

Cartesian Clarity

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Clear and distinct perception is the centerpiece of Descartes's philosophy. It is uniquely indubitable and uniquely infallible. It is the one and only source of certain knowledge. It is normatively required for assent in a priori disciplines like metaphysics, mathematics, and logic: you're not supposed to assent to a proposition unless you perceive it clearly and distinctly. Descartes designed an early work, the *Rules*, to help readers "acquire the habit of intuiting the truth distinctly and clearly" (AT 10:400–1).¹ Likewise, the chief purpose of his masterpiece, the *Meditations*, is to teach readers how to perceive things clearly and distinctly. As he writes to Mersenne: "We have to form distinct ideas of the things we want to judge about, and this is what most people fail to do and what I have mainly tried to teach by my *Meditations*" (AT 3:272).

Most interpreters recognize that clear and distinct perception plays the psychological and epistemic roles listed above. There is broad agreement, in other words, about what clear and distinct perception *does*. Much more vexed is the question of what it *is*. What does Descartes mean by the terms 'clear' and 'distinct' (and by their antonyms 'obscure' and 'confused')?

It is often suggested that Descartes offers no real guidance on this question and that it remains a kind of interpretive enigma. More than one commentator has quipped that Descartes's "concept of clear and distinct perception is the least clear and distinct concept in his philosophy" (Markie 1992: 161), that "the notion of a clear and distinct idea is, unfortunately, one of Descartes' least clear and distinct notions" (Della Rocca 2002: 74), or that "it does not seem he ever bothers to get clear on clarity and distinctness" (Shapiro 2008: 28). A recent reference entry on the topic ends by calling for a new account.²

1. For Descartes's works, I refer (by volume and page number) to the Adam and Tannery (AT) edition of the original. I generally quote from the standard translation (CSM[K]). I use (*) to indicate when I have altered the translation or provided my own. I use (†) to indicate when I have added italics or boldface.
2. "[A] more general account of clarity and distinctness is still required" (Schmaltz 2015: 76).

Other interpreters venture to explicate the nature of clarity and distinctness. They generally recognize that Descartes defines distinctness in terms of clarity: a distinct perception “contains within itself *only what is clear*” (Pr. i.45¹). Where scholars disagree — the crux of the debate — is about what it means for a perception to be *clear*.

According to the prevailing approach, what it means for a perception to be clear is that its content has a certain objective property, like truth. I argue instead that clarity is a subjective, phenomenal quality whereby a content is *presented as true* to the perceiving subject. Sense-perception and imagination can be clear to varying degrees which are fallible: what is presented as true might be false. But in the special case of completely clear intellectual perception, what is presented as true must *be* true.

Like phenomenal qualities in general, clarity is (epistemically) *primitive* in the sense that we cannot come to understand what clarity is by analyzing it or defining it in terms of other properties. Instead, we come to understand what clarity is by reflecting on examples, within our own experience, of clarity itself.

In addition to my main claim about the primitive, phenomenal nature of clarity, I develop a secondary claim about the natures of the other perceptual qualities Descartes identifies: obscurity, distinctness, and confusion. All three of these qualities, I argue, are defined in terms of clarity. *Obscurity* is the absence of clarity in a perception. *Confusion* is the condition whereby one perception is fused with another in a way that makes it *less clear*. *Distinctness*, the opposite of confusion, is the condition whereby a clear perception is “sharply separated” from anything obscure so that it’s *completely clear*. That last point is worth emphasizing: distinctness is not a further feature to be added to clarity. *A distinct perception is just a completely clear perception.*

Here is the plan: In §1, I lay out some basic points about Descartes’s appeal to clear and distinct perception. In §2, I expose problems for the dominant interpretation, which attempts to analyze clarity (and distinctness) in terms of an objective property of intentional content, like truth. In §3, I explain the alternative view that clarity is a phenomenal

quality, and then in §4 I offer five textual arguments to show that this is in fact Descartes’s view. In §5, I explain how Descartes defines obscurity, confusion, and distinctness in terms of clarity. I conclude in §6.

Altogether, Descartes views clarity as a *primitive* phenomenal quality which is definitionally *prior* to the other perceptual qualities. In a slogan: Clarity First.

1. Preliminaries

1.1 Relational Properties of Clear and Distinct Perception

Let’s begin by registering some well-known points about what a perception is, for Descartes, and what roles a perception plays when it is clear and distinct.

What Descartes calls a ‘perception’ or ‘idea’ is a mental state with intentional content; it is *of or about* things (AT 7:37, 44). Perceptions are not limited to the senses: they can be sensory, imaginative, or purely intellectual (due to pure reason, the intellect, or understanding). The term ‘perception’ refers to the *act* of perceiving. The term ‘idea’ can also refer to the act of perceiving, but it more often refers to the *object* of perception, the thing perceived, and so that is how I use it here.³

A perception is not by itself a belief or judgement; it merely provides the content for a possible judgement (AT 7:37, 56; AT 8A:17). The will responds to (the content of) a perception either by assenting to it as true (forming a judgement) or by withholding assent (suspending judgement in a state of doubt) (AT 7:37).

3. “I have frequently pointed out that I use the term ‘idea’ to apply to what is established by reasoning as well as anything else that is perceived in any manner whatsoever” (AT 7:185). “I make it quite clear in several places throughout the book, and in this passage in particular, that I am taking the word ‘idea’ to refer to whatever is immediately perceived by the mind [*quod immediate a mente percipitur*]” (AT 7:181). One way of understanding the relation between perceptions and ideas is offered by Descartes’s disciple Antoine Arnauld, who writes, “I take perception and idea to be one and the same. Nonetheless ... this thing, although single, stands in two relations: one to the soul which it modifies, the other to the thing perceived ... and the word ‘perception’ more directly indicates the first relation; the word ‘idea’, the latter relation” (2011 [1775]: 198). For more on Arnauld’s take, see Pearce (2016).

The content of a perception can be designated with a noun-phrase (e.g. I have a perception or idea of *the sun*) or a sentential complement expressing a proposition (e.g. I perceive *that the sun is round*). For Descartes, this is merely a verbal difference: we may choose to speak either way, depending our purposes.⁴ As we'll see, rival interpretations are often formulated only with noun-phrase constructions, as accounts of what it means to have a clear and distinct perception or idea of *x*. But as Descartes recognizes, we need propositional formulations in order to specify exactly what it is about *x* — which proposition(s) — are being perceived clearly and distinctly in a given instance. For example, when the meditator first comes to have a clear and distinct perception of herself through the *cogito* argument in Meditation Two, she perceives clearly and distinctly *that* she exists, without perceiving clearly and distinctly *that* she is 'really distinct' from her body. Descartes is emphatic that the latter claim isn't established until Meditation Six (AT 7: 8, 27, 129–32, 175, 355–6). So we need to use propositional formulations, as Descartes himself does, to be suitably specific.

When a perception is clear and distinct, it plays key epistemic roles. First, clear and distinct perception is *indubitable*: "The nature of my mind is such that I *cannot but assent* to these things, at least so long as I clearly perceive them" (AT 7:65).⁵ So long as you perceive *p* clearly (and distinctly), you cannot doubt *p*, cannot help but judge that *p* is true.

Second, clear and distinct perception is *infallible*: "whatever I perceive clearly and distinctly is true" (AT 7:35).⁶ Something cannot be the

4. When Mersenne asks Descartes about whether the contents of ideas should be expressed "as terms or propositions", Descartes replies: "I do not understand your question whether our ideas are expressed by a single term. Words are human inventions, so one can always use one or several to express the same thing. But I explained in my Reply to the First Objections how a triangle inscribed in a square can be taken as a single idea or as several" (AT 3: 417–8; cf. AT 3:395). This point has been noted by others: e.g. Gewirth (1943: n. 5), Nelson (1997: n. 23), and Simmons (2012: n. 17).

5. Cf. AT 7:39, 58; AT 3:64, 147.

6. Cf. AT 7:62, 65, 70. I am using 'infallible' in our contemporary sense of the term. Descartes himself uses the term (in its adverbial form: 'infallibly') to say

object or content of a clear and distinct perception unless it is real or true. Commentators refer to this claim as "the Truth Rule".

Third, clear and distinct perception is necessary for apprehending truths with certainty: "A perception which can serve as the basis for a certain and indubitable judgement needs to be not merely clear but also distinct" (Pr. i.44, AT 8A:21–2; cf. AT 7:145, 146).

Fourth, clear and distinct perception is not only necessary but also sufficient for certain apprehension of truths. The authors of the *Second Set of Objections to the Meditations* read Descartes as holding that one must apprehend God in order to apprehend anything else. But this is a *misreading*, as Descartes explains in reply:

The fact that an atheist can "clearly apprehend [*clare cognoscere*] that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles" is something I do not dispute ... (2O/R, AT 7:141*)

If you're an atheist, you can still perceive truths clearly and distinctly, you cannot help but assent to them when you do, and the judgement you thereby form constitutes what Descartes calls *cognitio* of those truths. As it was used in ordinary Latin, *cognitio* could be translated as 'knowledge', but Descartes often prefaces it with adjectives like 'clear', 'evident', and 'certain' to remind us that he is speaking of an epistemic achievement, characterized by certainty, which is more demanding than what we might ordinarily call 'knowledge'. To forestall the hasty assumption that *cognitio* is ordinary knowledge, I render as 'apprehension'.⁷

that the will assents "without fail" (i.e. inevitably) to clear perception. He says that "the will of a thinking thing is drawn infallibly [*infallibiliter*], to a clearly known good" (2O/R, AT 7:166*), and that "seeing very clearly what one must do, one does it infallibly [*infailliblement*]" (To Mesland, 2 May 1644, AT 4:117*). Thus, Descartes's use of 'infallible' is closer to my use of 'indubitable' above. I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me to clarify this.

7. Descartes goes on to explain that clear and distinct perception is not sufficient for the highest grade of knowledge, namely *scientia*, which requires *cognitio* of God. On Descartes's distinction between *cognitio* and *scientia*, see Carriero (2008, 2009), Christofidou (2012: 182–6), Cottingham (1986), Della

What we've enumerated so far are relational properties of clear and distinct perception. Infallibility is a relation that clear and distinct perception bears to reality: it always represents reality accurately. Indubitability is a relation that clear and distinct perception bears to the will: it always impels the will's assent. And the assent thus impelled always constitutes apprehension. While these points tell us what clear and distinct perception does, it remains to be seen what clear and distinct perception *is*. We get clues for answering this question by noting which kinds of perceptions can be clear and distinct, and to what degree.

