DESCARTES ON ‘THOUGHT’

BY JOHN COTtingham

In a famous passage in the Second Meditation Descartes asks
What am I then? A thing which thinks. What is that? A thing
which doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, is unwilling, and
also imagines and feels.¹

On the face of it, the gloss Descartes offers on ‘a thing which thinks’ (res
cogitans) is quite extraordinary. Doubting and understanding are evidently
kinds of thinking. But it is far from obvious that affirming, denying and
willing are to be classified in this way. And as for ‘feeling’ (sentire), this is,
in any normal sense, something entirely different from thinking. In this
paper I want to look at the reasons behind Descartes’ startling employment
of the term ‘thought’ (cogitatio, la pensée); I shall first reject some widely
accepted accounts of it, and then propose an alternative solution.

I

A highly influential account of what is going on in the passage cited and
other similar passages has been proposed, among others, by Alexandre
Koyré:

The term ‘thought’—pensée, cogitatio—had, in Descartes’ time, a
much wider meaning than it has now. It embraced not only ‘thought’
as it is now understood, but all mental acts and data: will, feeling,
judgement, perceptions, and so on.²

Taking a similar line, Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Geach warn that “to
use think and thought as the standard renderings for cogitare and penser
and their derivatives gives Descartes’ conception an intellectualistic cast that is
not there in the original”.³ Accordingly, they render res cogitans as ‘conscious
being’, and frequently (though not always) use more general terms like
‘experience’ for Descartes’ cogitatio. And indeed textbooks on Descartes
routinely caution the student not to construe the term ‘thought’ in its normal,
narrowly cognitive sense.⁴

However, while it is clear that during and after Descartes’ lifetime

¹ ‘Sed quid igitur sum? Res cogitans. Quid est hoc? Nempe dubitans, intelligens,
affirmans, negans, volens, nolens, imaginans quoque et sentiens”, AT VII 28; HR I 153
(AT = Oeuvres de Descartes, edd. C. Adam and P. Tannery (Paris, 1957); HR = The
Philosophical Works of Descartes, tr. E. Haldane and G. Ross (Cambridge, 1969)).
² Descartes’ Philosophical Writings, tr. E. Anscombe and P. Geach (London, 1969),
Introduction, p. xxxvii.
⁴ Typical is the following observation: “In English such terms [as ‘thought’] are
specially connected with . . . cognitive processes. For Descartes, however, a cogitatio or
pensée is any sort of conscious state or activity whatsoever”: B. Williams, Descartes
Descartes' use of *cogitatio* then, was, if not downright innovative, at the very least somewhat curious. But there is something deeply unsatisfactory about simply leaving it there. When philosophers use central terms in an unusual way there is invariably an underlying philosophical rationale for it: compare 'perceive' in Berkeley, or 'pleasure' in J. S. Mill.

What I want to suggest is that the "intellectualistic" overtones of the terms *cogitatio* and *pensée*, so far from being misleading, or calling for special translation, are in an important sense meant to be there, for reasons which have their roots deep in Cartesian method and metaphysics.

Let us start by going back to the context of our original quotation. Descartes asserts that he is a thinking thing. On what basis? Because the extremity of doubt—the malicious demon—failed to separate this attribute from his nature:

> What am I now that I am supposing that there is some supremely powerful deceiver? . . . Thinking—here I find it—this alone cannot be torn from me.\(^8\)

Descartes' claim that 'thought' is inseparable from his nature is, like his discovery of the certainty of his own existence, inextricably bound up with

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\(^7\)"Pour ce que vous inférez que, si la nature de l'homme n'est que de penser, il n'a donc point de volonté, je ne vois pas la conséquence; car vouloir, entendre, imaginer, sentir, etc., ne sont que des diverses façons de penser . . ."); AT I 366; K 32 (*K = Descartes' Philosophical Letters*, tr. A. Kenny (Oxford, 1970)). The importance of this text is noted in Kenny's *Descartes* (New York, 1968), p. 69.

\(^8\)"Quid autem nunc, ubi supraumo deceptorem aliquem potentissimum? . . . Hic invenio: cogitatio est; hæc sola a me divelli nequit", AT VII 26/7; HR I 151.
a strictly cognitive process—the method of doubt:

while it is easy to suppose there is no God, no heaven, no bodies . . . we cannot in the same way suppose that we who doubt these things are not.  

