

Representation and Objects of Thought in Medieval Philosophy

Edited by

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Chapter VIII

Objective Being in Descartes:

That Which We Know or That By Which We Know?*

Deborah Brown

Oh incompetence! My dreams never seem to engender the creature I so hunger for. The tiger does appear, but it is all dried up, or it's flimsy-looking, or it has impure vagaries of shape or an unacceptable size, or it's altogether too ephemeral, or it looks more like a dog or bird than like a tiger. (Jorge Luis Borges, 'Dreamtigers', 294)

What is it for an idea to be of something, a tiger say, and yet neither resemble a tiger nor represent it as it is? What would make it the idea it is, namely, the idea of a tiger? Answering this question on behalf of Descartes would, I think, tell us much about how he understood the relationship between the mind and its objects. It would also tell us much about how he conceived of the relationship between the knower and the known.

There is a certain picture of Descartes's theory of ideas which is standard and which I would like to join the challenge against. It has been challenged before by Brian O'Neil,¹ Calvin Normore² and Lilli Alanen³ among others⁴ and much of what I have to say is an extension of their ideas. The picture we all reject is this one: Rather than securing a firm foundation for knowledge, Descartes erects between

* I would like to thank my friends in the Inter-Nordic community of scholars working on medieval and early modern conceptions of mind (and honorary members of this community from other continents) for stimulating discussions about this topic. In particular, I am grateful to Lilli Alanen and Calvin Normore and to the participants and organizers of the conference *Intellect, Knowledge and the Object of Thought from 1200 to 1700* Oslo, November 24–6, 2000 and to the editor of this volume, Henrik Lagerlund for all assistance and helpful conversations.

¹ O'Neil (1974) directs our attention to the strong form of direct realism in the *Regulae* and the influence of Thomism throughout Descartes' works despite his rejection of substantial forms. See also Kemp Smith (1952), 51–2, and Beck (1952), 72–4.

² See Normore (1986).

³ See Alanen (1990).

⁴ See also Nadler (1989), Monte Cook (1987), Yolton (1975) and Lennon (1974). For a more sceptical attitude towards this trend towards reading Descartes as a direct realist, see Hoffman (2002).

the knower and the known a 'veil of ideas' or intermediate objects of thought and perception. Barry Stroud paints the picture aptly when he describes Descartes's sceptical conclusion in the *First Meditation*

... as implying that we are permanently sealed off from a world we can never reach. We are restricted to the passing show on the veil of perception, with no possibility of extending our knowledge to the world beyond. We are confined to appearances we can never know to match or deviate from the imperceptible reality that is forever denied us.⁵

This way of framing the problem invites a number of cheap responses and discounts Descartes's own anti-sceptical arguments. Stroud's targets are the cheap responses: the attempts 'to minimize the seriousness of the predicament, to try to settle for what is undeniably available to us, or perhaps even to argue that nothing that concerns us or makes human life worthwhile has been left out.'⁶ But few who take seriously the sceptical challenge would also take seriously Descartes's claims in the *Second Meditation* to have found a paradigm of certainty in the idea of the self. No amount of attention to the 'internal marks' of indubitability in an idea, clarity and distinctness, can, in the words of one scholar, address the 'fatal objection' that the possession of an idea does not in itself justify our claims to know about such matters as the existence of God and the nature of substance.⁷

What is evident from such objections is the assumption that at the end of the day Descartes is a representational realist. Although there may be variations on any theme, one way to characterize the representational realist is as one who holds to the following three propositions:

- (i) The only *immediate objects* of knowledge are the mind's ideas or internal states (concepts or percepts).
- (ii) The mind knows *indubitably* its own ideas or internal states.⁸
- (iii) Knowledge of extramental reality depends on an *inference* from knowledge claims about the content of one's ideas to claims about what those ideas purport to represent.⁹

⁵ See Stroud (1984), 33–4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁷ See Ashworth (1972), 105. See also Gibson (1932) on the 'nemesis' of representative perception: 'for if we know only through the medium of representative ideas, how do we know there is anything except ideas?' (79)

⁸ Perhaps it is not necessary for a representationalist to claim that the mind has indubitable knowledge of its own ideas or objects which are somehow internal to consciousness but it is unclear to me why anyone would bother with a representationalist epistemology were there not some such guarantee regarding the inner sanctum.

⁹ Differences within representationalism may depend upon whether or not ideas themselves are regarded as the intermediate objects of perception and knowledge or as acts directed at distinct objects (e.g., sense data). See Hoffman (2002) for five ways of drawing

On the representationalist reading Descartes is seen as subscribing to these basic tenets of representationalism. He is thus regarded as having regressed away from the direct realism of those Scholastics who, like Aquinas, espoused a non-inferential immediate awareness of extramental natures. I suspect that there is very little evidence to support the reading of Descartes as a representationalist. In fact, there is very little reason to believe that Descartes subscribed to these three propositions in their present form or, if he did, that his endorsement supports a reading of him as a representational realist.

