Sensing the Cartesian Self

1. Introduction

My Question: according to Descartes, can we sense ourselves? Can my sensory awareness acquaint me with or represent myself, the very subject of this awareness?

A Clarification: I am not asking whether sensory perception is accompanied by consciousness. The answer to this question, for Descartes, is clearly yes, since all occurrent mental states are accompanied by consciousness (whatever that might amount to). Rather, I am asking whether sensory perception ever takes oneself as its object, in (roughly) the same way in which sensory perception takes tables and chairs as its objects. In other words, I am asking whether the self is ever the ideatum of a sensory idea. And Descartes appears torn in this matter.

1.1 The Negative Answer

“it still appears — and I cannot stop thinking this — that the corporeal things of which images are formed in my thoughts, and which the senses investigate, are known with much more distinctness than this puzzling ‘I’ which cannot be pictured” (M2, AT VII 29/CSM II 20, emphasis mine)

I perceive my likeness to God “by the same faculty which enables me to perceive myself. That is, when I turn my mind’s eye upon myself, I understand that I am a thing which is incomplete and dependent on another…” (M3, AT VII 51/CSM II 35).

1.2 The Positive Answer

“everyone feels that he is a single person who has together a body and a mind, which are of such a nature that this mind can move the body and sense what happens to it” (Letter to Elizabeth, 28 June 1643, AT III 694/CSMK 228)

1.3 My Project

My project is to explore this tension. I want to show:

i. this tension is not merely textual: Descartes has a real philosophical problem on his hands, in so far as he has systematic commitments which push him towards both the negative and positive answers, and yet,
ii. that with a bit of tweaking, Descartes can (probably) avoid this problem.

2. Two Kinds of Argument for the Negative Answer: The Cartesian Self Cannot Be sensed

2.1 Restricting the Domain of Sensory Representation

Here is one way to argue for the Negative Answer:

i. Identify a general constraint, which Descartes endorses, that something must satisfy in order to be a possible object of sensory representation, and
ii. Argue that the Cartesian self fails to satisfy this constraint.

What kinds of constraints might Descartes accept on the domain of sensory representation?
a. Sensory Perception as an Imagistic Faculty of Representation

Descartes often claims that the senses, like the imagination, represent objects by forming mental images of them. This suggests that imageability or picturability is a necessary condition on sensory representation. But it seems that the C’n self is not the kind of thing that can be imaged.

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“the soul is nothing but a thing which thinks, and so it impossible for us ever to think of anything without at the same time having the idea of our soul as a thing capable of thinking of whatever we think of. It is true that a thing of such a nature cannot be imagined, that is, cannot be represented by a corporeal image. But that is not surprising, because our imagination is capable of representing only objects of sense-perception; and since our soul has no colour or smell or taste, or anything which belongs to the body, it is not possible to imagine it or form an image of it. But that does not make it any less conceivable; on the contrary, since it is by means of it that we conceive all other things, it is more conceivable on its own than all other things put together” (Letter to Mersenne, July 1641, AT VII 394/CSMK 186)

Important text about imagistic representation:

“When I imagine a triangle, for example, I do not merely understand that it is a figure bounded by three lines, but at the same time I also see the three lines with my mind’s eye as if they were present before me; and this is what I call imagining.” (M6, AT VII 72/CSM II 50)

b. Sensory Perception as a Causally Mediated Faculty of Representation

Descartes also holds that sensory perception depends on being causally affected. In what sense exactly? At the very least, it seems that something can be sensorily represented only if it is the kind of thing that can impinge on our sense organs (a condition, for example, that microscopic particles fail to meet). But it seems that the Cartesian self isn’t the kind of thing that can impinge on its own sense organs.

“we cannot perceive any body by our senses unless it is the cause of some change in our sense organs — that is, unless it somehow moves the minute parts of the matter of which these organs are composed.” (The World IV, AT XI 21-2/CSM I 87-8)

“since all sense-perception occurs through contact, only the surface of a body can be the object of sense-perception; yet if there were real accidents, they cannot be perceived by the senses…” (O/R 6, AT VII 434/CSM II 293)\(^1\)

Pulling these two threads together: the imagistic character of sensory representation, as well as its dependence on the causal affecation of our sense organs, both suggest that the senses are restricted to representing corporeal things. Assuming that the Cartesian self is an incorporeal thing, then it would seem that the C’n self is simply not of the right ontological category to be sensed.

