FINAL DRAFT/AAM manuscript.

Lähteenmäki, V., Marrama, O., & Sinokki, J. (Eds.). (2025). Cartesianism and Philosophy of Mind (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003517580

Publisher: New Yourk, Routledge. ISBN 9781003517580

November 2025.

Introduction

Abstract

An introduction to the volume *Cartesianism and Philosophy of Mind*, including a synopsis of the chapters and suggested readings.

Introduction

There is probably no other figure in the history of western philosophy whose views are more relevant to our current conceptions of mind than René Descartes (1596–1650). Even philosophers who reject so-called "Cartesian views" work firmly within the bounds of topics, research questions, and notions that owe their basic formulations to a long tradition in philosophy of mind, which stems from Descartes' philosophy.[1]

Despite abundant criticisms and dismissals of "Cartesian views", it remains the case that our vocabulary, concepts, and cultural imagination about mind and mentality are influenced by Cartesian thought and bear significant traces of it. Historically, this is a consequence of the revolution that turned the Aristotelian hylomorphism and tripartite view of the soul – vegetative, animal, and rational – obsolete, and in which Descartes had a major role to play. Arguably, it is Descartes' views that gave birth to the logical distinction between mind and body that is reflected in our current ways of thinking about the nature and functioning of mental life. Indeed, questions concerning the relation between mind and body continue to be widely debated across philosophy, psychology, and the cognitive sciences. In Descartes' writings, consciousness begins to be treated as a significant feature of the human mind, and the distinctive nature of human mentality – including phenomena such as perception, intentionality, representation, introspective awareness, and consciousness itself – became a focal point of intense debate among the Cartesians, much as it remains today.

Thus, contrary to common assumptions, discussions about mind and cognition in the Cartesian tradition are not only significant to scholars working within a historiographic paradigm but they remain a recognizable part of the discussions carried on by philosophers of mind today. Revisiting the original arguments of Cartesian thinkers is valuable for understanding what makes Descartes and his philosophical legacy still so relevant. Not only is there plenty of insight to be found into ideas that we already acknowledge as essentially "Cartesian", but there are also many lesser-known discussions on problems that continue to engage philosophers.

Moreover, exploring the Cartesian legacy in its historical and intellectual context allows us to correct an oversimplified, and somehow distorted, use of Descartes and "Cartesianism" found in present-day discussions. For the Descartes that is presented in current philosophy of mind is hardly the authentic historical figure, but rather a useful fiction, as historians of philosophy are eager to point out. The label "Cartesian" is often used as a placeholder for a host of views that philosophers find either appealing or appalling, depending on the author. In fact, the tradition commonly known as "Cartesianism" developed through distinct reactions to the ideas and arguments found in Descartes' works. Despite their shared intellectual heritage, Cartesian thinkers diverge in their views on the core principles of Cartesian philosophy, as the chapters in this volume illustrate. They disagree in their assessment of the significance, acceptability, and proper defense of specific doctrines about the mind. Hence, by looking at how Descartes' conception of the mind was received

through these reactions – including both constructive engagements and critical responses – we can gain a nuanced picture of the foundations of modern philosophy of mind.

Consider, for instance, the debate about the right way to interpret Descartes' notion of *idea* that occupied early Cartesians, such as Malebranche and Arnauld. Nicholas Malebranche (1638–1715) was a Cartesian philosopher in the sense that he endorsed some of Descartes' defining views (especially Cartesian physics) and considered himself a critical follower of Descartes. According to Malebranche, ideas do not depend on the mind of the perceiver in any way: they are literally in God and their existence depends solely on God. Moreover, Malebranche contends that ideas are the things we perceive, so that we perceive "all things in God". Thus, he writes that "through His presence God is in close union with our minds, such that He might be said to be the place of minds as space is, in a sense, the place of bodies" (Malebranche 1997, 230; III.ii.6).

