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7 The Third Meditation on objective being: representation and intentional content

My topic here is Descartes' Third Meditation – but not the causal principles and proofs that have probably been the target of more philosophical irk than anything else in Descartes. Rather, I am concerned with the language in which they are couched, where Descartes speaks of an "objective" component, feature, or mode of ideas, a bit of medieval shoptalk he uses to distinguish among ideas insofar as they represent different things. Taking ideas objectively (rather than "materially") differentiates them according to what the "Preface to the Reader" identifies as the "thing[s] represented by" operations of the intellect (AT 7: 8). The Third Meditation then refers to the degree of perfection of what the idea is *of* or *about* as its "objective reality," in contrast to the reality that is "actual or formal" [*actualis sive formalis*; AT 7: 41–2], which properly belongs to causes. In these slightly oblique ways, Descartes uses the notion of objectivity to introduce issues of mental content and its representation in ideas. But I will argue that the Third Meditation takes only a first step towards accounting for the representational content of Cartesian ideas: it asks how it is possible for our ideas to have (stable) content, and finds the condition of possibility in the content of the particular idea of God. If I am right, the content of Cartesian ideas is to be understood in a less internalist way than is typical.

I am hoping to avoid several moves that have bedeviled much commentary. One is a hermeneutical fault: failing to respect the context of Descartes' claims, particularly the "order of reasons" that structures the *Meditations* and the distinctions made among objective, formal, and material components of ideas. The other seeks to explain the mind's grasp on things (its ultimate objects) through representational relations that are (somehow) established independently of any

mental act. I shall argue that this approach inverts the priorities governing Descartes' philosophy of mind, which insists that relations of representation derive from the mental activity of being directed at an object – that is, from intentionality. This priority seems a basic commitment of Descartes' thought, although other aspects of intentionality and objective reality are developed only over the course of the *Meditations*. Understanding the status of mental content, in particular, requires working out the ontology of possibility, essences, and their causes, which is not complete before Meditation Five. Within the process of working out that ontology, the Third Meditation idea of God as the positive infinite is pivotal, for it underwrites the claim that everything I think about depends on an unlimited causal power and perfection existing in God.[1] God's power and perfection also guarantee that my mind is able to reach its ultimate intentional objects, that is, *the things themselves*.

A BIT OF BACKGROUND

As Caterus points out in *First Objections*, Descartes' terminology of objective reality is bit of philosophical vernacular, borrowed from the long history of medieval and late scholastic philosophy. His talk of degrees of objective "reality" is somewhat less standard, but *Second Replies* extends the notion to "'objective perfection', 'objective intricacy', and so on" (AT 7: 161). The Third Meditation likewise slides from objective "reality" to objective "mode of being" (*modus essendi*; AT 7: 42). I will use "objective being" as the catchall term, although later I will say something about why Descartes specifically uses "objective reality" for classifying ideas in terms of their representational content. But for all their common currency, Caterus is puzzled by Descartes' demand that objective being requires a cause sufficient to its degree of reality, since he (Caterus) understands objective being as no more than an empty description (*nuda denominatio*; AT 7: 92–3), a mere label applied to the thing targeted by a mental act.

The roots of the debate between Caterus and Descartes lie in medieval and Aristotelian approaches to cognition that treat it as involving assimilation between the knower and the known.[2] Thomas Aquinas explains this assimilation through the sharing of a form, typically received into the soul (initially) through sense-perception. But since a

form, e.g., of blue or of square in the intellect does not make the intellect become blue and square, such forms are there only immaterially and intentionally. They are curiously hybrid, inhering differently in different sorts of subjects, yet somehow the same, and somehow producing an intentional, or better *representational*, relation between the intellect and its targets. Some later Thomists cash out this relation by taking the act of cognition to give rise to a distinct, though dependent concept, which explains how the form inheres in the intellect. The concept thus formed is an intrinsically representational entity that provides the medium by which the intellect is directed at things instantiating the form materially. Some historians have traced Descartes' notion of objective being to this dependent concept.[3] But that seems unlikely: if anything, the Thomist account should be an ancestor of what was later dubbed the "formal concept," or the idea taken formally.