\(^1\) See also Rules XII, AT X 413/CSM I 40; Optics IV, AT VI 133/CSM I 168; M3, AT VII 51/CSM II 35; O/R 5, AT VII 360/CSM II 249; O/R 6, AT VII 436-7/CSM II 294-5; Principles IV.191, AT VIII A 318/CSM I 281; Principles IV.201, AT VIII A 324/CSM I 286; Principles IV.206, AT VIII A 329/SM I 290-1; and Passions I.13, AT XI 338/CSM I 333. Though see Optics IV, AT VI 109/CSM I 164.
2.2 Conditions on Self-Awareness

Here is a rather different strategy for establishing the Negative Answer:

i. Identify a general constraint, which Descartes endorses, that an idea must satisfy in order to qualify as a representation of the self.

ii. Argue that no sensory idea can meet this constraint.

What kinds of constraints does Descartes accept on self-awareness?

a. Self-Representation as Immune to Reference Failure

In Meditation 2, Descartes argues that one distinctive feature of self-representations is that they are immune to reference failure. Entertaining an idea of oneself guarantees the existence of oneself. This feature of self-representations is what explains our inability to coherently suppose our non-existence, as the cogito so famously illustrates.

“So after considering everything very thoroughly I must finally conclude that this proposition I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind. (M2, AT VII 25/CSM II 17)

n.b. Descartes does not recognize a distinction between ideas with propositional vs. object content: e.g. he does not recognize a distinction between thinking of a dog and thinking that a dog exists (July 1641 Letter to Mersenne, AT III 395/CSMK 186). As far as he is concerned, these are simply two ways of describing a single bit of objective reality. From this it follows that, for Descartes, there will be no difference between an idea that represents I and an idea that represents that I exist. —> Whatever special epistemic features attach to the idea that I exist also attach to the idea of I.

But Descartes is adamant that sensory perceptions never guarantee the existence of their objects. He seems to be thinking here that forming an image of a thing never guarantees its reality.

“You now I know for certain both that I exist and at the same time that all such images, and, in general, everything relating to the nature of body could be mere dreams <and chimeras>.“ (M2, AT VII 28/CSM II 19)

“the objects of my sensory experience and imagination may have no existence outside me” (M3, AT VII 34/CSM II 24)

b. Self-Representation as Reflexive

One of Descartes’s fundamental insights is that self-representation is reflexive. ‘I’ refers to the one who in fact thinks it. The main textual evidence for this claim is that Descartes frequently glosses the first-person pronoun in reflexive terms.

“I noticed that while I was trying thus to think everything false, it was necessary that I, who was thinking this, was something.” (Discourse IV, AT VI 32/CSM I 127, emphasis mine)

2 This immunity to reference failure is not unique to the self: Descartes holds that the idea of an infinite being exhibits this feature as well.
“we cannot suppose that we, who are having such thoughts, are nothing.” (Principles I.7, AT VIII A 7/CSM I 195, emphasis mine)

“if we, who are supposing that everything which is distinct from us is false, examine what we are, we see very clearly that neither extension nor shape nor local motion, nor anything of this kind which is attributable to a body, belongs to our nature, but that thought alone belongs to it.” (Principles I.8, AT VIII A 7/CSM 195, emphasis mine)

“I do not deny that I, who am thinking, am distinct from my thought, in the way in which a thing is distinct from a mode.” (O/R 3, AT VII 177/CSM II 125, emphasis mine)

Now, here’s my claim: there is reason to think that, from a Cartesian perspective, sensory perceptions cannot exhibit the reflexivity required for self-representation. Why not?

i. Images aren’t reflexive.

ii. Sensory representation mediated by causal affection. This suggests that if a sensory representation were to be reflexive, we would have to causally affect ourselves. But we don’t.