Or again:

from the very fact that I thought of doubting the truth of other things it very certainly and evidently followed that I was. On the other hand, if I had ceased to think . . . I should have no reason to suppose that I had existed. From that I knew I was a substance whose whole nature or essence consists in thinking.

The way in which ‘cogito ergo sum’ and ‘sum res cogitans’ are arrived at thus suggest a strictly intellectualistic interpretation of cogitare. Indeed, though it is sometimes claimed that “any conscious process will do as a premise for the cogito”, this seems inconsistent with Descartes’ method. “I want” is not indubitable in the sense in which “I think” or “I doubt” are. The demon could presumably deceive me into thinking I wanted an ice cream (though perhaps he could not deceive me about being aware of wanting one: I shall return to this point later). For the indubitability of “I think” consists precisely in the fact that doubting it entails its truth. So far, then, the “thinking being” of whose existence Descartes is apprised as his first step out of the morass of doubt is precisely that—a being that thinks, in the ordinary, strictly cognitive sense.

III

Before going any further, it is time to face an obvious difficulty. What has so far been said appears to ignore the definition of ‘thought’ (cogitatio) which Descartes himself explicitly provides in the Second Replies:

In the term thought I include everything which is in us in such a way that we are immediately aware of it. Thus all the operations of the will, intellect, imagination and senses are thoughts.

A closely similar account is given in the Principles:

By the term ‘thought’ I understand everything which happens in our conscious selves, in so far as there is awareness of it in us.

Notice, first, that both these passages have a somewhat idiosyncratic flavour. In the Second Replies, other definitions are introduced in the third person: “such and such is called (vocatur) ‘substance’”; “such and such is called “God””. But here we have “in the term ‘thought’ I include (complector) . . .”; “by the term ‘thought’ I understand (intello) . . .”. Yet—and here is the vital point—this is not simply a matter of arbitrary personal stipulation. Descartes does not simply say “I am extending the denotation of the term cogitatio, and that is that”. On the contrary, the appropriateness of

9 Principles I, 7 (AT VIII 7; HR I 221).
10 Discourse Part IV (AT VI; HR I 101).
11 Cogitationis nomine complector illud omne quod sic in nobis est, ut ejus immediate conscius simus”, AT VII 160; HR II 54.

12 Cogitationis nomine intello illa omnia, quae nobis consciis in nobis sunt, quatenus eorum in nobis conscientia est”, Bk. I art. 9 (AT VIII 7; HR I 221).
including acts of will and sensation under the label *cogitatio* appears to follow naturally, for Descartes, from a special feature of such acts—the mental awareness or *conscientia* involved (“quatenus eorum in nobis conscientia est”). The crucial terms *concius* and *conscientia* are not defined in the Second Replies or Principles; but their original meaning (deriving from *scire*, to know) is inescapably cognitive and intellectualistic. And indeed when Descartes himself discussed the meaning of ‘to be aware’ (*concius esse*) with Frans Burman, he made it clear that what was involved was a *reflective* act of the mind.13 Thus, so far from being a difficulty for the line taken in this paper, Descartes’ definitions of *cogitatio*, when properly understood, provide further support for the “intellectualistic” interpretation. For it turns out that, for Descartes, acts of will, etc., are *cognitiones* not *qua* acts of will, etc., but *qua* objects of reflective awareness.

One further objection to this account needs to be dealt with here. Anscombe and Geach have argued that sensations, at least, cannot be thought *qua* objects of reflection, since “Descartes ascribes *cognitiones* of pleasure, pain, warmth and cold to an unborn child, which he admits would be incapable of reflection”.14 But the text which Anscombe and Geach rely on here (the letter to “Hyperaspistes” of August 1641) says no such thing. In the letter, Descartes is concerned to defend his thesis that the mind or soul always thinks (*cogitare*); and he argues that the fact that we cannot now remember the thoughts of early infancy (including intra-uterine thoughts) is in itself no argument against his view.15 Infants and the unborn do, then, think; and nowhere does Descartes say this thought is non-reflective in character. Descartes does deny that “the mind of an infant meditates on metaphysics in its mother’s womb”; but this is because “the mind newly united to an infant’s body is occupied wholly with a confused perception or sensation of the ideas of pain, pleasure, heat, cold and other similar ideas which arise from its union and intermingling with the body”.16 I shall have more to say about this “confused perception” shortly, but for the moment it is sufficient to observe that nothing Descartes says rules out construing it as a reflective awareness of a purely cognitive kind. It may seem strange to ascribe this kind of awareness to an infant, but then many things Descartes says about the infant mind are strange, including the whole doctrine of innate ideas (which is vigorously defended in the passage under discussion).

