguish it from more obscure and confused perceptions, and (c) withhold our assent to any perception that is not absolutely clear and distinct. He must, then, think that there is something it is like to have a clear and distinct intellectual thought. In saying that all thought is conscious, Descartes is at least saying that thought is something we experience when we have it; it has a phenomenology.

16. See also letter to Hyperaspistes, AT III 424, and Principles I.71, AT VIII-A 35.

B. Cognition (of the Mind by the Mind)
In addition to rendering our mental life phenomenal, Cartesian consciousness is a kind of cognition—a way of being acquainted with some thing or some fact. We are never simply conscious. We are conscious of something or perhaps conscious that something is the case. But what does this claim amount to?

On one reading, the claim that consciousness is a kind of cognition is not very informative. That’s the reading according to which consciousness and thought amount to the same thing. To be conscious is to think; to think is to be conscious. This view is suggested by texts like the following: “There are ... acts which we call acts of thinking, such as understanding or imagining or sensing, etc., which all fall under the common concept of thought [cognition] or perception [perception] or consciousness [conscientiae]” (Third Replies, AT VII 176; see also letter to Gibieuf, AT III 474). This passage suggests that the words “consciousness” and “thought” are synonyms. If that’s right, then insofar as understanding, sensing, imagining, judging, and hoping are different ways of thinking, so too they are different ways of being conscious; and insofar as these modes of thinking are cognitive (or not), so too consciousness is cognitive (or not).17

17. Descartes is indifferent to the distinction we now make between object thoughts and propositional thoughts (e.g., seeing a dog vs. seeing that there is a dog in the room). As far as Descartes is concerned, these are just two different linguistic ways to describe a single mental phenomenon, and they can both be used to describe either sensory/imaginative thoughts or intellectual thoughts (see his letter to Mersenne, July 1641, AT III 395). He does distinguish perceptions from judgments, but the difference here is that a judgment includes the will’s affirmation or denial of what is represented by a perception; there is no difference in the representational content itself.

I don’t think this represents Descartes’ considered view. On the occasions when he speaks as if “thought” and “consciousness” are interchangeable, he is drawing a general distinction between the physical and the mental and so is reaching for a host of terms that he thinks distinctively describe the mental. He is not offering any careful analysis of the nature of the mental itself. In the Third Replies passage quoted above Descartes goes on to say, “We call this thing a thinking thing or mind or whatever name you like, so long as we do not confuse this substance with corporeal substance” (AT VII 176).

When he is being more careful to say what the nature of the mental consists in, Descartes’ language suggests a distinction of some sort between consciousness and thought. Consider the two following definitions of the term “thought”: “By the term ‘thought’ I understand all those things that we are conscious of happening in us insofar as we are conscious of them in us” (Principles I.9, AT VIII-A 7; italics mine). And again: “The word ‘thought’ includes everything that exists in us in such a way that we are immediately conscious of it” (Second Replies, AT VII 160; italics mine).

In passages like these, thought seems to be what I am conscious of. It’s not that thought is consciousness but rather that thought is the principle object of consciousness. And so too the various modes of thinking—sensing, understanding, imagining, hoping, willing—are not kinds of consciousness or ways of being conscious, but rather objects of consciousness. If that’s right, then consciousness appears to be a special kind of cognition, one that takes thought in particular as its object.19 If thought is the object of consciousness, then so is the mind, since thoughts are simply modifications (or temporary ways of being) of the mind. Put first personally: in being conscious, I am conscious of my thoughts and so of myself qua thinking thing. Consciousness, on this view, is a special sort of cognition of the mind by the mind. I want to press on the question what sort of cognition (of the mind by the mind) consciousness amounts to, but first let’s take stock.

Descartes insists that all thought is conscious. On the reading according to which consciousness and thought are the same thing, the claim that all thought is conscious is relatively uninteresting: if thought just is consciousness, then of course there can’t be any unconscious thought. On the reading according to which thought is the principle object of consciousness, however, the claim is more substantive. On this reading, all thought (be it a sensation, a moment of understanding, a desire, or a volition) is such that it is the object of this special form of cognition called “consciousness”, which confers a kind of phe-nomenality on it. And this is where things start to get both interesting and troublesome. Why does all of that thought have to be the object

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19. This raises the important question what thought itself is supposed to be, this stuff of which we are conscious and that constitutes the very essence of the mind. To the extent that the passages quoted above are supposed to be definitions of thought, they are spectacularly unhelpful. Defining thought as what one is conscious of is a bit like defining the heavens as what one sees through a telescope. It gives us at best an extensional definition, telling us how to find the stuff without telling us what it is. Descartes is notoriously resistant to giving proper definitions for things he thinks have simple natures on pain of making the matter more obscure rather than clearer (see Principles I.10, AT VIII-A 8, and Search for Truth, AT X 523–524). Thought is one such thing. As commentators have duly noted, however, Descartes frequently identifies thinking substance with intellectual substance and thereby suggests that intellectual constitutes the nature of thought (Meditation 2, AT VII 27; Meditation 6, AT VII 78; and Principles I.48, AT VIII-A 23). But it’s not clear what intellectual amounts to or how that helps us to understand why understanding, sensing, and willing are all forms of thought-cum-intellection. If intellection amounts to something sophisticated like the apprehension of universals then it seems too narrow to capture everything that Descartes includes under the rubric of thought. John Carriero endorses a different, but equally sophisticated, conception of Cartesian thought-cum-intellection: “full-fledged rational agency” (Between Two Worlds: A Reading of Descartes’ Meditations [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009], 368; see also 24). Lili Alanen similarly identifies thought-cum-intellection with a set of normative rational capacities associated with speech, conceptualization, and judgment (Descartes’s Concept of Mind, ch. 3). Marleen Rozemond explores different possible interpretations of thought-cum-intellection but finds no single one of them decisive (Descartes’s Dualism [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998], 58–60). A more inclusive possibility, explored by both Janet Broughton and Gary Hatfield, is that intellection amounts simply to the apprehension of a representation (or form or idea), be that representation a concrete sensory image or a universal concept (Broughton ‘Self-Knowledge’, 187–192, and Hatfield, Descartes and the Meditations [New York: Routledge, 2003], 325–326). My own view is that Broughton and Hatfield are on the right track, but the question remains vexed.
of consciousness? Why can’t some of it be an object of consciousness and some not? We need a few more details.