Instead, King argues that it was Duns Scotus who introduced the terminology of "objective being" to describe how content is present in the intellect. And Normore identifies his follower William of Alnwick as the first to pair formal and objective "modes" in differentiating between contents and mental acts.[4] Objective being applies to the being of what is known, its *esse cognitus*, and is introduced in the context of considering the exemplars or archetypes in God's mind; it is thus independent of existing things. Scotus suggests that the status of the *esse cognitum* as an *object* is also in some way distinct from its being known, even when the object in question depends on God's creative intellect for its being. That is because knowing is a relational state, requiring that the agent's act be related to a content. We might understand the distinction minimally as taking *esse cognitum* under different descriptions: *esse cognitum* can be understood solely as a dependent feature of the act, or as a content with properties other than those of the act by which it is conceived. As such, the content may be differentiated differently from the act. Similarly, Alnwick understands *esse cognitum* formally as just the cognition; understood objectively, it is differentiated by the intentional objects that "terminate" cognition. In this line of thought, *esse cognitus* has a "diminished" kind of being, less than that of actual things, but still requiring a cause.[5]

At the turn of the seventeenth century, philosophers such as Francisco Suárez and Eustachius a Sancto Paulo gave slightly new

twists to the common distinction (*vulgaris distinctio*) between formal and objective "concepts."[6] The formal concept is the intellectual act, which Suárez characterizes as "a true positive thing inhering as a quality in the mind." Both then identify the objective concept as what the formal concept represents, which (unlike the Scotist view) may simply be the thing itself, or could be an *ens rationis*, a being of reason, with only objective being in the intellect. Moreover, both describe the formal concept as a mental "word," by which, as Suárez puts it, "the intellect conceives of some thing or common account [*rationem*]." The objective concept, in turn, serves as "the object and matter around which the formal concept revolves and to which the eye of the mind directly tends." The use of the verbal metaphor turns the intentional relation between formal and objective concepts into a kind of *semantic* relation. But Suárez also insists that the objective concept determines the formal concept, and so the formal concept cannot count as a merely arbitrary vehicle for conveying semantic content. I suggest that we think of the formal concept as a *mode of presentation* of the objective concept, but with the caveat that the object falls intrinsically under various proper descriptions.[7] This gloss makes sense of the examples Suárez and Eustachius offer for the objective concept, which may be singular (e.g., a human being), or something universal and common (e.g., human nature). It may also be a mere being of reason, but not in the sense of an idiosyncratic mental construct. Even when we think of things that do not exist, *esse objective* describes a real possibility, something that could be the subject of a science. For this reason, Suárez associates *esse objective* with *esse essentiae*, the being of an essence.[8] Still, Suárez (like Scotus) thinks of such objective being as "diminished." As real possibilities, essences are "real and apt" for existence. But that indicates only "a kind of aptitude or better lack of repugnance to being produced by God with such an *esse*."[9] Possible being itself neither needs a cause, nor has causal force itself. At the same time, *how* beings of reason become objects of thought, with the particular contents they have, calls for explanation. In this sense, they require efficient causes, for which Suárez thinks the intellect suffices.[10]

Descartes' reply to Caterus' objection that objective being needs no cause seems to borrow elements from these various ways of understanding content. Descartes retorts that Caterus has misunderstood how he uses "objective being," insisting that the "idea of the sun" "is

the sun itself existing in the intellect . . . objectively . . . in the way in which objects normally are in the intellect" (AT 7: 102). This sounds akin to Suárez's and Eustace's assimilation of the objective concept to the things themselves.[11] But as Scotus and Alnwick do, Descartes insists that taking ideas objectively supplies different conditions of differentiation from ideas taken formally. It is those differences in specific content for which Descartes requires causes. And as we will see, the intellect does not always suffice to explain such differences in content.

The diverse demands Descartes makes of objective being are, I suggest, the result of how he conceives of the position of created human minds, and indeed, the task for the entire *Meditations*. Unlike Scholastic empiricists, Descartes cannot simply assimilate either the objective or formal being of ideas to existing things encountered in sense-perception. For he maintains that our thinking is active and spontaneous, determining the shape of its acts autonomously and in ways that cannot be explained merely by its "inputs" (which I take to be one of the lessons of Meditation Two). Still, we are not God, or even a demiurge: we do not create the being of things, but seek to fit our ideas to the natures of things already existing. The threat raised by the second set of hyperbolic doubts in Meditation One is that our ideas do not revolve around such natures as their "object and matter." Lacking an account of how robust forms enter the mind and shape its intentional acts, Descartes needs another way to anchor our thinking to real content.

INTENTIONALITY AND REPRESENTATION IN DESCARTES

Understanding the content of ideas becomes yet more challenging since Cartesian metaphysics has no ground for representation *other than* mental acts. Extended things differ from minds in having only quantitative modes expressible in geometrical terms and transferable through efficient causation. The transfer of motions and indefinite divisibility explain the diversity of arrangements and local motions found among extended substances. But they are not enough to account for the "aboutness" of intentionality and representation. Only a mind can provide the representational relations that make something into content, by taking it as an object.