I shall not here attempt to evaluate the *success* of Descartes's arguments against skepticism – that is well beyond the scope of this paper. My concern is with the *form* of his theory of our epistemic access to the world. The charge that Descartes is a representational realist has (at least) two sources: the Demon thought experiment and Descartes's representational theory of mind. Although my concern is primarily with the latter, what I have to say about it bears on the former. The Demon hypothesis seems to support the interpretation of Descartes as a representationalist insofar as it is construed in the following way. Descartes appears to present two possible worlds: the Demon world in which all our ideas of the external world misrepresent it (either by representing it as existing when it doesn't or by representing it as other than it is) and the world Descartes sees himself as proving is the actual one, a world in which at least an important subset of our ideas, upon critical reflection, can be known to correspond to the way things are. What is important for this reading of Descartes is that in both scenarios the ideas are the same. Thus what we know directly in either scenario is the same – namely, ideas – and the task for the meditator is to figure out what can be inferred from those ideas about the external world. That the Demon hypothesis supports a representationalist reading of Descartes thus depends on a certain view of Cartesian ideas as being objects the identity of which is independent of the way the world actually is.

But to draw any conclusions from the Demon hypothesis about the kind of realism to which Descartes subscribes, one has first to establish that there is a logical connection between representationalism as a theory of mind and representationalism as a theory of knowledge. The representational theory of mind is generally understood as defining thought as the processing of symbols or mental representations – that is, as involving some kind of commitment to realism about mental representations. That is a description sufficient to distinguish representationalism from behaviorism and eliminativism but leaves it an open question precisely what the nature of thought is – i.e., whether it is best understood by analogy with language or on some other model is up for grabs. It is also a further question whether the representational theory of mind entails representational realism. If there is an entailment between the two theories then those who believe that Scholastics like Aquinas are direct realists are in trouble for the Scholastics were as much committed to the representational theory of mind as Descartes was. Paul Hoffman has for this reason recently suggested

the distinction between direct and representational realism. But I assume that any theory of representationalism will be committed to something like these three propositions.

that Aquinas might also be a representational realist.¹⁰ The fact that, according to Aquinas, 'the intelligible species is not that what is understood, but that by which the intellect understands'¹¹ does not rule out, on a reading such as Hoffman's, that the intellect knows the natures of material things by first cognizing their likenesses (*similitudines*).¹²

But why think that representationalism about the mind does entail a representationalist epistemology? Let us look at the question from the other direction. What exactly is it about the representational theory of mind that seems to conflict with direct realism? One likely answer is that the link is forged by a certain picture of what ideas are. Descartes follows a tradition of thought which characterises intentionality in terms of the *objective existence* of things. On this picture there are what we might refer to loosely as two modes of being: the being of a thing *as represented by the mind* (objective being) and the non-representational being something has as either a mode or a substance (formal being). It is the objective being of ideas which, Descartes claims in the *Third Meditation*, accounts for the content of ideas and thus distinguishes one from the other:

In so far as ideas are simply modes of thinking, there is no recognizable inequality among them and all appear to proceed from me in the same way. But in so far as one represents one thing, another another thing, it is clear that they differ from each other greatly. (AT, VII, 40)

My question is whether this picture of representation is incompatible with direct realism. An incompatibilist might reason thus: On the objective existence theory, thought is a relation between the thinker and things which have objective being in the mind. The mind is only directly aware of things which appear on its private stage: thoughts about extramental objects are thus mediated by inference from thoughts about objective existents. But this shows us that the link between representationalism as a theory of mind and representationalism as a theory of knowledge is mediated by a certain understanding of the former. It is not really representationalism *per se* which compromises direct realism but *objective existence* versions of it in conjunction with the idea that what the mind knows primarily and indubitably are only things with objective reality.

We are now at the heart of the matter. It is supposedly objective existence versions of the representational theory of mind which are incompatible with direct realism. It is my view that there is nothing inherent in an objective existence version of the representational theory of mind, provided it is understood a certain way, that entails representational realism. To get our bearings on this topic it will be useful to take a short detour through the major accounts of objective reality in the middle ages.

Esse Obiectivum Before Descartes

The history of the notion of objective being has been canvassed by others and I do not propose to repeat the story here.¹³ My purpose is to draw attention simply to those aspects of the tradition prior to Descartes which test the credibility of a necessary conceptual link between the theory of objective existence and representational realism.

The concept of *esse obiectivum* figured in debates about the objects of visual illusions and in debates over the status of universals during the Middle Ages. On so-called 'perspectivist' theories such as Alhazen's, Roger Bacon's and Peter Aureol's when one is subject to a sensory illusion what is perceived is something with 'diminished', 'apparent' or 'objective' being. The following example from Aureol illustrates nicely one problem objective being was intended to solve.

When one is carried on the water, the trees existing on the shore appear to move. This motion, therefore, which is objectively in the eye (*in oculo obiective*) cannot be posited to be vision itself; otherwise vision would be the object seen, and a vision would have been seen, and vision would be a reflective power. Nor can it be posited to be really in the trees or in the shore, because then they would really have moved. Nor can it be posited to be in the air because it is not attributed to the air but to the trees. Therefore, it is only intentionally (*tantum intentionaliter*), not really, in seen being and in judged being.¹⁴

Aureol reasons thus: Since the motion which is seen cannot reside in the trees themselves, nor the air, nor do we perceive what takes place in the eyes, it must reside in something else: *esse viso iudicato et apparenti*.

