

Raffaella De Rosa

Descartes & The Puzzle of Sensory Representation.

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In this book De Rosa offers an interpretation of Descartes' account of sensory representation. The principal motivation for writing the book, she says in the preface, is to fill a void in the secondary literature: '[N]o systematic account of Descartes' theory of sensory representation is currently available' (xiii). This assessment seems initially at odds with the next five chapters, in which De Rosa closely examines the accounts of Margaret Wilson, Tad Schmaltz, Alan Nelson, Richard Field, Andrew Pessin, Thomas Vinci, and Alison Simmons, to name several, which are accounts taken not only by their respective authors, but by a great many scholars, to be systematic. As the book unfolds, however, it becomes clear that De Rosa does not deny that these accounts are proposed as and generally taken to be systematic. Rather, her position is that they fail as such.

There appears to be at least two senses of 'systematic' at work in De Rosa's assessments of these other accounts. The first refers to the Cartesian *system* of doctrines. An account of sensory representation is 'systematic' in this sense if it shows how Descartes' view of sensory representation stood in relation to all the relevant doctrines. The second sense of 'systematic' refers to the sort of account that shows the explanatory coherence of the relationships between doctrines. Such an account of sensory representation presumably offers a step-by-step explanation of how the sun, for instance, gives rise to the sensory idea of the sun. In her examination of Nelson's account, for example, the first sense is invoked: De Rosa rejects the account as being systematic because it 'contradict[s] Descartes' doctrine of the transparency of thought' (52). (I should mention here that I believe De Rosa's rejection to be based on a misunderstanding of Nelson. His reading of Descartes is perfectly aligned with the transparency doctrine, which says that a mind is aware of all its operations.) In her examination of Pessin's account the second sense is invoked: De Rosa rejects Pessin's account as being systematic (118-21) because although it correctly claims that in order for *yellow*, say, to represent some *motion*, the two must be internally related—so that the occasioning of *yellow* would involve the perceiver in thinking that he or she was aware of some mode of body, i.e., some *motion*—Pessin's account fails to explain *how* the two come to be related. De Rosa's complaint is that the account takes the relation to be primitive. From what I gather, Pessin, like many others, takes the relation to be primitive insofar as it is established by way of divine institution. But, De Rosa suggests, it is in not connecting the relevant dots—here, how the motions and *qualia* come to be related—that Pessin's account fails to be systematic.

Unfortunately, De Rosa's own account looks to be plagued by the very problems she finds in other accounts. For example, according to her assessment her own account contradicts the transparency doctrine (124). Since this was enough to rule that Nelson's account failed to be systematic—though, as I say, De Rosa is just wrong about this—one

would think De Rosa's view suffers the same fate. De Rosa later adopts a causal position as part of her story of sensory representation, where the correlation (or causal nexus) between motions and *qualia* is accounted for by an appeal to the mind-body union (141-2). There is no further explanation of how motions and *qualia* come to be related. Trouble arises for De Rosa, I think, once it is granted that the mind-body union is set up by way of divine institution. For, in granting this, her account looks no different from Pessin's on *this* front. So, if Pessin's account fails on this score, so does De Rosa's.

Still, De Rosa's positive contribution to the secondary literature is not conditional upon whether these other accounts fail, or on whether her argument somehow defeats them. In Chapter 5, we get the main part of what is in fact a fine and compelling account, the explanatory value of which, De Rosa maintains, derives partly from its capacity to solve a puzzle she finds lurking in Descartes' remarks about sensory representation. The puzzle is this: In order for an idea to be an idea of *x* it must represent *x* as it is (or, as she puts it: 'it cannot represent *x* as other than it is...' (2)). So, if an idea does not represent *x* as it is, it is not an idea of *x* (2). Given that an idea of *x* is said to misrepresent *x* insofar as it represents *x* as other than it is, and that sensory ideas are said to misrepresent their objects, De Rosa asks: 'How can a sensory idea be a representation of *x* and yet misrepresent *x* at the same time?' (2). In other words, if the sensory idea of *x* misrepresents *x*, which is to say that this sensory idea represents *x* as other than it is, then this sensory idea could not be an idea of *x* after all. So, to make room for Descartes' claim that sensory ideas misrepresent their objects, De Rosa sets out to solve this puzzle.

De Rosa's account assumes two explanatory components: the phenomenal (or sensory) component, which involves the *qualia* arising from the causal interaction between mind and body, and an ideational (or intellectual) component, which serves to inform or to organize the *qualia* into an intelligible presentation (148-9). This ideational component, she says, explains the 'descriptive' aspect of sensory experience: the idea introduces the 'latent conceptual description of the object' (144). The result of the 'fusion' of these two components is a sensory representation. She calls this a *Descriptivist-Causal* account. On this view, the sensory representation of the sun, which Descartes would say is the adventitious idea of the sun, is analyzed as follows: The *qualia* are occasioned via the mind-body union, where via one's sensory organs the sun supposedly causes certain motions to be present in the brain, resulting in mental *qualia*. These *qualia* are in turn organized by way of an occurring idea. In several places De Rosa claims that the idea doing the organizing is the innate idea of body (e.g., 129, 154). In other places, however, she suggests that it is the innate idea of the *kind* of object being represented (148). So, in the case now under discussion, it would be the innate idea of a sun (where 'sun' denotes a kind of object).