In fact, Descartes' commitment to deriving representation and content from mental intentionality may predate the full development of his metaphysics of extension. The early *World, or Treatise on Light* illustrates how an idea represents an object by analogy with how a bit of language (spoken or written) signifies its content. Descartes uses the comparison to claim that even the operation of "natural" signs (such as "laughter and tears" for joy and sadness) does not require them to resemble what they represent. Language enjoys considerable signifying success although words "signify nothing except by human convention." Now, I take it that relations of resemblance are simply the most plausible candidates for a kind of independent, non-mental relation connecting a sign and its meaning. Descartes frequently refers to such relations as crucial parts of the alternative accounts he rejects.[12] But the lesson here extends well beyond rejecting resemblance as the basis for representation: the linguistic analogy shows that signification works because "it is our mind which ... represents [the] meaning to us" (AT 11: 4).

In describing the linguistic analogy, Descartes also insists that we may remain oblivious to the character of the sign, and even of the signifying relation it bears, when focusing on what it signifies. Speaking as an absent-minded polyglot, he remarks that we may "hear an utterance whose meaning we understand perfectly well, but afterwards we cannot say in what language it was spoken" (ibid.). So, holding that relations of representation cannot extend beyond the mind's intentional "reach" on its objects does not commit him to an implausible view about the transparency of representation. It does not, for instance, require that the mind is somehow conscious of all its dependent representational relations, much less that it *decides* to establish those relations, or that they are just what we suppose them to be.

In contrast, some commentators suppose that Descartes takes brain states, or (in a different vein) sensations of bodily states, such as a feeling of dryness in the throat, to be representational.[13] But we can admit that Descartes allows special roles for phenomenal states, or even the arrangements of extension constituting brain states in representing the world: such states may "naturally" cause us to think of other things (the configuration of my environment, thirst). What I deny is simply that brain states and the like are *intrinsically* representational, independently of a mind's relating them to an object.[14]

I take it that such states are examples of the natural institutions established by God to stimulate us to form a thought of some object. Their role is primarily causal, no different in kind from the role played by words heard in a familiar language in prompting us to think of what they signify. It remains the province of minds to give words their intentional relations to meanings, and more generally to forge relations of representation in the world by their intentional activities. And I think we will find that Cartesian minds have the resources to introduce intentional representation into a world otherwise bare of it, if we allow that they can interact with at least some of what they manage to represent.

TWO STORIES ABOUT THE REPRESENTATIONALITY OF CARTESIAN IDEAS

The possibility of such interaction is what one familiar account of the representationality of Cartesian ideas seems to deny. In honor of its venerable status, I will dub this species of account the "same old story" (SOS). And an old story it is, one that can be traced to Thomas Reid's attack on the Cartesian "way of ideas" for hanging a veil of ideas between minds and the non-mental world, and thereby making external-world skepticism intractable.[15] Much as Reid did, different versions of the SOS commonly start with the distinction between mental acts and ideational objects, using the terminology of an idea taken "materially" and an idea taken "objectively" to characterize how an act of the mind represents an object, while attributing "formal" reality to the former, and "objective" to the latter.[16] The SOS can then trade on the thought that the object is simply a way of taking the idea to maintain that the object so represented is itself a mental entity, in the sense that its *esse* is *in-esse*, and requires being lodged in the mind. The idea taken objectively may then bear a representing relation to another, external thing, e.g., a bit of extension, but the primary object of an idea remains within determinate internal boundaries, so that the idea and its primary object are located fully in the (metaphorical) head. The result is a kind of "internalism" about mental ontology and an extremely "narrow" view of mental content.[17]

As you might guess, I think the SOS goes astray on objective being. For one, it assimilates the distinction between formal and objective

realities to the material and objective ways of taking ideas.[18] The account also imposes high costs, while promising only uncertain benefits.[19] The SOS typically charges those costs to Descartes himself, understanding him to be so under the spell of the skeptical worries of the dreaming doubt that he treats all experience as internally indiscernible from a cocoon of mental imagery. Reid's version of the SOS assumes that the proper objects of our ideas are internally accessible and explicable, and that the task of the *Meditations* is to establish their correspondence to independent, external things. But his gloss supposes that the mind's act terminates at internal intentional objects. The SOS thereby violates just the features of Descartes' philosophy of mind I have emphasized. First, it pushes the operation of representation beyond the edges of the mind's intentionality, at least insofar as it hopes to achieve some reference to the external world. At the same time, it treats mere presence to mind as sufficient for something to qualify as an object – and thus avoids explaining the role of intentionality. The SOS also faces textual troubles with Descartes' insistence that the things we perceive through our ideas have objective being in our intellect and that objective being is a mode of being of the thing itself (*First Replies*, AT 7: 102–103).