In contemporary theories of perception, visual illusions have provided the best argument for representational realism. If your awareness is the same in both cases of veridical and non-veridical perception, then, so the argument goes, what you must be aware of in both cases is the same. It follows that in the normal (i.e., veridical) case what you are aware of is the sensory state itself or sense data. I doubt that this argument would have persuaded many philosophers of the Middle Ages. Objective entia were not the percepts or concepts or properties of these things but objects, albeit with diminished, apparent, judged or objective being. For perspectivists such as Aureol they had a kind of 'third realm' status: neither mind-independent extramental objects nor intramental objects. From an ontological perspective positing objective beings incurs no greater cost in terms of additional beings than sense data views. There is no obvious reason to favor (and perhaps every reason to avoid) the idea that what I see when I see a bent stick in water and what I see when I see a stick which is really bent are properties of the mental or visual event itself over the idea that what I see are two different orders of object. The latter idea at least has all the advantages of being compatible with direct realism.

¹⁰ See Hoffman (2002), 165–7. For a detailed account of Hoffman's Thomistic reading of Descartes Hoffman (1996).

¹¹ See *ST*, I, q. 85, a. 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, I, q. 85, a. 2.

¹³ See Normore (1986), Tachau (1988) and Read (1977).

¹⁴ Peter Aureol, *Scriptum in I Sentarum*, lat. 329. d. 3. s. 14, a.1: II:696. See Tachau's discussion (1988), 89–100.

What then of the argument that universals are *objective entia*? Although the notion of objective being was not confined to nominalist theories (some argued that universals had *subjective* being in singulars and *objective* being as objects of thought) it was enormously convenient for nominalists who wanted to avail themselves of universals to account for general thought without admitting them into the ontology in any serious way. In Ockham's early works, a universal is a *fictum* - 'that which immediately terminates the act of thinking when no singular thing is thought of.'¹⁵ When I think abstractly of the kind *horse* without thinking of any particular horse what I think of is neither a quality of mind nor something with formal being but something with objective being.¹⁶

Is there anything in this picture which compromises direct realism? Certainly, critics of the nominalist view such as Walter Chatton thought so. Chatton argued that things with objective being must be either really distinct from mental acts or not. If not, then for every thought of the same type there is a distinct *fictum*, which is a violation of Ockham's razor. If, however, an act and its *fictum* are really distinct then the one can exist without the other 'but then there would be objective and intellectual being without any intellection, which is a plain contradiction.'¹⁷

Immunity against this argument could have been bought, as it seems to have been by Aureol, but only at the cost of admitting objective beings to a third realm. For one could just as easily come down on the side of the object rather than the mental act at this point. How objective beings could be mind-dependent yet have neither qualities of the mind nor of extramental reality is a mystery to be sure but not obviously contradictory. Alternatively, one could accept the identity of act and object but still find some use for thinking of mental acts in objective terms, that is, as defined by the directedness of the act towards an object. In any event, there is nothing essentially representationalist about this theory of universals. *Ficta* are not mental representations which are known prior to singulars but objects acquired through the same process in which singulars are known and through which singulars are known in a certain way. Persuaded by his confrere's arguments, Ockham, however, abandoned the concept of *ficta* altogether and the act-object distinction it seemed to presuppose. In the later *intellectio* or act-only theory, the process of acquiring a general concept by abstraction from the concept for a particular human is described thus:

First a human is apprehended (*cognoscitur*) by some particular sense, then that same human is apprehended by the intellect and when (the human being) has been conceived, a general notion common to all humans is formed. This apprehension (*cognitio*) is called a concept, intention or passion which is a common concept to all humans and when it exists

¹⁵ William of Ockham, *Ordinatio*, 274

¹⁶ Stephen Read notes that once the notion of objective existence caught on it dominated the discussion about universals for two decades and had the additional benefit of providing a point of reference for the idea of 'existing in the understanding' in Anselm's Ontological Argument. See Read (1977), 20.

¹⁷ Walter Chatton, *Lectura*, l. d. 3. a. 2, quoted in Gal (1967), 202-3.

in the intellect, the intellect immediately knows that a human is something without any process of reasoning (*sine discursu*).¹⁸

What is lost when one gives up the concept of objective existence? Not much on Ockham's account and to some extent I am inclined to agree. But there is something unsatisfying about the act-only theory of representation akin to what has struck some philosophers as so deeply unsatisfying about causal theories of reference. It is hard to give up the intuition that ideas don't merely represent their causes. Borges's idea represents the tiger as more like a bird or as having impure vagaries of shape or as having an unacceptable size. The attempt to build these features of ideas into the description of the act - the bizarre constructions of adverbial theories (e.g., thinking-tiger-as-a-bird-ly) - is clumsy and has little economical advantage over retaining objects of thought. Act-only theories also do little to reduce the unease produced by thinking that in our first encounters with objects we cannot be in error. On Ockham's later view, our first experience of a tiger should be sufficient for acquiring the concept of a tiger regardless of whatever dreamlike qualities it may be infected with.