1.2 Clear and Distinct Sense-Perception, Imagination, and Intellection

Commentators sometimes assume that, in Descartes's view, only intellection can be clear and distinct; sense-perception and imagination cannot.⁸ But Descartes says otherwise.⁹ He explicitly invokes clear visual perception when he defines clarity, in *Principles* i.45: "we see something clearly when — being present to the eye's gaze — it strikes it with a sufficient degree of force and openness". Elsewhere, he says, for instance, that "we see the sun *very clearly* [*tres clairement*]" (*Discourse iv*, AT 6:40⁺). He uses the terms 'lively' and 'vivid' for sensory clarity, and says that bodies "produce in us a certain very clear and vivid sensation which we call the sensation of colour" (*Pr.* i.70, AT 8A:34). When he entertains the dreaming argument in the *Discourse*, he asks, "How do we know that the thoughts which come to us in dreams are any more false than the others, seeing that they are often no less lively and vivid [*vives & expresses*]?" (AT 6:38^{*}).¹⁰ Sometimes "imaginings in sleep are

as lively and vivid [*vives & expresses*] as in waking life, or more so" (AT 6:40^{*}). So sense-perception and imagination can be very clear (lively, vivid).¹¹

Some commentators maintain that although sense-perception can be clear, it cannot be distinct. But again, Descartes says otherwise. Toward the end of the *Meditations*, Descartes has the meditator recall that, when she began, "the ideas perceived by the senses were much more lively and vivid [*vividae & expressae*] and even, in their own way, more distinct [*suo modo distinctae*]" (M6, AT 7:75^{*}) than the intellectual ideas that she only dimly glimpsed through her fledgling efforts in meditation. A few pages later: "I *distinctly* see where things come from and where and when they come to me" (M6, AT 7:90). And in the First Replies: "If we fix our gaze on some part of the sea at close quarters, then our view can be clear *and distinct*, just as our picture of a chiliagon can be, if it is confined to one or two of the sides" (AT 7:113; cf. AT 10:400–1). In the Second Replies he says that "someone with jaundice sees snow as yellow ... *just as clearly and distinctly* as we see it as white" (AT 7:145⁺). Compare his remarks on imagination: "We can *distinctly* imagine a lion's head on a goat's body" (*Discourse iv*, AT 6:40⁺). He says that "quantity ... is something I *distinctly* imagine" (AT 7:63⁺), and speaks of "the *distinct* idea of corporeal nature which I find in my imagination" (AT 7:73⁺). So, Descartes holds that sense-perception and imagination can be not only clear but also distinct.

This may be surprising. Isn't Descartes famously a Rationalist who holds that clear and distinct perception, as the source of certainty, is limited to pure reason (intellect, understanding)? The key to understanding what is going on here is that clarity and distinctness are both scalar; they come in degrees. Each act of perceiving (whether sensory, imaginative, or intellectual) falls somewhere on the continuum from the clearest to the most obscure. Sense-perception can be "very clear" and "in its own way distinct". The same is true of imagination. But

noting various things he seems to see and feel, he proclaims, "All this would not happen *with such distinctness* to someone asleep!" (AT 7:19⁺).

11. Cf. AT 7:83, 145; AT 8A:33.

Rocca (2005), DeRose (1992), Newman and Nelson (1999), Parvizian (*forthcoming*), Pasnau (2013; 2017: ch. 1), Sosa (1997), and Van Cleve (2002).

8. This assumption is often implicit in the literature, but is sometimes explicit. Broughton, for example, asserts that "Descartes plainly uses 'natural light' [the faculty of intellectual perception] to mean 'faculty of distinct perception'" (1984: 607 n. 16).

9. Rickless (2005: 313–8) forcefully makes this point.

10. Compare the corresponding passage in the First Meditation, where, after

Descartes is indeed a Rationalist, since he maintains that only intellection can be clear and distinct in the strict sense needed for certainty:

It is clear that we do not have this kind of certainty in cases where our perception is even the slightest bit obscure or confused; for such obscurity, whatever its degree, is quite sufficient to make us have doubts in such cases. Again, *we do not have the required kind of certainty with regard to matters which we perceive solely by means of the senses, however clear such perception may be. ... Accordingly, if there is any certainty to be had, the only remaining alternative is that it occurs in the clear perceptions of the intellect and nowhere else.* (2O/R, AT 7:145¹)

As Descartes explains in the Sixth Meditation, sense-perception is designed to be “clear and distinct enough [*satis clarae & distinctae*]” for practical purposes (AT 7:83) — just not enough for certainty.¹²

One form of intellection is rational insight into modal truths about what is necessary or merely possible, including truths about the essences or natures of things. Another form of intellection is introspection or what Descartes calls “reflection”, which targets contingent truths about one’s own thoughts. As I will explain, both forms of intellection can be completely clear — clear and distinct in the strict sense — and it is only then that they provide certainty.

2. Intentional Readings

Commentators generally recognize that Descartes defines distinctness in terms of clarity:

I call a perception “distinct” when, as well as being *clear*, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself *only what is clear*. (*Pr.* i.45, AT 8A:22¹)

¹². See Simmons (2008; 2014).

A perception is distinct when it is clear and contains “only what is clear” — when it is, in other words, *completely clear*.¹³ The controversial issue is what it means for a perception to be clear. The prevailing approach in the literature is what I will call *the intentional reading*, which proposes to analyze the clarity of a perception in terms of an objective property of its intentional content. On the simplest version of the intentional reading the relevant property is *truth*. We’ll turn to this interpretation in a moment.

But first I want to address the most common version of the intentional reading, according to which the relevant property is *truth specifically regarding the nature or essence of the perceived object*. In her defense of this reading, Sarah Patterson explains that the gist of it is that “having a clear and distinct idea of *x* involves understanding what does and does not belong to the nature of *x*” (2008: 219). The content of such an idea or perception is true or accurate with respect to the nature or essence of its object. I therefore refer to this as the “True-to-Essence Reading” of clarity and distinctness, or “TE” for short. Proponents of TE formulate it in different ways, but we can work with the following:

The True-to-Essence Reading (TE)

- A perception of *x* is **clear** to the extent that it ascribes to *x* features which are consistent with the essence of *x*.
- A perception of *x* is **distinct** to the extent that it is clear and (in Descartes’s words) “contains only what is clear” — i.e. it *doesn’t* ascribe to *x* features which are *inconsistent* with the essence of *x*.¹⁴

¹³. More on this in §5, where I will explain that the terms ‘clear’ and ‘distinct’ are interchangeable when they are used in their strict senses.

¹⁴. Patterson writes: “The best-known account of Cartesian clarity and distinctness is probably that provided by Gewirth (1943). The core of Gewirth’s interpretation is the notion that an idea of *x* is minimally clear if it contains the property which constitutes the nature and essence of *x*, and minimally distinct if it contains nothing contradictory to the essence of *x*. A minimally clear and distinct idea of *x* becomes clearer if more attributes necessarily connected with the nature of *x* are included in it. The idea thereby also becomes

In Patterson's illustration of choice, x is the mind.¹⁵ Given Descartes's mind-body dualism, properties that are consistent with the essence of the mind include the principle attribute of the mind — i.e. thought — which “constitutes the nature and essence of” the mind, as well as specific modes of thinking such as judging, doubting, willing, imagining, sensing, and feeling emotions, all of which are “necessarily connected to the nature of” the mind (Patterson 2008: 219). Properties that are *inconsistent* with the essence of the mind include the principal attribute of bodies — i.e. extension — as well as specific modes of extension, i.e. specific sizes, shapes, locations, and motions. So, on Patterson's reading, the more a perception of the mind ascribes specific modes of thought to the mind, the clearer it is. And the *less* it ascribes properties that actually belong to bodies rather than minds, the more distinct it is. TE allows that, as Descartes says, “a perception may be clear without being distinct” (*Pr.* i.46).¹⁶ If a perception of the mind contains thinking or modes of thought, then it is clear, but if it also contains bodily properties, then it is not distinct — it is clear but confused.

TE has something going for it. Descartes's Truth Rule asserts that if a perception is strictly clear and distinct, then it must be true — and so, *a fortiori*, it must be true regarding the essence of its object. Thus, TE identifies a condition that is necessary for strictly clear and distinct perception: *truth regarding essences*.

However, truth regarding essences is not sufficient for strictly clear and distinct perception. One way to see this is with cases where a

more distinct, since ‘the richer its content, the more is it distinguished from what is other than it’ (Gewirth 1943: 90)” (Patterson 2008: 219). In addition to Gewirth, Patterson also cites Curley (1986: 169–70), and Smith (2001: 294), to show that, despite variations in details, the core idea of TE is shared by others (Patterson 2008: 219–20). See also Smith (2010; 2015a; 2015b: 56–64; Smith 2017: §5).

15. I will follow Patterson's emphasis on perceptions of the mind, though all of the points I will make — both to illustrate her view and to challenge it — could be made *mutatis mutandis* for perceptions of the body.

16. We'll dive into this passage in §5 below.

perception is true regarding the essence of its object but is nevertheless false. Such cases remain out of view so long as we focus, as Patterson tends to focus, on the abstract idea or perception of “the mind”, meaning the mind-in-general, without referring to any particular mind. Truths about the mind-in-general are exhausted by truths about the essence of the mind. Such truths are not contingent truths but rather modal truths, as they identify properties that are either necessary or possible for a mind: a mind *must* be thinking; a mind *can* be judging, doubting, willing, imagining, sensing, feeling various emotions, or engaging in any other mode of thinking. But when we set aside the mind-in-general to consider some actual particular mind, we encounter a further realm of truths — contingent truths about the specific properties that a particular mind *does* have at a given moment. Take a case where you are trying to figure out what's going on in your friend's mind. Suppose that by misreading her body language you come to misperceive your friend as feeling anxious when she's not anxious at all. Anxiety is consistent with the essence of the mind, for Descartes: it's a mode of thought — a property that a mind *can* have. So, your perception satisfies TE's requirement for being strictly clear and distinct. But anxiety is a property that your friend's mind presently *doesn't* have, so your perception is false, and so, given the Truth Rule, it cannot be strictly clear and distinct.

This kind of counterexample to TE is not limited to third-person perceptions of other minds. Analogous cases arise even when we perceive our own minds through introspection or reflection. Such cases will be off the table for those who assume that Descartes is committed to “the epistemological transparency of mind or thought” (or “Transparency” for short), according to which introspection always delivers indubitable, infallible, certain knowledge of one's own thoughts. But as I've argued elsewhere, Descartes rejects any such Transparency (Paul 2018). In fact, he documents various ways in which introspection is fallible. For example, introspection can misrepresent a purely

intellectual act of conceiving as an act of imagining;¹⁷ a weak belief as a strong belief;¹⁸ and an obscure perception as a clear perception.¹⁹ In all of these cases, introspection represents one's mind in ways that are consistent with the essence of the mind (as having features it *can* have), so it satisfies TE's condition; and yet it *misrepresents* one's mind (as having features it *doesn't* have), so it cannot be strictly clear and distinct.