The SOS retains some currency in accounts of the metaphysics of Cartesian ideas.[20] But several important accounts, concerned particularly with sense-perception, offer something of a "new take" (NT) on Cartesian representationality.[21] The NT does not locate the representing relation between act and object, but instead, distinguishes between presentational and causal features of ideas. Ideas present some qualities or contents to the mind insofar as something is "in" the mind. They also have causes, which in the case of sense-perceptions lie outside the mind. For the NT, ideas of sense-perception represent their causes by referring to them (under standard conditions). The presentational features of ideas, in contrast, provide information, although that information may mislead. The NT thus differs from the SOS, first, by accommodating sensory misrepresentation through its distinction between presentational representation and causal-referential representation: sensory ideas normally present information attributable to the physical things that are their salient causes, but sometimes the qualities that sensory ideas present do not properly belong to their causes. In making this split, the NT refuses to treat the presentational features of an idea as the farthest terminus

the mind can reach and thus as an indispensible way station for connecting the mind to the things the idea represents. Nevertheless, the NT still reverses the dependence of representation on intentionality. And perhaps because it focuses on sensory ideas, which seem to cleave what is in the head from its external causes, the NT may likewise seem to treat the presentational features of the idea as if they were obstacles between the mind and the sense-perception's causal content. Indeed, both the SOS and the NT shape the intentional relation between representing and represented in ways that create problems for the very idea for which Descartes develops the machinery of objective reality and its causes in the Third Meditation: the idea of God.

CONTEXT AND ORDER IN MEDITATION III

I propose that we understand the main task of the Third Meditation as a matter of developing an account of how we can hang on to steady mental content after the destabilizing doubts of Meditation One. The *Meditations* as a whole is structured according to an "order of reasons,"

> [which does] not attempt to say in a single place everything relevant to a given subject [*tout ce qui appartient à une matiere*] . . . [but reasons] in an orderly way from what is easier to what is harder . . . ("To Mersenne, 24 December 1640," AT 3: 266)[22]

Respecting the order of reasons demands that we attend to how the Second Meditation gathers the rubble left by the First Meditation so as to characterize the nature of the mind as better "recognized" [*notior*] than that of the body.[23] After affirming that I am *cogitans* (cogitat*ing* or think*ing*) and that various specific acts cannot be distinguished from my thinking (AT 7: 28–29), the meditator turns abruptly to analyzing a perception of a piece of wax. The point of the examination is not to advance our understanding of wax in particular, or bodies more generally, but to clarify the mental activity involved in merely *seeming* to perceive a body. Indeed, at this point in the *Meditations*, Descartes' narrator is in no position to assert anything about bodies as such: not even that they are possible beings, or that they have some specific nature (e.g., being extended). Instead, what the wax passage establishes is that it takes a *mentis inspectio* – an "inspect*ing*" by the mind – to perceive. This *mentis inspectio* does

not seem to be a distinct kind of mental act, for the narrator is ready to generalize its involvement to all the forms of human thinking considered so far. It is simply what allows the meditator to think of the wax as the same (in some unspecified sense) through a series of changing appearances. We can understand this activity as the mind's directing itself towards a target, above and beyond its reception of inputs (whether sensory or imaginative). It is an intentional activity.

But Meditation Two is not the final word on intentionality. It acknowledges content only in passing, and says nothing about either its ontological status or information-bearing function. When the meditator emphasizes the certainty with which I "seem to see, to hear, to be warmed," it is the acts *as* acts that warrant certainty, not their contents. The SOS assumes that the meditator is committed to affirming the certainty of her grasp on internal, mind-dependent objects. Reading the Meditation as focused on mental acts rather than content undermines that assumption. To be sure, the meditator does not deny that mental acts have contents, offering examples ranging from the wax, to the smell of honey, to coats and hats crossing a square, to the various propositions that are the targets of the modes of doubting, willing, etc. But the examples are diverse, and the meditator remains studiously neutral about how they might (or might not) illustrate features of content. In short, Meditation Two remains agnostic about content, and even about the possibility of purely intentional objects. Instead, it focuses on establishing that the mind engages in an activity of intend*ing*.

