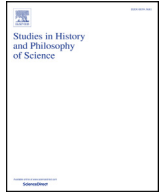




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Cartesian critters can't remember

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ABSTRACT

Descartes held the following view of declarative memory: to remember is to reconstruct an idea that you intellectually recognize as a reconstruction. Descartes countenanced two overarching varieties of declarative memory. To have an intellectual memory is to intellectually reconstruct a universal idea that you recognize as a reconstruction, and to have a sensory memory is to neurophysiologically reconstruct a particular idea that you recognize as a reconstruction. Sensory remembering is thus a capacity of neither ghosts nor machines, but only of human beings qua mind-body unions. This interpretation unifies Descartes's various remarks (and conspicuous silences) about remembering, from the 1628 *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* through the suppressed-in-1633 *Treatise of Man* to the 1649 *Passions of the Soul*. It also rebuts a prevailing thesis in the current secondary literature—that Cartesian critters can remember—while incorporating the textual evidence for that thesis—Descartes's detailed descriptions of the corporeal mechanisms that construct sensory memories.

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1. Memories and mere imaginings

You've lost your keys again. Consider two psychological acts you could perform in order to find them. You could remember where you left them. Or, if your memory fails, you could imagine where you might have left them. In either case, you would bring an idea to bear, such as an idea of keys resting in your coat pocket. In either case, your ability to bring this idea to bear would rely on traces left in your brain by previous sense experiences. Indeed, the distinct acts of memory and imagination might produce apparently identical ideas of keys stowed in coat pockets.

René Descartes famously argued that, while you happen to be a union of body and soul, your “essence consists solely in the fact”

that you are a soul: “a thinking thing” (CSM 2:54; AT 7:78).¹ Nevertheless, Descartes did not believe the psychological acts just described to be purely intellectual functions of your immaterial soul. Instead, he held that remembering (or imagining) where you have (or might have) left your keys is mainly to be chalked up to the operation of physiological mechanisms in your brain. He dissected the heads of various animals in order to unearth these mechanisms.

Despite the success of these dissections, there remains an interpretive puzzle about whether or not Cartesian critters can remember. Although Descartes frequently and enthusiastically attributed the faculty of imagination to nonhuman animals, he conspicuously shied away from unequivocal attributions of sensory

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¹ Descartes's writings are cited by the following standard abbreviations.

AT = Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Eds.) (1964–76). *Oeuvres de Descartes* (Vols. 1–11). CNRS/J. Vrin. Cited by volume and page number.

CSM = John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Eds. and Trans.) (1984–85). *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Vols. 1–2). Cambridge University Press. Cited by volume and page number.

CSMK = John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (Eds. and Trans.) (1991). *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Vol. 3): The Correspondence. Cambridge University Press. Cited by page number.

TM = Thomas Steele Hall (Ed. and Trans.) (1996). *Treatise of Man*. Prometheus Books (Great Minds Series). Cited by page number.

memories—such as your memory of keys resting in your coat pocket—to creatures without souls. As Dennis Sepper writes, “the fact is that Descartes wrote very little about memory, and that little is more enigmatic than clarifying” (1998, p. 295). The enigmatic and sparse state of the textual evidence has given rise to two competing strands of interpretation in the scholarly literature.

According to ‘corporealists’ scholars, Descartes mechanized all of the central functions of the sensitive soul, and thereby explained how soulless animals remember (Clarke, 2003; Gaukroger, 2000, 2002; Hatfield, 2000, 2007, 2008, 2012, 2016; Joyce, 1997; Landormy, 1902; Ott, 2017; Sutton, 1998, 2016).² Thus, John Sutton writes that “Descartes is consistent in attributing memory to animals” (2016, p. 490) and that “only intellectual memory is unique to humans: the celebrated beast-machine doctrine does not deny corporeal memory to animals” (1998, p. 74). And Richard Joyce (1997, p. 380) argues that Descartes claimed “that a system with no phenomenological mental states has the ability to remember ... (A plausible view, though not Descartes’s, is that remembering necessarily involves the conscious.)” Corporealists hold that Cartesian sensory remembering is the purview of the body, consisting solely in physiological processes.

‘Incorporealists’ scholars agree that Descartes attributed memories to nonhuman animals in the 1630s, but argue that Descartes later renounced his youthful view and conflated sensory memory with intellectual memory (Des Chene, 2001; Fôti, 2000; Morris, 1969; Scribano, 2016). Emanuela Scribano argues that “the outcome of Descartes’ mature reflections on memory is that brain traces, which he searched for by dissecting animal heads, deserve only metaphorically to be called memory” (2016, p. 146). Animal brains lack a mechanism to render these metaphorical ‘memories’ genuinely past-oriented. Thus, Véronique Fôti writes that in the 1640s Descartes “could no longer recognize a strictly bodily memory that humans would share with animals.” Instead, he came to believe “that animals do not possess genuine memory, but that their behavior attests only to the conditioning of their bodily mechanisms” (2000, p. 598) Incorporealists hold that all genuine Cartesian remembering is the purview of the soul, consisting in acts of the intellect.