Perhaps TE's requirement is just too narrow. Perhaps what makes a perception clear and distinct is not that its content is true just regarding essences, but more broadly that its content is *true*. This is the simpler version of the intentional view that I mentioned earlier. Defending it, Thomas Lennon asserts, "Perceiving the truth clearly and distinctly is not some mysterious additional episode. It is just perceiving the truth" (Lennon 2008: 172). As with TE, this alternative can be formulated in different ways. But the basic idea is this: A perception is clear to the extent that its content is *true*, and distinct to the extent that (in Descartes's words) it "contains only what is clear" — so, on this reading, *only what is true*. The content of such a perception is completely true.

When a content is completely true, that does not mean that it represents all truths, or even all truths concerning the perceived object. It just means that everything it does represent is true, which is compatible with it making no claim whatsoever about any number of other truths (AT 7:220–1). Such a perception contains the truth and only the truth. It needn't contain the whole truth.

This version of the intentional view is more promising than TE. It avoids the counterexamples to TE that we've considered so far. And since the Truth Rule provides that strictly clear and distinct perceptions must be completely true (not just true regarding essences), this view does a better job than TE does of specifying a condition that is necessary for strictly clear and distinct perception: *truth*.

17. AT 3:798–9; see Curley (1978: 177–8).

18. AT 3:395; see Radner (1988) and Rozemond (2006).

19. AT 6:33; AT 7:35; AT 8A:21; AT 8B:352; see M. Wilson (1978: 155).

But additional problems apply both to this simpler version of the intentional view and to TE as well. One such problem arises when we turn to the lesser degrees of clarity and distinctness, available to the senses and imagination, for which *truth isn't necessary*. Recall, for example, Descartes's assertion that a person with jaundice may visually perceive that *snow is yellow* "just as clearly and distinctly" as most of us visually perceive that *snow is white* (AT 7:145). At least one of these contents is false. In fact, Descartes maintains that, strictly speaking, *both* of them are false. He grants that there is a sense in which one of them is true: snow is indeed white, if "white" is taken to refer a certain physical property, a configuration of microscopic particles that reflects light in such a way as to cause perceptions of whiteness in typical perceivers. But ordinary vision doesn't reveal any such microscopic configuration. What vision depicts instead are what commentators call sensible or sensuous colours, which do not belong to bodies at all, in Descartes's view, but are rather just projections of the mind.²⁰ It is useful for us to see bodies as sensuously coloured, because it helps us navigate our surroundings, but it is a useful illusion. Insofar as we are talking about sensuous colours — colours as they appear visually — snow is neither white nor yellow. It doesn't have any sensuous colour at all. No physical object does. So, in depicting snow as yellow and snow as white, respectively, the perceptions in question aren't true regarding the essence of snow (nor of any physical object) and indeed they aren't true at all. And yet, Descartes says, both of them are (to a degree available to the senses) clear and distinct.

Let's return to the case of strictly clear and distinct (intellectual) perception, for which truth *is* necessary. Even so, truth isn't sufficient. A perception may be true even though it is obscure or confused. Descartes makes this plain when he insists that it's always improper, in the context of the *Meditations*, to assent to perception that isn't strictly clear and distinct — even if, in doing so, "by chance I arrive at the truth". In the *Meditations*, where the standards for assent are maximally

20. See Chamberlain (2019b), Nolan (2011), Rozemond (1996), Simmons (2008).

high, Descartes says you are “in error” and using your will “improperly [*non recte*]” whenever you assent to a perception that is in any way obscure — even if “by chance [you] arrive at the truth”. Sometimes an obscure perception “happens to be true”. In such cases, what you perceive is true, even while you “do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness” (AT 7:59–60). Truth is not enough.

In the Second Replies, Descartes indicates further that, contrary to the purely intentional reading, the clarity of a perception is not merely a matter of its content:

We must distinguish between the subject-matter [*materialiam*], or the thing itself which we assent to, and the formal reason [*ratio formalis*] which moves the will to give its assent: it is only in respect of the reason that transparent clarity is required [*sola ratione perspicuitatem requirimus*]. (AT 7:147–8)

Descartes uses the phrase ‘formal reason’ to contrast the *content* or “subject-matter” of a perception with the particular *form* of perception, namely clear perception, that provides a reason for assent. You make a judgement when you assent to the content of a perception. But if you have a *reason* for assenting, what gives you a reason is not the content itself but rather the particular way in which you perceive the content — i.e. *clearly*. Indeed, Descartes adds, “this formal reason consists in a certain inner light [*haec ratio formalis consistit in lumine quodam interno*]” (*Ibid.*); and this “light in the intellect’ means transparent clarity of cognition” (3O/R, AT 7:192). Mental illumination — clarity — is something over and above the content it shines upon, even when the content is true. A content may be true but unclear to you — in which case, you shouldn’t assent to it. As an example, Descartes gives “the case of the infidel” who believes Christian doctrines which are obscure to the infidel but nonetheless true (in Descartes’s view):

If, despite the fact that these doctrines are obscure to him, he is induced to embrace them by fallacious arguments, I

make bold to assert that he will not on that account be a true believer, but will instead be committing a sin by not using his reason properly. (AT 7:148*; cf. AT 7:208)

To drive home the distinction between perceiving a truth and perceiving it clearly, consider that you can perceive a truth in any number of different ways. For example, if you merely consider the proposition *God exists as the infinitely perfect immaterial being*, perhaps to wonder whether it’s true, then the content of your thought happens to be true (by Descartes’s lights) — and it’s true regarding the essence of God, so it satisfies the TE condition — but you wouldn’t thereby have a clear and distinct perception. Descartes holds that clear and distinct perceptions compel assent. But, as this example illustrates, merely considering a proposition that happens to be true does not compel assent. So, a perception’s being true cannot be sufficient for strict clarity and distinctness.²¹

This problem generalizes in two ways. We get the same problem if we substitute mere considering with any number of other attitudes that are not strictly clear or distinct, even when their contents happen (according to Descartes) to be true. If, for example, you assume, pretend, guess, hope, or doubt that *God exists*, you do not thereby clearly perceive that *God exists*. And we get the same problem yet again if we substitute the proposition about God with any other proposition. Regardless of what *p* is — even if *p* happens to be true regarding

21. I think Smith has a real insight when he says that a clear idea of *x* exhibits the element or elements that constitute the nature of *x*, along with the relation that unifies them, if *x* is complex (Smith 2001: 294). I see this as a precisification of the truth requirement for strict clarity — but again, it would be necessary but not sufficient. What is missing, I will argue, is the phenomenal quality that is clarity. Smith’s use of the term “exhibit” might point in the right direction, since, as Barth (2016) has shown, Descartes uses *exhibere* to say an object or idea is exhibited or displayed to the subject in consciousness, and thus with phenomenality. Even so, there is still the further question of how well — how clearly — an idea is exhibited, since many ideas are exhibited obscurely. In any case, Smith doesn’t go in this direction. On his reading, what makes a perception clear and distinct is just that it has the right kind of content, and so he makes no mention of phenomenality, subjectivity, consciousness, or anything of that sort.

essences, or even completely true — if you merely consider, assume, pretend, guess, hope, or doubt *p*, you do not thereby perceive *p* clearly or distinctly.

In sum, what makes a perception clear is not merely that its content has a certain objective property, such as truth or truth regarding essences or natures. Truth isn't necessary for the lesser degrees of clarity available to the senses and imagination. And although truth is necessary for the highest degree of clarity — completely clear intellection — truth isn't sufficient. Clarity is not a matter of the content itself but of the *way* in which it is perceived. To perceive something clearly is to perceive it in a certain way — a way that is characterized, I will argue, by its phenomenality.

3. Explaining the Phenomenal View

The phenomenality, or phenomenal character, of a thought is the subjectively felt or experienced quality of “what it’s like” to have that thought.²² Remember that Descartes uses the term ‘thought’ (*cogitatio/ pensée*) very broadly to include judging, doubting, conceiving, sensing, imagining, and occurrent emotions — any conscious mental event. The phenomenality of Cartesian thought is exemplified by the “first and simple thoughts of infants”, including “the pain they *feel* from some wind that distends their intestines, or the pleasure they *feel* from being nourished by sweet blood” (AT 5:221[†]; cf. AT 3:424, AT 8A:35). Other paradigmatic examples of phenomenal events include other forms of sensing, as well as imagining and occurrent emotions. In fact, Descartes holds that *all* thoughts have phenomenality, including intellectual ones.²³ For example, there’s something it’s like to intellectually

22. This use of the phrase “what it’s like” was made famous by Nagel (1974). I use ‘phenomenality’ for the relevant quality, and ‘phenomenology’ for the study or description of that quality. Scholars have documented a variety of ways in which Descartes attends to the phenomenal dimension of our mental lives. See, for example, Barth (2016), Chamberlain (2016; 2019a), Greenberg (2007), Lähteenmäki (2007), Nadler (2011: 134), Shapiro (2012), Simmons (2008; 2012; 2017).

23. This follows from two Cartesian commitments: (i) we are conscious of all

conceive of a chiliagon (as a thousand-sided figure), and this differs from what it’s like to imagine a chiliagon (AT 7:72).²⁴ Moreover, intellectual thoughts differ from each other in their phenomenality. For example, what it’s like to intellectually conceive of a chiliagon differs from what it’s like to do long division in your mind, and so on. Despite such variations, I argue, Descartes recognizes a phenomenal quality that is shared, to varying degrees, by some sensory thoughts and some intellectual thoughts, namely clarity.

The phenomenal reading of clarity has not been given a fair hearing.²⁵ Before confirming that Descartes views clarity as a phenomenal quality, we need to explain carefully what that view amounts to. Following Descartes’s dictum that the nature of clarity is to be learned through examples (AT 7:164), I will begin with examples both of sensory clarity (§3.1) and intellectual clarity (§3.2). I will then explain that clarity is adverbial in the sense that it is a way of perceiving a content, whereby the content strikes the perceiver as true (§3.3).

3.1 Sensory Examples

For sensory examples, let’s focus, as Descartes does, on cases of vision. Start with the visual experience you’re having right now. This page is visually clear to you — or ‘vivid and lively’ to you, as Descartes also puts it, using terms that plainly denote a phenomenal quality. While he reserves that pair of terms for imagistic forms of clarity in the senses and imagination, he uses the term ‘present’ for what is clear through any form of perception, including intellection. Clarity is presentational.²⁶

of our thoughts (AT 7:160; AT 8A:7), and (ii) consciousness imbues our thoughts with phenomenality. See Simmons (2012).