Which brings me to Aquinas, the last stop in this all-too-brief tour of the history of *esse obiectivum* and an odd place to stop since Aquinas, to my knowledge, never used the terminology nor, in using the notion of *intelligible species*, had in mind anything like Ockham's *ficta* or Aureol's apparent beings. It might seem more natural to stop the tour with Suarez, the one whose doctrine of objective being Caterus had in mind when he objected to Descartes that he was unjustifiably reifying the notion of objective being in his proof of God's existence. (AT, VII, 92-3.) But Descartes's own view has less in common with Suarez than Aquinas's doctrine of intelligible species for Suarez thinks of objective being as simply a way of talking about extramental objects insofar as they are thought about or 'denominated' (*esse cognitum quoad denominationem*)¹⁹ whereas Descartes makes it clear in his reply to Caterus that objective being is for him being 'in the intellect in the way objects usually are there.' (AT, VII, 102). Unlike Suarez, moreover, Aquinas has a role to play in explaining our contemporary use of the notion of *intentional object* through his influence on Brentano although this too is a peculiar piece of philosophical history.²⁰ Brentano

¹⁸ Ockham, *Summa logicae*, III, 2, c. 29, lines 14-22: 'Non quod isti conceptus praecedant notitiam intuitivam hominis, sed iste est processus quod primo homo cognoscitur aliquo sensu particulari, deinde ille idem homo cognoscitur ab intellectu, quo cognitio habetur una notitia generalis et communis omni homini. Et ista cognitio vocatur conceptus, intentio, passio, qui conceptus communis est omni homini: quo existente in intellectu statim intellectus scit quod homo est aliquid, sine discursu. Deinde apprehenso alio animali ab homine vel aliis animalibus, elicitor una notitia generalis omni animali, et illa notitia generalis omni animali vocatur passio seu intentio animae sive conceptus communis omni animali.'

¹⁹ Francisco Suarez, *Disputationes metaphysicae*, 25, 1, 32.

²⁰ Peculiar because, again, Aquinas does not use the terminology which suggests that despite Brentano's famous assertion that he derives the notion from the Scholastics, it was Descartes's use (on which Brentano frequently lectured) which was more influential on Brentano and thus the modern tradition. See Brown (2000).

himself denied that the intentional 'in-existence' of objects, as he put it, was anything but a way of speaking *synsemantically*, (*mitbedeutende*) about the thinker thinking and carried no ontological weight.²¹ Aquinas is important for our purposes, however, as an example of someone who professes direct realism but who also subscribes to two modes of being of objects.

What are Aquinas's objects of thought if not objective entia? They are *intelligible species* or the forms of extramental objects. The account of concept acquisition begins with the acquisition of sensible species, the accidental forms of external objects received in a spiritual mode into the matter of the sense organs. Species thus reach the intellect through increasing levels of abstraction: first from the matter of their original objects, then from the matter of the sense organs. By means of this process, the mind has purportedly *direct access to the natures* of material things because the species *just are* the forms of extramental things existing in a spiritual or intentional mode of being in the human soul. It is the *formal identity* of the species both within and outside the mind which is supposed to save the account from a representationalist epistemology.

At least this was the hope. Hoffman has raised doubts about the rights of Thomas to draw this conclusion and before Hoffman, A. Boyce Gibson put a similar objection delightfully thus:

The medieval theory of perception was realistic; the senses are the open gates thronged by the 'species' which emanate by effluence from the actual object, and passing into the mind nevertheless remain what they were outside it. But if perception is representative, the external world, on its entrance to the mind, passes, as it were, through a toll-gate of unreality, and its bewildered ghost wanders about its new home, for ever doubtful of its own identity.²²

The bewildered ghosts or species of material objects are the source of the doubt that Aquinas is a direct realist. The intellect is aware primarily of its own states or how it is modified (by these natures in a spiritual and universal mode) and not of how these natures are in the world, namely as individualized forms of matter.²³ Hoffman thinks that the very fact that the mind is able to know external natures because the intelligible species *resembles* extramental objects is indicative of a representationalist strand in Aquinas's realism.²⁴ But resemblance is not a primitive concept in the theory but one analysed in terms of the formal identity of species and external objects and there is no suggestion in Aquinas's account that one must *first* establish that the resemblance holds in order to know external natures. The *success* of the theory depends on the formal identity of the intelligible species and the forms of external things, an idea that taxes the modern mind too highly, but which does not on that account make the theory a form of representational realism. No inference from knowledge of intelligible species to extramental natures is suggested or required by the theory.

21 See Brentano (1874/1973), 332.

22 See Gibson (1932), 79.

23 See Hoffman (2002), 176.

An inference is however required in obtaining knowledge of *particular* things on Aquinas's account. Singular knowledge is indirect and inferential.

In this way, therefore, (the intellect) understands the universal itself directly through an intelligible species; it understands singulars however indirectly, of which there are phantasms.²⁴

Aquinas's treatment of singular knowledge is fraught with difficulty. The intellect trades in universals. Knowledge of singulars is relegated to the province of the senses. The intellect must 'revert to the phantasms' (*convertendo se ad phantasmata*) to be said to know singulars. Strictly speaking, the senses do not know anything. At *De Veritate*, I, q. 2.6, Aquinas asserts that it is the whole human being who knows singulars, not the intellect and not the senses. How the whole human being can be said to know that which no part of it knows is not, however, further clarified. In this domain there is direct perception by the senses but not direct knowledge and all because of what seems to be an excessive attachment to the generality of thought hypothesis. The fact that we do not know directly individual things or matter (hence not the whole of extramental reality) does not, however, detract from the claim that the mind knows directly the natures of external things. After all, they are in some sense *the same thing* as intelligible species.