C. Structure of Consciousness

Assuming that thought is the object of consciousness, we can ask whether consciousness is a higher-order phenomenon or a first-order phenomenon. Does it involve having a thought of a thought, such that the consciousness-conferring thought is distinct from the thought of which we are conscious? Or is consciousness a sui generis property of the first-order thought itself, so that the consciousness-conferring thought is identical to the thought of which we are conscious? In the Cartesian context, the higher-order view would have to go something like this: a first-order thought represents (or, in Cartesian terms, has for its objective reality) some object, say celery; a distinct higher-order thought then represents (i.e., has for its objective reality) the first-order celery-representing thought, rendering it conscious. On the first-order view, by contrast, consciousness is a kind of reflexive property of the first-order thought itself, so that every thought effectively has two objects: in virtue of having objective reality the thought has, say, celery as its object; and in virtue of having a reflexive property it also has itself as object. In thinking about celery, a thinker thus becomes aware at once of both the celery and her act of thinking, but through different features of the first-order thought, viz., representation and consciousness, respectively.\(^\text{20}\) (Note that the reflexive-property view of consciousness differs from the view I rejected earlier, that consciousness just is thought, despite the fact that they both treat consciousness as a first-order affair: on the reflexive-property account, thought and consciousness have different objects, viz., celery and the thinking of celery, respectively; on the identity view, consciousness and thought have the same object, viz., celery.)\(^\text{21}\)

As an interpretation of Descartes, I think we should opt for the reflexive-property view of consciousness. First, it makes better sense of Descartes’ conviction that thought is conscious by its very nature. If consciousness involves two distinct thoughts, it’s not at all obvious thoughts are conscious because they are modifications of thinking substance, which has the (sui generis) property of being aware of itself (cf. thoughts are conscious because they themselves have the sui generis property of being aware of themselves). In the end, I don’t think there is a real difference between the two readings, though I agree that Barth’s way of putting it is more linguistically felicitous. In the Cartesian context, modes are nothing more than changing modifications of the substance itself, as for instance the changing shapes of a piece of clay in a child’s hand. Just as it makes little difference whether we say, at a time, that the shape of the clay is spherical or the clay is spherical (locating the property in the mode or the substance, respectively), so it makes little difference whether we say that a thought is conscious or the mind is conscious. For a mode of thought to be reflexively aware of itself just is for the thinking thing to be reflexively aware of itself at the time that that particular modification of its thinking occurs.

21. One might wonder (as an anonymous reader of this paper for the journal did) what the ontological status of consciousness turns out to be on the reflexive-property view: if it’s not a first-order thought or a second-order thought, but a reflexive property of a first-order thought, is it a mode of a mode? That is probably the best way to think about it, but the issue is complicated by the fact that thoughts, as modes of mind, are already ontologically messy. A given thought has both formal and objective reality; these are supposed to be just two aspects of a single mode of mind, but they involve different “modes of being” (essendi modus), the latter an “imperfect” (imperfectus) mode of being that “belongs to ideas by their very nature” (AT VII 41–42). So there is the further question: is consciousness a mode of the formal or the objective being of the idea, or of the two together? I’m tentatively inclined to think it’s a mode of the formal being of a thought for two reasons: (a) the formal being of a thought is, as it were, the stuff of thinking—the perceptual or volitional aspect of thinking, while the objective being is tied to the object of thought (thereby providing the thought with representational content), and Cartesian consciousness would seem to derive from thinking rather than the representational aspect of thought; and (b) if there are non-representational modes of thoughts (best case: objectless passions), then Descartes will have to say that consciousness is present with no objective being present at all.
why a first-order thought is conscious by its very nature since it is not clear why it couldn’t exist without some distinct second-order thought taking it for an object. The higher-order view is prima facie more compatible with a theory of mind that includes both conscious and unconscious thoughts: conscious thoughts have, while unconscious thoughts lack, second-order thoughts that take them for their object.22 By contrast, the first-order view takes consciousness to be genuinely built into the nature of first-order thoughts themselves. This view doesn’t do much in the way of explaining consciousness. But it does help to make sense of Descartes otherwise unexplained conviction that all thought is conscious.

Second, the first-order view avoids the charge of infinite regress that the higher-order theory faces. The charge: Cartesian thought is conscious; on the higher-order view, a first-order thought requires a second-order thought in order to be conscious; but the second-order thought must also be conscious and so it requires a third-order thought; the third-order thought must also be conscious and so requires a fourth-order thought; and so on ad infinitum.23 Philosophically, Descartes is on better ground with the first-order view.


23. There is much discussion of this objection after Pierre-Daniel Huet accuses the Cartesians of just such a regress. The Cartesian, Pierre-Sylvain Regis, denies the charge, saying in effect that we can be aware of our thoughts without any second, higher-order act of thought being involved. This exchange is discussed in Geneviève (Rodis)-Lewis, Le problème de l’inconscient et le cartesianisme, 116–123 and also in Tad Schmalz, Malebranche’s Theory of Soul: A Cartesian Interpretation (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), fn. 20, 240.

Third, in his Replies to Pierre Bourdin’s elaborate and testy objections to the Meditations, Descartes recognizes that we are capable of thinking about our thoughts, but he explicitly rejects that idea that this ability to engage in higher-order thinking about thinking constitutes the consciousness that is pervasive throughout the mind. Bourdin had suggested that what distinguishes spiritual substances from material substances is that while they both think, only spiritual substances can think that they think and that “this is really what it is to be conscious [quod vere est esse conscientium]” (AT VII 533–534). Descartes objects that this would not get Bourdin anywhere since first- and second-order thoughts are exactly the same sort of thing as each other; so if first-order thoughts don’t distinguish spiritual from corporeal substances, then second-, third- or fourth-order thoughts are not going to distinguish them either. If the distinguishing mark of a spiritual substance, consciousness, is not present at the first-order level of thought then no amount of higher-order thinking about thinking is going to procure it (AT VII 559).

Fourth, when Descartes himself invokes higher-order thinking of thinking, it is clear that he has something other than garden-variety consciousness in mind, something more like voluntary reflection or introspection. This thinking of thinking presupposes the existence of conscious thought; it does not constitute it. I’ll take this point up below in Section III.C.1.

Finally, it is worth noting that two of Descartes’ closest followers, Louis de la Forge and Antoine Arnauld, are quite explicit that the consciousness that serves as a mark of the mental is a first-order affair that needs to be carefully distinguished from higher-order forms of reflection or introspection on our thoughts. The former accompanies all thought by its very nature; the latter accompanies only some thoughts by the voluntary effort of the thinker. Here’s La Forge:24

The nature of thought consists in this consciousness [conscience], this testimony and this inner sentiment by which the mind notices everything it undergoes and, in general, everything which takes place immediately in itself at the same time as it acts or is acted on. I say ‘immediately’ to let you know that this testimony and inner sentiment is not distinct from the action or passion and that the actions and passions themselves make the mind aware of what is taking place in itself. Thus you will not confuse this inner feeling with the reflection that we sometimes make on our actions, which is not found in all our thoughts because it is only one type of thought.

Arnauld similarly writes: 25

Our thought or perception is essentially reflexive on itself [essentiellement refléchissante sur elle même]; or, as one says more happily in Latin, est conscient su [is conscious of itself]… Beyond this reflection [réflexion] that one could call virtual, there is another more explicit, in which we examine our perception by another perception.

Consciousness for these Cartesians is built into the ground level of thought as a kind of immediate awareness of itself.