24. See Simmons (2012: 4).

25. None of the proponents of the dominant, intentional approach (cited above in n. 14) cite any defense of the phenomenal reading. Patterson is the only one who even mentions the phenomenal alternative, as an after-thought in the conclusion of her essay (2008: 232). Gaukroger (1992) offers something like the phenomenal reading, but his take is uncharitable, as I will explain in §3.2.

26. Presentational phenomenology is of vital interest to some contemporary

When you perceive p clearly, your perception doesn't merely have p as its content; it *presents* p to you as true. When p is clear or present to you, we might say, in other words, that p *strikes* you as true, or that p *feels*, *seems*, or *appears* to you to be true.

Contrast your clear vision of this page with the experience you'd have if, without seeing any page, you were merely to you assume, pretend, guess, hope, or doubt that there's a page here. All of these mental attitudes have the same content: there's a page here. And yet only vision *presents* the page to you as being right there in front of you. Only vision presents it to you as true that there's a page here.

Once we interpret clarity as this presentational phenomenal quality, it makes perfect sense when Descartes says that one person may see snow as yellow just as clearly as someone else sees snow as white (AT 7:145). He is not saying that these contradictory contents are equally true, as the intentional reading would entail. Rather, he's saying that that these two contents are equally presented as true — they equally feel, seem, or appear to be true — to their respective perceivers.

We mention truth to elucidate clarity, but not in the way assumed by the intentional reading. What it means for a perception to be clear is not that its content is true as a matter of objective fact, but rather that its content is presented as true to the conscious perceiver, which is a matter of its subjective, phenomenal character. When it comes to the senses, at least, clarity isn't truth. It's a feeling of truth.

3.2 Intellectual Examples

The phenomenal reading of clarity has been hampered by the assumption that phenomenality is limited to sensing, imagining, and occurrent emotions. As far as I'm aware, the commentator who comes the closest to the reading I propose is Stephen Gaukroger, who seems to indicate the phenomenal quality we noted above when he says that clarity is readily recognizable in "vivid pictorial representations" or

epistemologists — see, e.g., the excellent work of Bengson (2015a; 2015b) and Chudnoff (2013) — though I cannot here get into how Descartes's views relate to theirs.

"vivid images" in the mind which are "forceful" or "compelling". But then he complains that Descartes makes "a laughing-stock" of this quality by trying to transport it to the pure intellect (Gaukroger 1992: 585, 602).²⁷ I disagree. While clarity might be more familiar in its imagistic form, pure intellection can definitely be clear. The way to appreciate this is again through examples.

The only propositions that can be completely clear to the pure intellect are truths, according to Descartes, and the relevant truths range across the a priori matters of mathematics, logic, and metaphysics. The basic form of completely clear intellection is an *intuition*. When a completely clear intellection involves inference, it's a *deduction*.²⁸ The contents of intuitions are axioms or first principles. Here are a few of the many examples Descartes gives from math:

A. $2+3=5$

B. A square has four sides

C. A sphere has a single surface²⁹

These axioms are so simple that a typical mature human can intuit them directly, just by attentively considering them. Contrast this theorem:

D. If $\pi(x)$ is the number of primes less than or equal to x , then $x^{-1}\pi(x) \ln x \rightarrow 1$ as $x \rightarrow \infty$.³⁰

27. Gaukroger contends that this is a shift from Descartes's early work, the *Regulae*, to his later work. In my view, Descartes consistently holds throughout his career that perceptions of all kinds can be clear to some degree but only intellection can be completely clear. Despite my disagreement with Gaukroger, he makes a valuable contribution in tracing Cartesian clarity to the Roman rhetorical tradition, including Quintilian. Building on Gaukroger, Jones (2006: ch. 2) enriches this part of the story. Still, I think a more important line of influence stems from Stoic epistemology (see n. 37 below).

28. I expound Descartes's notions of intuition and deduction, as two forms of completely clear intellection, in Paul (*forthcoming*: ch. 8).

29. See AT 7:36 and AT 10:368.

30. This the Prime Number Theorem, proven (independently) by Hadamard and de la Vallée Poussin in 1896.

Whereas *A*, *B*, and *C* were clear to you as soon as you considered them, *D* is presumably obscure to you. All of these propositions are true, so the difference isn't a matter of truth. It's a matter of phenomenality. What's it's like to perceive the first three truths (clearly) differs from what it's like to perceive this last one (obscurely). Only the first three are presented to you, or strike you, as true.

It's especially useful to consider cases where a truth *becomes clear* to you after being obscure to you at first. *D* could become clear to you, but you would have to work through arduous demonstrations to get there. Instead, let's take some cases that are a little more complex than the first three above, but not as complex as *D*:

E. The sum of the numbers 1, 2, and 3 is equal to their product.³¹

F. Whenever two lines intersect, they produce two pairs of equal angles.

G. Every concave figure can be rounded out to a convex figure that bounds a greater area in a smaller perimeter.³²

H. Two differently sized circles can have at most two common points.

Each of these may be obscure to you at first. But *E* will become clear to you through this simple deduction:

$$1+2+3 = 6$$

$$1 \times 2 \times 3 = 6$$

$$\text{Therefore, } 1+2+3 = 1 \times 2 \times 3$$

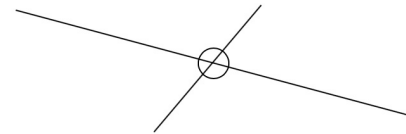
If *E* was already clear to you as soon as you considered it, I suspect it's because you automatically performed a deduction like this yourself.

31. Thanks to William Egri for suggesting examples *E* and *F*.

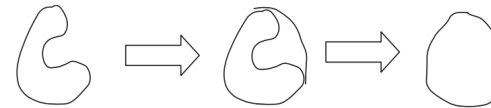
32. I borrow examples *G* and *H* from Chudnoff (2013). He uses them to illustrate the contemporary notion of intuition, however, and it should be noted that some of the mental states Chudnoff classifies as intuitions are dubitable and/or fallible, and so wouldn't count as intuitions (*intuitus*) in Descartes's sense.

This example follows the same pattern as the one Descartes uses to introduce his notion of deduction in Rule 3 of the *Rules* (AT 10:368).³³ As he explains there, a deduction is a chain of intuitions: you clearly intuit each premise; you clearly intuit the fact that the premises entail the conclusion; and you thereby clearly deduce the conclusion.

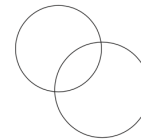
Some truths are readily made clear through diagrams or illustrations.³⁴ *F* should become clear to you when you reflect on this illustration:



G should become clear to you thanks to this illustration:



H should become clear to you with this illustration:



Each proposition — *E*, *F*, *G*, *H* — was true from the beginning when you perceived it obscurely. Each would be true if you were to assume, pretend, guess, hope, or doubt that it's true — which are all ways of perceiving obscurely. So again, contrary to the intentional reading, perceiving something clearly is not simply a matter of perceiving something true. Notice what it's like as each proposition becomes clear to you. It's like the truth gets *illuminated*. In each case, the proposition

33. His example is: $2+2 = 4$; $1+3 = 4$; therefore, $2+2 = 3+1$.

34. In such cases, Descartes insists that it is still through your intellect that you see truths clearly, even though your intellect is "helped" by your senses or imagination. See Rules 12–18 of the *Regulae* (AT 10:411–69). For commentary, see Sepper (1989, 1996).

goes from being one that you're merely considering to one that is presented to you, or strikes you, as true. In this respect, intellectual clarity is akin to sensory clarity: it, too, is a feeling of truth.

There are differences, however. One difference we should stress right away is that only intellection can be completely clear, in Descartes's view, and when it is, it's infallible. What completely clear intellection presents as true is always some truth, some bit of reality. In such a case, it would be an understatement to say, as we do with sensory clarity, that something 'seems' or 'appears' to be true, for in this case, "if something is clearly perceived, then ... it is true, and does not merely seem or appear to be true" (AT 7:511[†]). Thus, Descartes employs success-entailing terms to say that what you perceive in such cases is 'evident', 'manifest', or 'transparently clear' to you (*evidens, manifestus, perspicuus*) — terms that don't apply to fallible perceptions. By contrast, sensory clarity is fallible: what it presents as true may in fact be false.

While the examples canvassed so far are from math, Descartes also invokes completely clear intellection in metaphysics, which includes all truths about the existence of things and the natures of things that exist: minds, bodies, and properties thereof. Many of these are necessary truths or 'eternal truths', but some of them are contingent. Indeed, "the first principle" of Descartes's metaphysics is his famous *cogito* argument — "I am thinking, therefore I am" — in which the premise and conclusion are both contingent truths. Descartes often replaces the generic premise *I am thinking* with claims about the specific thought one is having at a given moment: *I am doubting; I think I am walking; I seem to see such-as-such*, and so on. If you were to apprehend any such truth, then you would do so through introspection, a higher-order act of perceiving your own current thoughts. Introspection itself is always intellectual, even when the lower-order thought to which it is directed is sensory or imaginative (AT 5:221; AT 7:358). As a form of intellection, introspection *can be* completely clear, but that doesn't mean it always is.

For starters, like any form of perception, introspection admits of variations in clarity. If you have a mild pain, it may not be clear to you

introspectively — it may not strike you — that what you have is pain, as opposed to, say, an itch or a tickle. If you have an intense, searing pain, by contrast, then it will be very clear to you introspectively — it will strike you forcefully — that what you have is pain.

But even when introspection is very clear, Descartes holds that, ordinarily, it won't be completely clear. This is because, ordinarily, introspection is confused with obscure perceptions of your body in a way that lessens its clarity. I will explain this in §5 below. For now, though, we need to get precise about the kind of phenomenal quality that clarity is.

3.3 Clarity Is Adverbial

One obstacle to seeing the viability of the phenomenal reading is an outmoded conception of phenomenality. When analytic philosophers began to take special interest in phenomenal mental states as such, in the first half of the 20th century, they tended to contrast them with intentional states, and often assumed that the two are mutually exclusive.³⁵ The paradigm examples of phenomenal states were so-called "raw feels" or "brute sensations" — pain being their favorite example — which they thought had phenomenality but no intentionality. They contrasted these with beliefs, desires, and other attitudes, which they thought had intentionality but no phenomenality. Sarah Patterson seems to adopt this dichotomy when she opposes her "intentional view" of clarity to the "phenomenal view", and suggests that, on the phenomenal view, clear (and distinct) perception is merely "a kind of feeling that compels the will to assent", a feeling which exerts a "brute compulsion" and which one might "compare to pain" (Patterson 2008: 232). But this is a caricature. On a charitable version of the phenomenal view, clarity is not a brute feeling devoid of content. In fact, there is no such thing as clarity without content. Just as you cannot have a perception without some content that you perceive, you cannot have a clear perception without some content that you perceive clearly. To

35. Barth (2016: 17) helpfully makes this observation.

perceive a content clearly is to perceive it in a phenomenally distinctive way.

