

Ideas: Representing the World

1. Scholastic Background

“I may tell you, between ourselves, that these six Meditations contain all the foundations of my physics. But please do not tell people, for that might make it harder for supporters of Aristotle to approve them. I hope that readers will gradually get used to my principles, and recognize their truth, before they notice that they destroy the principles of Aristotle.” (*Letter to Mersenne*, 28.1.1641)

- Aristotelian epistemology:
 - seeing is receiving the form without the matter,
 - hence the knower shares something with the known, *viz.* the form of the known thing: when we see a dog, the sensible form of this kind of animal transmits through the senses to the soul and in-forms it;
 - so, our ideas of things resemble the things;
 - consequently, thought depends on sensory interaction with the world
- Descartes thinks this is unintelligible, and incompatible with mechanical science.

2. Descartes

- A *mode* is a particular way a thing is; it is a characterisation of something (hence modes are now called ‘properties’).
Examples. The speed of a car (a mode of a particular extended body); the idea of a car (a mode of thought).
In a literal sense, modes are ways of thinking and ‘extending’.
Modes existentially depend on the thing that it characterises: it has no existence apart from being the modification of *something*; that something is a substance.
- Ideas are modes, i.e. modifications of thinking substance (Reading [1]).
- Ideas are *representational* (or intentional) entities.
- Ideas are characterised by a special asymmetry:
 - ideas as *modes* are the same kind of thing (dependent entity);
 - ideas as *representing objects* differ widely.
- A crucial distinction (Reading [1] and [2]):
 - *formal reality* is the actual intrinsic reality of an entity (as a certain kind of thing), everything has formal reality of some sort;
 - *objective reality* is the *intentional* or representational reality that only ideas have in virtue of representing objects with a certain degree of formal reality.
If an idea represents object *x*, and *x* has property *P*, then *P* is ‘contained’ *formally* in *x*, and *objectively* in the idea of *x*.
- An ambiguity (Reading [2]):
Ideas as *objects*: ‘as it were the images of things’; “I take the word ‘idea’ to refer to whatever is immediately perceived by the mind” (*Third Replies*, AT VII 181).

Ideas as *acts*: ‘operations of the intellect’ (*Fourth Replies*, AT VII 232), “I claim that we have ideas not only of all that is in our intellect, but also of all that is in the will. For we cannot will anything without knowing that we will it, nor could we know this except by means of an idea; but I do not claim that the idea is different from the act itself” (*Letter to Mersenne*, 28.1.1641).

- Ideas have different sources: innate (part of our cognitive equipment), adventitious (involuntary), or invented (Reading [1] and [3]). *Nativism*: the basic conception of reality is not derived from senses: some ideas constitute our native equipment for understanding the world, which we bring to bear on our experience of it.
- By a ‘spontaneous impulse’ we think that our ideas *resemble* their objects. But ideas can represent x without resemble x . (This impulse is an empiricist intuition.)

3. Spinoza

“D3. By an idea I understand a concept of the mind which the mind forms because it is a thinking thing. *Expl.* I say ‘concept’ rather than ‘perception’ because the word ‘perception’ seems to indicate that the mind is *acted on* by the object, whereas ‘concept’ seems to express not the mind’s being *acted on* but its *acting*.” (*Ethics* IID3). “No one who has a true idea is unaware that a true idea involves the highest certainty; for to have a true idea means knowing a thing perfectly or in the best way. No one can doubt this unless he thinks that an idea is something mute, like a picture on a tablet, and not a mode of thinking, namely, the very act of understanding.” (*Ethics* IIP43S).

- Ideas are mental acts, or representings.
- *Total* representationalism: for every mode of extension (every extended object), there is a corresponding mode of thought, i.e. an idea. There is in God/Nature an idea and hence representation of everything.
Recall: not all ideas are clear and distinct.
- Consequence: for every stone, leaf, and cloud, there is an idea that represents it.
- The human mind is a special case: it represents not the external world, but the human body. When we see a stone, say, what this idea represents is not the stone ‘out there’, but a specific modification of our body: “The ideas that we have of external bodies indicate the condition of our own body more than the nature of the external bodies” (*Ethics* IIP16C2).

4. Leibniz

- Ideas are mental dispositions (Reading [5]). Since dispositions are permanent, ideas are permanent, and hence not caused by external objects. Hence innate.
- Against Descartes: we are not always aware of having ideas. There are unconscious ‘little perceptions’ (*petit perceptions*).