Cartesian consciousness, then, is a kind of reflexive cognition that every thought has of itself. I said above that on the first-order reading every thought effectively has two objects, each in virtue of a different feature of thought. Seeing a bunch of celery has celery for its object in virtue of its representing celery (i.e., in virtue of its objective reality); it has itself for its object in virtue of consciousness (i.e., in virtue of its reflexivity). I want to note that on this view consciousness is not so much a form of representation as it is a form of immediate acquaintance. I take Cartesian representation to be tied to the notion of objective being, so that a thought represents whatever has objective being in it (in my example, celery), and there is no indication that Descartes thinks that thoughts exist objectively within themselves, or that such a feat would explain their being conscious. Consciousness does not seem to be analyzable into any other features of thought. 26

II. Problems for the Conscious Mark

Those of us who teach Descartes to undergraduates get an uncomfortable feeling when we tell our students that all Cartesian thought is conscious. As I indicated at the start, the trouble comes not from post-Freudian sensibilities or from knowledge of the latest experimental work in cognitive and social psychology. It doesn’t come from standard philosophical worries about memories and standing beliefs or even from a gut suspicion that this just has to be wrong. The worry comes from knowing full well that Descartes himself introduces all sorts of thoughts into the Cartesian mind that seem by his own lights not to be conscious. How could the champion of the conscious mark introduce so many apparently unconscious thoughts into the mind? Let’s survey a few problematic cases.


26. One might argue that having an object is tantamount to representing it, so if a thought is an object for itself, it must therefore represent itself. Descartes had no official theory of intentionality or representation. Two of his closest followers, Arnauld and Malebranche, famously disagreed about what it is for human thought to have an object, the former arguing that it is tantamount to representing it via objective being in the intellect, the latter arguing that there are four different ways of being intentionally related to something (directly [e.g., our cognition of God], indirectly by way of representational ideas [e.g., our cognition of bodies], by consciousness [cognition of one’s own mind], and through conjecture [cognition of other minds]). I have argued that Malebranche in effect distinguishes intentionality from representation in his account, and that his view of consciousness involves intentionality without representation (see my “Sensation in a Malebranchean Mind” in Topics in Early Modern Philosophy of Mind, ed. Jon Miller [Dordrecht: Springer, 2009], 105–130). It seems possible that Descartes too recognizes in consciousness a form of intentionality that does not involve representation.
A. Innate Ideas and Intellectual Memories

Innate intellectual ideas and intellectual memories pose an obvious problem for the all-conscious Cartesian mind.27 The problem is that these ideas are supposed to be somehow stored in the mind without our being aware of them for most of our lives. Innate ideas are “implanted [in the mind] by nature” (Principles II.3, AT VIII-A 224), so that that the mind of an infant, though consumed by the blooming buzzing confusion of its sensations: “has in itself the ideas of God, of itself and of all such truths as are said to be self-evident [per se notae], just as adult human beings have them when they are not attending to them” (letter to Hyperaspistes, AT III 424). Similarly, intellectual memories are said to remain in the mind for later recall (letter to [Mesland], AT IV 114). Here we have intellectual ideas that are in the mind but of which Descartes himself recognizes we are not typically conscious. How does that square with the conscious mark?

One might think the answer is easy. Descartes several times explains that innate ideas (and presumably intellectual memories) are not actual ideas but rather dispositions to have actual ideas (and so actual thoughts). Thus:

> When we say that an idea is innate in us, we do not mean that it is always observed. This would mean that no idea was innate. We simply mean that we have in us a faculty for eliciting the idea. [Third Replies, AT VII 189; see also Comments on a Certain Broadsheet, AT VIII-B 357–358, 366]

While actual ideas have to be conscious, dispositions to have them evidently do not (AT VII 246). The move to dispositions works fine for things like sensory memories, which are also said to be “in the mind” even while we are not currently aware of them. In the case of sensory memories, however, the mind’s disposition to recall the idea is itself grounded in traces left by sensory experiences in the brain. These traces in the brain “dispose it [the brain] to move the soul in the same way as it moved it before, and thus to make it remember something” (letter to [Mesland], AT IV 114; see also his letter to “Hyperaspistes”, AT III 425, and Treatise on Man, AT XI 177–178). So it’s really the brain that has the disposition to produce a conscious idea in the mind in virtue of an actual trace persisting in it.28 In the case of innate ideas and intellectual memories, however, there is no obvious ground for the disposition. It can’t be located in the brain since the ideas in question are intellectual ideas; the brain is simply not involved. Descartes draws the contrast himself: “besides this memory, which depends on the body [sensory memory], I recognize also another one, entirely intellectual, which depends on the soul alone” (letter to Regius, AT III 48; see also his letters to Mersenne, AT III 143; to Huygens, AT III 598; and to [Mesland], AT IV 114). Maybe Descartes is comfortable with the mind’s having ungrounded dispositions, but I don’t think so. In at least two discussions of intellectual memory he speaks of it relying on “impressions of its own” (letter to Mersenne, AT III 84–85) or “traces that remain in the mind itself” (letter to [Mesland], AT IV 114). What are these traces in the mind? Alas Descartes doesn’t say. But if there are traces in the mind either put there by God before birth (innate ideas) or once I’ve actually entertained an intellectual idea (intellectual memory), they appear to be unconscious. And that’s a problem for the conscious mark.

27. I set aside the innate sensory ideas of the Comments on a Certain Broadsheet and sensory memories, which I do not think pose a problem for reasons I describe in what follows in the text and in fn. 28.

28. In the case of the innate sensory ideas of the Comments, there may not be an antecedent trace of the idea stored in the brain from birth, but there will be a brain event that causes (or occasions) the sensory idea in the mind in accordance with the institution of nature. So again we needn’t think that these ideas are sitting around in the mind waiting to be brought to consciousness. Descartes’ point in calling sensory ideas innate in the Comments has more to do with his rejection of any resemblance between sensory ideas and their (distant or proximate) causes than with any suggestion that they are in the mind from birth (see AT VIII-B 358–359). For an excellent treatment of the topic, see Tod Schmaltz, “Descartes on Innate Ideas, Sensation, and Scholasticism: The Response to Regius”, in Studies in Seventeenth-Century European Philosophy, ed. M. A. Stewart (Oxford: Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, 1997), 33–73.
B. Unconscious Mental Processes
The second group of thoughts that pose a problem for the conscious mark arises from a number of mental processes that Descartes proposes the mind engages in but that seem to go on undetected by consciousness.

1. Sensory Processing
The details of Descartes’ account of sensory perception are filled with hypothesized mental processes. We barely have to scratch the surface to find Descartes insisting repeatedly in the Meditations and Principles that our sensory experience is the result of (a) having sensory ideas; (b) judging that there is something outside the mind that is causing those ideas; and (c) judging that those causes resembles their appearances (Meditations 3 and 6; AT VII 35, 75, 82; Principles I.66–72; AT VIII-A 32–36). Call (b) and (c) projective judgments, since they collectively project sensory ideas onto the corporeal world, giving us an experience of seeing colored, shaped, moving things that are distinct from us and at some distance from us (an epistemic disaster from Descartes’ point of view, since it gives us a misleading picture of what the world is like). If we were individually conscious of these epistemically troublesome judgments, there would be little reason for Descartes to spill so much ink trying to convince us that we are making them. He’d just tell us to introspect. But Descartes knows full well that introspection will not turn them up: we simply find that “we feel a pain as it were in our foot... and see light as it were in the sun” (Principles I.67, AT VIII-A 33). The ideas and judgments present themselves phenomenologically as a single seamless whole.

