

Notes on the Ontological Argument

Version 1 Anselm's Ontological Argument

I can conceive a being, call it *g*, such that none greater can be conceived.

Claim: *g* exists outside the mind (in reality).

Proof. Suppose, for a reduction to the absurd, that

- (1) *g* does not exist outside the mind. (Hypothesis for reduction.)
- (2) I can conceive of something such that none greater can be conceived. (Assumption.)
- (3) I can conceive of *h* like *g* but such that *h* exists outside the mind. (Thought experiment.)
- (4) Something that existing outside the mind is greater than something that does not. (Obvious?)
- (5) I can conceive of something greater than *g*. ((3) and (4).)
- (6) I cannot conceive of something such that none can be conceived.
- (7) (2) and (6) are contradictory.
- (8) Hypothesis (1) is false. QED.

Gaunilo's counter example: by parity of reasoning, the perfect island exists outside the mind.

Version 2 Descartes, Version in Meditation V (similar to Anselm's)

For Descartes if a human has a clear and distinct idea of *S* as *P* then the proposition *Every S is P* is true. It lays out the content of the idea. A special category of such propositions state the essence of those substances in the world that the idea is of. One has a clear and distinct idea of God as existing or infinite. It follows that the propositions *God is infinite* and *God exists*. Infinity and existence are, he says, part of the essence of God. It follows that the proposition *God exists* is true.

I have a clear and distinct idea of God as existing.

Existence is a property contained in the essence of God.

Therefore, God exists

Version 3 Descartes, Version in Meditation III

Descartes makes use of the Greek principle of causation that properties are transferred from cause to effect. There are two details. First, the principle applies only to positive properties, and second properties come in degrees. Hence, two propositions follow:

If A is the cause of B and B has property P to degree n , then A has P to a degree of at least n .

If A is the cause of B and B has property *existence* to degree n , then A has *existence* to a degree of at least n .

So far so good. The doctrine is familiar from, for example, Neoplatonic philosophy.

In Meditation III, however, Descartes combines the causal principle with another doctrine drawn from medieval philosophy about ideas, which are also called concepts. According to a standard medieval doctrine which Descartes adopts every idea has two kinds of “being.”

First, an idea is a property of the soul. This view is really an analysis of the ontological status of ideas. It answers the question, “What sort of entity is an idea?” On this view, which comes from Aristotle, all that exists are substances and properties. Properties, moreover, inhere in substances. Some of these properties make up its essence or nature, and are such that if the substance ceases to have these properties it ceases to exist. Other properties are “accidental” meaning that the substance sometimes does and sometimes does not have these properties and whether it does does not affect its existence. In Descartes era properties are called “modes.”

Aristotle and most medieval philosophers thought that perception and thought work this way. The property of red jumps off the apple, affects sequentially all the bits of air between you and the apple, and eventually inhere in your eye. Redness then travels to your brain, and then to your soul. The concept or idea of redness is nothing other than the property of redness instantiated in your soul. Curiously, when redness is in the apple it makes it red, but when it is in the air, or your eye, or your brain, or your soul, it is there but it does not make the air, your eye, your brain, or your soul red. Nevertheless, the idea of redness is in your soul. When a property is instantiated in a substance in such a way that it does cause the substance to have that property, it is said to be instantiated *intentionally*. What is the idea of redness? It is simply the property of redness instantiated in your soul intentionally. Descartes rejected the view of perception in which properties actually travel from bodies to the soul, but he retained the ontological view that ideas are properties of the soul. Because there is a sense of “form” that means all the properties possessed by a substance, an idea is said to have *formal reality* or *formal being* because it is a property of the soul. That is the first kind of being that ideas have.

Ideas also have a second kind of being. When we understand an idea of a substance S , it is always of S as having some properties or other. That is, we always understand S as P , not simply as S . The properties we always understand S to have are its essential properties. These

properties are said by Descartes to be “contained in” the ideas of *S*. Moreover, propositions that detail this containment are necessarily true. That is, if when I understand *S*, I always understand *S as P*, then the proposition *every S is P* is necessarily true.