One question immediately arises: What determines the idea's being of *the sun*? What summons the appropriate innate idea so that the perceiver is presented with a sensory representation of the sun? De Rosa argues that it is not the 'causal connection' (144) that holds only between motions in the brain and the occurring *qualia*. Nor is it the extra-mental sun that is (causally) responsible for the idea's being *of* the sun. Rather, the mind determines the object of ideation, by way of the occurring idea, and this is

accomplished via the latent conceptual description of the object possessed by the organizing idea (144). So, that the idea represents the sun and not some other object is determined *internally* by the mind (via some set of latent descriptive features) and not externally by the sun (via the causal relation between the sun's formal reality and the idea's objective reality).

But consider the following analogy, in which Socrates stands before a mirror. There are three items on which to focus: Socrates, the mirror, and the image of Socrates. In Cartesian terms, insofar as Socrates and the mirror are existent things, they possess *formal reality* (the level of which is that of a finite substance). The image on the mirror's surface, which is *of* Socrates, depends ontologically on both the mirror and Socrates. Destroy either one and we destroy the image of Socrates. The image is *real*, but its reality is of a different kind than Socrates and the mirror. In Cartesian terms (though strictly speaking Descartes will only attribute this to ideas), the image is said to possess some level of *objective reality* (it is a reality possessed insofar as a thing *represents* something). On this traditional reading of Descartes, the image is taken to represent Socrates (the image is *of* Socrates) insofar as Socrates' formal reality causes the image's objective reality. The mirror, which is the bearer of the image, is analogous here to the mind. De Rosa's account breaks from this traditional reading, severing the causal connection between Socrates and the image. (Recall, on De Rosa's reading, the extra-mental sun, the sun existing formally in the heavens, in no way determines the sensory idea's being *of* the sun—it has no connection to the idea's objective reality. What determines the idea's being of the sun is something internal to the mind.) On De Rosa's account, then, what determines the image's being *of* Socrates does not appear to be Socrates but (something internal to) the mirror. If so, De Rosa is allowing for the strange view that there can be mirror images of Socrates even though Socrates is nowhere to be found (or isn't standing before any mirror).

Since Descartes nowhere talks of innate ideas of natural objects such as suns and tigers, a charitable reader of De Rosa will have to find her account of the sensory representations of individual bodies (such as the sun) in her remarks about that latent descriptive content. Although not clear, the account seems to go as follows. *Qualia* arise from the causal interaction between mind and body. The innate idea of body is summoned by the mind to organize the *qualia* (though why this idea is summoned and not the innate idea of mind is never explained). The way in which the *qualia* are organized or structured, where the innate idea acts as a kind of presentational template, makes them appear to be properties of body. The 'confusion' of *qualia* for corporeal modes, De Rosa says, is guaranteed by an additional fact: the mind-body union. *Qualia* 'obscure' from mental view certain corporeal modes. Thus, as a mind begins to draw from the latent descriptive content, it will mistake the *qualia* as constituting part of the description of the object—in this case a body. Given that there is only one innate idea of body, not only must the description of the sun be latently in this idea, but so must the descriptions of every other material object—tigers, mountains, rivers, the moon, etc. But this seems to raise the same question again: What determines the sensory idea's being of, say, a pebble, a boulder, a mountain, a dwarf planet, or a planet? What determines the sensory idea's being of Jupiter and not of Saturn? As De Rosa denies that it is the extra-

mental Jupiter, the question remains how a mind knows which latent descriptive content to draw from the innate idea of body. De Rosa says that the occurring *qualia* provide ‘clues’ for the mind (148), but this seems to conflict with her claim that the mind mistakes *qualia* for descriptive content. For far from being clues for deciding which latent content to choose, they are mistaken as constitutive parts of the content of the object being presented.

Working through this book one cannot help but be struck by the intriguing similarity between De Rosa’s Descartes and Kant (e.g., 128-9, 145-6, 164). The *qualia* are akin to what Kant calls *sensations*, or the *material* of intuition, and the organizing ideational structure—De Rosa’s innate idea—is akin to Kant’s system of *a priori* categories. This is most strongly intimated on pp. 128-9. Given this similarity, I would have expected De Rosa to give serious consideration to Martial Gueroult or Michael Friedman, both of whom have suggested Descartes as a precursor of Kant. De Rosa mentions Gueroult twice in passing and Kant only once, and no doubt this is something that De Rosa can expand upon in work to come.

I recommend this book to those researching Descartes’ theories of ideas and sensation. The novice too can learn much from De Rosa, but because her book assumes a rather sophisticated familiarity with both primary texts and secondary literature, it may be a bit overwhelming, so I would caution newcomers to Descartes.

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