Scratching below the surface a little more, Descartes famously expands on this point in the Sixth Replies. Here he introduces into the sense-perceptual mix a number of what we might call “constructive” judgments that fill in some of the content of our visual experience. Constructive judgments are responsible for a good deal of the three-dimensional character of our visual experience:

From this sensation of color by which I am affected, I judge that the stick outside me is colored. And from the extension of that color and from its boundaries and position in relation to parts of the brain, I figure out [ratio] the size, shape and distance of that same stick. Although commonly assigned to the senses ... it is clear that this judgment depends solely on the intellect. [AT VII 437–438; see also Optics, AT VI 138–140, 145; Treatise, AT XI 161, 163]

Again this is a good deal more than we are likely to say we are conscious of.

Finally, if we look at Descartes’ treatment of sensory perception in the Treatise on Man and Optics, we find Descartes hypothesizing yet more rational and now also associative judgments above and beyond the sensory ideas produced in us by the institution of nature when an object causally impacts our sense organs. My visual experience of celery lying two feet in front of me involves, on Descartes’ account, a judgment associating a muscular sensation of my looking eyes (or reaching hands) with a position relative to my body (AT VI 135, 142); judgments associating my occurrent sensation with an imagistic memory of the celery’s size, shape, color, or brightness (the result here is constancy); judgments associating the clarity and brightness of the sensations with distance (Optics, AT VI 138–40; Treatise, AT XI 160, 163); and so on.29 While Descartes does manage to attribute an impressive amount of our sensory processing to things going on in the brain, and to the psycho-physiological institution of nature that gives rise to a rich array of sensory ideas, there is still a rather staggering amount of processing left for the Cartesian mind to do, all of which it seems to undertake unawares.

29. He says something similar in Meditation 2 when he imputes judgments to our conceptualized sensory experience of things like wax and men in hats: while it seems to us we see these things, in fact we only see the wax’s color and shape and the men’s hats and coats (which could hide automata); we judge that there is wax and that there are men (AT VII 32). Again, however, the sensing and judging are phenomenologically indistinguishable in the experience. Marleen Rozemond gives close attention to these passages in “The Nature of Mind”. 
2. Conceptualized Thoughts

There is a smattering of cases outside sensory perception in which Descartes introduces structurally complex thoughts whose surface phenomenology is simple, and so whose complexity is missed by consciousness. In his exchange of letters with Arnauld in the summer of 1648, Descartes distinguishes “direct” [directam] thoughts from “reflexive” [reflexam] thoughts. Direct thoughts include “the first and simple thoughts of infants” such as the sensations of pain and pleasure I mentioned earlier. Reflexive thoughts are thoughts the intellect adds to a direct thought, and in so doing casts it in a new light. The example Descartes offers to Arnauld is the experience of a pain as a new pain. A pain sensation occurs with the recognition that it has not been felt before. What we have here is not just a belief after the fact that that the pain is new. The pain itself is experienced as new. Descartes is clear about that: the two thoughts are so “conjoined [conjuncta]” that they “occur simultaneously and appear to be indistinguishable from each other” (AT V 221). Presumably the same analysis would apply to my experience of the same old pain in my knees. I will call the compound thought that results a “conceptualized” thought in order to highlight the fact that it involves the intellect’s role in adding a conceptual layer to the original thought. In these examples, the pain by itself is a conscious thought. Descartes is going to have to say that the superadded intellectual or conceptual thought is conscious too. And yet Descartes himself suggests that the two thoughts are not individually present to consciousness. Consciousness is missing out on something.

Memory provides another example of a conceptualized thought that requires an intellectual add-on: “In order for us to remember something, it is not enough that the thing have previously been observed by our mind and have left some trace in the brain which gives it occasion to occur in our thought again; but it is also necessary that we recognize, when it occurs the second time, that this is happening because we perceived it before” (letter to Arnauld, AT V 219–220).

Suppose I remember missing the train yesterday. My imagination conjures up an image of the train pulling out of the station. This is not yet an experience of remembering. It must be accompanied by my recognition (or apparent recognition) that this is something that happened in the past. The “direct” idea here is the image. The intellect’s “reflexive” idea conceptualizes the experience as something that happened in the past. As before, the two thoughts are so intertwined that they give rise to a phenomenologically single experience: the experience of remembering something.

These cases, and presumably all cases of aspect seeing or seeing-as, pose an obvious problem for the conscious mark since by Descartes’ own lights two mental acts are experienced as one; something has gone missing from consciousness.

C. Unconscious Mental Contents

In the third set of problem cases, what goes under the conscious radar is not so much mental processing as mental content.

1. True and Immutable Natures

Margaret Wilson drew special attention to our ideas of true and immutable natures, because she quite rightly worried that they pose a problem for the omni-conscious Cartesian mind. These ideas contain “implicitly” more than first appears. With concerted effort, those implicit contents can be dug out. That's what a priori learning is all about, viz., unpacking ideas. Here is Descartes: “I draw out from an innate idea something that was implicitly contained in it but which I did not notice before, as from the idea of a triangle that its three angles are equal to two right angles, and from the idea of God that he exists, etc.” (letter to Mersenne, AT III 383; see also Meditation 5, AT VII 63–4).
The issue here is clearly tied to the issue of innate ideas (which represent true and immutable natures), but now the issue is not that there lies buried in me an idea that I have never before been conscious of; now the problem is that even once brought to consciousness, the idea contains more within it than I notice on first (or perhaps second or third or fourth) encounter. I am conscious of the ideational chest, as it were, but not of its contents. But if those contents are just components of the idea, shouldn’t they be exposed to consciousness like everything else in the all-seeing Cartesian mind?

2. Sensory Ideas
In addition to the hidden contents of intellectual ideas, there is the problem of sensory ideas. I have already discussed one problem that they raise, viz., our confusion of sensory ideas with unnoticed judgments we make about them. Here I want to focus on a different problem: the obscurity of sensory ideas. For even once we have managed to disentangle our sensory ideas from the various judgments we habitually and confusedly make about them, we are left with ideas that are, by Descartes’ own account, obscure. Sensory ideas are not typically phenomenally obscure (to the contrary they are “very noticeable and sharp [manifestus & perspicuus]” [Principles I.70, AT VIII-A 34]; they are even “much more vivid and pronounced [multo magis vividae & expressae]” than the intellectual ideas we encounter through meditation [Meditation 6, AT VII 75]). But they are representationally obscure in the sense that we cannot tell what they are representing to us; we cannot tell what the ideas are ideas of. This line of thought comes out chiefly in Descartes’ discussions of material falsity in Meditation 3 and in the Fourth Replies to Arnauld. We cannot tell whether sensory ideas are ideas of things or non-things, ideas of sensations or ideas of corporeal modifications, ideas with some or no objective reality, materially true ideas or material false ideas. Sensory ideas seem to come with irreparable mental cataracts. Sharpen our introspective gaze as much as we like, we still can’t tell what they are ideas of.

