

# Being, Formal versus Objective

## from ENTRIES

Published online by Cambridge University Press: **05 January 2016**

By Deborah Brown

Edited by Lawrence Nolan



Book contents

Get access



## Summary

In developing his first and, in many ways, most central argument for **God's existence** in the *Third Meditation*, Descartes invokes a distinction between two ways in which things may be said to be: *formally* and *objectively*. Formal being consists in the reality something possesses in virtue of existing; objective being consists in the reality something possesses whenever there is an **idea** of it. God is said to exist objectively in our idea of him, and **while objective being or "being in the intellect" is generally diminished compared to the formal being of something existing outside the mind, it is not thereby nothing**. Since it is "not nothing," the objective reality of an idea stands in need of a **cause** (AT VII 41–42, CSM II 28–29). The infinite degree of objective perfection of the idea of God implies God's **existence** (AT VII 45–52, CSM II 31–36). That this argument hangs on a rather dubious distinction between two modes of being was not lost on Descartes' contemporaries. **Johannes Caterus** responded that the Schoolmen would not take "objective being" to imply a mode of being distinct from formal being but simply the "**extrinsic denomination**" of a thing by the intellect (AT VII 92–93, CSM II 66–67). This is our first inkling that Descartes is not inventing the terminology and that there is no general consensus about how it was to be understood. Caterus represents one interpretation, but there were others in what was in fact a protracted medieval debate. Descartes' use of the terminology is obscure – "objective reality," "objective being," "objective intricacy," and "objective perfection" may seem to connote differently but are used interchangeably (see AT VII 161, CSM II 113–14; AT VIIIA 11, CSM I 198; AT VIIIB

362–63, CSM I 306) – and his indebtedness to tradition difficult to discern. We can only do so much in reconstructing the peculiar way in which he intends the distinction to be understood.

The *Third Meditation* purports to be “of God” but contains both a theory of ideas and an account of how ideas may be true or false. The two turn out to be connected because it is of the nature of ideas to be “as if images of things” (AT VII 3, CSM II 25–26; AT VII 43–44, CSM II 29–30), and in purporting to represent something, an idea may thus be true or false (see **falsity, material**).

### Type

Chapter

### Information

The Cambridge Descartes Lexicon , pp. 60 - 65

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511894695.027>

Publisher: Cambridge University Press

Print publication year: 2015

## References

Alanen, Lilli. 2003. *Descartes's Concept of Mind*. Cambridge, MA:

Harvard University Press. [Google Scholar](#)

Ayers, Michael. 1998. “Ideas and Objective Being,” in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, vol.2, ed. Garber, D. and Ayers, M.. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1062–107. [Google Scholar](#)

Boyce Gibson, Alexander. 1932. *The Philosophy of Descartes*. London: Methuen. [Google Scholar](#)

Brown, Deborah. 2008. “Descartes on True and False Ideas,” in *A Companion to Descartes*, ed. Broughton, J. and Carriero, J.. Oxford: Blackwell, 177–98. [Google Scholar](#)

Chappell, Vere. 1986. “The Theory of Ideas,” in *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, ed. Rorty, A. O.. Berkeley: University of California Press, 223–41. [Google Scholar](#)

- Hoffman, Paul. 2002. "Direct Realism, Intentionality and the Objective Being of Ideas," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 83: 163–79. [CrossRef](#) [Google Scholar](#)
- Nelson, Alan. 1996. "The Falsity of Sensory Ideas: Descartes and Arnauld," in *Interpreting Arnauld*, ed. Kremer, E.. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 13–32. [Google Scholar](#)
- Nolan, Lawrence. 1998. "Descartes' Theory of Universals," *Philosophical Studies* 89: 161–80. [CrossRef](#) [Google Scholar](#)
- Normore, Calvin. 1986. "Meaning and Objective Being: Descartes and His Sources," in *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, ed. Rorty, A. O.. Berkeley: University of California Press, 223–41. [Google Scholar](#)
- Smith, Kurt. 2005. "Rationalism and Representation," in *A Companion to Rationalism*, ed. Nelson, A.. Oxford: Blackwell, 206–23. [Google Scholar](#)
- Wells, Norman. 1990. "Objective Reality of Ideas in Descartes, Caterus and Suárez," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 28: 33–61. [Google Scholar](#)

## Related content

### AI-generated results: by UNSILO

#### Book

##### The Cambridge Descartes Lexicon

[The Cambridge Descartes Lexicon](#)

Published online: 5 January 2016

#### Chapter

##### Representing and referring

Deborah J. Brown

[Descartes and the Passionate Mind](#)

Published online: 15 December 2009

#### Chapter

##### Looking inward: truth, falsehood, and clear and distinct ideas

Noa Naaman-Zauderer

[Descartes' Deontological Turn](#)

Published online: 10 January 2011

**Chapter****The Third Meditation:**

Lawrence Nolan

[The Cambridge Companion to Descartes' Meditations](#)

Published online: 5 February 2014

**Element****Cosmological Arguments**

Michael Almeida

Published online: 25 August 2018

**Element****Ontological Arguments**

Tyron Goldschmidt

Published online: 6 November 2020

**Chapter****Cosmological Arguments**

Graham Oppy

[Arguing about Gods](#)

Published online: 18 August 2009

**Chapter****The Failure of Classical Theistic Arguments**

[The Cambridge Companion to Atheism](#)

Published online: 28 January 2007

**Chapter****Natural Theology**

Graham Oppy

[Alvin Plantinga](#)

Published online: 27 October 2009