It is Meditation Three that turns directly to mental contents, by introducing the objective components of ideas through the quasi-technical notion of their objective reality. To unpack the notion, many commentators refer us to formal reality, making it the touchstone notion from which objective reality is derived: "in effect, reality *simpliciter*."[24] Yet neither Meditation Three, nor even the "geometrical" arrangement of arguments at the end of *Second Replies* follows this order: both speak *first* of objective reality, and *then* turn to formal reality.[25] This is particularly marked in *Second Replies*, in which the third definition describes the "objective reality of an idea" as the "being [*entitatem*] of the thing represented by an idea, insofar as it is in the idea." Only then does definition four declare that "the very same is said to be formally in the objects of ideas when it is in itself

just the same [kind] as we perceive," and "eminently when [it] is not of the same kind, but is so great as to be able to take its place" (AT 7:161*).[26] Moreover, the definitions explicitly make formal and eminent being explanatorily dependent on objective being, and do so in at least two slightly different ways: 1. something counts as "in" an object formally when it is there in the same way as an idea represents it to be; and 2. formal (or eminent) being is a way of being belonging to the objects of our ideas when they are not considered as being (only) in the intellect. The Third Meditation likewise introduces objective reality first. It then offers yet another way of explaining the formal in terms of the objective by describing the "actual or formal" mode of being as what belongs to the causes of my ideas taken objectively (AT 7: 42). This makes sense in the context of Meditation Three, for the meditator cannot yet assume that the "being represented by an idea" could exist in itself, and so can only speak about the degree of reality that must belong to the cause of the idea taken objectively. Indeed, Meditation Three says relatively little about the notion of formal reality other than attributing it to the nature of causes, and brings in the formal reality belonging to an idea only implicitly (if at all) when considering what the meditator herself could cause. None of these various accounts makes the differences between objective and formal being a matter of how a quality inheres *in* its subject. Instead, the decisive difference is whether the object itself is considered to be in the intellect, or (also) outside it. It is thus a matter of the metaphysical location of the *subject* of inherence.[27]

That is telling, since the Third Meditation introduces objective reality – and the entire topic of the representational content of ideas – as a way of classifying thoughts before addressing their truth or falsity. Here is another point where the SOS may go astray, for it supposes that the meditator should have no uncertainty about the internal characteristics of ideas at this stage of the game: whatever lies within the head (including ideas in their intrinsic representational character) should be cognitively accessible and secure. But the meditator is less sanguine, for she emphasizes that the hyperbolic doubts of the First Meditation still operate. As such, the entire Third Meditation is subject to the worry that God may have created her nature incapable of grasping the truth, leaving her incapable "ever of being fully certain about anything" (AT 7: 36*) – including the results

of the previous Meditation and the meditator's halting bids to describe the internal contents of the mind. The Third Meditation opens with tentative and indecisive attempts to taxonomize ideas. But not only does the meditator use extremely hedged language for classifying differences among "forms" (*formas*) of ideas (AT 7: 37–8*), she eventually abandons them all, treating the ideas so described merely as "certain ways of thinking" (*cogitandi quidam modi*) with no recognizable inequalities (AT 7: 40*). She then finds that she can differentiate ideas insofar as they represent one thing (*rem*) rather than another. So, it is diversity in their contents, not their "forms," that differentiates ideas. Even here, however, the meditator avoids specifying content in any fine-grained way, simply distinguishing ideas that represent "substances" from those representing "modes and accidents," and the idea by which I think (*intelligo*) the infinite God from ideas that exhibit finite substances. In doing so, the meditator keeps her ontological commitments modest by refusing to assume that the metaphysical distinctions in question apply to anything. The distinctions are simply a matter of what "as a way of speaking" (*ut ita loquar*) is called objective reality. All that matters is that it admits of degree.

Odd as this approach might be,[28] differentiation by degree of reality seems as generic and noncommittal a device as Descartes can find in his ontology. It applies to all modes of being, objective, formal, and eminent, indifferent to the status of the subject of inherence. Descartes' examples of different degrees of reality among modes, finite substances, and God suggest that the differences track whether something is a quality, a subject, or an infinite subject. As such, the degree is a matter of *how* a being inheres in its subject, and differences in degree measure relations of ontological dependence: the more independent, perfect, or complete some being is, the higher its degree of reality. Because degree of reality is a matter of ontological dependence, it makes sense that Descartes uses it as a measure of the sufficiency of a cause to its effect. For Descartes, as for his predecessors, adducing causal powers served a wide variety of explanatory purposes: one is making the ontological support for dependent beings intelligible. As such, the general causal principle of the Third Meditation could be understood simply as a version of the principle of sufficient reason.