As 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. I do not even know whether they are true or false, that is, whether the ideas I have of them are ideas of real things or of non-things…the ideas I have of heat and cold contain so little clarity and distinctness that it is not possible for me to tell whether cold is merely the privation of heat or heat the privation of cold or whether both of them are real qualities, or neither. [AT VII 43–44; see also Fourth Replies, AT VII 232–233, 234]

There is just something about our sensory ideas that prevents us from having a clear view of what it is they are representing to us. This might be thought to be a problem for the transparent Cartesian mind.32

It does not help to note that Descartes elsewhere says that we have a clear and distinct perception of color and pain “when they are regarded merely as sensations or thoughts” in the mind (Principles I.68, AT VIII-A 33). First, this clear and distinct perception is a hard-earned intellectual achievement; it is not the result of consciousness alone. It requires a clear and distinct (second-order) perception of our (first-order) color and pain sensations, which is what “regards” the color and pain “as sensations or thoughts”; the consciousness that attends the (first-order) sensations reveals no such thing to us. (Again, if it did, Descartes’ job would have been a lot easier.) In any event, and this is the second point, what we are doing when we regard colors and pains merely as sensations in the mind is exercising judgmental caution in the face of an intrinsically obscure idea. We can know for sure that the color and pain are sensations in the mind because they present themselves to consciousness. That doesn’t change the fact that we

can’t tell (even with application of the intellect) what those sensations are representing to us. In the very passage in which Descartes recommends this judgmental caution he goes on to say that if we “examine the nature of what is represented by the sensation of color or pain [and presumably this examination is a deliberate exercise of intellect] ... he will realize that he is wholly ignorant of it” (Principles I.68, AT VIII-A 33). The cataracts are on our sensory ideas for good. Consciousness may reveal to the mind its many sensations; but it does not reveal what they represent to us.

This brief survey does not exhaust the problematic cases. Descartes maintains that we make all sorts of introspective errors about our own mental states, suggesting they aren’t quite clearly present to consciousness: we typically don’t know what we believe (AT VI 23); we mistake preconceived opinions for clear and distinct ideas (Comments, AT VIII-B 352); those of us most agitated by passions know them the least (Passions I.28, AT XI 349); and more. Many of these cases have been addressed by authors focusing on transparency of the mental and so I leave them aside for present purposes.

III. Cartesian Resources

Why wasn’t Descartes worried about all these thoughts and processes that seem to fly about unconsciously in the mind? What resources might he have to accommodate them? He has many, I’ll argue. The first two resources that I’ll discuss are reasonably well known, since Descartes is explicit about them. In the end, I don’t think that they do much work: either they do not solve the problems I’ve discussed, or Descartes does not invoke them to solve the problems. But Descartes has other (better) resources available to him.

A. Automation

Descartes’ first resource is to limit the domain of the mind: he removes from the mind whatever he can explain through the mechanism of the body. Descartes (in)famously claims that we need not attribute minds to animals at all, since all their behavior can be explained through the mechanism of their bodies. Wherever possible, Descartes will outsource things that look like unconscious mental processes to the mechanics of the human body. He accounts for skilled automated actions like playing the lute, e.g., by appeal to automated mechanisms in the body: the lute player “has a part of his memory in his hands for the ease of bending and positioning his fingers in various ways, which he has acquired by practice” (letter to Mersenne, AT III 48; see also letter to Meyssonier, AT III 20). These processes are unconscious all right, but they not unconscious mental processes. Others have amply catalogued the many apparently mental processes that Descartes relocates to the body, and so I won’t repeat them here.

Even taking the impressive range of Descartes’ mechanization of the mental into account, however, there remains a lot going on in the Cartesian mind proper that we appear not to be conscious of. To deal with it Descartes needs other resources.

B. Memory

The most famous (or infamous) move that Descartes makes to account for the fact that we do not seem to be conscious of all the thinking going on in our Cartesian minds is to appeal to vagaries of memory. When he tries to convince Arnauld that it isn’t so crazy to suppose that we have conscious thoughts continuously throughout our sleeping lives, he writes:

It is one thing to be conscious of our thoughts at the time when we are thinking and another to remember them afterwards. Thus, we think of nothing in sleep without being conscious of it at the same moment, though we

33. See his letter to Mersenne, AT III 122; letter to Gibieuf, AT III 479; letter to the Marquess of Newcastle, AT IV 574–576; Discourse V, AT VI 55–56; and Passions I.50, AT XI 369–370.

typically forget them immediately. [letter for [Arnauld], AT V 221; see also letter to Gibieuf, AT III 479]

Commentators cringe at this response. It seems utterly ad hoc: a desperate attempt to cling to the conscious mark. Even Locke, just as much a champion of the conscious mark as Descartes, thought the memory move was hopeless and preferred to change the essence of mind from actual conscious thinking to the capacity for conscious thinking than say that the mind forgets most of what it consciously thinks.35

Descartes does not appeal to the vagaries of memory very often, and he doesn’t need to in order to respond to the sorts of problems I’ve raised. Still, it’s worthwhile pausing over it briefly because it reveals some important things about Cartesian consciousness. In the letter to Arnauld, Descartes is effectively pointing out that memory is a real achievement while forgetting is not. Thoughts come and thoughts go, one replaced by the next. And while Descartes allows that some thoughts take up a considerable duration (Conversation with Burman, AT V 148), it seems that most Cartesian thoughts have a brief lifespan. Once they are gone, the mind has to work to remember them. What requires explanation is the fact that we manage to remember any of our conscious experiences. As Descartes understands it, remembering a conscious thought involves no fewer than five steps: (1) having a conscious thought, say, a sensation of pain in the knee; (2) the intellect’s recognition at that moment that the thought is new; (3) storage of the thought in the form of a trace in the brain; (4) revival of the thought afresh in the mind; (5) the intellect’s recognition that this thought is one that the mind has had before (see AT V 220). Whatever we think of the details of Descartes’ account of memory, it is not unreasonable to suppose that it is an achievement, that it is selective, and that much of what passes through the mind is not, after the fact, remembered. Think of all the images that pass before the waking mind as one walks down the street, the bulk of which fall right out of the mind as quickly as they enter.36

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. Recall the conceptualized thought from Section II.B.2: a “reflexive” thought of the intellect accompanying a fleeting sensation conceptualizes it and makes it stand out in the life of the mind. Infants and sleeping adults, the claim goes, have only fleeting unconceptualized thoughts, and so most of their thoughts are unremembered. That need not mean that their mental lives are unconscious. This seems to me not such a bad argument after all.

The take-home point for present purposes is that simply having a Cartesian conscious thought is not going to get us very far in our cognitive endeavors. Most of the thinking that we care about as philosophers, and in particular the building up of a system of beliefs and knowledge, is going to require the work of memory and, as I argue below, reflection. Consciousness alone won’t do it. It is too transient.

C. Varieties of Consciousness

It’s tempting to think that Cartesian consciousness is all-or-nothing: you’re conscious of something or you’re not. Descartes doesn’t say that consciousness comes in different kinds or different degrees; he just says that if something is a thought, then I’m conscious of it, and if I’m conscious of it, then it’s a thought. And yet in his Replies to Cateus, he says something interesting: “there can be nothing in me of which I am in no way conscious” (AT VII 107; italics mine). I am going to take this tiny little crowbar and use it to pry the door open. There are, I submit, both different kinds and different degrees of consciousness in the Cartesian


36. Descartes may be ahead of his time here. Current empirical work on memory suggests that it is required for much of the ordinary operation of our cognitive life, and even for our having a sense of self. See Daniel Schachter, Searching for Memory: the Brain, the Mind, and the Past (New York: Basic Books, 1996).
mind. Getting clear on them can help us acquit Descartes of many of the more implausible implications of his thoroughgoing conscious mind.