I suppose we nowadays tend to think of foetal and early infant mental processes as simple sensations (of warmth, hunger and the like) without

13AT V 149. See J. Cottingham, Descartes’ Conversation with Burman (Oxford, 1976), pp. 7 and 61. In this passage Burman raises the pertinent question (which there is no space to go into here) of whether Descartes’ account of *conscientia* may not involve an infinite regress.


15AT III 423 ll. 23 ff.; K 111.

16“Mentem corpori infantis recenter unitam in solis ideis doloris, titillationis, caloris, frigoris et similibus, que ex ista unione ac quasi permissione oriuntur, confuse percipiendis sive sentiendis occupari”, AT III 424; K 111.
any conceptual awareness; but we should not foist such a view on Descartes. If Descartes was really saying that this sort of simple sensation was sufficient to count as a cogitatio, it would be puzzling to see why he so adamantly denied the possibility of cogitationes in animals. Only a more restricted account of cogitatio will make full sense of what Descartes emphatically ascribes to infants and denies of animals.17

IV

It is now time to look more closely at exactly what Descartes means by the frequent inclusion of sense-perception and sensation as “modes of thinking” (modi cogitandi). Perhaps the clearest indication of what is going on comes in Book I of the Principles, where Descartes discusses why ‘video ergo sum’ might not do equally as well as ‘cogito ergo sum’. Descartes in effect says that ‘I see’ is ambiguous. If understood ‘de visione’ it is not a good premise for inferring one’s existence (since, for one thing, it could then imply the existence of a body, which is subject to doubt). Alternatively, however, it may, says Descartes, be understood “concerning the actual sense or awareness of seeing” (de ipso sensu sive conscientia videndi); here it is quite certain “since it is in this case referred to the mind which alone feels or thinks it sees” (quia tunc refertur ad mentem quae sola sentit sive cogitat se videre).18 Once again, in connection with Descartes’ employment of cogitare, we are presented with the crucial term conscientia (self-awareness); and this makes it clear just how misleading it is to say tout court that cogitatio “includes” sensations and feelings. The only sense in which seeing is a true cogitatio is the sense in which it may involve reflective mental awareness—the self-conscious perception of the mind that it is aware of seeing.19

The more one looks at what Descartes says about perceptual operations like seeing and hearing, as well as sensations like feeling pain, the more one observes that he regards them as having a curious hybrid nature. Descartes often calls perception (e.g., seeing) a “special mode of thinking”;20 and sensations (e.g., of heat) are frequently called “confused modes of thinking”.21 The “special” nature or “confusedness” turns out to be tied up with this: that such operations qualify as cogitationes at all only in a partial and restricted sense. In a famous passage in the Sixth Meditation Descartes points out that when the body is damaged we do not merely notice the damage


18Bk. I art. 9 (AT VIII 7; HR I 221).

19Compare a closely similar passage in the Second Meditation: “Idem denique ego sum qui sentio . . . videlicet iam lucem video . . . Falsa hac sunt, dormio enim. At certe videre videor . . .” (“Finally it is I who sense . . . e.g., now see the light . . . All this may be false—I may be asleep. But certainly I seem to see . . .”), AT VII 29; H I 153. Italics mine.

20“specialis modus cogitandi” (AT VII 78; HR I 190). Cf. Conversation with Burman, p. 75.

21“confusi modi cogitandi” (AT VII 81; HR I 192). Cf. note 16 above.
puro intellectu, as a pilot observes damage to his ship; in addition we actually feel pain, because of the mysterious "intermingling" of the mind with corporeal substance. What is seldom if ever asked about this much discussed passage is why Descartes should have put the matter in this way. Why should one ponder on the curious possibility of being aware of bodily damage in a purely cognitive way? Once one looks for a rationale behind Descartes' train of thought, the answer springs into focus: because that is exactly how one would expect it to be for a res cogitans. In a letter to Regius, Descartes discusses how an angel (a pure res cogitans) might experience if he were in a human body: he would not feel (sentire) as we do, but would merely "perceive the motions caused by external objects". This is because sensations such as pain are not the pure thoughts (purae cogitationes) of a mind distinct from a body, but are rather the "confused perceptions which result from the real union with the body".25