A special terminology evolved to describe the “content” of an idea. Because the properties (also called modes) that we understand when we understand *S* are in a sense “thrown up” at you by the understanding, they were said to have “thrown-at-you-being.” In Latin the word *objectere* means to throw at. Hence, because an idea is such that when we understand it, there are always properties that we understand it to have, the idea is said to have *objective reality* or *objective being*, and its content is called its *objective reality* or its *objective being*.

In sum, then, an idea has two sorts of being. It has formal being because it is a property (mode) of the soul – it is part of the soul’s “form.” It has objective being because when we understand it we understand that anything that the idea of is of has certain properties – because these properties are “thrown at” the understanding when we have that idea.

In quite an original, and highly contentious, way Descartes combines the Greek causal principle with the distinction between an idea’s formal and objective reality. He gets a new causal principle, which he later applies to existence. The general principle is:

If the idea of *A* contains property *P* objectively to degree *n*, then the cause of *A* has the property *P* formally to at least to the degree *n*.

Normally, this principle does not imply that something exists. When I understand the idea of a horse, I understand that it has a tail. The principle tells me that the cause of my idea of a horse with a tail (the tail is part of the formal reality) must have as much formal reality as that idea. Hence, only a cause that has at least as much formal reality as a tail (for example, a real tail) could have caused my idea of a tailed horse, which has objective reality.

He now applies this principle to the idea of God. Everybody grants, he says, that the objective reality of the idea of God contains the property “existence to an infinite degree.” That is, when we understand the idea of God we understand a being that exists to an infinite degree. Hence, the only thing that could have caused my idea of God as infinitely existing is a cause in the world that infinitely exists. The argument may be summarized:

If the idea of *A* contains property *P* objectively to degree *n*, then the cause of *A* has the property *P* formally at least to the degree *n*.

The idea of God contains the property existence to an infinite degree

Therefore, the cause of the idea of God has the property of existence to an infinite degree.

Version 4 Leibniz's version

Notation: Let $\Box P$ be read "Necessarily P." Let $\Diamond P$ be read "Possibly P."

Truth-Conditions of $\Box P$ and $\Diamond P$:

$\Box P$ is T in w iff, for all w' , P is T in w' .

$\Diamond P$ is T in w iff, for some w' , P is T in w' .

Theorem: The argument from $\Diamond \Box P$ to $\Box P$ is valid.

Proof. Assume for an arbitrary world w that $\Diamond \Box P$ is T in w . Then, for some world, let us call it w' , $\Box P$ is T in w' . But if $\Box P$ is T in w' , it follows that for any world w'' , P is T in w'' . But if for any world w'' , P is T in w'' , it follows that $\Box P$ is T in w . Therefore, if $\Diamond \Box P$ is T in w , $\Box P$ is T in w . Since w is an arbitrary world, it follows that for any w , if $\Diamond \Box P$ is T in w , $\Box P$ is T in w . That is, the argument from $\Diamond \Box P$ to $\Box P$ is valid. QED.

Corollary: \Box God exists.

Proof. I can conceive of God as a necessary being. Therefore, $\Diamond \Box$ God exists. Therefore, by the theorem, \Box God exists. QED.

Problems. It is not clear I can conceive a necessary being of the sort intended. Moreover, conceivability does not entail possibility, and therefore $\Diamond \Box$ God does not follow. in the corollary's proof. More seriously, granting $\Diamond \Box$ God begs a serious question. Not only it is an issue whether it is true that God, understood as a necessary being, exists, but it is also a question whether the traditional necessary being is even possible. There are serious arguments that as traditionally understood the concept of god is internally contradictory and therefore any such being would be impossible. For example, (1) the trinity, (2) an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent deity that permits evil in the world, and (3) a deity with foreknowledge that allows free will, are often held to be conceptions that are logically contradictory.