In his *On True and False Ideas,* Antoine Arnauld (1612–1694) attacks Malebranche's view for treating ideas as representations that mediate between the mind and the world. His argument is two-pronged, addressing both the explanatory role of Malebranche's ideas and their necessity in perception. On the one hand, he argues that ideas, conceived as mediating representations, contribute nothing to our understanding of how we perceive external objects. On the other hand, he claims that positing ideas as objects of perception is entirely unnecessary: perceiving is tantamount to representing, and representations need not themselves be perceived for cognition to occur (Arnauld 1990, 66ff.).

Much of the disagreement between Arnauld and Malebranche occurs within a Cartesian framework and concerns the proper interpretation of Cartesian concepts and the use of relevant terminology. While Malebranche is a Cartesian philosopher, he is also influenced by Augustine, and his notion of ideas blends elements from both thinkers. Traditionally, Augustine used "ideas" to refer to the forms of divine intellection – the archetypes through which God creates all things. Descartes famously departs from this use by applying the term to signify the forms of human intellection. Malebranche retains Augustine's association of ideas with the divine intellect but, like Descartes, uses them to explain human cognition. His view strengthens the link between worldly objects and thought by introducing bridging entities that are perceived by the thinker, whilst serving as the archetypes for God's creation of the objects of thought. This account makes the connection between thoughts and their objects highly intimate, though it relies on quite heavy metaphysical assumptions – ones that other Cartesians, like Arnauld, were reluctant to accept.

Leaving aside the metaphysical aspects, the debate between Malebranche and Arnauld also offers an intriguing historical lesson on how mental representation and intentionality were discussed by Cartesians. Arnauld stresses that our ideas are representational, but not in the sense of being mental *objects*: rather, they are *acts* of perception. Malebranche, in contrast, emphasizes that our cognitive contact with objects cannot occur merely inside our heads but requires a metaphysically robust connection to the nature of things. In this dispute, significant philosophical complexities that affect all theories of perception come to the fore, expressed in terms that have no antecedent in the history of the philosophy of mind.[2] Of course, the debate over the intentionality and representational nature of ideas was not confined to Malebranche and Arnauld; all Cartesians engaged in the discussion, albeit in different ways. Some of the most interesting contributions are explored in the chapters of this book.

Another key issue considered in this volume is the relationship between philosophy of mind and epistemology. A central theme in the history of philosophy of mind has been that much theorizing about the mind has taken place in the shadow of the skeptical challenges raised by Descartes in the

First Meditation – particularly questions about the reliability and certainty of our knowledge of the external world. The shadow of these epistemological challenges is evident insofar as accounts of mind developed after Descartes also aim to explicate the mechanisms that allow us to break free from our heads, as it were, in order to establish direct contact with the world. The assumed direction of this mechanism – moving from the inside outwards – is often underlined. For example, according to views on mental representation also attributed to Descartes, the mind connects with worldly objects by accurately resembling them. In this sense, the way our minds supposedly represent things is much like Fregean descriptions, where a name is linked to whichever thing satisfies the description. Notably, this resemblance-based view is not endorsed by the Cartesians, though it is sometimes resorted to as a means of criticism – such as is in Arnauld's *reductio* argument against Descartes' account of material falsity (AT VII 206).

It is striking, then, that this view about mental representation – representation through satisfaction conditions – is absent from discussions of mental representation among historical Cartesians. Yet, this picture is nonetheless often labeled as "Cartesian". There is, however, a reason for this absence. One fundamental assumption that Cartesians seem to share with the Aristotelian tradition they otherwise reject is the idea that cognition is essentially a *unification* of the mind and world. As many chapters in this volume attest, despite their various disagreements, Cartesians seem to agree on a key point about intentionality: that all thinking requires an object. Their discussions on intentionality and representationality presuppose that the mind connects with the objects in thought. What is at stake in intentionality, therefore, is not merely the mind's capacity to escape its confinement within the head. Rather, it is the explanation of a two-step mechanism by which the world first enters the mind, and only then can the mind reach outward in knowing the world. Accounting for this process is also at the heart of the debate between Malebranche and Arnauld.