But the corollary causal principle that follows is another matter: it demands that the objective reality of an idea must have a cause with

at least the same degree of formal reality (AT 7: 41). The principle thus applies the demand for sufficiency *across* objective and formal modes of being. One might think that the object represented by an idea would *ipso facto* have a high degree of dependence (on the mind) – and thus a correspondingly low degree of reality. But that would collapse objective being into a dependent being, treating it not as mental content, but as a mental mode, property, or event. The *Meditations* is in not yet in any position to treat the objective mode of being in this way (that is, as an idea taken materially), if only because it is working from the first-person standpoint of the meditator. Instead, I suggest that the Third Meditation has not yet settled how to think of objective being, or of the contents of intentional acts in general. In this vein, we can understand the causal corollary to be less robust than it might first seem: it states that the only cause sufficient to explain an idea's content is one that has at least the degree of ontological independence represented by that content and is located in a subject the existence of which does *not* depend on the represented content. The meditator describes this second demand as a requirement that the cause have the kind of reality appropriate to causes (AT 7: 42); we might say that it is a demand that the cause of my mental content be stable, or at least as stable as the content is represented as being.

Yet even this demand by itself does not go far, because the meditator remains remarkably uncertain about how her mental content is, in fact, represented. Consider the so-called "rule of truth" that appears at the very start of the Meditation: it posits "all that to be true [*illud omne esse verum*] which I perceive as genuinely clear and distinct" (AT 7: 35*). But it is not first offered as a reliable rule, only proposed speculatively as a possible generalization of previous results. It also remains tentative and provisional about *what counts* as the content of ideas and perceptions: the content is whatever can be picked out as "all that" (*illud omne*) and counted "true" (*verum*). But the meditator fails to specify what is thus picked out. With only the results of the Second Meditation on which to rely, she should not yet assert that "all that" exists, or even commit herself to what "all that" is. Instead, as we find out in Meditation Five, the truth rule concerns whether what I perceive clearly and distinctly has a genuine, or "true and immutable" nature. Such true and immutable natures may

exist nowhere outside of me [*si extra me ... nullibi*] ... but what belongs to this content is not put together by me, nor does it depend on my mind [*a me non efficta est, nec a mente mea dependet*]. (AT 7: 64*)

The idea of a true thing has content that is independent of the meditator's thinking it: it has a determinate nature, essence, or form that describes what it is to be that thing. For this reason, at least some of the properties of a true thing are susceptible of demonstration, and judgments about those properties are susceptible to formal truth. What we must bear in mind, however, is that *none of these features of the truth-rule has yet been established at the beginning of Meditation Three*. The meditator does not even know whether the contents of her ideas are stable enough that they could exist independently.

FROM APPARENT POSSIBILITY TO THE GROUND OF ALL POSSIBILITY

Because of the lingering skeptical doubts, Descartes begins Meditation Three assuming rather less about both the broad and narrow content of our ideas than did his medieval and Renaissance forerunners. Thus, we should not assume – as some commentators do – that we can cash out the contents even of clear and distinct ideas in terms of possible things.[29] Meditation Three has not yet earned the conceptual capital to suppose that the content of any idea represents real possibility. Even if all mental acts are intentionally directed, as Meditation Two suggests, the content of those acts may be no more than an unstable effigy, stitched together by the efforts of thinking. Conceivability in this sense does not entail real possibility, that is, an essence that could (but may not) be instantiated outside of the mind. All that it provides, so to speak, is an *apparent* possibility. This is so even for clear and distinct ideas. The meditator has introduced clarity and distinctness as promising qualities to qualify an idea for the truth rule (AT 7: 35). But the rule has only been proposed, not established. Indeed, it is not even clear that the meditator as yet has the wherewithal to decide which ideas are genuinely clear and distinct. Some ideas may seem to represent real things; I may even be utterly convinced of the real being of their objects when I entertain such ideas, but that is only to say that

their objects *seem* to me to be possible. Making the move from such apparent possibilities to real possibilities is the work of several Meditations. But Meditation Three takes the decisive step, for it lays down the conditions for the real possibilities of objects (and things) and finds it to be the same as the condition for the mind's existence. It does so by demonstrating that in order even to think that one has the idea of the infinite God, the infinite, incomprehensible God must be a genuine possibility. In short, the causal arguments for God's existence bootstrap their way into showing that the independence of content in the idea of God is a condition for having the idea itself. In doing so, they do not apply the notion of objective reality so much as develop the understanding of content implicit in it.