Appendix 1: Texts from Descartes Meditations III Explaining his Causal Principle

[14] there must **at least be as much reality** in the efficient and total cause as in its effect;

the idea of the heat, or of the stone, cannot exist in me unless it be put there by a cause that contains, at least, **as much reality** as I conceive existent in the heat or in the stone.

in order that an idea may contain this **objective reality** rather than that, it must doubtless derive it **from some cause** in which is found at least **as much formal reality** as the idea contains of objective

Nor must it be imagined that, since the reality which considered in these ideas is **only objective**, the **same reality** need not be **formally (actually) in the causes** of these ideas, but only objectively:

although an idea may give rise to another idea, this regress cannot, nevertheless, be infinite; we must in the end reach a **first idea**, the **cause** of which is, as it were, the archetype in which **all the reality** [or perfection] that is found objectively [or by representation] in these ideas **is contained formally** [and in act].

Appendix 2. Texts from Medieval Philosophers Explaining Formal and Objective Being

Peter Aureol (c. 1280 - 1322)

Peter holds that what we see when we see motion is not a substance outside the mind but a third entity. We see an “intentional object.” His view is an example of what is called *perceptual representationalism*, the view that we do not directly see objects in the world (a view called *direct realism*) but rather we see some sort of “intentional” representation of those objects.

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 objective*) cannot be posited to be the [sense of] vision itself; otherwise vision would be the object seen, and 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.

Peter Aureol, *Scriptum in I Sentarium*, lat. 329. d.3, s. 14, a. 1; II:696. Deborah Brown, “Objective Being in Descartes”

Francisco Suárez (1548-1617)

Suárez held: (1) we have knowledge not *of* things in the world but *of* objective concepts (of what Ockham called *esse objectivum*), (2) that objective concepts are representatives of things in the world, and (3) that the content of objective concepts can be individuals, or “entities of reason” like privations or relations, or universals (Norman J. Wells, “Material Falsity in Descartes, Arnauld, and Suárez,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 22(1984), 25-50):

By the formal concept is meant the act itself or (what is the same thing) the word by which the intellect conceives either some thing or a common nature. ... it is called formal moreover because it is the final form of the mind; because it formally represents to the mind the thing thought; or because it is seen as an intrinsic and formal term of mental conception – in all of which ways it differs from the objective concept, of which I am going to speak.

Conceptus formalis dicitur actus ipse, seu (quod idem est) verbum quo intellectus rem aliquam seu communem rationem concipit. ... formalis autem appellatur, vel quia est ultima forma mentis, vel quia formaliter repraesentat menti rem cognitam, vel quia revera est intrinsecus et formalis terminus conceptionis mentalis, in quo differt a conceptu objetivo, jam dicam.

Disputationes Metaphysicae, 2, 1,1;25,64-65.

By the objective concept is meant that thing or idea (ratio) which is uniquely and immediately is known or represented by means of the formal concept.

Conceptus objectivus dicitur res illa, vel ratio, quae proprie et immediate per conceptum formalem cognoscitur seu repraesentatur Homo autem cognitus et repraesentatus illo actu dicitur conceptus objectivus.

Disputationes Metaphysicae, 2, 1,1;25,26.

An objective concept, in truth, is not always a real positive thing; for we sometime conceive privations and other sorts of things which are called "mental entities" (*entia rationalis*) because they only have objective being in the intellect. ... Moreover, an objective concept indeed can sometimes be a singular and individual thing the degree that it can be put before to the mind (*menti objici*), and conceived through a formal act, often indeed it is a universal thing, both confused and common, as is *man*, *substance* and others that are similar.

objectivus [conceptus] vero non semper est vera res positiva; concipimus enim interdum privationes, et alia, quae vocantur entia rationis, quia solum habent esse objective in intellectu. ...

Conceptus autem objectivus interdum quidem esse potest res singularis, et individua, quatenus menti objici potest, et per actum formalem concipi, saepe vero est res universalis vel confusa et communis, ut est homo, substantia, et similia.

Disputationes Metaphysicae, 2, 1,1;25,65.

In another way, something is said to be in the reason through the mode of an object for its said to be a *res cognita* in being known, not in the manner of inhearing through its image, but also objectively according to itself.