To be sure, Descartes and his followers develop their ideas in a philosophical context that is imbued with Aristotelian views. And while they reject several doctrines and tenets of that tradition, they also owe much to it. In his writings, Descartes frequently employs scholastic jargon, repurposing its terms with idiosyncratic meanings within his new philosophical system. Interpreters today often struggle to decipher their precise intent, just as his immediate followers did. Even if the so-called early modern philosophical revolution was less radical than once believed, or than Descartes himself portrayed, the fact that this reorientation of traditional terminology caused notable confusion even among those supporting the new philosophy indicates that significant philosophical shifts were underway. Given this context, it is no surprise that many chapters also in this volume examine how Cartesian thinkers engaged with Aristotelian concepts and vocabulary.

For instance, there is no consensus in current scholarship on how to interpret Descartes' use of the scholastic terms "objective reality" or "objective being", even though their function is seminal to understanding his account of cognition and his demonstration of God's existence. Nor was there agreement among Descartes' early followers. Most of the Cartesians were, in fact, skeptical about the notion of "objective reality", often criticizing it and sometimes rejecting it. Arnauld is one exception, defending Descartes' doctrine that ideas "contain within themselves … objective reality" (AT VII 40; CSM II 28). However, he offers a rather reductive interpretation, assimilating the objective reality contained in ideas with their representational nature (Arnauld 1990, 66ff.).

On the other hand, Robert Desgabets (1610–1678) finds Descartes' account of "objective reality" self-defeating. He argues that it renders the *cogito* – that is, Descartes' "first and most certain" knowledge, namely that of one's own existence (AT VIIIA 7; CSM I 195) – epistemically uncertain. Interestingly, his criticism follows a similar line to Arnauld's counterargument against Malebranche's theory of ideas and vision in God. Contemporary readers will recognize that what is

at stake is the issue that was later coined the "veil of ideas", or "veil of perception".[3] As Desgabets' criticism makes clear, the skeptical consequences of ideas veiling the world beyond our cognitive reach were acknowledge by the Cartesians. However, they primarily evoked this scenario in a way similar to those who use it to criticize Descartes' views today – namely, as a form of *reductio ad absurdum* against competing accounts of cognition, including those of fellow Cartesians thinkers.

These are just a few examples of the topics and authors in the Cartesian tradition that this book examines. The chapters of this volume are best approached as exhibiting the diversity of views of Cartesian philosophers by shedding light on the philosophical disputes in which they were engaged. The result is a collective work that focuses, from the viewpoint of the philosophy of mind, on interesting but insufficiently studied views and arguments among the Cartesians and connects them to other figures in that tradition, including Descartes himself, as well as to the Aristotelian tradition. What emerges from the various contributions in this book taken together is not a single narrative about Cartesianism, nor have the editors strived to provide one for the reader. This is already precluded, to some extent, by the nature of the material: there is notable complexity and depth to the topics and the thinkers examined are, after all, philosophers in their own right, each articulating a philosophical system. This volume seeks to offer careful philosophical engagement with both the topics and the sources – clarifying what Cartesian philosophy of mind amounts to, and, in doing so, helping us also better discern what is Cartesian in our contemporary philosophy of mind.[4]

The Chapters

Part I – Mind and Intentionality

The first part of the volume focuses on the general features of the Cartesian mind, with particular emphasis on intentionality, representationality, and self-reflectivity.

In chapter 1, Alison Simmons and Matthias Somers examine the claim that Descartes invented the modern concept of mind. By investigating the work of Cartesians Louis de La Forge, Antoine Arnauld, and Antoine Dilly, they argue that Cartesian thought is essentially "object consciousness": conscious, representative perception. They suggest that by shifting the focus from distinct mental faculties to universal features of cognition, Descartes and his intellectual legacy laid the foundation for modern philosophy of mind as we know it.