1. Brute Consciousness vs. Reflective Consciousness

My first distinction, between brute consciousness and reflective consciousness, is relatively straightforward, at least in the abstract.\textsuperscript{37} The difference is first and foremost structural. Brute consciousness is built into every Cartesian thought; it is simply (on my reading) the reflexive aspect of a thought. So there is (on my reading) only one thought in play in brute consciousness. Reflective consciousness, by contrast, requires two thoughts: a first-order thought (complete with brute consciousness) and a second-order thought (with its own brute consciousness) that takes the first-order thought as its object. This latter sort of reflective consciousness arises when we engage in either deliberate introspection (in order to get a better view of our own minds and thought(s) or in what we might describe as deliberate reflection (in order get a better view of whatever it is we are thinking about, say, the nature of extension). This reflective consciousness does not accompany all Cartesian thoughts, but only those we deliberately target for further inspection.\textsuperscript{38}

That’s easy to state in the abstract. What’s the evidence that Descartes recognizes this distinction? Frans Burman reports having argued to Descartes that consciousness is always a form of retrospection. Like Bourdin before him, Burman insists that consciousness is a form of thinking a thought; it is a second-order phenomenon. But, he adds, thinking of a thought can only be a form of retrospection that takes place after the target thought has occurred. Conclusion: we can never really be conscious of a thought at the time it occurs. Descartes seems to miss the fact that Burman is making a case about consciousness in general, and addresses him as if he’s talking about the more particular phenomenon I’m referring to as reflective consciousness (or more simply, reflection). We can, he retorts, think of a thought in second-order fashion at exactly the moment we are having it:

To be conscious of one’s thought is both to think and to reflect on [reflectere] it. But it is false that this reflection cannot occur while the previous thought is still there. For, as we have already seen, the soul can think of many things simultaneously, and it can persist in a given thought. It is free to reflect on its thoughts as often as it likes, and to be conscious of its thoughts in this way. [AT V 149]

The “consciousness” Descartes is talking about here is clearly a kind of deliberate reflection that accompanies only some thoughts and not the more pervasive consciousness that he insists accompanies all thoughts. For it is something he says the mind has a power to do whenever it likes. It takes an act of volition. Brute consciousness is not a matter of volition.

Later Cartesian like La Forge and Arnauld more explicitly draw the distinction between what I’m calling brute and reflective consciousness. La Forge writes: “you will not confuse this inner feeling [the brute consciousness that all thought has] with the reflection that we sometimes make on our actions, which is not found in all our thoughts because it is only one type of thought” (Traité 54). Arnauld says much the same in a passage quoted earlier: “our thought or perception is essentially reflexive on itself; or, as one says more happily in Latin, est conscia sui [is conscious of itself]. . . . Beyond this reflection (reflexion) that one could call virtual, there is another more explicit, in which we
examine our perception by another perception” (VFI 52; see also 226). The distinction, then, is certainly in place in the Cartesian context.

I said that the difference between brute consciousness and reflective consciousness is first and foremost structural (one is first-order, the other is second-order), but it is also epistemological, and this is important for present purposes. Brute consciousness gives us a certain kind of acquaintance with our thoughts, but there is no reason to think that this acquaintance amounts to knowledge of any substantive sort. To the contrary, any substantive knowledge of our thoughts (either qua modifications of mind or qua representations of things) arguably requires reflective consciousness. There are two routes to this conclusion.

First, as Daisie Radner has cleverly pointed out, even having a belief about a thought chez Descartes would seem to require more than brute consciousness since beliefs constitutively require an act of the will in addition to the conscious thought one is forming the belief about.39 If knowledge presupposes belief, then it too will require more than simply having a brutally conscious thought. Consciousness itself can constitute neither belief nor knowledge about my thoughts. It simply makes them present to me.

The second route to this conclusion comes from the Sixth Replies. Descartes distinguishes the epistemic output of our pre-reflective consciousness of our thoughts from the epistemic output of our deliberate reflective engagement with our thoughts:

It is true that no one can be certain that he thinks or that he exists unless he knows what thought and existence are. But this does not require reflective knowledge [scientia reflexa], or knowledge acquired through demonstration, much less knowledge of reflective knowledge through which we know that we know, and know that we know that we know, and so on ad infinitum. It is entirely sufficient that we know it by that internal cognition [cognitione illà internà] that always precedes reflective knowledge. [W]hen anyone notices that he thinks and that it follows from this that he exists, even though he may never before have inquired what thought is or what existence is, he still cannot fail to have sufficient knowledge of them both to satisfy himself in this regard. [AT VII 422]

The pre-reflective internal cognition that we have of our thoughts through brute consciousness is good enough for the purposes of getting the cogito off the ground because it makes our thoughts present to us, and so acquaints us with thought and existence. But mere presence to the mind of our thoughts should not be confused with reflective knowledge about them (or even belief about them). To the extent that the cogito reasoning in Meditation 2 yields certain knowledge that we are thinking and that we exist as thinking things, it requires second-order reflection on our first-order thoughts. Consciousness of our thoughts may make this reflection possible, and so may be essential to self-knowledge. But in and of itself it does not constitute self-knowledge.40

I think this distinction helps to take the sting out of the claim that the Cartesian mind is transparent to itself. If that is taken to mean that we have substantive knowledge of every thought in our mind, it is simply false. Those things require reflective consciousness. Consciousness gives us some acquaintance with the contents and acts of our own mind, and that provides an occasion for further reflection on them, but it does not afford knowledge or possibly even belief.

2. Degrees of Brute Consciousness

Within brute consciousness we can draw some differences as well, not in kind of consciousness but in degree. I think there has been a temptation to suppose that the light of Cartesian consciousness must have


40. For those interested in epistemic transparency of the mind, then, the question that needs to be asked is whether second-order reflective consciousness (thinking about our thoughts) is indubitable, incorrigible, infallible, etc., and if so to what extent first-order consciousness grounds those epistemic properties.
just one setting, viz., high beams, with the consequence that I must be equally conscious of everything going on in my mind. Not only is that phenomenologically implausible (the pain in my knee is much more present to my mind than the feeling of the floor under my feet); it runs counter to one of Descartes’ most basic ways of describing and classifying thoughts.

What I have in mind is his classification of thoughts as clear or obscure. I talked earlier about Descartes’ use of this distinction in a representational capacity (sensory ideas are intrinsically obscure as representations insofar as I cannot tell what they represent), but he also (and arguably more typically) uses these terms phenomenologically to refer simply to the extent to which a thought is “present and accessible to the attentive mind”; that’s the definition of clarity (Principles I.45, AT VIII-A 22). If clear thoughts are “present and accessible” to the mind, then obscure thoughts are “not so present and accessible” to the attentive mind. They can’t be invisible to the mind, since that would run counter to the all-thoughts-are-conscious principle. They must therefore be simply less present and accessible to the attentive mind. (There must, of course, be an even larger set of thoughts that fail to be present and accessible to the inattentive mind.)