Insofar as clarity is a *way* of perceiving content, it needn't be part of the content itself. Let's distinguish between two kinds of phenomenal qualities. On one hand, some phenomenal qualities figure in the content of perception; they are qualities that seem to belong to the objects we perceive. For example, sensuous qualities like colour, heat, and taste appear to be properties of things we perceive: the apple looks red, the stove feels hot, the mango tastes sweet. Such qualities are part of *what* we perceive.

On the other hand, some phenomenal qualities are adverbial: within a given perception, they are not part of what we perceive, but characterize the way we are perceiving. Adverbial phenomenal qualities include the ones that vary between perceptual modalities, which are, literally, different ways of perceiving. Compare vision and touch. What it's like to see with your eyes that a ball is round is different from what it's like to feel with your hands that the ball is round. The phenomenal qualities of seeing and touching are not perceived as properties of the ball, like roundness is; instead, they characterize different ways of perceiving the roundness of the ball. Qualities of this sort can be referred to with adverbs — what it's like to perceive roundness *visually* differs from what it's like to perceive roundness *haptically* — which indicate ways of perceiving rather than objects perceived.

Clarity is likewise an adverbial phenomenal quality. When your perception is clear, its clarity is not an object of that very perception, but characterizes the way you are perceiving. Suppose you're looking at a robin in the woods. When it's far away and you perceive it obscurely, you perceive it as having a certain shape and colour. When you get closer and you perceive it clearly, you perceive it as having several additional properties — eyes, a beak, a certain texture of feathers, etc. — but clarity is not among them. We can of course say that the robin is now clear — or more precisely that it's now clear *to you* — but that should not mislead us into reifying a referent for 'clear' as if it were some thing or property that you've now come to see. When we

say that the robin is clear to you, all this means is that you perceive the robin clearly. Clarity is not *what* you perceive when you are close to the robin. Rather, clarity qualifies the *way* you perceive the robin when you are close to it. And this way of perceiving is characterized by its distinctive phenomenality: what it's like to perceive the robin clearly differs from what it's like to perceive it obscurely.³⁶

Surface grammar can be misleading. When we say that your perception represents something as red, this just means that *red* is a predicate within the content of your perception. When I say that a clear perception of *p* presents *p* as true to you, one might think that, likewise, this just means that *true* is a predicate within the content of your perception. But that would be a misunderstanding. To see why, let *p* be the proposition, for example, that there are Martians. If you suppose for the sake of argument that *it's true that there are Martians*, then *true* is a predicate within the content of your supposition, but this does not by any means make it clear to you — it doesn't thereby *strike* you — that there are Martians. In §2 we saw that perceiving a content which happens to be true is not sufficient for perceiving it clearly. Here we see further that predicating truth of a proposition within the content of your perception is not sufficient for perceiving it clearly.

Descartes uses the following forms of locution interchangeably:

- p* is clear to S.
- S has a clear perception that *p*.
- S clearly perceives that *p*.

All three of these locutions mean the same thing, but the last one — using the adverb 'clearly' — is the most apt because it indicates that clarity is an adverbial quality, modifying the way in which a subject perceives something.³⁷

36. I don't deny that clarity can be an object of perception. When you have a clear perception, the clarity of that perception may become the object of an additional, higher-order act of introspection; you may introspectively perceive the clarity of your lower-order perception. The point remains that the clarity of the lower-order perception is not an object of that very perception.
37. Lennon gets on the right track momentarily when he observes that clarity

4. Attributing the Phenomenal View to Descartes

In the course of explaining the view that clarity is phenomenal, we've already seen that that it fits with various things Descartes says. We'll now see that his adherence to the phenomenal view is confirmed by five new lines of argument: Like phenomenal qualities in general, he treats clarity as primitive or indefinable (§4.1); he refers to clarity with phenomenological terms (§4.2); he describes clarity with phenomenological metaphors (§4.3); he insists that clarity requires attention (§4.4); and he identifies perceptions as clear while it remains an open question whether they are true (§4.5).

4.1 Clarity Is Primitive

We're about to see that Descartes regards clarity as primitive, in a certain sense. While the intentional reading does not account for this point, the phenomenal reading does.

Philosophers commonly observe that phenomenality "cannot be defined in more basic terms. Like many other concepts, it is *primitive and indefinable*. Our only option is to define the concept ostensively ..." (Smithies 2019: 4[†]). What does this mean? Given that a definition of x

(and distinctness) are "adverbial notions" which qualify the act rather than the object or content of perception. But I'm not sure his reading respects this observation. He writes: "Clarity and distinctness are used by Descartes as adverbs to emphasize the success of certain perceptions in arriving at the truth" (Lennon 2008: 171). On this reading, a perception of p is successful — and thus clear and distinct — precisely insofar as p is true. But truth is not adverbial. "S clearly and distinctly perceives p " cannot be replaced with "S truly perceives p ". And truth is a property of the content of a perception, not the act. We can say that an act of perceiving is accurate or true, but only in virtue of the fact that its content is true. This is why, in §2, I cast Lennon as advancing a version of the intentional reading, perhaps *malgré-lui*.

Responding to Lennon, Smith denies that clarity itself is an adverbial quality, though he grants that we can use adverbs to describe it (Smith 2010: 75; Smith 2015a: 90). Smith could agree with me that the three locutions above mean the same thing, but I think he would say that the *first* one is the most apt, insofar as it might seem friendlier to his view that clarity is a property of the content rather than the act of perceiving. I would reply that, even in the first locution, what 'clear' qualifies is not the content p by itself, but the way p is to the perceiving subject: " p is clear to S ".

is an attempt to explain or convey what x is, let us distinguish between *logical definitions* and *ostensive definitions*. To start with the former:

A **logical definition** of x is an attempt to convey what x is by analyzing x into more basic conditions that are each logically necessary and together logically sufficient to make something x .

We can logically define *octagon*, for example: a closed plane figure with eight straight sides. These are all more basic concepts that you can understand without knowing what an octagon is. So, you can use this definition to learn what an octagon is, without experiencing one first-hand.

We cannot, however, give a logical definition of anything phenomenal. This goes not just for phenomenality in general but also for the distinctive phenomenality of specific types of thoughts. We cannot logically define sensuous redness, for example. The only way to convey what sensuous redness is like is to point one's attention to instances of that quality in one's own experience, which is to define it ostensively. More generally:

An ostensive definition of x is an attempt to convey to someone what x is by *pointing* their attention to (instances of) x .

We can now be precise about the sense in which phenomenal qualities are primitive and indefinable:

x is (epistemically) primitive just in case x cannot be defined logically, but only ostensively.

Descartes is in line with the consensus that phenomenal qualities are primitive in this sense. Consider this passage from his *Search After Truth*, where he discusses the paradigmatically phenomenal quality that is (sensuous) colour, using white as an example:

There are, in my view, some things which are made more

obscure by our attempts to define them: since they are very simple and clear, they are perceived and known just on their own, and there is no better way of knowing and perceiving them. Perhaps some of the most serious errors in the sciences are those committed by those who try to define what should only be conceived The only way we can learn such things is by ourselves: what convinces us of them is simply *our own experience or awareness* — that awareness or internal testimony which everyone experiences within himself when he ponders such matters. Thus it would be pointless trying to define, for someone totally blind, what it is to be white: *in order to know what white is, all that is needed is to have one's eyes open and to see white.* (AT 10:524^{*†})

Though he does not use the term 'primitive' here, he does say, in effect, that white is primitive. We cannot understand "what white is" by defining it in other terms; indeed, attempting to define it would only "[make it] more obscure". We can understand "what white is" only "on [its] own", by being acquainted with white itself as it occurs in "our own experience" when we "see white", which is why "someone totally blind" has no way of learning "what white is".

In the same passage of the *Search*, Descartes says that *doubt* and *thought* are also primitive: "[T]here are things we cannot know about unless we see them. In order, then, to know what doubt and thought are, all we need do is to doubt and to think" (AT 10:525). He discusses primitives again in the corresponding passage of the *Principles*:

I have often noticed that philosophers make the mistake of employing logical definitions in an attempt to explain what was already very simple and self-evident; the result is that they only make matters more obscure. (*Pr.* i.10, AT 8A:8)

Things which "we cannot know about unless we see them" (as he says in the *Search*) — or things which do not admit of "logical definitions" (as he says here in the *Principles*) — are primitive in the sense I identified above.

Descartes gives at least four indications that clarity is primitive. First, when we consider Descartes's list of primitives — including *thought*, *doubt*, and *certainty* — it seems like *clarity* belongs in the same category. Someone who insists that we can understand what doubt, thought, and certainty are only by "seeing" or reflecting on our own states of doubt, thought, and certainty should probably also hold that we can understand what clarity is only by reflecting on our own states of clarity.

Second, one could argue that, for Descartes, certainty in particular is not just in the same category as clarity: it *is* clarity. Descartes often uses terms for 'certain' (*certus*) and 'clear' (*clarus*, *perspicuus*) interchangeably. In a prominent strand of Latin usage going back to Cicero, those terms are not only interchangeable but synonymous.³⁸ If Descartes follows this usage, then, when he says that certainty is primitive, he is saying, in other words, that clarity is primitive. While this point is suggestive, we needn't put weight on it here.

For in another passage — and this is our third and most direct bit of evidence — Descartes does refer to clarity by name as he indicates that it is primitive:

I ask my readers to ponder all the examples that I went through in my *Meditations*, both of clear and distinct

38. Before Cicero, Western philosophy as we know it was conducted exclusively in Greek, and so it was Cicero, more than any other individual, who standardized Latin usage for philosophical discourse. In his *Academica*, Cicero renders *dêlos* as *clarus* ('clear' as 'clear') and *adêlon* as *incertum* ('unclear' as 'uncertain'). In this rendering, 'clear' and 'uncertain' are antonyms, so 'clear' and 'certain' are synonyms. In other work (Paul *forthcoming*: ch. 2), I argue that Descartes it at least partly through Cicero that Descartes encountered the epistemology of the ancient Stoics, who coined the notion of clear and distinct perception. My phenomenological reading of Cartesian clarity dovetails with 'internalist' readings both of Stoic clarity (Nawar 2014, Perin 2005) and of late medieval *evidentia* (Choi 2018).

perception, and of obscure and confused perception, and thereby accustom themselves to *distinguishing what is clearly apprehended from what is obscure*. This is something that it is easier to learn by examples than by rules, and I think that in the *Meditations* I explained, or at least touched on, all the relevant examples. (2O/R, Geometrical Appendix, AT 7:164⁺*)

The difference between what is “clear” (or “clearly apprehended”) and what is “obscure” is to be learned “by examples” rather than “by rules”. There is a close connection between rules and logical definitions. If there is a logical definition of x , then it can be used to formulate a rule for determining whether or not something is x . The logical definition of *octagon*, for example, yields an obvious rule for determining whether or not something is an octagon: Check whether or not it’s a closed plane figure with eight straight sides. If there were a logical definition of clarity, there would be a corresponding rule for determining whether something is clear as opposed to being obscure. But Descartes says the difference between clarity and obscurity is not to be learned by rules, and so not by logical definitions, but rather by examples — which is just what it means for something to be primitive.