Note: this second way of arguing for the Negative Answer does not obviously presuppose any robust commitments about the metaphysical nature of the Cartesian self. Rather, it tries to show that the way of relating to ourselves required for self-awareness is incompatible with the way sense perception relates us to its objects (i.e. imagistically and causally).

3. Argument(s) for the Positive Answer: The Cartesian Self Can Be and Is Sensed.

Descartes consistently holds that the senses provide our best grip on our unions with our bodies. But it seems as though the senses could only teach us about the self’s relation to its body if the senses represent the self.

In Meditation 6:

the meditator reviews “those things which, as they were perceived by the senses, I previously thought to be true” (M6, AT VII 74/CSM II 51). The very first thing he mentions is that “I sensed [sensi] that I had a head, hands, feet, and other limbs making up the whole body which I regarded [spectabam] as part of myself, or even as my whole self” (M6, AT VII 74/CSM II 52, emphasis mine)

“There is nothing that my own nature teaches me more vividly, than that I have a body, which is damaged when I feel pain, which needs food and drink when I am hungry or thirsty, and so on. So I should not doubt that there is some truth in this.” (M6, AT VII 80/ CSM II 56)

“Nature also teaches me, by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst, and so on, that I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it…” (M6, AT VII 81/CSM II 56)

“Also, the fact that some of the perceptions are agreeable to me while others are disagreeable makes it quite certain that my body, or rather my whole self, in so far as I am combination of body and mind, can be affected by the various beneficial or harmful bodies which surround it.” (M6, AT VII 81/CSM II 56)

In the Search for Truth:
“When...I said that I was a man, I was not actually thinking of all the scholastic entities which I knew nothing about and had never heard of, and which, so far as I am concerned, subsist only in the imagination of those who have invented them. I was thinking, rather, about the things we see, touch, perceive with our senses, and experience in ourselves — in a word, about things which even the most simple-minded of men know just as well as the greatest philosopher in the world. Undoubtedly I am a certain whole made up of two arms, two legs, one head, and all the other parts which make up what we call the human body, and which besides is nourished, walks, perceives by the senses, and thinks” (Search for Truth, AT 517/ CSM II 411-412).

In the Principles:

“Although they may have put the certainty of their existence before that of anything else, they failed to realize that they should have taken ‘themselves’ in this context to mean their minds alone. They were inclined instead to take ‘themselves’ to mean only their bodies — the bodies which they saw with their eyes and touched with their hands, and to which they incorrectly attributed the power of sense-perception” (Principles I.12, AT VIIIA 9/CSM I 196-7)

In his correspondence with Elizabeth:

“what belongs to the union of the soul and the body is known only obscurely by the intellect alone or even by the intellect aided by the imagination, but it is known very clearly by the senses. That is why people who never philosophize and who use only their senses have no doubt that the soul moves the body and that the body acts on the soul. They regard both of them as a single thing, that is to say, they conceive their union.” (Letter to Princess Elizabeth, 28 June 1643, AT VII 692/CSMK III 227)

“everyone feels that he is a single person who has together a body and a mind, which are of such a nature that this mind can move the body and sense what happens to it” (Letter to Elizabeth, 28 June 1643, AT III 694/CSMK 228)

In the Passions:

“We shall not find this very difficult [to understand the passions of the soul] if we bear in mind that anything we experience as being in us, and which we see can also exist in wholly inanimate bodies, must be attributed only to our body. On the other hand, anything in us which we cannot conceive in any way as capable of belonging to a body must be attributed to our soul.” (Passions I.3, AT XI 329/CSM I 329, emphasis mine)

4. Resolution?

I think that we should hold fixed Descartes’s claim that the self can and is sensed. Two prong resolution of the tension:

i. Build a little bit of corporeality into the Cartesian self so that (a) it can be imaged, and (b) impinge on its our inner (i.e.proprioceptive) senses, and

ii. Argue that sensory representation can meet the requirements for self-representation: viz. that an imagistic and causally mediated representation can both (a) guarantee the existence of its reference and (b) be reflexive.