Let me unpack this thought. The immediate task the Third Meditation meditator confronts upon realizing that her thinking can be differentiated by its termini, by what she seeks to think, is to determine whether she has indeed succeeded in hitting upon some real object, an objective reality sufficiently great that it represents a real possibility. The meditator cannot simply assume she has succeeded, and so at first the objective reality in the idea of God must be treated merely as an apparent possibility. But that object is presented according to a variety of detailed descriptions. The meditator specifies what "I think by the name God" (*Dei nomine intelligo*): a substance that is infinite, independent, and a host of "summa"-properties (AT 7: 45*). It is by attending to how all such things are (*omnia talia sunt*) that it seems less and less possible that she could be their source. The meditator then proceeds to develop the thought that what the idea presents to her is the positive infinite, something prior to the perception of the finite limits by which she characterizes herself. Indeed it is the perception of the infinite that allows her to acknowledge (*agnoscerem*) her own defects (AT 7: 46).

Here we can make use of the notion of a mode of presentation. The idea of God presents its object as genuinely infinite, utterly different from and prior to the mode of presentation by which the mind perceives itself. As the example of my idea of myself (qua meditator) shows, even an idea that seems clear and distinct, and thus utterly reliable, can be presented opaquely: although I cannot think of myself as not-thinking, "this I that I know [*ego ille quem novi*]" (AT 7: 27) may be much more than I know. And although I cannot simultaneously think of myself and doubt that I exist, nothing in my idea of

myself guarantees that I must exist or will continue to exist; nor does it explain how I *can* exist. The metaphysical imperfection of the meditator is why the threat of uncertainty still looms at the beginning of Meditation Three. But the mode of presentation of the idea of God – that by which God appears possible – is different. Descartes demands that even the appearance of a possible object of thought demands some sort of explanation – that is, a cause. In most cases, this demand will be utterly trivial: there may be some mode of presentation in the mind, but not one that will require anything more than the mind's substance as a source. If that mode does in fact present a real object, the meditator's mind has the resources to explain that fact, and if it does not present a possible object, the meditator can appeal to her defects as the (privative) cause of the idea's mutilation. In contrast, to think of something under the mode of the positive infinite is not something for which any finite mind is ontologically sufficient. I, the meditator, cannot generate even the appearance of the positive infinite, for I am not, so to speak, big enough to contain it within me. In this case, the mode transparently presents at least the degree of reality of its object: it must be a presentation of the real possibility of the infinite. And as the object of my idea, that degree of reality determines its cause. Only the actual, infinite God is capable of producing such a real possibility, although that being may in fact greatly transcend what the idea presents. In short, to so much as have the conceptual *appearance* of the positive infinite requires that the positive infinite be a real possibility. For unlike Suárez, Descartes demands an explanation, some cause, for possibility itself. As Descartes makes clear elsewhere, God is the source of possibilities. In this case, then, God is the source of Its own possibility. By establishing the existence of such a God, Descartes secures the ground for real possibilities. By establishing that such a God is the cause of my existence (insofar as I have certain special ideas), Descartes secures the grounds for trusting that I, the meditator, am capable of grasping truth.

As this gloss shows, the mode of presentation of an idea need not be really distinct from the content it presents: God is presented *as* the positive infinite and God *is* positively infinite. But as Descartes often insists, God can (and should) also be thought of as incomprehensible. We finite minds can know God, but not embrace Its full nature: our minds "touch" what we think, without embracing it.[30]

The idea of God is, of course, *sui generis*. Nonetheless, it shows that the objective being of an idea cannot always be limited to what is "in the head."[31] More generally, Descartes seems to explain the stability of the contents of our ideas through our interaction with what the ideas represent – first and foremost, with God, but also with the "true and immutable" natures described in the Fifth Meditation. Such interaction allows those contents to constrain our thought, so that we have real contents and a stable semantics for our ideas. On this view, Descartes is far from the internalist navel-gazer that popular rumor makes him out to be. But that does not make him an externalist by default. Descartes understands the contents of our ideas, and perhaps even what gives form to our thought, through multiple levels of explanation, in which the finite mind contains within itself the mark of the incomprehensible infinite, and what exists nowhere "outside" the mind may yet be independent of it. The spatial metaphors used by contemporary philosophy of mind to describe the boundaries of the mind and the breadth of its content simply fail to do justice to the complicated web of causes and ontological dependence that Descartes weaves.[32]

