

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

SAMPLE APPLICATION NARRATIVE

Summer Stipends

Philosophy

National Endowment for the Humanities

Division of Research Programs

Excerpt from a Successful Application

This excerpt from a summer stipends application is provided as an example of a funded proposal. It will give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. It is not intended to serve as a model. Every application is different, depending on the requirements of the project, the stage of the research, the resources required, and the situation of the applicant. This sample includes only the narrative and the bibliography; it does not include the résumé or letters of recommendation.

Additional examples of funded applications can be found on the Division of Research section of the NEH website: <http://www.neh.gov/whoweare/divisions/Research/index.html>

Project Title: Descartes' Theory of Sensory Representation

Project Director: Raffaella De Rosa, Rutgers University

Result: *Descartes and the Puzzle of Sensory Representation*, Oxford University Press.
(Forthcoming)

I seek funding to support research that will contribute to the book I am writing on Descartes' theory of sensory representation. First I will present the book project and then I will describe in more detail the part of the overall project for which I am seeking funding.

The 17th Century French philosopher René Descartes gave a fairly elaborate account of the workings of the human sensory faculty. I am interested in two related issues raised by his account. The first one concerns whether, according to Descartes, sensations of color and the like are intrinsically representational. That is, I am interested in establishing whether, according to Descartes, sensations of color and the like represent the physical world to us or whether they are mere presentations of the qualitative features of human experience. The difference between these two views is the difference between claiming that when we perceive the color red we are perceiving a red surface of bodies and claiming that when we perceive the color red we are merely experiencing the subjective feel of redness.

The standard view among Descartes scholars is that Descartes believed that sensations lack intrinsic intentionality. Nicholas Malebranche (1638-1715) interpreted Cartesian sensations this way and since then many scholars have followed (more or less explicitly) Malebranche's interpretation. (See MacKenzie (1990); Wilson (1978); Field (1993); Nelson (1996) and Alanen (1994) and Alanen (2003)) Moreover, many contemporary philosophers of mind accept this interpretation of Cartesian sensations as part and parcel of Descartes' internalist account of mental content. Indeed some of the current arguments for the existence of qualia (where "qualia" are intended to be mental states devoid of intrinsic intentionality) are Descartes' legacy. (See Loar (2003) and Dennett (1988)) Contra the standard view, I will show that the argument and the textual evidence offered in support of the standard view fail to establish that Descartes held this position. Indeed, I will argue that there are textual and theoretical reasons for believing exactly the opposite, that is, that Descartes attributed intrinsic intentionality to sensations.

Once I have established that Cartesian sensations are representational, I address the following question: in virtue of what do sensations, according to Descartes, represent external bodies to us? That is, I am interested in establishing what Descartes' account of sensory representation in fact is.

This second question has received little attention in the literature (undoubtedly because of the standard view discussed above), with a few exceptions. Margaret Wilson (1990) argued that Cartesian sensations represent bodies in virtue of their causal connection with the environment (this view is known in the contemporary literature in philosophy of mind as a "causal theory of content"). Martha Bolton (1986) has argued that sensations represent bodies in virtue of the relation of satisfaction between the object and the intellectual description of the object contained in the sensation (this view is known in the contemporary literature in philosophy of mind as an "internalist theory of content.") Finally, Alison Simmons (1999) has recently argued that Cartesian sensations represent bodies in virtue of their biological role ("this view is known in the contemporary literature in philosophy of mind as a "teleological theory of content."). I argue that all three proposals are untenable either because they are incapable of explaining sensory misrepresentation or because they are inconsistent with other principles of Descartes' philosophy.

I tender an alternative account of Descartes' view on the nature of sensory representation that explains the role of causation in Descartes' account of sensory representation within an internalist theory of mental content. Not only does my account fare better than any other of the current alternatives in explaining misrepresentation, but it is also consistent with the rest of Descartes' philosophy.

Currently, I anticipate a book of 6 Chapters:

Chapter One: Descartes' theory of ideas and cognitive architecture

Chapter Two: Descartes on the intrinsic representationality of sensations

Chapter Three: Why Descartes did not hold a purely internalist theory of sensory representation

Chapter Four: Why Descartes did not hold a causal theory of sensory representation

Chapter Five: Why Descartes did not hold a teleological theory of sensory representation

Chapter Six: An Alternative account of Descartes' views on sensory representation

The project is significant for several reasons. First, it establishes – contra a common view among Descartes scholars – that Cartesian sensations are intrinsically representational and is thus an important contribution to the scholarship on Descartes. Second, to the extent that some contemporary arguments for qualia are similar to (some of) those attributed to Descartes, and I argue that these arguments are inconclusive, I undermine some of the ways of arguing for qualia in the contemporary literature in philosophy of mind. In reality, Descartes' account of the representationality of sensations can offer insights on how it is possible to defend the view that sensations have a qualitative character without lacking representationality – a view that some contemporary philosophers also have tried to defend. (See Crane (2001) and Loar (2003)) Third, at present, there is no systematic study of Descartes' theory of sensory representation and so the book fills an important gap in the literature. Finally, in addressing the issue of Descartes' account of sensory representation the book raises broader issues regarding various theories of content -- for example, how a theory of mental representation can account for misrepresentation – that are of great concern in the current work in philosophy of mind.

The book is aimed not only at scholars of Early Modern Philosophy but also at the broader audience of scholars and students interested in the contemporary debate on mental representation and qualia both in philosophy of mind and cognitive science.

The part of my Project for which I seek support

During the funding period I aim to write Chapters Two and Four (See above).

In Chapter Two, I examine the argument and textual evidence offered in support of the standard view discussed above and argue that neither offers conclusive evidence for attributing to Descartes the view that sensations lack intrinsic intentionality. On the contrary, I examine some passages often overlooked by supporters of the standard view and I argue that these passages together with other broader theoretical considerations conclusively establish that Descartes attributed intrinsic intentionality to sensations. The importance of the conclusions of this chapter is described above.

In Chapter Four, I examine the role of causation within Descartes' account of sensory representation and explain why it does not (and cannot) amount to a causal theory of mental content. My contribution consists in suggesting that Descartes' account of how sensory ideas are acquired explains the role that a causal element plays in Descartes' account of sensation without committing him to a causal theory of content. This chapter is of crucial importance in the book since it explains my criticism of the view that Descartes holds a causal theory of sensory representation (as defended by Wilson (1990)) and prepares the way to my novel interpretation of Descartes' account of sensory representation and misrepresentation (Chapter 6 above)

Parts of this book material – in the form of journal articles – have either been already published or are currently under review. Completion of these two chapters is of crucial importance for the advancement of the overall project. Funding for this project will allow me to take huge strides towards the completion of the book.

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