Alio ergo modo dicitur aliquid esse in ratione per modum objecti, nam ... dicitur *res cognita* esse in cognoscente, non solum inhaesive per suam imaginem, sed etiam objective secundum seipsam."

Disputationes Metaphysicae, 54, 1, n. 5 (XXVI, p. 1016)

Petrus Fonseca (1528-1599)

Further to clarify a conceptual distinction: at the start it should be posited that a concept is twofold: one formal, the other objective ... formal concept is nothing more than the actual similitude to a thing which is understood by the intellect constructed for expressing that thing. For example, when the intellect perceives human nature, the formal concept of human nature is an actual similitude of this nature which the intellect fabricates for itself. It is called moreover an actual similitude to distinguish it from the intelligible species, which is also

similar to the thing understood, but which inheres in the intellect as an habit rather than an act. Accordingly, it is clear why a concept of this kind should be called formal, for when there should be some form of an accident inhering in the intellect, it is fitting that it should be called formal to be distinguished from the objective ... there is another reason why it is called formal: indeed, because it represents the thing as having that form or nature through which it is conceived.

Atque ut distinctione conceptus ordinamur: principio ponatur duplicem esse conceptum: formalem unum, alterum objectivum ... conceptus formalis nihil est aliud quam actualis similitudo rei, quae intelligitur, ab intellectu ad eam exprimendam producta. Exempli causa, cum intellectus precipit naturam humanam, actualis similitudo illius, quam sibi fabricat, ut humanam naturam exprimit, est conceptus formalis humanae naturae. Dicitur autem actualis similitudo, ut discernatur a specie intelligibili, quae etsi sit similitudo rei, quae intelligitur: non inhaeret tamen intellectui, ut actus, sed ut habitus. Hinc patet, cur huiusmodi conceptus dicatur formalis. Cum enim sit forma quaedam accidentaria inhaerens intellectui, merito formalis appellatur, ut distinguatur ab objectivo ... est et alia ratio, cur dicatur formalis: nempe, quia repraesentat rem sub ea forma seu natura, secundum quam intelligitur ... conceptus objectivus est res quae intelligitur, secundum eam formam naturamve quae per formalem concipitur. P. Fonseca Commentarii in XII libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis, q. ii, sectio 1.

Eustace of St. Paul (1573-1640)

On this (question) we should first address several things of generally about formal and objective concept and of what of thing it is. Therefore, it is assigned into twofold kind, one formal, the other objective. It is called a concept in its own right, but the latter in truth only analogically and denominatively [i.e. in its function as giving a naming to or classifying things], as thing or object conceived. Moreover, a formal concept is an actual similitude to the thing which is understood by the intellect and is produced for the purpose of expressing that thing. For example, when the intellect perceives human nature the formal concept of this understood nature is an actual similitude which sets out (exprimit) human nature. It is called moreover an actual similitude to distinguish it from the intelligible species which is an habitual image of the same thing. From this you understand that a formal concept is the species expressed (expressam) of the thing as understood, or in other words it is a mental word (verbum mentalis). Moreover, that is called objective which is a formal *ratio*; it is the thing that is represented by the formal concept to the intellect, as in the earlier example it human nature in the cognitive act that is called the objective concept. ... When to the formal concept there corresponds in some way or other an objective concept, which is nothing other than the thing represented by the formal concept, then in that very way its exemplar corresponds [to it] by means of an image.