Fourth, even if Descartes had never said that clarity is primitive, he *treats* clarity as primitive, in that he never gives it a logical definition. He only points to it. Throughout his writings, he points to clarity in six different ways, by identifying:

- (i) **objects or contents** that can be perceived clearly — i.e. the *cogito*, various other axioms or first principles that can be intuited, as well as various theorems that can be deduced.
- (ii) **synonyms** for ‘clear’ — i.e. (phenomenally) ‘present’, ‘open [to view]’, ‘manifest’, ‘evident’, ‘perspicuous’ or ‘transparent’; and, for sensory clarity, ‘lively and vivid’.

(iii) **metaphors** for (complete) clarity — i.e. illumination; feeling and handling.

(iv) **an enabling condition** for clarity — i.e. attention.

(v) **a cause** of (sensory) clarity — i.e. forceful impact on sensory organs.

(vi) **an effect** of (complete) clarity — i.e. compelled assent.

In his *Meditations*, Descartes leans most heavily on the first and primary way of pointing to clarity, which is to get you to *have* a clear and distinct perception, with the paradigm example of the *cogito* (AT 7:25), and then to reflect on this perception so as to *notice* its evidential quality: “In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting” (AT 7:35).³⁹

Descartes employs the other ways of pointing to clarity throughout the *Meditations* and in other works as well. Indeed, that is precisely what he is doing in the notoriously puzzling text where he defines clarity in *Principles* i.45:

I call something ‘clear’ when it is present and open <Fr. manifest> to the attentive mind — just as we say that we see something clearly when, being present to the eye’s gaze, it strikes it with enough force and openness [*Claram voco illam, quae menti attendenti praesens & aperta* <Fr. manifeste> est: sicut ea clarè à nobis videri dicimus, quae, oculo intuenti praesentia, satis fortiter & apertè illum movent]. (AT 8A:22*)

39. The *Meditations* is specially written to help you gain clarity for yourself. The way it does so, I would argue, is partly thanks to its unique style, which appropriates literary strategies from the traditional genre of spiritual meditations. On the style of the *Meditations* see Cunning (2010), Garber (1986: 91–7, 113 n 36), Gilson (1975: 186), Kosman (1986), Janowski (2000: 109 ff.), Marlies (1978), Mercer (2014; 2016); Nolan (2000) and Rorty (1986). On Descartes’s debt to the meditational tradition, see Hatfield (1985; 1986; 2003), Mercer (2014; 2016), Secada (2013), and Vendler (1989).

This isn't good for the intentional reading. If Descartes defines clarity in terms of truth (or essences or natures), why doesn't he say so when he defines clarity? Proponents of the intentional reading downplay this passage.⁴⁰ But it appears in a major work that he published twice, and it is the only sentence in the entire corpus where he explicitly says what he means by 'clear'. If there is one sentence to which an interpretation of Cartesian clarity must answer, this is it.

So let's dig into it. It has two clauses, separated by the dash. In the first clause, Descartes glosses clarity in general, and then he turns to the familiar case of visual clarity.

The adjective "clear" applies to a content or object here, but notice the dative construction: *menti attendenti*, "to the attentive mind." Clarity isn't just a matter of the object itself but of how that object is presented to the subject. Reinforcing this point is the fact that Descartes moves freely here, as he often does, between the adjective "clear" as it qualifies the perceived object and the adverb "clearly" as it qualifies the act of perceiving. So the object is not clear full-stop; it's clear to the subject who perceives it clearly.

While this sentence is conventionally referred to as Descartes's definition of clarity, we should be careful how we define 'definition'. It is not a logical definition; it doesn't provide a rule or independent criteria for identifying clarity. Those who expect that kind of thing are naturally disappointed.⁴¹ Instead of analyzing clarity in terms of other properties, this sentence defines clarity by pointing to it. It does so in three of the six ways mentioned above: by identifying an *enabling condition* for any clear perception (i.e., attention); *synonyms* for 'clear' (i.e. 'present', 'open', 'manifest'); and a typical *cause* of visual clarity in particular (i.e., forceful stimulation of the eye).

The fact that Descartes denies that clarity can be defined logically in terms of another property is a problem for intentional readings, which

40. See, for example, Lennon (2008: 168), who dismisses it without quoting it.

41. Recall the remarks of Markie, Della Rocca, and Shapiro, quoted in the introduction. I agree with LoLordo that the definition "would not help anyone understand clarity and distinctness from the outside" (2005: 59 n. 15).

define clarity logically in terms of another property (*viz.* truth, or truth regarding essences or natures). In contrast, the primitive nature of clarity fits very well with the phenomenal reading, because Descartes treats phenomenal qualities as primitive. He cannot give a logical definition of clarity any more than he can for a sensuous colour. All he can do is point your attention to it as you experience it for yourself. And when you do look where he points, what you'll find, he trusts, is the phenomenal quality of something striking you as true.

4.2 Phenomenological Terms for Clarity

Recall the first clause in the definition of clarity: "I call something 'clear' when it is present and open <Fr. manifest> to the attentive mind" (*Pr. i.45*^{*}). Three of these terms — 'present', 'open', and 'manifest' (*praesens, aperta, manifeste*) — are used as synonyms for 'clear' (*clarus*).

As we noted in §3.1, 'present' evokes the phenomenal quality you experience when an object or content is presented to you as real or true. When something is present to you in this way, it is, in other words, 'manifest' to you or 'open' to you (in the sense of being open to your view as opposed to being 'hidden' or obscured from your view). Elsewhere he describes the same quality by speaking of what is 'evident' or 'transparent' (*evidens, perspicuus*) to you.⁴² While he reserves these terms for completely clear intellection, we've seen that in the case of sensory clarity he speaks of what is 'lively and vivid' (*vividae & expressae*) to you.

At least some of Descartes's synonyms for 'clear' have unmistakable overtones of phenomenality. Insofar as these terms refer to qualities of perceptions, it is hard to know what 'vivid' or 'lively' could mean if they don't describe a phenomenal quality, and, taken in context, the same is true for terms like 'manifest' and 'evident'. It should be emphasized too that 'clear' itself has a definite phenomenal resonance. This

42. For example, he says that none God's purposes are "open" to us; "all are equally hidden" (*AT 7:375*). There is an abundance of texts where *clarus* is substituted with *manifestus* (e.g. *AT 7:16, 40, 120*), *evidens* (e.g. *AT 7:47, 58–9, 147–8*), or *perspicuus* (e.g. *AT 7:62, 147–8*), or *vividae & expressae* (recall §1.2).

is even more obvious in the original Latin and French, where both *clarus* and *clair* connote bright, vivid, vibrant, or loud, and *obscurus* and *obscur* connote dark, dim, faint, or quiet. The authors of the Second Objections find it natural to speak of truths that are “as clear as the sunlight” — a phrase that Descartes repeats with approval in his response (AT 7:126, 146). In French, when a truth is evident or manifest to us, we can say, “*C’est clair comme le jour*” — “It’s as bright as day.”

4.3 Phenomenological Metaphors for Clarity

Phenomenality lends itself to metaphors and similes. In trying to convey what it’s like to have a given kind of thought, we naturally resort to saying, well ... what it’s *like*. As we’ve already seen, Descartes uses a famous metaphor to convey what it’s like to experience intellectual clarity at its best. He likens it to the experience of light, a kind of mental *illumination* — a metaphor that is all the more apt given the connotation of brightness in *clarus* and *clair*. It’s no coincidence that another term for clear is ‘lucid’, from *lucere* (‘shine’) and *lux* (‘light’). When you employ your intellect well, Descartes says, truth is revealed to you “by a certain inner light” which he calls “the natural light” or the “light of reason”, explaining that this “light in the intellect means transparent clarity of cognition” (3O/R, AT 7:192). If phenomenality is, as we say, the “lights-on” subjective quality of what it’s like to have a certain kind of thought, then having clear intellection of a truth is like blasting it with your mental floodlights.⁴³

43. We can unpack the light metaphor in terms of the structure of perception. A perception is a relation between subject and object, between perceiver and thing perceived. Descartes holds that by its very nature, every perception is endowed with intentionality in relation to its object, as well as consciousness whereby it displays that object to the perceiving subject. Consciousness imbues perception with phenomenality; it is the light of the mind (Barth 2016; Lähteenmäki 2007; Simmons 2012). So in perceiving this page, you are conscious of this page — it is something you *experience*. Whereas the intentional reading locates clarity in the object alone, I locate clarity in consciousness of the object. Everything we perceive is in the light of consciousness to some degree, but while the light shines brightly (clearly) on some things, it shines only dimly (obscurely) on others.