I have an intermediate interpretation to offer, according to which Cartesian sensory remembering is the purview of the mind-body union. Corporealists are right that Descartes mechanized the (unconscious) functions of the sensitive soul, including the physiological process of constructing sensory memories. But incorporealists are right that Descartes provided no mechanical means of distinguishing memory from mere imagination. If my arguments are good, both corporealism and incorporealism are false. Descartes held both that remembering necessarily involves the conscious³ and that sensory memories consist in physiological processes (as opposed to conscious products of intellectual acts)—albeit physiological processes that directly engender conscious feelings and bear the right relationship to conscious acts of reflection. Descartes’s understanding of memory was thus such that he could coherently dissect the heads of animals in order to explain what sensory memories are, while simultaneously denying animals the ability to remember. Humans, as mind-body unions, remember sensory ideas when our souls reflectively recognize that our bodies are reconstructing ideas (rather than merely fantasizing). Insofar as

they lack the intellectual capacity for reflection, Cartesian critters possess the requisite neurophysiological machinery for memory yet cannot remember.⁴

2. Memory as reconstruction recognized as such

Both remembering and imagining a past sensation produce a particular idea, such as the idea of keys resting in your coat pocket. Neither of these acts produce the relevant idea out of thin air. They recruit traces that past events have left in your brain, in order to construct an apt image for the situation at hand. The most obvious difference is that imagination sometimes cobbles together fresh images, whereas memory reconstructs previously sensed images. (I will call the latter phenomenon ‘reconstruction.’)

Many renaissance scholastics held reconstruction to be sufficient for remembering (Des Chene, 2000; Edwards, 2013), as did some seventeenth-century philosophers who shared Descartes’s project of mechanizing the sensitive soul, including Pierre Gassendi (1649a, 1649b)⁵ and Nicolas Malebranche (1674-1675).⁶ However, most early modern European philosophers stressed that remembering necessarily involves an additional element: the reflective awareness that the newly constructed idea closely resembles a previously experienced idea. (I will call this phenomenon—the reflective awareness of a reconstruction as a reconstruction—‘recognition.’) Following Aristotle, Rudolph Goclenius (1613) countenanced recognition as a necessary element of remembering.⁷ So did prominent philosophers writing soon after Descartes, including Henry More (1659),⁸ Louis de La Forge (1666),⁹

⁴ I presume that Cartesian critters lack rational souls. Descartes admitted that it cannot be proved that animals lack souls, “since the human mind does not reach into their hearts” (CSMK 365; AT 5:276–277). Nevertheless, he argued severally that we have (inconclusive) reason to doubt that nonlinguistic animals have souls, since we need not posit souls in order to account for their behavior (CSM 1:139–141; AT 6:55–59; CSMK 302; AT 4:573–576; CSMK 365–366; AT 5:277–279; CSMK 374; AT 5:344–345). Descartes presumed “the fact that animals lack a mind” (CSMK 181; AT 3:370) elsewhere as well (CSMK 148; AT 3:85).

⁵ Gassendi (1649a, p. 60): “Nothing [corporeal] acts on itself ... This is the reason that sight cannot see itself or know its vision or apprehend that it sees; nor can any other faculty, which is corporeal, do the like; and moreover, neither can phantasy, which is corporeal, perceive its own imagining or apprehend that it imagines.” Gassendi took memory to be the unreflective corporeal reproduction of ideas (Michael & Michael, 1988; see also note 13 below).

⁶ Malebranche (1674-1675/1997, p. 106): “our brain fibers, having once received certain impressions through the flow of the animal spirits and by the action of objects, retain some facility for receiving these same dispositions for some time. Now, memory consists only in this facility, since one thinks of the same things when the brain receives the same impressions.” See Sutton (1998, Appendix 2) for commentary.

⁷ Goclenius (1613, pp. 680–681): “Memory is of those things which we have previously known, and notice that we have known, the marks of which are evident, and which without delay arouse our power of remembering. In other words, [in memory] there is a recognition of the thing previously known, as it was known.” (Thanks to Nabeel Hamid for advice on this translation.)

⁸ More (1659, §10): “For there is necessarily comprehended in Memory a Sense or Perception that we have had a Perception or Sense afore of the thing which we conceive ourselves to remember.”

⁹ La Forge (1666/1997, p. 182): “When some species re-appears on the gland it is always an effect of memory, unless the re-appearance depends completely on the object. But it is not always an effect of remembering. For in order to remember it is not enough simply to perceive a species which comes back again, if one does not also know that this is a re-appearance and that it is not the first time one has had this thought. Thus remembering or the power we have of recalling something consists in our faculty of recalling the original species on the gland and being aware that this is not the first occasion on which it gave us the thought which is present to the mind at the time.”

² Corporealists disagree amongst themselves about just how richly sensitive Cartesian automata might be. For example, Sutton (1998) and Gaukroger (2000) interpret Descartes as countenancing purely mechanistic varieties of sentience and intentionality. Hatfield (2008) does not.

³ Per Joyce, this view is plausible; pace Joyce, it is also Descartes’s.

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