... in hac praesenti (quaestione) generatim de conceptu formali et objectivo cuiusque rei nonnulla praemittamus. Duplex igitur cuiusque rei assignatur, alter formalis, alter objectivus: ille proprie, hic vero non nisi analogice et denominative conceptus dicitur: concepta sive objectum conceptus. Est autem formalis conceptus actualis similitudo rei quae intelligitur ab intellectu, ad eam exprimendam producta : exempli gratia, cum intellectus percipit humanam naturam, actualis similitudo quam de natura humana exprimit est conceptus formalis huius naturae intellectae. Dicitur autem actualis similitudo, ut discernatur a specie intelligibili, quae est habitualis eiusdem rei imago. Ex quo intelligis formalem conceptum esse speciem expressam rei intellectae, seu verbum mentis. Objectivus autem qui dicitur etiam ratio formalis, est res quae per conceptum formalem intellectui repraesentatur, ut in supra dicto exemplo, natura humana actu cogita dicitur conceptus objectivus. ... Cum formali cuique conceptui respondeat objectivus, qui nihil aliud est quam res formali conceptu repraesentat, quemadmodum cuique imagini suum respondet exemplar.

In *Summa Philosophiae Quaripartita, de rebus dialecticis, moralibus, physicis et metaphysicis*.
Prima pars metaphysicae, De natura entis, de conceptus formali et objectivo.

Charles-Francis d'Abra de Raconis (1590-1646)

A concept is said to be a relation, either to the conceiving mind or to the mind forming a likeness to an object. This is due clearly to the subdivisions of concept by kind, of which the broadest given is into formal and objective. A formal concept is an actual likeness to a thing expressed by the intellect through intellection: by some it is called a mental act, and it is in fact an offspring of the mind and informs it, whence it is called “formal”, and it is an active intention: it is an intention because the intellect reaches out (intendit) to perceive its object. A formal concept is genuinely active in comparison to the earlier distinction in which a concept is called objective. It is also called an intention, but one that is passive because it is what terminates the intention of the active mind. Moreover it is called not just a concept but an objective concept (with the addition) because by this it is said to be the object that is conceived and expressed by the action of the mind. Another way a concept can be explained is by simple example: in expressing a proposition to himself, somebody forms the concept of an animal and its nature. That *ratio*, which expresses this through his intellection or, as they say, through a “formed” word, is called a formal concept. The animal itself as understood in fact is called an objective concept.

Conceptus dicit relationem ad mentem concipientem seu objecti similitudinem formantem. Generatim dari patet ex ipsius divisionibus, quarum generalissima traditur in formalem et objectivum. Formalis conceptus est actualis similitudo rei ab intellectu per intellectionem expressa: ab aliis vocatur actio mentis estque de facto eius proles, ac eam informat unde formalis nupatus est, et intentio activa: intentio quidem quia per eam intendit intellectus objectum suum percipere: activa vero ad distinctionem prosterioris conceptus qui dicitur

objectivus, vocaturque etiam intentio, sed passiva, quia est id quod terminatur ipsa activa mentis intentio. Dicitur autem conceptus non proprie sed cum addito, nempe objectivus, eo quod sit objectum conceptum et per actionem mentis expressum. Uterque conceptus facili exemplo explicari potest: aliquis propositi sibi animalis conceptum et naturam formet, ratio illa quam de eo per suam intellectionem exprimet seu verbum, ut loquuntur, efformatum, vocabitur, formalis conceptus, animal vero ipsum cognitum, objectivus.

Totius Philosophiae, hoc est logicae, moralis, physicae et metaphysicae, revis et accurata, facillime et cara methodo disposita Tractatio. C.F. d'Abra de Raconis, De Principiis entis, a. 3, de essentia et conceptus entis, sectio 1a de nomine conceptus et existentis. P. 827.

Descartes (1596-1650)

But I respond to this that there subsists an equivocation in the word “idea”: for it can be taken either materially, for an operation of the intellect, in which sense it is not possible that I can be said to be “more perfect”, or objectively, for the thing that is represented through that operation, which thing, even if it is not supposed to exist outside the intellect, can nevertheless be “more perfect” with respect to the *ratio* of its essence.

Sed respondeo his subesse aequivocationem in voce ideae: sumi enim potest vel materialiter, pro operatione intellectus, quo sensu me perfectior dici nequit, vel objective, pro re per istam operationem repraesentata, quae res, etsi non supponatur extra intellectum existere, potest tamen esse perfectior ratione suae essentiae.

Meditations, Prefatio ad Lectorem 7:8.19-25