Objective Reality or Perception in Descartes

What, besides the terminology, does Descartes's notion of objective being have in common with the notion as it appears in these traditions? Descartes rejects the notions of substantial forms and species in either the medium or the mind. Rather than conflating concepts with species, Descartes adopts the Platonic terminology of 'ideas' but, as he is commonly understood, drops the association between ideas and 'exemplars', copies of the Divine ideas, or models for creation. Descartes's ideas are dependent upon their causes both for their formal reality and, importantly for our purposes, their content. (AT, VII, 41-2.)

Descartes also modifies the long-standing assumption that ideas represent by virtue of being similar to what they represent. Aquinas's insistence that species are *likenesses* (*similitudines*) of external things may not be sufficient to make him a representational realist but it certainly compromises his realism. If relations of similarity are to be understood in terms of shared properties of the relata, it is difficult to see what properties material objects could share with their 'bewildered ghosts' in a dematerialized intellect. Moreover, as Descartes points out in connection with his discussion of the two ideas of the sun, there is often a great disparity between the idea and its object. The idea of the sun which emanates more directly from the sun itself and, one would think, puts us more directly in contact with the sun, the idea of the sun as a small yellow disk, is the one which bears the least resemblance to its

24 See *ST*, I, q. 86, a. 1

object (AT, VII, 39). It is possible, therefore, on Descartes's account, to have an idea which bears little, if any, resemblance to that of which it is an idea. It is also possible to have contradictory ideas of the same thing, both of which cannot be of the thing by virtue of resembling it (AT, VII, 39). Descartes's account of objective being commits him only to the claim that things can have two modes of being, formal and objective, to the identity of the object outside the intellect and inside it. There is nothing in his use of this notion which commits him to the claim that ideas must resemble that of which they are ideas or that ideas and their formally existing objects have any properties in common.

Descartes tells us instead at the beginning of the *Third Meditation* that ideas are 'just as if certain images of things' (*veluti quasdam imagines*) which may not seem to advance the debate much at all (AT, VII, 42; also, 36–7). Are not images (at least in his time) representational by virtue of resembling their *res representata*? This is certainly how Descartes is often interpreted: as arguing that there is both a causal or referential and a resemblance or non-referential constraint on true representation. I doubt that this is his point in stating that ideas are 'as if images' of things. Descartes refers to his habit of judging that the ideas he finds within himself resemble reality to be the greatest source of his previous errors (AT, VII, 37). When he later reintroduces the analogy between ideas and images, rather than relying on any claims about the power of images to resemble reality his point seems more to establish that ideas are like images or *copies* in the sense of not being able to have a greater degree of perfection than their causes (AT, VII, 42).

Thus it is clear to me, by the natural light, that the ideas in me are like images which can easily fall short of the perfection of the things from which they are taken, but which cannot contain anything greater or more perfect. (AT, VII, 42; CSM, II, 29)

The picture analogy serves to make, however, one useful point. The representationality of an idea cannot be reduced to the formal or 'subjective' properties of the idea – the properties an idea has by virtue of being a mode of mind any more than, as Descartes explains to Regius, one could expect to paint pictures like Apelles by arranging patterns of paint on a canvas in the same way as Apelles. (June, 1642; AT, III, 566–7.) The problem of representation Descartes is sketching here would not go away with a materialist theory of mind, a point with which many contemporary externalists about mental content concur.

Denying that Descartes's theory of ideas is in any straightforward way a resemblance theory is not to say that there is no non-referential component to ideas as Calvin Normore has pointed out.²⁵ Indeed, ideas could not provide occasions for error if they did not present their objects in certain ways. It is this aspect of ideas which Margaret Wilson, careful to avoid resemblance talk in her early discussion of the notion of objective reality, designated the 'representational character' of Cartesian ideas.²⁶ Although this notion only shifts the question of how to understand the notion

25 See Normore (1986).

26 See Wilson (1978), 102.

of representation for Descartes to the question of how to understand the notion of 'representational character,' Wilson is right to have marked it as distinct from the notion of resemblance. Wilson's representational character is close to what I think of as the non-referential component of ideas but whereas for her the representational character of an idea is distinct from the objective reality of the idea, and hence an 'embarrassment' for Descartes, for me the non-referential component is a *component* of objective reality.²⁷ I shall return to this point below in discussing the notion of 'material falsity.'

As Descartes explains perhaps unhelpfully in the *Replies to the First Objections*, the objective being of ideas 'signifies nothing other than being in the intellect in the way in which objects usually exist in the intellect' (AT, VII, 102). The distinction between formal and objective being was not new but what does seem to be new is Descartes's further claim that both the formal and objective aspects of ideas need a cause.

For if we suppose that something is discovered in an idea which cannot be in its cause, it must therefore have this from nothing; nevertheless, however much imperfection is in that mode of being, by which the thing exists objectively in the intellect through the idea, plainly it is not really nothing, nor consequently can it exist from nothing. (AT, VII, 41)

The causal principle Descartes uses to argue for the existence of God is an extension of the Scholastic principle that there cannot be more reality in an effect than is contained formally or eminently in its cause. For Descartes an idea can have less objective reality than its cause has formal reality but it cannot have more which is why the idea of an intricate machine cannot have been caused by anything less than a machine with that much intricacy formally or a knowledge of engineering (AT, VII, 103–4.) The distinction between formal and eminent containment can be characterized in the following way. If an idea, A, represents an object X as F, then either F-ness is contained formally in its cause or, if the cause of A's representing X as F does not contain F formally, it must have a greater degree of reality than the content of A. It might be thought that eminent containment is added to account only for the idea of God. Since God has no modes it cannot be that God has formally what our idea of God contains objectively. But eminent containment may also be useful to explain ideas which misrepresent their objects. For example, our non-astronomical idea of the sun contains features which are not contained formally in the sun but the sun has a greater degree of formal reality than this idea has objective reality and so can be its cause.