The picture that thus emerges is this. (1) A human being is not a pure res cogitans, he is a res cogitans mysteriously united with a body. (2) Much of his mental life none the less consists of pure cogitationes—the cognitive intellectual operations which a disembodied spirit might enjoy. (3) However, perceptions (seeing) and feelings (pain) are not cogitationes simpliciter, but "confused perceptions". This last category, I suggest, breaks down for Descartes into two elements. (a) There is the reflective awareness of the mind that it is being presented with a datum of some kind: this alone is what qualifies as a cogitatio proper; and (b) a curious residual element, which might be called the "qualitative feel" (e.g., the painfulness or hurtiness of pain), that remains, in terms of Descartes' metaphysics, ultimately mysterious. Indeed, the proposition "I am in pain" is not, contrary to what is sometimes suggested, something I can clearly and distinctly know. For to be clear and distinct a proposition must contain nothing but what is clear.23 Yet on Descartes' own account our perception of being in pain is intrinsically "confused". We can have a clear and distinct awareness of "being in pain" only if we, as it were, slice off the purely reflective element; if, as Descartes puts it, "we take great care not to include in our judgement anything more than that which is contained in our perception".24

V

Let me now draw the threads of the argument together. What I have argued is that Descartes' inclusion under the label cogitatio of willing, perceiving, feeling, etc., is a deliberate and idiosyncratic move. It is a move, moreover, which should not be baldly accepted as an arbitrary extension of usage, but as one which requires careful diagnosis. And the proper diagnosis reveals the philosophical reason for the labelling: the various opera-

22January 1642. AT III 493; K 127/8.
23Principles I, 45 (AT VIII 22; HR I 237).
24"Si accurate cavemus ne quid amplius de iis judicemus quam id præcise quod in perceptione nostra continetur", Principles I, 66 (AT VIII 32; HR I 247).
tions listed are *cogitationes* only and precisely in so far as they include a reflective cognitive act—the mind's intellectual awareness of itself which Descartes terms *conscientia*. The upshot is that when Descartes calls himself a *res cogitans* there is an important and illuminating sense in which he means precisely that—a thing which *thinks*.

I must end with an important *caveat*. What has so far been said provides a kind of explanation of Descartes' procedure; but it is very far from providing a full justification of it. On the contrary, the diagnosis of Descartes' terminology reveals some important underlying philosophical confusions. I noted earlier on that Descartes' discovery of himself as a thinking being is crucially bound up with an intellectual process—the method of doubt ('let [the demon] deceive me as much as he likes, he can never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something').25 "Thinking" cannot be torn from my nature because the act of doubting it confirms it. But the incorrigibility of a judgement concerning this intellectual process does not *eo ipso* imply the incorrigibility of judgements concerning the other processes which Descartes proceeds to list in his gloss of *res cogitans*. There is no *prima facie* reason why the demon should not deceive me into thinking, e.g., that I wanted or desired something. Descartes' reasoning at this point appears to be that even in these other cases we can slice off the reflective awareness of some datum (it still *seems* to me that I am wanting, or seeing), and there can be no mistake about *this*.26 But this is a different and more perilous line of argument than the proof of "sum" and "sum res cogitans" by the method of doubt. The new line of argument rests on the (dubious) thesis of the "perfect transparency of the mind": that the mind cannot but be clearly aware of its own data, in so far as these are objects of pure reflection. The method of doubt, by contrast, relied not on the supposed pellucid awareness of a mental datum, but on a logical guarantee concerning the *content* of the datum. Descartes does not simply argue—as he does for willing and feeling—that "if I am thinking it at least *seems* to me that I am thinking"; rather he argues that "I am thinking" is incorrigible because so long as I am thinking there is nothing the demon could do to bring it about that I am not thinking.

Descartes' *cogitatio*, then, is intellectualistic and cognitive: there is always a reflective mental act involved. But the fact that there is, for Descartes, an important common denominator to 'dubito' (I doubt) on the one hand, and 'volo', 'sentio', etc. (I will, I feel) on the other, does not justify the move from "sum res cogitans" to "sum res volens, sentiens, etc." The most that Descartes' hyperbolical doubt could allow him to assert as essential to his nature is that—in the narrowest sense—he thinks.

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25 AT VII 25; HR I 150.
26 Cf. the passage quoted above, note 19.