In chapter 2, Jani Sinokki and Vili Lähteenmäki argue that Descartes' use of the terms "material," "objective," and "formal," serves to distinguish different functions of ideas: as mental operations, as unifications with objects, and as representations subject to truth and falsity. The authors apply this framework to reinterpret Descartes' responses to Arnauld and Desgabets, and to reassess Margaret Wilson's claim that Descartes' view collapses into incoherence. They show that representation and objective reality converge in the *cogito*, making it a special case that safeguards against error.

In chapter 3, Laura Moretti investigates Robert Desgabets' thesis that all ideas must correspond to a real external object. She argues that Desgabets' claim draws significantly from Descartes's *Meditations* and Arnauld and Nicole's *Port-Royal Logic*. The chapter examines the historical and philosophical context that shaped Desgabets' theory of mental representation, by tracing its origin to seventeenth-century debates about Descartes' own account of ideas.

In chapter 4, Daniel Schmal focuses on Antoine Arnauld's concept of virtual reflection. He shows how Arnauld departs from Descartes's account of self-awareness by incorporating late-scholastic

notions – in particular from Francisco Suárez. On this basis, Schmal contends that, although Cartesian and scholastic understandings of consciousness share basic features, they put emphasis on different philosophical aspects: Cartesians turn reflection from a theological instrument into an epistemological principle, contributing to the modern conception of self-consciousness.

In chapter 5, François Recanati examines the debate between Descartes' advocate Pierre-Sylvain Régis and Descartes' critic Pierre-Daniel Huet. Huet contends that the Cartesian distinction between consciousness and reflection renders the *cogito* impossible. Recanati argues that Régis' response to Huet – claiming that the *cogito* depends solely on consciousness, not reflection – is ultimately unsuccessful. The author proposes an alternative solution, rooted in Descartes' works, that reconceives the self-referentiality of the *cogito* to make consciousness and reflection continuous.

Part II – Bodies and Perception

The chapters of the second part focus on the mind–world relationship, examining how minds are linked to and interact with external objects.

In chapter 6, Lauren Douglas investigates how, for Descartes, sensory ideas succeed in representing external objects, even though they neither resemble their objects nor share causal connections with them. She argues that sensory ideas are like meanings of signs, with the signs themselves taking the form of corporeal images. This sign-meaning correspondence is divinely ordained to represent aspects and qualities of the external world to the perceiving subject.

In chapter 7, Anna Ortín Nadal expounds Gérauld de Cordemoy's analogy between language and perception. She demonstrates that Cordemoy's reference to language serves three purposes: illustrating the distinction between sensory ideas and their physical causes (thus corroborating dualism), explaining perception and the union of mind and body, and providing a model of mind-body interaction compatible with an occasionalist framework. The author compares Cordemoy's use of language in these respects with that of Descartes.

In chapter 8, Eric Stencil examines Descartes' substance dualism and the objections raised against it by Antoine Arnauld and Elisabeth of Bohemia. He demonstrates that, alongside their more famous criticisms – namely, Arnauld's objection to the conceivability-possibility principle and Elisabeth's formulation of the mind-body interaction problem – other pertinent, though overlooked, objections regarding whether and how thinking depends on the body also emerge. These critical arguments center on the nature of experience and contingent features of the world.

In chapter 9, Steven Nadler investigates Louis de La Forge's account of mind-body causation. Nadler notes that, for La Forge, the causality between bodies is just as opaque as that between mind and body. La Forge's occasionalist account of body-body interaction presents a reductive understanding of how one body moves another: it is a law-like relationship in which the state of a body serves as the occasion for God to alter the motion of the other body. Nadler questions whether the body's ability to occasion ideas in the mind, and the mind's capacity to direct certain bodily motions, should be understood in a similar fashion.