The referential component of an idea is given by the identity of the object existing objectively in the intellect, as either an essence or nature, for example, triangularity, or an existing particular such as the sun (AT, III, 350). How then are we to understand the non-referential component of objective being in Descartes? Calvin Normore and I have recently argued in relation to Descartes's account of the passions and sensations that Descartes's notion of representation is primarily

27 *Ibid.*, 106.

representation as.²⁸ I want to suggest here that the objective being of a thing should not merely be thought of as the thing itself but as the thing under a certain *mode of presentation* (though I am not suggesting in addition the Fregean ideas that the mode of presentation is really distinct from the idea of the object or that it determines the reference of an idea). Hence, in the case of the two ideas of the sun, both are ideas of the sun but they differ in how the sun is objectively presented in each idea.

It follows from this view that there can be a difference in the objective reality of ideas which is not a difference in the identity of the object represented. Descartes says as much himself in the letter to *** (1645 or 1646) when he writes that a thought of the essence of a triangle, and a thought about *the existence of the same triangle* “even understood objectively differ modally in the strict sense of the term “mode.” even though the essence and existence of the triangle itself are not distinct. (AT, III, 350.) Notice that on Wilson’s view these are not differences in the objective reality of ideas but a difference between their representational characters. Why does Wilson argue for this distinction and why do I want to resist it?

Wilson proposes that it is necessary to separate the representational character and objective reality of ideas in order to make sense of Descartes’s claims about ‘materially false’ ideas. When an idea is confused and obscure it can provide material for error to an unwary mind by representing ‘non-things as things.’ For example, it is impossible to tell from our idea of cold whether cold is a positive entity or merely the absence of heat (AT, VII, 43–4). The problem with this claim, as Arnauld rightly observed, is that Descartes’s very theory of representation would seem to require that what is conceived must be some thing, if only an objectively existing thing. To Arnauld’s objection that if cold is a privation it can no more exist objectively in the mind than formally exist, Descartes replies somewhat obscurely:

I think that a distinction is necessary: for it often happens in confused and obscure ideas, among which those of heat and cold are numbered, that they are referred to a thing other than that of which they are ideas. Thus, if cold is only a privation, the idea of cold is not cold itself, as it were objectively in the intellect, but another thing which I take wrongly for that privation: truly, it is a sensation which has no being outside the intellect. (AT, VII, 233)

Wilson takes Descartes’s notion of material falsity point to be incompatible with the claim that materially false sensations have objective being.²⁹ In so far as sensations are representations their intentionality and distinctiveness should be due to some other feature, which Wilson labels their representational character.

I used to hold views like this myself but I now think that it is deeply mistaken. For one thing, it would make Descartes’s texts stupidly inconsistent. (I’m prepared to admit they may be inconsistent but not stupidly so.) The objective mode of being is not an inessential feature but belongs, Descartes writes, to ideas ‘by their very nature’ (AT, VII, 42). There is, moreover, a problem regarding the two ideas of the

28 See Brown and Normore (2002).

29 See Wilson (1978), 111.

sun on Wilson’s reading. The two ideas of the sun would have the same objective being but differ in representational character. Here Wilson’s view implies that if ideas were just characterized by their objective being, these two ideas would be indistinguishable. But this is precisely the mistake Descartes accused Gassendi of when he. Descartes, complained that two ideas are not the same for having the same *subject* (AT, VII, 363). It is not at all obvious that he would have regarded the two ideas of the sun as having the same objective reality simply because they each contain the same *thing* objectively. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly for our purposes, if Wilson is right, then Descartes’ theory of representation would run perilously close to entailing representational realism. For Wilson’s representational character of an idea does seem to work like a Fregean mode of presentation in fixing reference by whatever fits the representational character of the idea (or not as in the case of materially false ideas) and in being that which one has primary epistemic access to. Since the representational character determines the content of a materially false idea, not its objective reality, what else could it represent than whatever resembles the representational character of the idea? Hence, Wilson argues, the whole account is deeply embarrassing because it raises an obvious objection to Descartes’s proof of the existence of God in that:

... it entails that the objective reality of an idea is not something the idea wears on its face. Descartes would have it otherwise: in his initial exposition of the concept of objective reality he seems to indicate that an idea’s objective reality is transparent, deriving directly from its representative character ...³⁰

But if the content of an idea is determined by its representational character, Descartes could not claim that the two ideas of the sun were ideas of the same thing. The actual sun fits the representational character of the astronomical idea: the referent of the other idea should, if any such thing exists, be some yellow disk the size of a coin.³¹