The point here is that some conscious thoughts stand out more than others. Descartes does not hesitate to say precisely that. In terms of phenomenal power, sensory ideas are typically very clear: they are “much more vivid and pronounced and even, in their own way, more distinct” than intellectual ideas and memories (AT VII 73). Within sensory experience itself, not all sensory ideas are equal in phenomenal power: some stand out more than others. The pain I feel in the foot that I have inadvertently slammed in the door is a lot more phenomenally clear than the feeling of pressure that the other foot feels as it stands on the floor. This difference in phenomenal clarity is surely a good thing: the foot caught in the door demands more attention than the one standing on the floor. Some sensations are so phenomenally weak (or obscure) that they are barely detectable. Thus for example, when I look at a piece of celery on the table, there is a very faint feeling associated with the muscular changes that turn my eye in one direction or another and also in focusing near or far, but I only notice it when the eye doctor or a perceptual psychologist directs me to it (Optics, AT VI 135, 144; Treatise AT XI 162). What matters for my purposes is that although these sensations are so faint or phenomenally obscure that they are highly unlikely to be reflectively noticed, they are arguably still present to consciousness. For (a) with effort we can reflectively attend to them, and it is hard to imagine attending to something that is in no way present and (b) if they were to disappear altogether from consciousness, our experience would be very different. (I will flesh out this second point in the next section.)

D. The Leibnizian Move, Cartesian Style

It’s a small step from phenomenal obscurity to the final resource that I think Descartes has access to in accounting for apparently unconscious thoughts: phenomenal confusion. When a thought is so faint that it hardly stands out to consciousness, it may well be that I can’t distinguish it from other thoughts in the vicinity (at least without a lot of work). It becomes phenomenally con-fused with those other thoughts. Now such a thought, while not individually present to conscious at the moment it occurs, is still present to consciousness in the whole.

Descartes defines a distinct thought as one that in addition to being clear is “so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear” (Principles I.45, AT VIII-A 22). So a confused thought may include a clear thought (Descartes’ example is a pain) that is so yoked to another thought (the projective judgments that habitually accompany it, the reflexive thought that this is a new pain, etc.) that we can’t tease them apart. But it is not as though the judgments are thereby lost to consciousness. They turn up in the overall experience of the pain in the form of my feeling the pain to be located in my foot or experiencing the pain as a new one. When the pain and the judgments are con-fused, they blur together so that I have an overall experience that is quite unlike the one that I would have if the thoughts were disentangled.
The confusion I’m describing is similar to Leibniz’s treatment of perceptual confusion in the New Essays. Descartes cannot go so far as to admit Leibnizian petites perceptions into the Cartesian mind. Petites perceptions are individually unconscious. Descartes won’t have that. Consequently there is a restriction on Cartesian confusion: the ingredients of a confused Cartesian thought must be individually conscious thoughts, so that if you could disentangle them they would be individually present to consciousness. Leibniz can claim that our conscious experience of the ocean’s roar contains individually unconscious perceptions of each wave. Descartes cannot. Nor does he want or need to. He’ll outsource the effects of the individual waves to the brain and argue that nothing turns up in the mind at all until there is a sufficiently strong impression in the brain to produce a minimally conscious sensation in the mind. Still, once you get a bunch of minimally conscious thoughts in a mind together, there is no reason there cannot be some psychological chemistry such that some stand out more than others and some cast a different light on others with a net result of an experience that is different from the experience we would have if each thought were phenomenologically demarcated from every other one. All Descartes needs is that we be conscious of each thought in some way. The key for preserving the conscious mark, I think, is that each thought make a contribution to the overall conscious experience that the mind has, so that if it were removed our conscious experience would be altered (on which more below in Section IV.B.).

IV. Cartesian Solutions

So how does all this help with the problem cases I discussed earlier?

A. Innate Ideas and Intellectual Memory

I will be brief on innate ideas and intellectual memories because my own view draws heavily on Robert McRae’s excellent and much more detailed work on the relationship between innateness and consciousness in Descartes. Most everyone will agree that innate ideas are in the Cartesian mind only potentially. Descartes himself is explicit about that: “[innate ideas] always exist within us potentially, for to exist in some faculty is not to exist actually, but merely potentially, since the term ‘faculty’ denotes nothing but a potentiality” (AT VIII-B 361). But what does that mean? Need there be, as I suggested above, some ground or trace existing permanently in the mind to account for our ability to conjure up the idea for the first time or, in the case of intellectual memory, to recall it once it has been first conjured up? In short: no. Innate ideas are in the mind potentially in the sense that the mind has a capacity to think them not on the basis of some pre-existing trace (as sensory memories depend on a trace in the brain) but rather by reflecting on thoughts that are, at the moment of reflection, present to consciousness. As McRae puts it: “[innate ideas] are not prior to experience or consciousness, they are prior only to reflection on experience.”

The reflection at work here is precisely the second-order thinking about our thinking discussed earlier. It’s the reflection that he discusses with Burman when he says that we have the power to reflect on our thoughts as often as we like (AT V 149) and that he offers to the authors of the Sixth Replies as what yields scientia reflexa (AT VII 422). It starts with an occurrent, conscious thought and takes it as an object for concentrated inquiry. One may draw logical or conceptual consequences from it; figure out the logical or conceptual preconditions on it; infer something general from a particular; or simply, through concentrated attention, see something that wasn’t noticed at first. In reflecting on a thought we come to understand something about it, either about what it represents or about its status as a modification of mind. It takes us from a seeing or imagining a triangle to understanding that triangles have interior angles that sum to two right angles (Meditation 5, AT VII 64–65); from awareness of my own thinking and existing at a moment to the principle that everything that thinks exists (Second Replies, AT

42. “Innate Ideas”, 40.
VII 140); from immediate awareness of my imperfections to the idea of God (a perfect being) that they presuppose (Meditation 3, AT VII 45–46); from acquaintance with the changing flow of thoughts in my mind to the idea of duration and number (Meditation 3, AT VII 44–45); and so on. Innate ideas, then, are not sitting in the mind waiting to be discovered. We arrive at them by reflecting on ideas that occur in the mind. The analytic method of the Meditations takes the reader on a journey in just this kind of reflective thinking.