More evidence that clarity is phenomenal comes from Descartes’s correspondence with Silhon, in which he elaborates on his very paradigm of clarity — the intuition of the *cogito* — in a way that explicitly highlights its phenomenality. In a letter to Descartes, Silhon contends that, because we are embodied, we are so prone to obscurity and confusion that we cannot have intuitive knowledge during our earthly lives and must await the beatific vision of God in the afterlife. In reply, Descartes grants that whatever clarity we enjoy in this life is fleeting and surely pales in comparison to the “pure, constant, clear, certain, effortless, and ever-present light” of the “beatific vision” (To [Silhon], March or April 1648, AT 5:136–7). But he insists that, even here and now in our Earthly lives, we are nevertheless capable of intuiting truths clearly enough to apprehend them. He tries to get Silhon to recognize that Silhon himself has such clear intuitions, and the way he does so, notably, is by pointing to *what it feels like* to experience such clarity. He points to this quality with two sensory metaphors: one visual, the other tactile. The visual metaphor is, again, that of illumination: clear intuition, he writes, “is an illumination of the mind” (*Ibid.*). He then introduces the tactile metaphor to describe his prime example of clear perception:

I agree that such illumination is somewhat obscured by the soul’s mingling with the body; but still it gives us a primary, unearned and certain apprehension which we touch [*touchons*] with our mind with more confidence than we give to the testimony of our eyes. You will surely admit that you are less certain of the presence of the objects you see than of the truth of the proposition ‘I am thinking, therefore I exist.’ Now this apprehension is not the work of your reasoning or information passed on to you by teachers; it is something that your mind sees, feels and handles [*la voit, la sent & la manie*]; and although your imagination insistently mixes itself up with your thoughts and lessens their clarity by trying to clothe them

with shapes, it is nevertheless a proof of the capacity of our soul for receiving intuitive apprehension [*une connoissance intuitive*] from God. (*Ibid.*^{*†})

The visual language (“sees”) reminds us that Descartes elsewhere refers to the faculty of intellectual intuition as “the mind’s eye” (e.g. AT 7:25), and with this new tactile language he depicts that same faculty as, so to speak, the mind’s hand. By saying that when you clearly intuit a truth you “touch” and “feel and handle” that truth, Descartes is expressly highlighting the *feeling* of intuition; we might similarly describe it as the feeling of “grasping” or “getting hold of” a truth. He is, in effect, rehearsing the strategy of the *Meditations*: using the *cogito* as his paradigm example, he tries to get Silhon first of all to have a (completely) clear perception, and then to reflect on it so as to notice its clarity — notice how it feels to grasp the truth, what it’s like when the truth is illuminated.⁴⁴

4.4 Clarity Requires Attention

Something can be clear only “to the attentive mind” — a requirement that is stated not only in *Principles* i.45 but also (twice) in Descartes’s characterization of completely clear intuition in the *Rules* (AT 10:336). In the Second Replies, after recapping some important claims from the *Meditations*, Descartes asserts that “all this is manifest if we give the matter our careful attention” (AT 7:120). Within the *Meditations*, he repeatedly illustrates the need to attend to or concentrate on things in order to perceive them clearly:

[My perception of the wax can be] imperfect and confused, as it was before, or clear and distinct, as it is now, depending on the degree to which I **attend** [*minus vel magis ... attendo*] to what the wax consists in. (M2, AT 7:31^{*†})

[Upon completing the first argument for the existence of

44. On uses of the light metaphor more broadly in the 17th century, see Jolley (1990).

God,] if I **concentrate** carefully, all this is quite evident But when I relax my **concentration** ... it’s not so easy for me to remember how I arrived at that conclusion. (M3, AT 7:47[†])

It’s quite clear to anyone who **attentively** considers the nature of time ... that creating something and conserving it in existence are exercises of the same power. (M3, AT 7:49[†]; cf. AT 7:45)⁴⁵

When Descartes prepares to introduce or reinforce a clear (and distinct) perception, he stresses the need to concentrate or pay attention. Furthermore, he says the degree to which he perceives things clearly depends on the degree to which he attends to them or on how carefully he concentrates on them. Note that the attention required is not a higher-order act. In order to perceive *p* clearly, what you have to concentrate on is *p* itself, not your perception of *p*.

The fact that clarity requires attention is yet another mark against the intentional reading, according to which an idea is clear and distinct just in virtue of having the right kind of content. In his defense of that reading, Kurt Smith notes that innate ideas have what he takes to be the right kind of content. Thus, he infers that “Descartes’s position is that innate ideas are clear *and* distinct” (2001: 292). While Smith regards this implication as a virtue of his reading, I see it as a problem. In Descartes’s view, we always have innate ideas — of God, extension, number, etc. — even when we’re not attending to them, and when we’re not attending to them, they can’t be clear, much less clear *and* distinct. It’s not enough that we’re born with ideas that have the right kind of content. “We have to *form* [clear and] distinct ideas” (AT 3:272[†]),

45. Thanks to Alison Simmons for suggesting these texts. While these examples concern intellectual clarity, attention is also required for sensory clarity. See, e.g., Rule 9, where Descartes “compares mental intuition with ordinary vision” and describes how focused attention enhances both (AT 10:400–1).

Descartes stresses, and what that requires, minimally, is that we give them due attention.⁴⁶

While the need for attention clashes with the intentional reading, it coheres nicely with my alternative. For just like clarity, attention itself admits of an adverbial treatment and invites the phenomenally-laden metaphor of light. To perceive something clearly, you have to perceive it in a certain way: “attentively” (AT 7:49). You have to bring it into the spotlight of attention.⁴⁷

4.5 The Truth Rule Is Not Trivial

The intentional reading defines clarity and distinctness in terms of truth (or at least truth with respect to the essences or natures of things). On this reading, clear and distinct perceptions are true by definition. If this were correct, the Truth Rule — that clear and distinct perceptions are always true — would be trivial tautology. Lennon embraces this result: “Descartes takes the truth rule of clarity and distinctness to be trivially true” (2008: 173). On his interpretation, it would be utterly incoherent to ask whether clear and distinct perceptions are true. That would be like asking whether circles are shapes, or whether bachelors are unmarried⁴⁸ — it makes no sense.

46. Smith does note that attention is “connected to clarity” (2001: 284), but one problem, just noted, is that this goes against his claim that innate ideas are always clear, since we have them even without attention. Another problem is that Smith misconstrues the connection between clarity and attention when he adopts Nelson’s proposal that things which are clear are “attention grabbers” (Smith 2001:301, citing Nelson 1996: 24). Some things become clear to us when they grab our attention, as in the case of intense pain or other salient stimuli. But other things, especially abstract intellectual matters, do not grab our attention, and Descartes stresses that we have to attend to them voluntarily and sometimes with difficulty in order to perceive them clearly (AT 7:47; AT 8A:37).

47. Descartes’s treatment of attention is interesting in its own right. See Barrier (2017), Brown (2007), Dubouclez (2017), and Hatfield (2009; 2017).

48. Or to adapt Lennon’s own comparisons, it would be like asking whether someone who has successfully sought a thimble has found it, or whether a doctor who has successfully treated a patient has cured him (2008: 173).

But it does make sense to question the veracity of clear and distinct perceptions. It is the ultimate skeptical question, and Descartes takes it very seriously. At the beginning of Meditation Three, when he notes that what assures him of the truth of the *cogito* is nothing other than his clear and distinct perception of it, he queries whether he “can now lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true” (AT 7:35). In the next two paragraphs he concludes that he cannot do so yet. He concedes that, for all he knows so far, God could be a deceiver, and could “bring it about that I go wrong even in those matters which I think I intuit utterly clearly” (AT 7:35*). In order to dispel this doubt, he must establish the Truth Rule, and in order to do that, he “must examine whether there is a God, and, if there is, whether he can be deceiver. For if I do not apprehend this, it seems that I can never be fully certain about anything else” (AT 7:35*).

Pursuing this examination, Descartes goes on to argue that indeed there is a God, and that God cannot be a deceiver. From there he proceeds into Meditation Four — titled “Truth and Falsity” — where he marshals the following argument through a thicket of objections: God cannot be a deceiver; God would be a deceiver if God allowed indubitable perceptions to be false; clear and distinct perceptions are indubitable; so, God must guarantee that clear and distinct perceptions are true (= the Truth Rule).⁴⁹ In short, Descartes’s quest is largely driven by the skeptical question of whether clear and distinct perceptions are true, and he has to work very hard to answer it in the affirmative. None of this would make sense if clear and distinct perceptions were true by definition, as the intentional reading makes them out to be.

On the phenomenal reading, by contrast, it does make sense. The skeptical question amounts to this: When things are compellingly *presented* to me as true, are they really true? That question is meaningful, and answering ‘yes’ to it is no trivial matter.

49. We can remain neutral here on which notion of indubitability drives this argument. Some scholars say it’s psychological indubitability (Gewirth 1941; Loeb 1992; Newman 2007; Newman 2019: §5.3); others say it’s rational indubitability (Della Rocca 2006; 2011).

5. Obscurity, Confusion, and Distinctness

It's appropriate that we've examined clarity extensively, because Descartes defines the other perceptual qualities — obscurity, distinctness, and confusion — in terms of clarity.

Take obscurity. Clarity and obscurity are contraries. More precisely, since they are scalar, they are logical complements: more clarity means less obscurity, and vice versa. But there is an asymmetry between them: obscurity is the absence of clarity, not vice versa.⁵⁰ Descartes is part of a long, broadly Augustinian tradition that posits this kind of asymmetry between certain contraries (AT 7:55, 374). Within this tradition, evil, non-being, imperfection, and darkness, for example, are not positive features. Evil is the absence of goodness, non-being is the absence of being, imperfection is the absence of perfection, and darkness is the absence of light. That last example is particularly instructive. We've seen that clarity, at its best, is a floodlight in the mind, and so obscurity is simply the absence of that illumination. Obscurity is not a positive feature; it's just the absence of clarity.⁵¹

Now for distinctness and its contrary, confusion. Here once again is how Descartes defines distinctness after defining clarity in *Principles* i.45:

50. Martha Bolton makes a similar suggestion when she says that obscurity and confusion are "privations" of clarity and distinctness (Bolton 1986: 389). While scholastic philosophers distinguished between at least three different kinds of absences or negative entities — 'lacks', 'negations', and 'privations' (see Embry 2015) — I remain neutral on those finer classifications here.

51. Closely connected with obscurity is Descartes's notion of "material falsity". A materially false perception or idea is one that provides "subject-matter for error" or for "formal falsity" (4O/R, AT 7:232). The "essence of error [*formam erroris*]" consists in the "incorrect use of free will" (M4, AT 7:60). In the context of the *Meditations*, you use your will improperly just in case you assent to a perception that is obscure or confused — even if that perception "happens to be true" (*Ibid.*). Confusion entails obscurity, as we'll see. Thus, Descartes says that "an idea's material falsity ... arises solely from the *obscurity* of the idea" (4O/R, AT 7:234[†]). So, a perception is materially false just in case it is obscure. For more support for this proposal, see Naaman-Zauderer (2010).

I call a perception 'distinct' when, as well as being *clear*, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself *only what is clear* [*Distinctam autem illam, quæ, cum clara sit, ab omnibus aliis ita sejuncta est et præcisa, ut nihil plane aliud, quam quod clarum est, in se contineat*]. (AT 8A:22)

Clarity is more fundamental. Distinctness is defined in terms of clarity. Moreover, distinctness is defined *negatively*, not as clarity combined with some additional feature, but as clarity *in the absence of* — "sharply separated" or literally "cut off" and "separated" (*sejuncta et præcise*) from — anything *unclear*. Notice the double-negation: a perception is distinct to the extent that it's *not* contaminated by what is *not* clear. Distinctness is simply the purest case of clarity, obtaining when a perception "contains within itself *only what is clear*" — when it is *wholly* or *completely* clear. This bears emphasis:

(1) A distinct perception is a **completely clear** perception.