None of this rules out the possibility that Wilson is right and Descartes’s account is simply incoherent. We should not underestimate the difficulty of reconciling Descartes’s remarks about material falsity with his objective existence theory of content. But I think we can read the exchange with Arnauld in a way that does not compromise his theory of objective being or his direct realism. In the passage where Descartes replies that the mind mistakes a sensation for cold, Descartes seems to be suggesting that it is the sensation itself which is objectively present in the idea of cold. What if the mode of presentation of the sensation were presenting not the features properly predicable of a sensation but features properly predicable, if they exist, of bodies? If there are no such corresponding features of body – for example, if cold is a privation – then the mode of presentation of the sensation will represent a non-thing as a thing. It cannot be that cold is a feature of the objective reality of the idea for the reasons Arnauld gives – if cold were a feature of the objective reality of the

30 Ibid., 112.

31 O’Neil raises this as a general worry for objective existence theories but does not explore how it might be solved within such theories. O’Neil (1974), 10.

idea, then it would have some degree of being and so cold would not be a privation and the idea of cold would not be false. But it can be a feature of the objective reality of a sensation that it is presented as a *mode of body*: or, in Descartes's terminology, is 'referred' to some external body, and then from an intentional perspective it will represent bodies as having some property as much as if the corresponding property of bodies did exist and was objectively present in the idea.³² This reading is different from standard *projectionist* accounts since the claim is not that either a sensation or a feature of sensation, *coldness*, is projected by the mind onto bodies. The point is rather that it is part of the mode of presentation of materially false sensations that they appear as modes of body and thus are necessarily false.³³ This mode of presentation of the idea of cold, like the false idea of the sun, is, however, nothing distinct from the objective reality of the idea.

In what sense, then, does a materially false idea represent a non-thing as a thing? Since a sensation is something positive, the account just given suggests that materially false sensations represent some thing as it is not rather than a non-thing as a thing. But I think the latter is just a way of thinking of the representational relation involved in material falsity from the point of view of the object rather than from the point of view of the perceiver. By representing a sensation as a mode of the body, at the same time and by the same process, we represent bodies as having modes that they of metaphysical necessity lack.³⁴

Descartes's general view of sensation is that because the mind is aware of its sensations and because sensations present as they do that it is natural to refer them to external objects. The notion of 'referring' introduced in the replies to Arnauld is thus crucial to Descartes's theory of perceptual representation. Some ideas spring from one source (e.g., the body) and are referred to another. In *Les Passions de l'Âme*, this idea becomes part of the very definition of passions and sensations.³⁵ Pain is a mode of the soul but is predicated by the soul of some part of the body like the foot or the hand; a sensation of green is referred to the grass and anger to the soul but all are caused by proximal movements of the animal spirits and pineal gland (aa. 22–9). What one is aware of when an idea is false is not some intermediate object but the sensation itself, on account of the nature of which or the way it presents itself, one refers it outside the mind. *Referring*, however, is not *inferring*. One does not know

32 See Descartes's *Les Passions de l'Âme*, a. 23; AT, XI, 346.

33 Compare Nadler's projectionist reading of Descartes and Arnauld (1989), 125–6.

34 One might wonder whether it follows that all sensations are materially false. To this it might be objected that Descartes seems to allow for the possibility of materially true sensations, for example, the idea of heat if cold turns out to be a privation (AT, VII, 44). Descartes has, however, no way of ruling out that all sensations are materially false – at least nothing about a sensation tells us whether it is true or false – but if some are true, their truth could be accounted for by the presence of the material quality (e.g., heat) objectively in the idea. The epistemic shortcoming of confused and obscure ideas is not, as Wilson suggests, that they fail to wear their objective reality on their face but that they fail to wear their material falsity on their face.

35 *Ibid.*, a. 27; AT, XI, 349.

first some feature of the sensation and then infer to some property of bodies; if one knew that much, the idea would not be false. But this picture raises some skeptical concerns. Our referring our sensations outside the mind does not entail the existence of anything outside the mind. But this is, for Descartes unlike the Scholastics, what we should expect for the answer to the skeptic is not going to be given simply from within the theory of perception alone.

When we look, therefore, for a cause of the objective reality of a sensory idea, we need look no further than human nature or the union of mind and body. For if a sensory idea is false it stems from an imperfection in my nature and, if it is true and the reality it presents is indistinguishable from a non-thing, in either case I would be right to conclude that the idea originates wholly from within me. (AT, VII, 44)

Descartes as a Direct Realist

Is there anything in Descartes's account of objective existence and material falsity which commits him to representational realism? Let us begin by re-examining the evidence in favour of three central tenets of representationalism.

First: are the immediate objects of awareness ideas rather than things our ideas are about? It is true that Descartes sometimes uses representationalist language: '... I understand by the term *idea* that form of any given thought through the immediate perception of which I am conscious of that very thought' (AT, VII, 160). But given Descartes's commitment to the objective reality of ideas as determining the representational content of ideas, being immediately aware of one's ideas is not incompatible with being aware *directly* of external objects, for the objective reality and the formal reality of the object are not really distinct.

The second tenet – that the mind knows indubitably its ideas – seems uncontroversial but even this proposition has to be modified in light of the discussion of material falsity. What I know indubitably is the *formal* reality of my sensory ideas – that I am experiencing a pain, a desire, a fit of pique – but uncovering the objective reality of the idea may require some theory (*Principles*, I, 45–6; AT, VIIa, 22). In cases of material falsity what I am thinking of turns out to be nothing but the modification of mind which has been caused by some external process but then what I am conscious of directly is not merely the idea but also the object of the idea, although not under that description.