B. Unconscious Mental Processes

What are we to do with the apparently simple but in fact complex thoughts that seem to hide a myriad of mental processes that go into their making, such as sense perceptual experiences and conceptualized thoughts? The fact that Descartes often depicts these processes as occurring very rapidly and habitually from childhood may suggest that he thinks they were originally made consciously (even deliberately) and later are made so quickly that, while still conscious when made, they are immediately forgotten (Sixth Replies, AT VII 438, and Principles I.66–72, AT VIII-A 32–37). But Descartes need not go the memory route. Nor do I think he should. All of the components of these complex experiences are, after all, present to consciousness in some way. What I mean is that the overall phenomenology of these complex thoughts testifies to all their components at the time they are experienced. If we were to remove any component, the phenomenology would change. Remove distance judgments from sense perceptual experience, and objects would appear two-dimensional. Remove projective judgments, and color and flavor sensations would seem to be what, according to Descartes, they really are (modifications of the mind) rather than what they appear to be (intrinsic modifications of body). Remove the “this occurred in the past” judgment from a memory, and I feel like I’m missing the train now rather than remembering missing the train yesterday. This is what we should have expected all along. The reason Descartes introduces these processes in the first place is to account for the actual phenomenology of our conscious experience. Now these various components may be so confused that we cannot tease them apart within the experience even with a lot of concentrated introspective effort or even theorizing. But that’s not a problem. Descartes never promised that consciousness itself, or even introspection, would deliver up a clear and distinct perceptual catalogue of the mind’s individual contents and their relations. That takes some metaphysical reflection and scientific investigation. All that consciousness has to do is testify in some way to the presence of all these thoughts. And this it does.

C. Unconscious Mental Contents

What, then, can Descartes say about unconscious mental contents of the sort that appear to be tucked away in our ideas of true and immutable natures and our obscure sensory ideas? Descartes cannot make the

43. I haven’t said anything explicit about intellectual memories in this section. That is because I think they just amount to innate ideas. To remember that the interior angles of a triangle sum to two right angles, I do the same thing I do when I first figure it out, though it perhaps it is easier the second time around. (I’m assuming here that intellectual memory involves genuine understanding and not simply reproducing in my mind’s ear or eye the sentence “the interior angles of a triangle sum to two right angles”, which would be a matter of sensory memory.)

44. See Descartes’ own discussion of the analytic method, and the effort required to “make our perception of primary notions clear and distinct” in the Second Replies, AT VII 157.

45. Lähteenmäki argues that what I’m calling conceptualized thoughts require a third kind of consciousness that falls in between what I’m calling brute and reflective consciousness. He calls it “reflective consciousness” and maintains that it is important for underscoring the difference between the fleeting and unconceptualized thoughts of children and sleeping adults and more stable and notable experiences that we have of things that are not yet the object of deliberate reflection (or what he calls “attentive reflection”). He is certainly right that these two sorts of conscious experiences are different, both structurally (since conceptualized thoughts are always complex and involve an intellectual add-on) and phenomenologically (since only the latter is a form of seeing-as). Whether this forces us to introduce a third kind of consciousness here, I am not sure. For my purposes what matters is that we can make sense of the components of these conceptualized thought being present in some way to the mind that has them at the time it has them.
Leibnizian confusion move here because these are not cases in which there is any hint that there are many thoughts present to the mind at once that are confused together. To the contrary, in these cases there is a single idea present to the mind but something about it appears to fall beneath the conscious radar.

Let’s take ideas of true and immutable natures first. In this case Descartes has two options, both of which rely on the distinction between brute and reflective consciousness. Brute consciousness acquaints us with an idea, but does not in and of itself yield scienza of its contents; that takes reflection. Consider a different kind of case: I am genuinely acquainted with my neighbor, Maya, and the fact that I don’t know everything there is to know about her doesn’t change the fact that I am acquainted with her. If I want to learn more about her I have to do some investigative work. So too with my ideas. If I want to learn more about my idea of a triangle I can do some work: I can attend to it, reflect on it, and thereby learn a thing or two. Now what happens when we reflect on an idea of a true and immutable nature might be understood in two ways (and these are Descartes’ two options). Descartes could liken these to innate ideas, saying that when we have a conscious idea of a triangle before the mind, there is really no hidden content there at the moment, but through reflection we infer things that are true of it. On this view, reflection is productive, and involves reasoning from the conscious idea to new ones that are related to it. Alternatively, Descartes could allow that the complexity is there in the idea all along, and say that reflection shines a brighter light on the idea; it involves changing the focus of our attention from one aspect of the idea to another. Although Descartes’ language suggests the latter reading (“I draw out from a [now conscious] innate idea something that was implicitly contained in it but that I did not notice in it before” [AT III 383]), I think one could reasonably treat the language metaphorically and apply the former reading to it.

As for our representationally obscure sensory ideas, what Descartes should say is that there was never any problem here. Sensory ideas (i.e., sensations) are simple ideas. They may get confused with all sorts of other thoughts in sensory experience, but in and of themselves they are simple. (In this way they differ from Leibnizian sensations, which appear simple but are in fact complex confusions of petites perceptions). There is therefore nothing in a Cartesian sensation that is hidden from consciousness. There is no point engaging in higher-order reflection to get at some hidden contents that are not immediately evident to consciousness, as there is for an idea of a true and immutable nature, for that extra content just isn’t there. (What higher-order reflection can do is show is what our sensations are not, viz., intrinsic modifications of bodies.) What is more, we don’t need to know what our sensations represent. Our nature, according to Descartes, has insured that we use these ideas as indications of differences in bodies and as harbingers of benefit and harm (Meditation 6, AT VII 74, 81). We are able to do that in virtue of their phenomenal differences and their phenomenal agreeableness and disagreeableness. As such, sensory ideas serve us well. Whatever the further story is about their status as representations does not matter. Maybe they represent the goodness and badness of things. Maybe they represent damage, edibility, and the like. Maybe they represent proper modifications of res extensa, or themselves, or nothing. Maybe they represent in virtue of how they feel; maybe in virtue of their causal relations to the world; maybe by God’s fiat. The only thing ruled out is that they represent in virtue of their hidden contents, since there are none. If I’m right, then there is nothing here hidden from consciousness.

V. Cartesian Consciousness Reconsidered

So where does this leave us? Descartes is indeed unwavering in his commitment to the conscious mark: every thought that occurs in the Cartesian mind is conscious at the moment it occurs because consciousness is built into thought as a sui generis reflexive property. Descartes’ treatment of consciousness, however, is a good deal more nuanced than one might expect. The brute consciousness that accompanies all thought is relatively modest, and must be distinguished from the reflective consciousness that does most of the epistemic heavy lifting in Descartes’ philosophy. This distinction tempers the
claim to mental transparency. What’s more, within the psychology of brute consciousness, Descartes has the resources to accommodate a range of phenomena in the conscious mind that others might be inclined to identify as unconscious thoughts by (a) outsourcing them to the mechanisms of the body (in which case Descartes agrees they are unconscious, but not unconscious thoughts), (b) pointing out that consciousness of a thought is as fleeting as the thought itself is (and a thought’s being conscious is no guarantee that it will be remembered a millisecond later), or (c) appealing to different degrees of consciousness, and degrees of obscurity and confusion in our thought, that make for the complexly layered conscious experience that we have. The conscious Cartesian mind thus has a rich structure: some thoughts are more consciously present to us than others, some are so intermingled with others that they do not individually stand out to consciousness, and only a few are subject to a form of reflective consciousness that affords philosophical knowledge, be it self-knowledge or knowledge of other things. Descartes did change our conception of the mind by treating consciousness as a mark of the mental. But the Cartesian mind is not, after all, uniformly illuminated by a high-intensity mental light bulb. It is as full of peripheral perceptions, unpacked ideas, unacknowledged judgments, and unnoticed passions as any properly human mind should be.  

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