NOTES

1. The "doctrine of the eternal truths" that Descartes elaborates in his correspondence holds that we must grant God the power to make and unmake eternal truths – and thus the being of *possibilia*, essences, and values – "as a king lays down laws" ("To Mersenne, 15 April 1630," AT 1: 145).
2. See Brown 2008, 197. I offer a somewhat different assessment of Descartes' debt to this tradition.
3. See, e.g., Michael Ayers (1998, 1064) who describes this concept as an "internal object of thought." But cf. Brown 2008, 198–99.
4. King 2004, 75 n. 25, and Normore 1986, 233. Although I am not providing a history of reception but only general background, we might note that Scotism was alive and well in early seventeenth-century France (Ariew 1999, 45 and 41).
5. On this last point, see Normore 1986, 233. For relevant primary texts, see Duns Scotus 1963, 258, paragraphs 31–32, and 469, paragraph 26; and Alnwick 1937, 26.
6. Suárez, 1965, 2.1.1, and ACS 1998, 33. I use "ACS" to abbreviate Ariew, Cottingham, and Sorrell 1998. Unless otherwise indicated, all relevant passages from Suárez come from D.M. 2.1.1, translated in ACS 1998,

33–4, although the translations above are mine. References to Eustachius are from *Summa philosophiae quadripartite* I. dis.1, ques.2 and 1.dis. 2, ques. 3, translated in ACS 1998, 93–4.

7. It is thus important not to think of the relation exactly as we now think of that between sense and reference. In a way, the object assimilates sense and reference, insofar as it embodies a "meaning" found in the structure of the world; even mere beings of reason may conform to the structure of the world.
8. See Ayers 1998, 1066.
9. Suárez 1965, D.M. 31.2.2.
10. D.M. 54.2.1–7, in Doyle 1995, 66–71. Thanks to Gideon Manning for bringing these passages to my attention.
11. But cf. Ayers 1998, 1068.
12. See, e.g., *Optics*, AT 6: 112–14.
13. See, e.g., Simmons 1999 for the latter.
14. Denying such intrinsic representationality carries costs for explaining the perception and behavior of non-human animals. I will bite that bullet, however.
15. See, e.g., Reid 1983, 114.
16. See Kaufman 2000; without endorsing it, Simmons (forthcoming) offers a taxonomy.
17. For this terminology, see C. Brown 2011.
18. It is tempting to do so, as Gassendi did in *Fourth Objections*, AT 7: 285. For accounts of why this is an error, see Clemenson 2007, 45–46, and Lionel Shapiro 2012, 386–87.
19. These costs are metaphysical (positing an odd mental entity), epistemological (inserting a curtain of ideas between the mind and its targets), and explanatory (doubling the relations of representation).
20. See Ayers 1998, 1068, and Brandom 2002, 354–55, although cf. 24–6.
21. The NT seems to appear first in Wilson's revision of her earlier views (1999, 69–83). Simmons (1999) presents a functionalist version of the NT (see also her forthcoming). The gloss I offer above follows Wilson's focus on ideas of sensory-perception. Other kinds of ideas have different etiologies, which would require adjusting the account suitably.
22. See also "Preface to the Reader," AT 7: 8–10.
23. The *sit notior* in the subtitle *quod ipsa sit notior quam corpus* indicates that the nature of the mind is more prominent, eminent, or marked than is the body, rather than that it is better understood discursively.
24. Wilson 1978, 105.
25. I owe this point to Annette Baier.
26. References marked with an asterisk are modified from the translations of CSM.

27. See Clemenson 2007, 20–21.
28. See also *Third Objections*, AT 7: 185.
29. For example, Margaret Wilson (1982) seems to jump the gun at p. 108.
30. See, e.g., "To [Mersenne], 27 May 1630," AT 1: 152, and *First Replies*, AT 7: 113–14.
31. Indeed, in this case, not even the mode of presentation seems confined within the head. In general, I suspect that diverse ideas may show a wide variety in the status of and relations between the modes of presentation and content, without those relations being sufficient for sorting ideas by their epistemic reliability. But cf. Lionel Shapiro 2012.
32. I'd like to thank many people for patient and constructive help: to start, Sean Greenberg and Joseph Dowd at the Scientia Workshop of the University of California-Irvine, the colloquium audience at the University of Calgary (with hat tips to Ron Wilburn, Nicole Wyatt, Mark Migotti, Ann Levey, Noa Latham, and Allen Habib), the members of the Early Modern Workshop at the California Institute of Technology, especially Gideon Manning and Patricia Easton, and John Kardosh for some acute points. I am grateful for the able research assistance of Juan Santos Castro and the support of a Standard Research Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Most of all, I want to express enormous gratitude to David Cunning, whose kindness and hard work (even when sorely tested) are a model for editors everywhere.