

# “Insofar as” in Descartes’ Definition of Thought

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## A Problem with Descartes’ Definition of Thought

In *Principia Philosophiae* I 9, Descartes defines “thought” as follows:

“By the name ‘thought’ I understand all that which happens in us such that we are conscious of it, insofar as there is consciousness of it in us”.

According to this definition, thought is one of the things that happen in us. I take it that this simply means that thought belongs to the wider class of things that (a) take time and (b) involve us as an agent or patient. This class includes our thoughts and intentional actions, but arguably also such things as respiration and headaches. According to the definition, thought differs from all other members in this class in that we are conscious of it. Should anything happen in us of which we are not conscious, it will not be a thought. Further, if we are conscious of something that is happening in us, what happens in us is a thought only *insofar as* we are conscious of it. This puts considerable weight on two things: the notion of consciousness and the phrase “insofar as” (*quatenus*). In this paper I will focus on “insofar as”. Before I do so, however, a few things need to be said about consciousness.