Within *Principles* i.45, Descartes also says:

(2) A perception which can serve as the basis for a certain and indubitable judgement needs to be **not merely clear but also distinct**. (AT 8A:22*)

If I have interpreted distinctness correctly, then, it should follow that:

(3) A perception which can serve as the basis for a certain and indubitable judgement needs to be **completely clear**. [from 1, 2]

And that is, indeed, what Descartes says:

It is clear that we do not have this kind of certainty in cases where our perception is *even the slightest bit* obscure or confused; for such obscurity, *whatever its degree*, is quite sufficient to make us have doubts in such cases. (2O/R, AT 7:145[†])

A perception provides certainty only when it is completely clear, unmarred by even the slightest scintilla of obscurity.

This point is crucial because, as Descartes says in the very next article, “a perception can be clear without being distinct” (*Pr.* i.46) — i.e. clear but confused. In other words, a perception can be clear — more precisely, it can be relatively clear, or even *very clear* — without being *completely clear*. Even when a perception is very clear, it may be confused with an obscure perception, such that it is not distinct, not completely clear. To illustrate this point, Descartes describes the way people commonly or ordinarily perceive pain:

For example, when someone feels an intense pain, [*c*] the perception he has of this pain is indeed very clear, but is not always distinct. For people commonly *confuse this perception with [o] an obscure judgement* they make concerning the nature of something which they think exists in the painful spot and which they suppose to resemble the sensation of pain; but in fact it is the sensation alone which they perceive clearly. Hence a perception can be clear without being distinct, but not distinct without being clear. (*Pr.* i.46, AT 8A:22[†])

Two perceptions are “commonly” (*vulgò*) or “ordinarily” (*ordinairement*) confused — literally “fused together” (*confusio*). One of them is (*c*) a very clear perception of pain. Importantly, the object of this perception — pain — is a sensation, which, for Descartes, is a kind of thought, existing only in the mind. Pain and other sensations are caused by the body but they are not *in* the body, so the perception of pain is not a perception of the body. Rather, it’s an inner perception of something within one’s own mind, a perception which Descartes goes on to identify as “inner consciousness [*intimè consci*]” (*Pr.* i.66, AT 8A:32*). In this example, one’s (*c*) very clear perception of one’s mind is not distinct, because it’s fused with (*o*) an obscure perception of one’s body. Descartes calls the obscure perception an “obscure judgement” here, but a judgement *is* a perception, in his view: it’s a perception “with

an additional form”, provided by the will’s assent (M3, AT 7:37). The contents of the perceptions involved may be formulated as follows:

- (*c*) very clear perception: *a pain exists*.
- (*o*) obscure perception: *something in my foot exists*.
- (*c*) and (*o*) fused together: *a pain in my foot exists*.

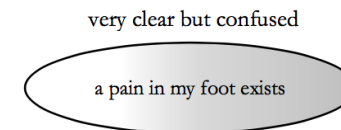
To explain this, I will adapt an expository device from an excellent essay by Alan Nelson (1997) and use diagrams as follows: each oval is an act of perception; what is printed inside each oval is the content of that perception; and a white interior indicates clarity while shades of grey mark degrees of obscurity. If the perception of pain were clear and distinct, it would be sharply separated from the obscure perception of the foot so as to be thoroughly clear.



But this is not how we ordinarily perceive the pain. We don’t just perceive pain *and* something in the foot. We perceive pain *as* something in the foot:

We generally regard [pain] not as being in the mind alone, or in our perception, but *as being in the hand or foot or in some other part of our body*. (*Pr.* i.67[†])

Our perception of the pain and our perception of something in the foot are not separated but are fused into an indiscriminate whole.



This is just one instance of a persistent syndrome of confusion: “All our ideas of what belongs to the mind [i.e., thoughts] have up till now [before the *Meditations*] been very confused and mixed up with our

ideas of sensible things [i.e., bodies]" (2O/R, AT 7:130–1*). Our ideas of thoughts are normally "very confused and mixed up with" our ideas of bodies. In one remarkable passage, Descartes says this confusion even interferes with our apprehension of "the proposition 'I am thinking, therefore I exist.'" He says that "your imagination insistently *mixes itself up* with your thoughts and *lessens the clarity* of this apprehension by trying to clothe it with shapes" (To [Silhon], March or April 1648, AT 5:136–7*). That is precisely what is depicted in the diagram above. With perceptions of the foot and the pain "mixed together" in this way, the obscurity of one "lessens the clarity" of the other.⁵²

Interpreting distinctness as nothing other than complete clarity resolves a puzzle in Descartes's usage. Recall his view that a "perception which can serve as the basis for a certain and indubitable judgement needs to be *not merely clear but also distinct*" (Pr. i.45). He also says that "a perception can be clear without being distinct, but not distinct without being clear" (Pr. i.46). Since distinctness entails clarity, it makes sense that he sometimes uses the term 'distinct' by itself when he means 'clear and distinct'. But the converse doesn't hold — clarity doesn't entail distinctness — and yet he often uses the term 'clear' by itself when he means 'clear and distinct':

I **clearly** infer that God also exists. ... So **clear** is this conclusion that I am confident that the human intellect cannot know anything that is more evident or more certain. (M4, AT 7:53†; cf. M5, AT 7:65)

Sometimes he substitutes 'clearly and distinctly' with 'clearly':

Admittedly my nature is such that so long as I perceive something very **clearly and distinctly** I cannot but

52. In other work (Paul 2018) I examine these passages in more detail to argue the following. The clear but confused "perception of pain" at issue is not sense-perception but an intellectual act of introspection, which is why it can *become* clear and distinct in the way required for certainty. The way it becomes clear and distinct is through radical doubt, i.e. doubt about the existence of all bodies, including one's own.

believe it to be true. But my nature is also such that I cannot fix my mental vision continually on the same thing, so as to keep perceiving it **clearly**. (M5, AT 7:69†; cf. 2O/R, AT 7:125, 141)

Given that clarity does not entail distinctness, why does Descartes so often just say 'clear(ly)' when he also means 'distinct(ly)'?

If distinctness were an additional feature, this usage would be problematic. But since a distinct perception is just a completely clear perception, it makes perfect sense. On my reading, the phrase 'clear and distinct' is logically similar to the phrase 'one and only'. Being *one* person in the room does not entail being the *only* person in the room, but we could say the same thing by saying that you are the 'one person', or the 'only person', or the 'one and only person' in the room. This is because only-ness is not a property in its own right to be added to one-ness: it's just the condition of being one thing in the absence of — separated from — anything else. Likewise, being clear does not entail being distinct, but Descartes often means the same thing by saying that a perception is 'clear', or that it is 'distinct', or that it is 'clear and distinct'. That is because distinctness is not a property in its own right to be added to clarity: it's just the condition of being clear in the absence of — separated from — anything unclear.

Finally, remember that while a completely clear perception must contain the truth and only the truth, given the Truth Rule, that does not mean it contains the whole truth (AT 7:220–1). There is always more to learn, more to get clear on.

6. Conclusion

In sum, Descartes is committed to the following thesis:

Clarity First

- Clarity is a *primitive*, phenomenal quality.
- Clarity is definitionally *prior* to these other properties:

- *Obscurity* is the absence of clarity.
- *Confusion* is the condition whereby one perception is fused with another in way that *lessens its clarity*.
- *Distinctness* is the condition whereby a clear perception is ‘sharply separated’ from anything obscure so that it’s *completely clear*.

We began by noting that clear and distinct perception is the centerpiece of Descartes’s philosophy, but on closer inspection it is clarity, specifically, which stands at the center. Clarity is an indefinable quality in terms of which the other perceptual qualities, including distinctness, are defined.

In other work, I elaborate on Descartes’s Clarity First thesis by showing that, in his view, clarity is prior in a different way – not definitionally but explanatorily – to six other key properties. When your perception is completely clear, its clarity explains why you have (i) a conclusive reason for assent (belief, judgement), (ii) rational indubitability, (iii) psychological indubitability, (iv) spontaneity (the highest grade of human freedom), (v) infallibility, and (vi) apprehension. These six properties are the goods that clarity provides. They flow from the very nature of clarity, from the phenomenally distinctive way in which a clear perception presents its content as true to the perceiving subject. Clarity does what it does because of what it is.⁵³

This might seem to make it all the more urgent to ask: How can we tell whether or not a perception is completely clear? While Descartes claims to have complete clarity on various matters, he also admits that there have been things which “through habitual belief *I thought I perceived clearly*, although I did not in fact do so” (M3, AT 7:35¹; cf. AT 8A:21; AT 8B:352; AT 6:33). This raises a version of the traditional problem of the criterion: Even if completely clear perceptions are

53. Paul (*forthcoming*: chs. 4, 5, 6).

infallibly true, how can we *use* them to apprehend truths if we can’t be sure which of our perceptions are completely clear?⁵⁴

Whether this is really a problem depends on what is required for apprehending truths. Some commentators assume that in order to apprehend some truth, *p*, it wouldn’t suffice that you have a completely clear perception that *p* – you further have to apprehend the second-order truth *that* you have a completely clear perception that *p*.⁵⁵ Given the present assumption, you further have to apprehend the third-order truth *that* you have a completely clear perception *that* you have a completely clear perception that *p*. And so on, ad infinitum. If this were required, it would be impossible for finite minds like ours to apprehend truths.

Fortunately, Descartes denies that apprehension requires any such thing. As we saw in §1, he holds that having a completely clear perception that *p* is sufficient for apprehending *p*. It follows that nothing further is required, including any act of higher-order apprehension or thought. When you perceive *p* with complete clarity, there is no room for doubt or deliberation, including higher-order deliberation. The clarity of your perception compels your assent, and the resulting judgement just *is* an act of apprehension. I develop this point in other work,⁵⁶ but what I want to observe here, in closing, is how it underscores the primacy of clarity itself. Since clarity is primitive, there are no independent criteria we can use to identify clarity. Nor do we need any. To apprehend truths, we don’t need criteria for clarity. All we need is clarity.⁵⁷

54. This problem was raised in the 17th century by Pierre Gassendi (see LoLordo 2005a; 2005b; 2006: 55–9) and Pierre-Daniel Huet (see Lenon 2008: cf. 5). For another treatment, see Humber (1981).

55. Larmore (1984) articulates this assumption but doesn’t endorse it. Alanen (1999; 2003: ch. 7) does.

56. Paul (*forthcoming*: ch. 6).

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