Part III – Mind and Sociality

The third and final part of the volume shifts focus from individual minds to trans-individual aspects of mentality.

In chapter 10, Olivier Dubouclez explores understandings of stupidity within the context of early modern Cartesianism. Descartes' account of cognition pays attention to failures of the human mind. From his texts and those of his followers, a specific idea of *stupiditas* or *hebetudo* progressively emerges, which has implications for the conception of humans as rational animals. Initially regarded as a cognitive disorder arising from the mind-body union, stupidity becomes a mark of bestiality that challenges the distinction between thinking and non-thinking beings.

In chapter 11, Julie Walsh focuses on Malebranche's conception of love. Malebranche identifies love of the good in general – that is, love of God – as the source of all motives behind human actions, including the pursuit of pleasure. Scholars have noted the difficulties in reconciling Malebranche's hedonism with love of God. However, the relationship between his account of love and his endorsement of the duty to love one's neighbor has not received much attention. Walsh examines the way in which Malebranche conceives of this duty, addressing the question of human obligations toward one another.

In chapter 12, Anik Waldow reveals the social dimension of Buffier's account of self-knowledge through his critique of Descartes's *cogito* argument. Central to Buffier's point is the idea that knowing oneself as a thinking being demands recognizing one's capacity for rational thought. This requires positioning oneself among people with similar cognitive abilities. Waldow highlights two conclusions that follow from Buffier's position. First, self-knowledge is limited if based solely on examining one's thoughts. Second, norms of rationality are the result of social construction.

In chapter 13, Jessica Gordon-Roth and Nancy Kendrick argue that labeling Mary Astell a "Cartesian" can conceal her original philosophical contributions. They show that, although Astell and Descartes share some philosophical commitments, considerable differences emerge when comparing their accounts of the knowledge seeker. Examining Astell's views outside the Cartesian framework highlights her as a virtue epistemologist, with implications extending to both Descartes studies and contemporary epistemology.

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[1] The most famous example is the "Cartesian Theater", a label coined by Daniel Dennett (1991, 104–407) to criticize the view of consciousness as "an inner space" where images of the external world are reproduced. This view had previously been ascribed to Descartes by, among others, Gilbert Ryle (1949, 154ff.), Richard Rorty (1979, 50–51; 104), and Anthony Kenny (1968, 116). Scholarly works on perception still refer to the inner theater view as "the Cartesian view" (e.g., Byrne and Logue 2009, x), often with the aim to oppose it.

[2] One way to frame the debate is in terms of *direct* and *indirect* theories of perception. Steven Nadler (1989) interprets Arnauld as a defender of direct realism and Malebranche as advocating the opposing, indirect realist position. Paul Hoffman (2002) challenges this interpretation, and a similar alternative view – though articulated much earlier – was proposed by Arthur Lovejoy (1923), who regarded Arnauld as the indirect realist, and Malebranche as the direct realist. Jani Sinokki (2023) argues that Descartes' original account of perception contains elements of both theories and explains why both readings are defensible.

[3] The term "veil of perception" appears to originate from Jonathan Bennett's critical reading of Locke's theory of ideas: "Locke puts the objective world, the world of 'real things' beyond our reach on the other side of the veil of perception" (Bennett 1971, 69). The related term "veil of ideas" is used, for example, by Rorty (1979, 51). The accusation that the theory of ideas veils the world – thereby making skepticism inevitable – can also be found in Thomas Reid (1896, 224ff.). Notwithstanding the historical inaccuracies present in Reid's reading, which were promptly noted by the editor William Hamilton, it is precisely this conception of a "veil of ideas" that is often labeled as Cartesian (see, e.g., Byrne and Logue 2009, viii; for discussion of these readings, see Nadler 1989, 7–8).

[4] The editors' work in compiling this volume was generously supported by the Academy of Finland, and by the European Research Executive Agency through the MSCA-PF grant 101064483 (Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the REA. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them).