The third tenet is particularly important for determining whether Descartes is a representational realist or not. Does knowledge of extramental reality depend, according to Descartes, on an *inference* from one's knowledge of one's own ideas? Here are three reasons why someone may be tempted to answer this last question affirmatively. First, Descartes's method is to proceed from an examination of the attributes of ideas (clarity and distinctness) to judgements about the natures of things. The fourth postulate of the Geometrical Exposition of the arguments of the *Meditations* in the *Second Set of Replies* states:

I ask that [the readers] examine the ideas of natures in which a complex of many attributes together is contained, such as the nature of a triangle, the nature of a square, or of other figures: likewise, the nature of mind, the nature of body, and above all the nature of God. And they should notice that all those things which we perceive to be contained in those ideas can be truly affirmed of those things. (AT, VII, 163)

Second, the method succeeds only because of these internal marks of the truth of ideas: clarity and distinctness. When an idea is both clear and distinct, that is, both present and accessible to the mind and so sharply distinguished from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear, Descartes claims that it can serve as the basis for a certain and indubitable judgement (AT, VIII, 22). A clear and distinct idea makes perspicuous the essential features and existence of an object thereby distinguishing it from every other thing.

Finally, it may be thought that Descartes's use of the *causal principle* to secure knowledge of the causes of ideas introduces an inferential aspect to knowledge.

We could not judge on the basis of this idea that the sky exists unless because every idea must have as the cause of its objective reality a really existing thing: which cause we judge [in this case] to be the sky itself ... (AT, VII, 165)

Is it not the case that Descartes uses the causal principle that an idea must have a cause which contains formally or eminently all the objective reality present in the idea to establish that certain features of an idea (those about which we have a clear and distinct perception) must be contained in the cause? (AT, VII, 41). And does he not also use it in the *Sixth Meditation* to defeat the supposition of the dreaming and Demon hypotheses that he is either alone in the world or stuck in very bad company? (AT, VII, 79–80).

In my view, the above discussion of objective reality shows that these aspects of Descartes' epistemology do not determine that the form of Descartes' realism is representationalist. Descartes' claim that an idea is what the mind perceives directly does not preclude its being true that what the mind thereby perceives directly is some true and immutable nature, triangularity, or an actual existing particular such as the piece of wax before him or the sun.

When, for example, I imagine a triangle, even if perhaps a figure of no such kind exists outside my thought, or anywhere, there is nevertheless its determinate nature, or essence, or form, immutable and eternal, which is not produced by me nor dependent upon my mind ... (AT, VII, 64)

We might say, therefore, that Descartes has something like a *direct reference* theory of ideas: ideas represent directly the objects with which they are in some sense identical. But does the fact that Descartes on my reading holds that ideas represent objects *as* this or that require an inference to draw conclusions about the degree to which ideas correspond to reality? Cartesian ideas are clearly not the same as the 'intuitive cognitions' of Scotus and Ockham: they require some kind of analysis or test (for clarity and distinctness) for us to be certain that they correspond to

some thing which actually exists. It is true that Descartes's method requires that we examine ideas for clarity and distinctness to determine whether they represent some *being*. Is it also part of our reasoning about the correspondence of ideas that we consider the truth of the causal principle?

It is important to distinguish what in Descartes's epistemology is part of the *theory* of why we know what we know and what is part of the *process* of knowing what we know. The clarity and distinctness of an idea explains why we know what we know but entails nothing about whether what we know directly is some idea or some external object. When Descartes describes the process by which we come to assent to clear and distinct perceptions, there is no evidence of a gap between the perception and the assent to be bridged by an inference:

And even if this is proved by no reason, it is impressed upon the minds of all by nature that whenever we perceive something clearly, we assent to it willingly, and in no way are able to doubt but that it is true. (AT, VIII, 21)

Descartes's clear and distinct ideas are thus in one way like Ockham's intuitive cognitions: no further inference or reasoning is required to know that the idea corresponds to *something*.

The causal principle is also part of the theory of why we know what we know. When Descartes rejects in the *Second Replies* that one knows that the sky exists because one 'sees' it and offers instead the justification that one knows the sky exists because seeing it affects the mind in such a way as to produce an idea which 'must have a really existing cause of its objective reality' and 'thus we judge that the cause is the sky itself' (AT, VII, 165) he should not be read here as contrasting direct and representational realism and defending the latter over the former. The sky existing in the intellect is the very sky that exists in the heavens so what one knows when one knows one's idea just is the sky itself. The causal principle is required as part of the explanation of how one's knowledge claims can be justified and is not proposed as an intermediary in the cognitive relationship between the knower and the known.

We should, therefore, be wary of concluding that Descartes's speaking of ideas as the basis for judgement commits him to anything like our third tenet of representational realism. Being the basis for judgement does not mean that ideas are the basis for any inference from indubitably given internal objects to the existence of external objects and their properties. To return to our earlier question, it should also be clear that there is, therefore, no intrinsic connection between representationalism as a theory of mind and representational realism. If I am right about Descartes's account of objective being, the tendency to regard Descartes as a representational realist thus represents a significant misunderstanding of his theory of ideas as well as his epistemology.

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